

# The Contentious Legacy of Bin Ladin in al-Sham

*A Comparative Analysis of the Ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham (January 2012-May 2014)*

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Master's thesis in Middle Eastern and North African Studies  
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30 May 2015

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2015

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<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Printing: Representeren, Universitetet i Oslo

# Abstract

Since 2012 Syria has arguably taken over the position previously held by Iraq as the focal point for the broader jihadist movement.<sup>1</sup> The conflict has witnessed the rise of a new al-Qa‘ida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, the entrance of an existing affiliate into the country, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and the emergence of non-al-Qa‘ida-affiliated Salafi-Jihadi groups of which Ahrar al-Sham is a prominent example. However the growing presence of Salafi-Jihadi groups in Syria has not manifested itself as a unified or homogenous movement. Rather the self-proclaimed Salafi-Jihadi groups have largely been unable to efficiently unify their efforts or ranks despite the creation of numerous coalitions. ISIS was rebuked by the al-Qa‘ida leadership and has engaged in military and ideological rivalry with Jabhat al-Nusra. Arguably at stake is the title of the inheritor and guardian of the legacy of Usama bin Ladin. This study outlines the larger underlining ideological differences for this rivalry as extracted, from the groups’ ample bibliography within the timeframe of January 2012 and May 2014, and subsequently structured and analysed.

By comparing the ideological characteristics of the official al-Qa‘ida affiliate (Jabhat al-Nusra) with groups of similar outlook, the thesis might further shed light on what an affiliation with the group entails in a post-Arab Spring era. Similarly, the comparative analysis of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS up until 2014 arguably illustrates two diverging trends within the Salafi-Jihadi movement transcending the Syrian conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadism: Seven Assumptions Shaken by the Arab Spring”, Memo from the conference “Rethinking Islamist Politics”, published by Project on Middle East Political Science, 3 February 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/02/03/jihadism-seven-assumptions-shaken-by-the-arab-spring/>.



# Preface

I started doing research on Salafi-Jihadi groups in the Syrian civil war mid-June 2013 working as a summer student at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) where my main focus was three Salafi-Jihadi groups, Jabhat al-Nusra, The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham. Whereas the first two were al-Qa'ida affiliates had recently fallen out with each other, the third had publically distanced themselves from al-Qa'ida whilst acknowledging their ideological kinship with the organization. Initially, their ideological similarities appeared more striking to me than their differences, whilst apparently not sufficient for them to merger or even collaborate more extensively. By the end of my internship at FFI in August 2013, I had mapped the statements and operations of these three groups and gained an impression of their role and position within the larger landscape of armed groups. That said, the relations between them; whether they were ideological triplets, enemies, “frenemies” or genuine “mujahid brothers” remained somewhat unclear to me. Similarly blurry was the role of al-Qa'ida's in it all; whether it was a mere label, a puppet master pulling the strings or a retired grumpy grandfather bypassed by those younger. Intrigued by the subject, and encouraged by my colleagues at FFI, I decided to investigate the ideological similarities and the differences between these three groups further in my upcoming master. With a year at my disposal I optimistically set a side autumn to gather more empirical evidence, and winter and spring to write the thesis.

By summer 2014, the situation in Syria and the role of the three protagonists of my thesis, had changed drastically from the previous year. A parallel intra-rebel largely directed against ISIS had emerged six months earlier and was still ongoing. ISIS had further been disowned by the leadership of al-Qa'ida in February just to be reborn four months later as the Islamic State (IS) – a self-designated caliphate. Its rapid expansion geographically in both Iraq and Syria, pared with its self-propagation of mass executions gained the group an unprecedented worldwide reputation for ruthlessness and brutality. Jabhat al-Nusra for their part wore their position as the sole affiliate for al-Qa'ida's in Syria seemingly as a badge of honour, whilst at the same time paradoxically engaging in this parallel war against ISIS/IS. Ahrar al-Sham was at the forefront in the armed and rhetoric war against ISIS alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, however its demand of an Islamic state had seemingly sunk on their list of their publically pronounced priorities.

As one might suspect, my original, stringent plan to analyse the group's publications up until January 2014 was rapidly surpassed by what I considered to be the necessity of tracking the unravelling intra-rebel conflict and the ideological shifts and variances it either provoked or simply highlighted. And, as my topic of study gained an actuality I did not foresee, the worry of writing something already undated when sent to print kept stretching the time-frame of my analysis.

With FFI and the University of Oslo granting me a much desired extension, I was able to combine the finalizing of this thesis whilst working at the Norwegian Embassy of Damascus based in Beirut. Working with the conflict in a different format at the embassy confirmed my initial impression that there is a great interest and demand for in-depth knowledge about the ideological roots, innovations and variations of the Salafi-Jihadi flank of the Syria civil war beyond its simplistic portrayal in the media and transcending my humble efforts.

# Acknowledgements

This thesis neither wrote itself nor can I take the whole credit for its completion myself. Torn by the dilemma posed by the “Law of Jante”<sup>2</sup> where writing too long a “thank-you” -section comes off self-important, and silently taking all the credit myself most definitely is, I have opted for the first alternative. I first and foremost wish to express my limitless gratitude to my colleagues and peers at FFI for including me in their daily work and letting me tap into some of their immense insight and knowledge. Extra thanks go to Truls Hallberg Tønnesen for daily conversations, challenging discussions and for keeping the doors to his knowledge as well as his office wide open, and to Thomas Hegghammer for good advices and conversations.

I further want to express my gratitude to the University of Oslo and the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages for the many years I have been taught, entertained and challenged here. The many opportunities and the trust we as students are given to leave your lectures to go study by ourselves in the Middle East are no doubt amongst the main reasons why so many of us loyally return. Thanks are especially due to Bjørn Olav Utvik for his trust, interest and good advices.

I also wish to thank the Norwegian Embassy in Damascus, and Charge d’Affaires, Martin Yttervik, for giving me the opportunity to put my knowledge to the test in their daily work, and for, together with the staff at the Norwegian Embassy in Beirut, providing daily challenging conversations and discussions.

Then comes the list of friends and family to which thanks are due for their constant support and relentless efforts to pull me back to the living; my parents and Emil for their invaluable help and patience and for being the model of a supportive family in all aspects of life, the exceptional extended family for the simply being exceptional, Roland and the “Chlouks” for becoming my second family with all the love and food that entails, the good friends and co-members of the “master-frustrations-comradery-club” for honest critique, constant support and invaluable advices, and the many other friends which have put up with these master frustrations. Finally I wish to add a remark on the many Syrians whom have reminded me of the humanity of the conflict. Their unwavering hope and continuous efforts for peaceful coexistence between all Syrians despite immense personal loss and increasingly

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<sup>2</sup> “The Law of Jante” constitutes then ten rules of the fictional town of Jante as imagined and described by author Aksel Sandemose. The underpinning of the Law of Jante is the discouragement of parising of oneself and ones abilities whilst creding all to the collective.



gloomy predictions should not be forgotten as they are muffled by the louder voices of the groups analysed here, but be an inspiration to all.

Kaja Holmeide Blattmann

Beirut, 20 May 2015

# Glossary of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AS	<i>Katā'ib Ahrār al-Shām</i>	The Freemen Battalions of al-Sham (alt. The Free People of al-Sham Battalions) (Referred to as Ahrar al-Sham)
AQ	<i>al-Qā'ida</i> or <i>Qā'idat al-Jihād</i> or <i>Tanzīm al-Qā'ida</i>	al-Qa'ida
FSA	<i>al-Jaysh al-Sūriyy al-Hurr</i>	Free Syrian Army
IF	<i>al-Jabha al-Islāmiyya</i>	Islamic Front
ISI	<i>al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fi-l- 'Irāq</i>	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	<i>al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi-l- 'Irāq wa-l-Shām</i>	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JN	<i>Jabhat al-Nuṣra li ahl al-Shām min Mujāhidī al-Shām fī Ṣāḥat al-Jihād</i>	The Support Front for the People of Greater al-Sham from the Fighters of al-Sham in The Field of Jihad (Referred to as Jabhat al-Nusra)
NC	<i>al-I'tilāf al-Waṭaniyy li-Quwā al-Thawra wa-l-Mu'āraḍa al-Sūriyya</i>	Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Referred to as the National Coalition)
NCB	<i>Hay'at al-Tansīq al-Waṭaniyya li-Quwā al-Taghyīr al-Dīmuqrūqrāṭiyy</i>	The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i>	Kurdish Democratic Union Party
PKK	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i>	Kurdistan Workers' Party
SMC	<i>al-Majlis al- 'Askariyy al- 'A' lā</i>	Supreme Military Council

SNC	<i>al-Majlis al-Waṭaniyy al-Sūriyy</i>	Syrian National Council
SIF	<i>al-Jabha al-Islāmiyya al-Sūriyya</i>	Syrian Islamic Front
SIG	<i>al-Ḥukūma al-ʿIntiqāliyya al-Sūriyya</i>	Syrian Interim Government
SILF	<i>Jabhat Taḥrīr Sūrīya al-Islāmiyya</i>	Syrian Islamic Liberation Front
SRF	<i>Jabhat Thuwwār Sūriyā</i>	Syria's Revolutionaries Front
YPG	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i>	People's Defence Units

# A note on transliteration and translation

For transliteration I have followed the transliteration chart and guidelines used by the International Journal of Middle East Studies.<sup>3</sup> In accordance with these guidelines, I use diacritical marks and italics when Arabic words or citations are left untranslated. I have left some words of Arabic origin untransliterated (with the exception of the Arabic letters ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (’) (not initial hamza)) in correspondence with the wordlist compiled by the International Journal of Middle East Studies over words which have entered the English language.<sup>4</sup>

Personal names, geographical locations and names of groups, parties and organizations, will not be italicized or written with diacritical marks, with the exception of the Arabic letters ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (’) (not initial hamza) with the exception of place names which have acquired a standardized English spelling.<sup>5</sup> Further I have chosen to transliterate place names according to their pronunciation in classical Arabic/Modern Standard Arabic (alt. *fuṣḥā*) as opposed to colloquial Arabic, English or French for the purpose of consistency in spelling. As such al-Ladhiqiya will be spelled as such as opposed to Latakia, Latakiah or Lattaquié, and similar Dayr al-Zur will be chosen over Deir Ezzur, Deir ez-Zur, Der Ezzor, Der Zor etc. As for the names of the armed factions, groups, parties and organizations I refer to in this analysis, I will write their full names in Arabic transliteration (following the above mentioned norm) as well as a full English translation first time mentioned. Thereafter I will pragmatically refer to some in English whilst other in Arabic transliteration, following the general standard of the foreign press as well as scholarly literature. For instance, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham will appear as such, whereas al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi-l-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham will be referred to in its English translation as The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. A full list of all groups referred to with full Arabic transliteration, translation and abbreviations is found in the preceding section entitled Abbreviations.

I will further transliterate Arabic in pausal mode without case endings, with the exception of *idāfa* constructions where *tā’ marbūṭa* (feminine ending) is transliterated as *at* (as opposed to regular *a*). *Hamzat al-waṣl* is omitted. In the case of words with an initial *shams* letter (alt. sun letter) preceding the definite article, I will not assimilate the preceding letter *lām*, for instance

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<sup>3</sup> “IJMES Translation & Transliteration Guide,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, [http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/IJMES\\_Translation\\_and\\_Transliteration\\_Guide.htm](http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/IJMES_Translation_and_Transliteration_Guide.htm).

<sup>4</sup> “IJME World List,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5 October 2010, <http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/docs/WordList.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Place names which appear in Mariam-Webster dictionary, such as Damascus and Aleppo, will be written as such.

*al-da`wa* (lit. call, commonly denotes proselytizing and preaching) will be transliterated as such as opposed to *ad- da`wa*. As Arabic does not distinguish between small and capital letters, titles and names will be capitalized according to the norms in English.

## **A note on citation**

A large number of the primary sources this study builds upon were originally published on password restricted online forums and social media profiles. Due to online censorship and the nature of the content published, a substantial number of the primary sources are no longer available on their original web-pages. The official publications of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, their original posts on these forums and social media profiles have to a large been collected and re-published by scholar Aaron Y. Zelin on the blog Jihadology.net. To facilitate the verification and secure consultation of my sources for the reader I have largely cited these sources in their re-published version on Zelin's blog. As for material published via social media profiles or currently closed web-pages I have cited their original location and date of publishment. To be sure, all cited documents, audio messages and film clips are stored electronically by the author.

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# 1 Introduction

Since 2012 Syria has arguably taken over the position previously held by Iraq as the focal point for the broader jihadist movement.<sup>6</sup> The conflict witnessed the rise of a new al-Qa'ida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as the entrance of an existing affiliate into the country, namely the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. Secondly, the rhetoric and ideology commonly associated with al-Qa'ida has seemingly been adopted by a larger number of self-identified Salafi-Jihadi insurgency groups. And thirdly, the Syrian civil war has become a recurrent point of reference in the broader jihadi discourse through publications by ideologues, organizations, armed groups and online supporters.

However the growing presence of Salafi-Jihadi groups in Syria has not manifested itself as a unified or homogenous movement. Rather the self-proclaimed Salafi-Jihadi groups have largely been unable to efficiently unify their efforts or ranks despite the creation of numerous coalitions. As for the relations between two al-Qa'ida affiliates, it has gradually deteriorated from rivalry into open warfare. By January 2014 intra-rebel rivalries had escalated into a parallel intra-rebel war, with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham on side and a broad spectrum of armed oppositional groups on the other, Jabhat al-Nusra included. In February the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham was rebuked by the overall al-Qa'ida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, making Jabhat al-Nusra its sole official affiliate in the country. The rebuke from al-Qa'ida and continuous rebel infighting notwithstanding, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham has not only remained a force to be reckoned with in the Syrian conflict but has resurged in Iraq increasing its territorial control substantially. By 29 June 2014 the group crowned its military and territorial come-back with a declaration of an Islamic caliphate claiming the title of Caliph for its leader.

As for the broader Salafi-Jihadi movement, the fall-out between the Salafi-jihadi factions in Syria has arguably reflected and potentially even created sharp divides within the broader movement. Thus, on the one hand the Syrian conflict has indisputably been coloured by the ideological influence of al-Qa'ida as the symbols, rhetoric and elements of the ideology commonly associated with the group have been adopted by a large number of Syrian insurgency groups. On the other hand the spread of Salafi-Jihadism in the conflict has not manifested itself as a unified force. Rather the collective of self-proclaimed Salafi-Jihadi has

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadism: Seven Assumptions Shaken by the Arab Spring", Memo from the conference "Rethinking Islamist Politics", published by Project on Middle East Political Science, 3 February 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/02/03/jihadism-seven-assumptions-shaken-by-the-arab-spring/>.

been characterized by factionalism, tension and rebel infighting. As such the Syrian civil war has become the scene for a Salafi-Jihadi awakening, as well as “full blown jihadi civil war”.<sup>7</sup>

Thus study attempts to go beyond the ideological and operational similarities assumed by the shared label of Salafi-Jihadi as well as an affiliation with al-Qa‘ida to explore the differences and fault lines within the Syrian Salafi-Jihadi scene. I have chosen three groups I consider to be representative of this scene, and whose publications constitute the primary empirical base for the analysis. These three groups are Jabhat al-Nusra (official al-Qa‘ida affiliate), the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (former al-Qa‘ida affiliate), and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (self-identified Salafi group). The time-frame of this study is from the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham in January 2012 up until May 2014.

The overarching question this analysis aims to answer is “what are the ideological differences between Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS and Ahrar al-Sham?” In addition to a review of how the groups themselves have conceptualized their differences, I will apply five parameters in the subsequent analysis which arguably reflects key divisive issues within the Salafi-Jihadi movement to further identify similarities and diverging stands and priorities amongst the three.

By comparing the ideological characteristics of the official al-Qa‘ida affiliate (Jabhat al-Nusra) with groups of similar outlook, the thesis might further shed light on what an affiliation with the group entails in a post-Arab Spring era. Similarly, the comparative analysis of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS up until 2014 arguably illustrates two diverging trends within the Salafi-Jihadi movement transcending the Syrian conflict.

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<sup>7</sup> Expression from Aron Lund, “One Year of Jihadi Civil War”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 9 April 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55297>.

# 2 Methodological overview and ethical considerations

## 2.1 Conceptual and methodological framework

### 2.1.1 Salafism

The three groups analysed here have received a large number of labels denoting their ideological and religious foundations as well as their actions. Ahrar al-Sham has been categorized as a “Syrian rebel brigade,”<sup>8</sup> “Islamist rebel group,”<sup>9</sup> “Islamist Brigade,”<sup>10</sup> “Salafi armed group,”<sup>11</sup> a “hardline Salafi group,”<sup>12</sup> “anti-Assad jihadist group,”<sup>13</sup> “independent jihadist,”<sup>14</sup> and “salafi jihadist unit.”<sup>15</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra as variably been described as a “Syrian salafist group,”<sup>16</sup> “Syria’s indigenous jihadist organization,”<sup>17</sup> “Syria’s homegrown Salafi-jihadist group”<sup>18</sup> “Salafi armed group,”<sup>19</sup> “salafi jihadist unit,”<sup>20</sup> “radical salafi-jihadi group,”<sup>21</sup> and, since its links with al-Qa‘ida was affirmed, it has perhaps most frequently been referred to simply as “al-Qa‘ida’s affiliate in Syria.” Finally, ISIS “jihadis”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lina Khatib, “The Nusra Front’s Game-Changing Rise in Syria”, *Carnegie*, 24 March 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/24/nusra-front-s-game-changing-rise-in-syria>.

<sup>9</sup> Aron Lund, “Islamist Merger in Syria: Ahrar al-Sham Swallows Suqour al-Sham”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie* Endowment, 23 March 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59471>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), ix

<sup>11</sup> “Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition”. *Middle East Report*. No. 131. International Crisis Group. 12 October 2012.

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Aron Lund, “Say Hello to the Islamic Front”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 22 November 2013, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53679>.

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, (London: William Collins, 2015) ix.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Weiss, “America’s Catch-Up Policy on Syria”, *NOW Lebanon*, 7 March 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/americas-catch-up-policy-on-syria>.

<sup>16</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, “The imminent Hezbollah-Nusra war”, *Now Lebanon*, 15 May 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/the-imminent-hezbollah-nusra-war>.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth O’Bagy, “Jihad in Syria,” *Middle East Security Report*, No. 6, September 2012, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf>, 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> “Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition”, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Weiss, “America’s Catch-Up Policy on Syria”.

<sup>21</sup> Aron Lund, “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front,” *UI Occasional Papers*, No. 17, March 2013, <http://www.ui.se/eng/upl/files/86861.pdf>, 30.

<sup>22</sup> “The slow backlash: Sunni religious authorities turn against Islamic State,” *The Economist*, 6 September 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21615634-sunni-religious-authorities-turn-against-islamic-state-slow-backlash>.

Whilst different assessments of the groups ideology certainly adds to the range, the large number of labels is more than anything symptomatic of the lack of a universally agreed upon terminology or categorizing framework for the classification of Islamic movements. Not only are there multiple attempts, by observers, scholars and members of Islamic movements themselves<sup>23</sup> but as Islamic movements arguably “moves” and evolves, the existing terminology is constantly the subject of reevaluation and re-definition.

As any precise categorization of a group, regardless of chosen terminology and classifying framework, presupposes an in-depth knowledge of the group’s ideological (and arguably theological) basis and operational activities, it is a task performed with greatest accuracy in the concluding chapter when such an in-depth analysis has been executed and presented. However the in-depth analysis itself presupposes a familiarity with the central tenants and characteristics of the broader ideological and political current or discourse to which the groups under scrutiny arguably pertains. In other words, the analysis of a group’s ideology is of little use unless the broader ideological current it arguably inhabits, challenges, influences, and draws its major tenants from is accounted for.

I have thus pragmatically chosen to adopt the less specific term of Salafi-Jihadi as conceptualized by Quintan Wiktorowicz to distinguish the groups from a broader spectrum of rebel groups in the uprising. “Salafi” or Salafism denotes the ideal of purifying the Islamic creed and the practice of religion, through a literalist interpretation of the religious scripts<sup>24</sup> and a strict adherence to the example of the first three generations of Muslims, or *al-ṣālaf al-ṣāliḥ* or the “righteous predecessors” (alt. “pious forefathers”). “Jihadi” denotes the endorsement of violence and armed activities conceptualized as jihad to replace the perceived un-Islamic leadership and power structures with the establishment of an Islamic states<sup>25</sup> - as opposed to non-violent, apolitical quietists purists and politicians engaged in party politics and elections.

To be sure, there are obvious and frequently criticized weaknesses and limitations of Wiktorowicz classifying framework, such as being too schematic, negligent of doctrinal and

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<sup>23</sup> For a good overview over such categorizing labels and frameworks as well as an assessment of their problematic nature and inherent weaknesses, see; Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism”, in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, Roel Meijer (ed.) (London: Hurst & Company, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> For some Salafis this entails a rejection of the four canonical schools of Islamic jurisdiction in Sunni Islam, and instead a sole dependency on *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) in legal matters. Other adherents of Salafism (such as the “branch” of Wahhabism ) follow the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisdiction. Bernard Haykel, «On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action», in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, Roel Meijer (ed.) (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 42.

<sup>25</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 29, Issue 3, 2006, [http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100500497004?journalCode=uter20#.U2lYe\\_1\\_trU](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100500497004?journalCode=uter20#.U2lYe_1_trU).

theological differences within Salafism, omitting additional aspects such as sectarianism, and mixing means and objectives<sup>26</sup> and inadequacy in illustrating the inner divergences and debates within the three categories.<sup>27</sup> Whilst some have compensated for this weakness by adding sub-branches to his trisection, others have skilfully produced alternative frameworks for classification altogether, such as Thomas Hegghammer's "Preference Based Typology".<sup>28</sup> In this particular study however, I consider the vagueness of the Salafi-Jihadi category to be an advantage considering that the three groups under scrutiny all fit its criteria thus allowing me to analyse the three groups without presupposing ideological similarities or differences.

### 2.1.2 Ideology and parameters as indicators of ideological distinctions

Addressing the three groups' ideology presupposes that they have one, which, depending on our definition and translation of ideology, the three groups themselves might dispute. Whilst they primarily use the loanword *aydiyūlūjiyya* (alternatively *īdiyūlūjiyyā*) to denote man-made, foreign and particular Western ideologies or political institutions which they ardently oppose, they commonly conceptualize the underlying basis for their own beliefs and actions with the two concepts of *ʿaqīda* and *manhaj*. In Salafi/Salafi-Jihadi discourse the two concepts are used complimentary to describe the "creed" and the "practice" of the Righteous Predecessors, with the normative assertion of *the* "right" or "correct" Islamic creed practice.<sup>29</sup> Now turning the table and asking whether or not *ʿaqīda* and *manhaj* constitutes an ideology or a religious belief, and whether the two are complementary or opposed to each other – depends on our chosen definition of ideology out of the ample selection of possible ones.

As illustrated by John Gerring's review of definitions of ideology most embody the aspects of self-definition, creed and practice<sup>30</sup> - three elements the three groups agree upon in theory as fellow "followers of the Righteous Predecessors" and seemingly sharing *ʿaqīda* and

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<sup>26</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism".

<sup>27</sup> Brynjar Lia, "Chapter 5: Jihadi Strategies and Doctrinarians", in *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa'ida and its Periphery*, (ed. Assaf Moghadam, Brian Fishman), Harmony Project/CTC, 103.

<sup>28</sup> As for applying the preference based typology of Islamist Activism by Hegghammer, I have found it problematic in this particular case. The premise for using this typology is the ability to pin-point the group's immediate priorities. I have found this difficult in this study where the group's actions and chosen enemies has arguably changed within the timeframe of this analysis – not least with the eruption of a parallel intra-jihadi war. However the key divisive factors at the basis of Hegghammer's typology will be included as parameters in the main analysis. Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism".

<sup>29</sup> Whilst the concepts of *ʿaqīda* embodies the meanings of "doctrine", "faith", "conviction" and "creed" *manhaj* (alternatively *minhaj*) can be translated as "a well-trodden path or trail", "procedure", "method", "practice" or "methodology".

<sup>30</sup> John Gerring, «Ideology: A Definitional Analysis», *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 1997, [www.jstor.org/stable/448995](http://www.jstor.org/stable/448995).

*manhaj*. To identify and address where and how these stands shared in theory are manifested themselves differently by the three groups I have selected five parameters reflecting some of the major disagreements and divergences within what is here referred to as the Salafi-Jihadi-movement. These five parameters or sub questions forms the basis for the analysis' five empirical chapters;

- What is the extent to which they conceptualize their differences and does it include *takfir* (excommunication)? (Chapter 4)
- What is the centrality of (armed) jihad in their discourse? (Chapter 5)
- What are the conditions and prerequisites for the establishment of an Islamic State? (Chapter 6)
- What and whom constitute the groups' hierarchy of enemies and target selection? (Chapter 7)
- How do the groups prioritize between territorial and creedal unity vs. geographical aims? (Chapter 8)

Building on the argumentation above, I consider the groups' stands regarding these parameters to be key components and distinguishers of their ideology, whilst acknowledging that the full breadth of what can be considered to be their ideology falls outside the scope of this analysis. For the sake of simplicity I will further reserve the use of the concept of ideology to denote group-specific ideology throughout the analysis whilst noting that this separation is purely analytical, and the ideological kinship between them will be emphasized and the validity of its distinction discussed in the conclusion.

### **2.1.3 A qualitative and quantitative analysis**

The empirical material to which the chosen parameters will be subjected is the groups' own publications thus limiting my focus to the self-projection of the group's ideology and their discursive practice. The empirical material which has been gathered through a long-term open source data collection consist of official statements from the groups, speeches of and interviews with their central leadership, film-clips from smaller affiliated battalions, as well as joint statements with other groups.

The analysis is primarily qualitative in so forth as it is primarily an in-depth study of the content of key official publications, such as speeches, promotional videos and interviews. The study is arguably also qualitative in so forth as I track the frequency and continuity of

certain stands and themes to identify possible changes over time and distinguish core narratives.

## **2.2 Limitations**

One of the greatest challenges of this study has been the nature of the Syrian conflict itself. Making a clear overview of organizational structure, the geographical span and the size of the insurgency groups is not only problematic due to the scarcity of verifiable sources, but further precluded by the frequent shifts in alliances, changing patterns of cooperation, the establishment of larger joint fronts and the dissolution of others. Furthermore, the insurgency groups partaking in the conflict have published, and continue to publish vast amounts of textual material, audio tapes and numerous videos online. Because of the complexity of the conflict, the immense size of potential sources and texts, as well as my own timely limitations I have had to narrow the scope of the study both in terms of time, geographical span and the selection of groups. In the following section I will explain and justify these choices, review some of the problematic aspects of the empirical study, and discuss the validity of the study despite such limitations and obstacles.

### **2.2.1 Limitation of groups**

Because of the large number of groups, their numerous publications and my own time limitations I have had to narrow the number of groups under scrutiny here to three; Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Ahrar al-Sham (AS). I have chosen these three groups over the multitude of others, as I consider them to illustrate both the influence and potency of Salafism (and Salafi-Jihadism) in the Syrian uprising as well as the inner disputes and varieties within this current. The three groups are among the largest and most influential groups of the armed uprising, both in terms of their geographical span, size and the appeal of their ideological message within the Salafi/Salafi-Jihadi flank of the armed uprising. I acknowledge that the analysis would benefit from including a fourth group representing an “Islamist flank” of the armed uprising. However, as this ideological or political flank of the armed uprising is by most accounts as heterogeneous as the Salafi-Jihadi one, choosing one group for the sake of comparison would be more suggestive than conclusive. Furthermore adding a fourth group to the analysis would be at the expense of the accuracy and depth of the analysis of the remaining three.



## 2.2.2 Limitation of source material

In the case of ISIS I will further limit the empirical study to the group's publications *as* ISIS, and not include statements from the group under its former name of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In other words the empirical body of publications from ISIS is limited to the timeframe from April 2013 to May 2014. I will neither include statements published within this timeframe regarding the group's military operations in Iraq unless its presence and actions Syria is explicitly mentioned.

As for AS, the group has been a leading faction in three larger coalitions, The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF),<sup>31</sup> the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) and the Islamic Front (IF). Considering AS' central role in these fronts, I will include the charters, official communiqués and joint statements from these coalitions in the analysis in so forth AS has signed, or is explicitly mentioned or referred to. However, statements and military communiqués from other member factions of these fronts will not be included in analysis due to the sheer amount of material published.

Finally, whilst JN considers itself part of al-Qa'ida (AQ) and acknowledges the authority of Ayman al-Zawahiri I will not include the official statements of the latter as part of the empirical basis for the study of JN's ideology unless republished or quoted by the group's official media wing. The same goes for ISIS in the time-frame of its (at least formal) affiliation with AQ until February 2014. Whilst the ideological influence of al-Qa'ida on ISIS and JN is undoubtable there have also been ideological debate and disagreements. Whilst the extent of both similarities and discrepancies are of obvious interest and relevance it is worthy of a study in itself and falls outside the scope of this paper. Statements of al-Zawahiri, as well as other members of the al-Qa'ida leadership will however be included in so forth that they are informative about the evolution of the groups and their relations to al-Qa'ida itself. Similarly there are other statements from other armed groups, ideologues and supporters which are of potential relevance. Where such publications shed light on the abovementioned three's ideology, military operations, actions in rebel governance or rebel infighting, they will be included to illustrate the context and changing dynamics of the groups.

Due to own time restrictions, I have limited the timeframe of the empirical material to two and a half years, from January 2012 to May 2014. However as the conflict is still on-going and statements published after May 2014 or prior to January 2012 might shed light on past developments, this time frame is treated pragmatically.

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<sup>31</sup> Not to be confused with its namesake, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front established by 15 armed factions affiliated with the Free Syrian Army in December 2013.

## 2.3 Remarks on the authenticity, reliability and validity of the empirical material

### 2.3.1 The selection of empirical material

As for the task of gathering a “complete” body of publications it is problematic not solely due to the vast amount of material published, but also the nature of the channels of publications. Over the course of the study, all three groups have gradually come to rely heavily on social media as their primary channels for publications. As some of their published material has been of a brutal and violent character, they have increasingly been subjected to online-censorship and removed. Similarly, their second type of publication channels, namely central online jihadi forums, are regularly shut-down for shorter or longer timespans. That said, publications removed or in other ways made unavailable from their original channels, have for the most part been collected and subsequently re-distributed online by analysis and researches, as well as via blogs and social media profiles run by what is commonly referred to as the “online jihadi fraternity”. In particular the most important speeches and film clips from the leadership of the group gain a near “canonical” status within the jihadi movement through widespread redistribution online. Thus, claiming complete overview over all *official* online publications is hardly possible, however I consider the size and content of my “empirical collection” substantial enough to complete this analysis with a high degree of accuracy. As for “unofficial” publications which are not published via the group’s official media wings or web pages, such as pamphlets, graffiti, murals, banners and school books, my access is limited to what the groups choose to publish online or what other groups or activists republish. The same goes for speeches, meeting protocols, verdicts from shar‘ia courts and so forth. The inaccessibility of such “unofficial” publications and the impossibility of my presence at such public appearances constitute an obvious obstacle to gaining a complete overview of the manifestations of the group’s ideology. However, even if a complete overview of all publications is not obtainable, I do not regard this empirical shortcoming of such severity as to overshadow the importance of the study in itself. Furthermore I consider the large extent and varied content of the actual collected body of publications to moderately compensate for this empirical shortcoming.

As for the content of the official publications, I will include written texts and speeches in the analysis. Poems and militant hymns (*anāshīd*) will not however be included partially based on a necessity to delimit the empirical body to a feasible amount. Although such literary

expressions are clearly illustrative of the groups' discourse, I consider the content of a more symbolic character and thus less informative and direct than speeches, military and political statements.

### **2.3.2 The authenticity of the content**

Another obvious challenge related to the empirical material concerns the authenticity of the publications as there have been several known examples of "false statements" and false flag operations, and potentially many more yet unknown. The procedure of verifying the authenticity of the source of the publications largely depends on the group's own control and oversight. However as the groups' have paid great attention to this subject and published corrective statements where both false statements and unofficial media channels are rejected, I consider the risk of including such fake statements into my study to be relatively small.

### **2.3.3 Reliability of the information in the publications**

As my study is primarily based on the material published by the groups themselves, another obvious dilemma is the reliability of the information they provide. It would be naïve not to presume that the groups display a degree of self-censorship as well as self-praise in their publications. Similarly, one should expect that parts of their activities will be presented in a particularly favorable way, whilst other activities are neglected in their online self-projection of themselves. I have chosen to treat this dilemma pragmatically by limiting my focus to the self-projection of the group's ideology and their discursive practice, thus rendering the dilemma of the reliability of the information they publish less relevant. For instance, a promotional film clip from one particular group showing combat training of children cannot be used as unequivocal evidence proving that the group actually deploys minors in armed operations. Such film clips is however evidence that the group use children in the role of soldiers in their propaganda, and consequently indicating that the group to a certain extent endorse children soldiers in principle. To compare, a different group who does not publish films of children in combat training, might still employ minors in armed operations.

Following this logic, my empirical material does not allow me to speculate about what certain groups "really" wants, what they "really do", or if they have hidden intentions or agendas. That said I consider the following in-depth study of what they actually say, and claim to do, to be indicative of what their actions and agendas if not offering a complete picture.

Consequently I consider this study to be more than an analysis of mere propaganda but also informative of their aims, priorities and actions.

Finally secondary sources such as reports and articles from researchers, journalists or activists, constitute a natural and necessary supplement by providing important additional information regarding the group's activities.

### **2.3.4 Inequality of source material**

As the three groups have had different focus in their PR-campaigns, the mapping of their military operations and combat activities suffers from an inequality of source material. For instance JN has established a media wing solely for the purpose of reporting their *da'wa* activities and relief work. Further, the group have published numbered military communiqués regularly where their military activities, cooperation and targets are documented. AS and ISIS on the other hand have published a large number of film clips where both combat and non-combat activities are documented, but the regularity of these as well as the degree of details in terms of location, duration and cooperation varies greatly. And whilst media reports to a certain extent might compliment and even out this empirical imbalance, their focus on ISIS and JN at the expense of AS for obvious reasons, constitute another empirical imbalance.

### **2.3.5 Inner divergences and variations of each group**

As with any organization or group the three groups under scrutiny here are not entirely unified and coherent entities, but rather encompass rivalling personalities and trends. Whilst such inner divergences and variations can at times be discerned through gradual changes, they have been not discussed or included in the groups' own official publications. As such, this study will not touch upon the competing trends, inner rivalries and differences within each group. Similarly, it should further be emphasized that this study concerns itself with the ideological production of these three groups, whilst not addressing the extent of its endorsement among the groups' own members. As such it should be noted that amongst the many reasons while people have, and continue to, join the ranks of the three, ideology is but one – and endorsement of the groups ideology is not necessarily a requirement for joining the group or fighting alongside it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance the survey of 50 fighters, including members of AS and JN, briefly outlined in the article cited under. Whilst the number interviewed were limited, the researchers notes a high degree of support for a

## 2.4 Language and translation loss

Another issue worthy of mention relates to the fact that the texts, film clips and audio tapes forming the empirical basis of this study are with few exceptions in Arabic. As is the case with any language, translating sections of text will by necessity involve degrees of translation loss.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, religious terminology and certain key concept with a centrality within Islamic theology have acquired different meanings within various religious schools, sectarian groups or religious communities. As such, dogmatic or theological differences between say Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims can sometimes manifest itself at a word-level with the result that one particular concept used might be used differently or have a different value or centrality depending on the speakers religious beliefs and background.

As the rhetoric and discourse of the groups constitutes a central aspect of this study, the accuracy of the translations is of the outmost importance. Thus, I have chosen to leave some the central key concepts untranslated and instead provide a partial translation in parenthesis or a more extensive explanation in footnotes. If not specified otherwise, all translations are my own.

Furthermore, in the translation of the publications of the groups I have taken the liberty of omitting some of the repeated, formulaic expressions, such as “May His peace and prayers be upon him” after every mentioning of the Prophet. These are frequently used expressions in discourse of the groups under scrutiny in this study, as well as political parties and everyday speech. Although such expressions underline the religiosity or religious character of the speakers discourse they are arguably not of any deeper or more informative significance. Because of the high frequency of such expressions in everyday discourse, and the lack of parallel common expressions in English, I have chosen to omit some of them so as not “foreignize” or “exotify” the language to the English reader. For the same reason I have chosen to translate the Arabic (*Allāh*) to English God.

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democratic system, as well various motivations for joining AS and JN spanning from better fighting conditions, medical aid and the common cause of removing the Assad-regime. Vera Miranova, Loubna Mrie, Richard Nielsen and Sam Whitt, “Syria’s Democratic Jihad: Why ISIS Fighters Support the Vote”, *Foreign Affairs*, 13 January 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-01-13/syrias-democracy-jihad>.

<sup>33</sup> The ambiguity, associations and connotations of a certain word in the source language might not be reflected in the nearest equivalent word in the target language. In the case of Arabic some argue that this is particular problematic as the richness of the language is not only manifested in its large vocabulary but also at word-level in the multitude of meanings and connotations a single word can embody. Furthermore many of the central key concepts in Arabic which have become somewhat semantically synchronized with the English equivalent concepts, they still retain some of the connotations, associations and uses from its own cultural-linguistic history.

## 2.5 Ethical considerations

This study has been conducted in accordance with the guidelines for research ethics at University of Oslo<sup>34</sup> in addition to the guidelines presented by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH).<sup>35</sup> There are additionally a number of problematic issues and ethical dilemmas related to studying an ongoing conflict, and in particular one of such complexities as the Syrian civil war, which should be offered some consideration.

Firstly, in-depth analysis of the three groups would ideally be accompanied by an equally thorough and detailed account of their spatial and temporal context. However, in practice a more extensive overview of the conflict and the discourse of opposition far exceed the scope of this study. I have compensated for this by interweaving what I consider to be the necessary background and chronology of the Syrian conflict with an overview with the emergence and evolution of these three groups in the first empirical chapter. This is chosen primarily for two reasons. Firstly, I consider a chronological presentation of the conflict's evolution the best way to accurately illustrate its complexities. And secondly, the central role of the three groups considered, an introductory narration of the conflict would be incomplete without including the three, whereas a division into two separate chapters would make for a tediously repetitive read. That said, the necessary alternation between an in-depth focus on the three groups and a briefer and more generalized review of the broader landscape of groups and oppositional movements should not be interpreted as a reflection of the actual influence and importance of the former in the conflict.

Secondly, there are a number of problematic issues related to the increasingly sectarian aspect of the conflict, referring to sectarian motivated violence and the militarization of minority communities,<sup>36</sup> but also the normalization of sectarian animosity in the groups' rhetoric and narratives of the conflict based overwhelmingly on religious/sect-based generalizations. One problematic issue is how to accurately analyse the groups' discourse and their use of derogatory terms of religious communities whilst not endorsing their application.

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<sup>34</sup> "Etiske Retningslinjer", Universitetet i Oslo, 18 February 2011, <http://www.uio.no/om/regelverk/etiske-retningslinjer/>.

<sup>35</sup> "Forskningsetiske Retningslinjer for samfunnsvitenskap, Humaniora, Juss og teologi", Forskningsetiske Komiteer, 24 April 2012, [http://www.etikkom.no/Documents/Publikasjoner-som-PDF/Forskningsetiske%20retningslinjer%20for%20samfunnsvitenskap.%20humaniora.%20juss%20og%20teologi%20\(2006\).pdf](http://www.etikkom.no/Documents/Publikasjoner-som-PDF/Forskningsetiske%20retningslinjer%20for%20samfunnsvitenskap.%20humaniora.%20juss%20og%20teologi%20(2006).pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Holliday, «The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War», *Middle East Security Report*, No. 8, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf>, 18.

To best portray the groups discourse I have chosen to deploy such derogatory terms in my analysis whilst writing them in brackets to attribute the use of such terms to the groups as opposed to myself. Similarly, generalization regarding whom the groups refer to as “the Jews” also forms part of their discourse and subsequently becomes relative to my analysis. In a similar manner I will refer to whom the groups refer to as “the Jews” in brackets. In regards to the sectarian aspects of the conflict it should be noted that whilst the increasing politicization of ethnic and sectarian identities is an important mobilizing dynamic of the conflict and as such should not be neglected, it should neither be emphasized as *the* main driving force. Painting a picture of the country as an ethno-sectarian mosaic where civil war has always been in the cards, neglects the long history of co-existence and cooperation across sectarian and ethnic identities, just as it neglects the fact that ethnic and sectarian minorities are present in most camps of the opposition as well the pro-regime flank.

Thirdly, I consider the general lack of transparency from all sides partaking in the conflict precluding a clear overview of the conflict to be a practical as well as an ethical dilemma. Central issues such as transnational (and national) alliances, the involvement of regional powers, channels of funding, rebel infighting and war crimes are subjects where verifiable information is scarce but accusations are plenty. As my main focus is on the group’s own publications and how they themselves portray their role and *modus operandi*, I consider this weakness to be of less gravity. In cases where the groups’ information is scarcer and/or highly biased, such as their engagement in rebel infighting and rebel governance, I have to a greater extent supplemented with information from media, activists and observers. Where this is the case I will clarify the nature of the source and discuss its reliability.

Fourthly, I have chosen to refer to the group that calls itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, as such or abbreviated as ISIS - reflecting the way the group refers to itself. The use of a definite article preceding the group’s chosen name should however not be interpreted as a recognition or a legitimation of the group’s self-professed status as “a state” nor as being Islamic.

Fifthly, the three groups refer to some of their members or other individuals considered religious authorities by honorary titles such as doctor, shaykh, *’amīr* (commander or prince) and *amīr al-mu’minīn* (commander of the faithful). I will include such titles in quotations and other contexts where its use is relevant to illustrate the position and esteem such individuals hold within the group. However, as such titles are considered to be signs of religious authority and respect by a population much larger than the supporters of these groups alone, I will not apply such titles in references to such individuals in my own analysis.

Finally, I must acknowledge my role as an observer with a geographical distance to the conflict, and enclosed in a public discourse on Syria which have shifted from starch condemnation of the regime to an “anti-terror” angle arguably benefitting the regime. Additionally, as a former student in the country with friends and acquaintances greatly affected by the ongoing war, my remoteness in kilometer does not translate into detachment. Thus, I have attempted to my greatest effort to offer an objective analysis of one flank of the opposition built on the empirical material available whilst leaving causal suppositions and condemnations aside.



### 3 Chronological overview

The Syrian uprising and subsequent war is commonly traced back to events in Der‘a in mid-March, shortly after popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia had succeeded in ousting their presidents. The Mohammad al-Bu‘azizi<sup>37</sup> or the Khalid Sa‘id<sup>38</sup> of Syria was a small group of school children spray-painting anti-regime slogans in the city of Der‘a south of the capital.<sup>39</sup> Their arrest and torture at the hands of the notorious security services sparked demonstrations in the southern city, and the subsequent brutal attempts to quell the growing public manifestations of opposition merely caused them to increase and spread to other parts of the country. However, similar to Egypt and Tunisia, the discontent that fuelled the uprising in Syria ran deeper and stemmed from a multitude of political, economic, social and religious issues with a history much older than March 2011. In short, during the presidency of the two Assads (Hafiz al-Assad 1971-2000, Bashar al-Assad 2000-...) any oppositional movements of a political or religious nature had met harsh repression and any upsurge of violence or attempts at regime change had been met crushed with overwhelming force.<sup>40</sup> The political and economic elite of the country was largely concentrated around the Assad extended family, and their allies within the Sunni merchant class.<sup>41</sup> The religious ‘Alawite minority, to which the Assads pertained, were disproportionately represented in the political leadership, the echelons

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<sup>37</sup> Mohammad al-Bu‘azizi was a Tunisian fruit vendor who set himself on fire in protest 17 December 2010 and became a popular symbol for the subsequent popular uprising in the country.

<sup>38</sup> Khalid Sa‘id was a young Egyptian reportedly beaten to death by the police 6 June 2010, and who posthumously became a mobilizing symbol (and protagonist of the viral online campaign “We are all Khaled Said”) in the Egyptian popular uprising in 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Der‘a is commonly portrayed as the “birthplace of the revolution” in popular narratives, but public demonstrations also erupted in the city of Banyas as early as 18 March. “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People’s Slow-motion Revolution”, *Middle East/North Africa Report No. 108*, International Crisis Group, 6 July 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/108-%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VI%20-%20The%20Syrian%20Peoples%20Slow-motion%20Revolution.pdf> 11.

<sup>40</sup> The most well-known example is the Muslim Brotherhood dominated uprising which arose in the mid-70s and ended with the bombing of Hama in 1982, see for instance, Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81-129. More recent examples include the “Damascus Spring” in 2000-01 and the Qamishli uprising in 2004. For more on the former, see Joe Pace and Joshua Landis, “The Syrian Opposition: The Struggle for unity and relevance, 2003-2008”, in *Demystifying Syria*, Fred H. Lawson (ed.), (London: Saqi 2009), 120-121. Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*, 2.ed. (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 61-75. For more on the latter, see Julie Gauthier, “The 2004 Events in al-Qamishli: Has the Kurdish Question erupted in Syria?” (translated by Diana V. Galbraith), in *Demystifying Syria*, Fred H. Lawson (ed.), (London: Saqi 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Salwa Ismail, “Changing Social Structures, Shifting Alliances and Authoritarianism in Syria”, in *Demystifying Syria*, Fred H. Lawson (ed.), London: Saqi 2009.

of the army hierarchy and the security services.<sup>42</sup> The list of other potential and complimentary push- and pull-factors for igniting a protest against the regime goes on with rising cost of living, marginalization of the provinces, rivalries between different flanks of the ruling cadre, a growing Salafi-movement,<sup>43</sup> a devastating drought,<sup>44</sup> economic liberalization without mechanisms for redistribution of wealth,<sup>45</sup> severe limitations on freedom of speech, widespread surveillance from an infamous secret police, oppression and large restrictions on the civil society.<sup>46</sup> In sum, the glass of discontent was already filled to the brim and the events in Der'a appeared to be merely the last drop.

Whilst Bashar al-Assad had come to be seen as a relatively moderate force in the region, not least by a number of European countries<sup>47</sup> the regime's response to the uprising of 2011 was far from moderate. Neither the political "carrot" of promising reforms and elections, nor the "stick" of increased state violence, surveillance and arrests, managed to quell the growing public display of dissent and discontent.<sup>48</sup> The regime portrayed itself as guarantors of security, secularity and the protection of the country's religious minorities whilst framing the uprising as a whole as a "foreign conspiracy" largely led by "terrorists."<sup>49</sup> Simultaneously

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<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that only a smaller section of the country's 'Alawite population are in fact in positions of power, and the majority is still considered to be economically and politically marginalized. Hassan al-Qalish, "Not All of Syria's Alawites Support President Assad," *Al-Monitor*, 10 August 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2012/08/are-all-of-syrias-alawites-really-with-the-regime.html#>.

Whether or not the regime, whose politics are according to themselves highly secular, is innately sectarian or not continues to be a highly debated subject.

<sup>43</sup> Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front", 8-10.

<sup>44</sup> Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrel, "Climate Change Before and After the Arab Awakening: The Cases for Syria and Libya", *The Arab Spring and Climate Change: A Climate and Security Correlations Series*, February 2013, <http://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/climatechange-arab-spring-ccs-cap-stimson.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Majid Rafizadeh, "In Syria, Follow the Money to Find the Roots of the Revolt," *The Daily Beast*, 4 August 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/08/in-syria-follow-the-money-to-find-the-roots-of-the-revolt.html>.

<sup>46</sup> For a good overview of some of the central factors fuelling the popular movement in the early phase see, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution", 11-29.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the reform efforts, or alternatively the upgraded authoritarianism, of Bashar al-Assad and an assessment of its failures, see Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading to revolution?'," *International Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 1, January 2012, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x/citedby>. Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Adaptive Authoritarianism", in *POEMPS Studies 5: The Political Science of Syria's War*, No. 5, 18 December 2013, [http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/POMEPS\\_Studies5\\_PoliSciSyria.pdf](http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/POMEPS_Studies5_PoliSciSyria.pdf). During the first ten year of his presidency, Bashar al-Assad not only maintained good relations with long standing allies, such as Russia and Iran, but also improved relations with Turkey and the EU. Fred H. Lawson, "The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship: Syrian-Turkish relations since 1998", in *Demystifying Syria*, Fred H. Lawson (ed.), (London: Saqi 2009). Anja Zorob, "Partnership with the European Union: Hopes, risks and challenges for the Syrian economy", in *Demystifying Syria*, Fred H. Lawson (ed.), (London: Saqi 2009).

<sup>48</sup> For more on the Syrian regimes responses to the uprising see Jonathan Spyer, "Syrian Regime Strategy and the Syrian Civil War", *MERIA Journal*, vol. 16, no. 03, 14 November 2012, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2012/11/syrian-regime-strategy-and-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

<sup>49</sup> "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide",

releasing former fighters in Iraq, their recruiters and facilitators from prison summer 2012 - arguably infused the uprising with a cadre of motivated, experienced fighters of various degrees of Salafi-Jihadi inclinations.<sup>50</sup>

In the camp of the regime loyalists and supporters were large parts of the old economic and political elite (with the exception of early defectors), sections of the army, security services and a growing number of pro-regime militias. Among its regional allies, the regime came to count on the financial, military and vocal support primarily from Iran, the Iraqi (Shi'ite) political leadership, Iraqi Shi'ite militias, and Hizballah in Lebanon. Further China and Russia provided financial support, loans, credit lines and crucial vetoes in the UN Security Council.

Arguably in a “middle position” between the opposition demanding regime removal and the hard-core regime loyalists, was a number of pre-existing political parties and organizations as well as some new formations.<sup>51</sup> At (the varying degrees of) mercy of the regime, these parties have remained inside the country where they call for dialogue with the regime and for its gradual reform rather than a complete regime removal. Their presumed lenience towards the regime gained them the label of “regime collaborators” by many of the oppositional groups. Whereas most of these “middle position” parties and groups has not yet gained any larger influence or importance in the post-2011 Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) and its armed wing the People's Defence Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) are noticeable exceptions.<sup>52</sup> Whereas the party's political thrust in Damascus is less noticeable, the group and its military wing had by summer 2014 established a *de facto* Kurdish proto-state in Kurdish majority regions and adjacent areas in the Northern and North-Eastern parts of Syria.

Finally there is the third complex and diverse category of the opposition. Already from an early phase of the conflict, the opposition was split into three larger “blocks” divided by

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*Middle East/North Africa Report*, No. 109, International Crisis Group 13 July 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20--%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf> 2-4.

<sup>50</sup> Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, 144-149.

<sup>51</sup> Most of these parties joined efforts in The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB) established June 2011. for more on NCB, see “National Coordination Body for Democratic Change”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 15 January 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48369>. And for more on the disputes within NCB, see Aron Lund, “A Rift in the National Coordination Body”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 31 January 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54381>.

<sup>52</sup> For more on PYD/YPGs emerging role in the Syrian conflict, as well as its position within the complex topography of Kurdish parties see, «Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle», *International Crisis Group Middle East Report*, No. 136, International Crisis Group, 22 January 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/136-syrias-kurds-a-struggle-within-a-struggle.pdf>.

their preferred means of opposing the regime; non-violent activist,<sup>53</sup> a political opposition in exile, and a growing number of armed factions fighting the regime on the ground.

The “block” or “flank” commonly referred to as the political opposition in exile refers to the many political activists, human rights lawyers, “veteran dissidents”, army defectors and religious figures – all attempting to oust the regime primarily through political means from outside the country. Over the course of the past four years they have joined efforts in the establishment of a number of parties and councils, most prominently the Syrian National Council (*al-Majlis al-Wataniyy al-Suriyy*, or SNC) established August 2011, the Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (*al-I'tilaf al-Wataniyy li-Quwa al-Thawra wa-l-Mu'araaa al-Suriyya*, hereafter referred to as the National Coalition or NC) established November 2012, and the Syrian Interim Government (*al-Hukuma al-'Intiqaliyya al-Suriyya*, SIG) initiated March 2013. The initiatives of the political opposition in exile have largely been precluded by personal rivalries, juggling the interest of its rivalling patrons<sup>54</sup> and the insufficient means and experience to carry the daunting task and unrealistic expectations following its appointment as “the legitimate representative of the Syrian people”.<sup>55</sup> Their main link with the armed opposition has been through their support of the Free Syrian Army, and later in the establishment of the coordinating structure of the Supreme Military Council.<sup>56</sup>

As for the multifaceted and diverse assembly of the numerous armed oppositional groups,<sup>57</sup> it has, much like the political opposition in exile, been unable to form a unified force on the ground. Whilst the first armed groups seemingly emerged as an extension of the demonstrations early autumn 2011, the armed opposition evolved into a different “flank” of

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<sup>53</sup> The first block (non-violent activists) is of less centrality to the upcoming analysis and will not be presented at length here, however their importance due to their dissemination of information, role in governance in liberated areas and as watchdogs monitoring both regime and rebel violations of human rights is nonetheless substantial.

<sup>54</sup> For instance the rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Qatar are mirrored within the Syrian political opposition, as the states have supported each their own individuals and parties. See for instance Fehim Tastekin, “Saudi Arabia and Qatar Vie for Influence in Syria”, *al-Monitor*, 17 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/saudi-arabia-qatar-vie-influence-syria.html#ixzz3bFcrJd9z> and Chris Zambelis, “Royal Rivalry in the Levant: Saudi Arabia and Qatar Duel over Syria”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 11, Issue 16, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=41249&no\\_cache=1#.VWR05fntmko](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41249&no_cache=1#.VWR05fntmko).

<sup>55</sup> The international diplomatic collective constituting “The Group of Friends of the Syrian People” (or Friends of Syria) recognized the Syrian National Coalition as “legitimate representative” of Syria December 2012 at a conference in Marrakech where delegates from 114 countries were present.

<sup>56</sup> For more on SMC see here “Statement on the Formation of the Supreme Military Council Command of Syria”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, [undated], <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50445>.

<sup>57</sup> Estimates of the total number of armed oppositional groups have varied greatly. Carter Center who have monitored the establishments, mergers, and dissolutions of armed groups had by August 2014 registered approximately 6000 individual armed groups and military councils which together constitute a constantly changing network of more than 1000 groupings. “Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4”, *The Carter Center*, 11 September 2014, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate-Sept-18-2014.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate-Sept-18-2014.pdf), 11.

the opposition altogether as the conflict became increasingly militarized. Whilst the label of “Free Syrian Army” (*al-Jaysh al-Suriyy al-Hurr*, FSA) echoed in the many announcements of armed groups and a central leadership of the FSA became established in Turkey, it did not evolve into the formalized or centralized army it name implies.<sup>58</sup> Whilst the formal leadership, itself harbouring inner rivalries,<sup>59</sup> have remained close to the political opposition in exile, it has arguably failed to create stable links and a centralized command over the many diverse armed groups carrying its banner.<sup>60</sup> Further an armed faction’s affiliation with FSA commonly overlapped with its membership in larger armed coalitions or alliances inside the country. In sum, the militarization of the conflict fostered some groups which carried the banner of FSA and others not, as well as coalitions united by geographical proximity, ideological similarities or mere pragmatics. As such the ideological heterogeneity, size and scope of each coalition varied greatly. And regardless of whether they remained affiliated with the FSA-banner and/or –leadership, most of them evolved into separate units with their own names, banners, leaders and a public presence online. This is the case for two of the three main protagonists of this analysis which publically entered the scene of the armed uprising in January 2012.

### **3.1 The establishment and early evolution of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra:**

Ahrar al-Sham<sup>61</sup> announced their establishment publically in January 2012, however it had been active since June 2011 primarily in the governorates of Hama and Idlib.<sup>62</sup> The group’s leader went by the *nom de guerre* Abu ‘Abdullah al-Hamawiyy but later went public by his

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<sup>58</sup> Some have even argued that a Free Syrian Army never truly existed. “Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4”, 11.

<sup>59</sup> For more on the inner rivalries of FSA, see for instance; Aron Lund, “The Free Syrian Armies: Institutional Split”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 25 March 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55085>, and Aron Lund, “The Free Syrian Armies: Failed Reconciliation”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 26 March 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55104>.

<sup>60</sup> There have been several attempts to reduce the distance between the political opposition and the FSA leadership in exile and the armed groups in Syria, most notably with the establishment of the Supreme Military Command (SMC). The aim of the SMC was to create a structure of command, a system for funneling support and interlink the FSA in and outside Syria. Whilst it had some success in certain areas, primarily Aleppo, it did persist or evolve into a more stable or long-term structure.

<sup>61</sup> The full name of the group is *Kata’ib Ahrār al-Shām* (the Freeman Battalions of al-Sham or The Free People of al-Sham Battalions, AS). By late January 2013 the group changed its name to Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (the Freeman Movement of al-Sham or The Free People of al-Sham Movement). For the sake of simplicity, as well as reflecting the common short version of which the group is known in regional media and commonly referred to in its own publications, I will refer to it in short as Ahrar al-Sham, or AS.

<sup>62</sup> Lund, “Say Hello to the Islamic Front”.

real name, Hassan ‘Abbud.<sup>63</sup> The group prided itself as “one of the first organized union of battalions” to take up arms against the regime,<sup>64</sup> but neither then nor later did it reveal much in regards to its activities prior to going public or further details surrounding the establishment.<sup>65</sup>

Like AS, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)<sup>66</sup> went public as a group in January 2012 some months after its actual establishment. Whereas the details surrounding its establishment was kept secret at the time, it was later revealed and confirmed that the group had been established by members of the Iraqi al-Qa‘ida affiliate, Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) sometime during autumn 2011.<sup>67</sup> The secrecy regarding the identity of its leader, going by the *nom de guerre* of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, however has remained.

Yet, the founding statement contained no reference to the ISI or AQ whatsoever. Rather JN’s message and rhetoric largely likened that of AS, whilst also vaguely hinting at a commitment to the imperative of armed jihad prior to the establishment of the group.

In the months that followed, JN rapidly gained the attention of the regional and Western press due to their large scale urban bombings and regular use of suicide bombers – tactics which were unprecedented in the conflict thus far. Further, the group’s preference for using top-tier jihadi forums for the dissemination of their statements and film clips rapidly gained them the reputation as the “Syrian al-Qa‘ida branch” or “al-Qa‘ida-like group”.

Over the course of 2012, the growth of JN and AS corresponded with a proliferation of armed oppositional groups who increasingly challenged the military hegemony of the regime. Both increased geographical scope<sup>68</sup> and the number of their fighters and member factions<sup>69</sup> - merging with local groups as well as welcoming many of the foreign fighters entering the

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<sup>63</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni, *Liqa’ al-Yawm* (Today’s Meeting), Al Jazeera, 11 June 2013, 48:29. <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/28fb39ff-06ea-47c9-a1ae-ec7dc64fd624>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> In an interview with Rania Abouzeid a member of Arhar al-Sham claimed that the group started forming brigades “after the Egyptian Revolution” and well before the March events in Der‘a and Banyas. However this is an individual claim I have not seen repeated by other members of the group. Rania Abouzeid. “TIME Exclusive: Meet the Islamist Militants Fighting Alongside Syria’s Rebels”, *TIME*, 26 July 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/26/time-exclusive-meet-the-islamist-militants-fighting-alongside-syrias-rebels/#ixzz2wExLi1fi>.

<sup>66</sup> The full name of the group is *Jabhat al-Nusra li ahl al-Sham min Mujahidi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad* (The Support Front for the People of Greater al-Sham from the Fighters of al-Sham in the Field of Jihad).

<sup>67</sup> According to journalist Rania Abouzeid, al-Jawlani went from Iraq to Syria to establish JN as early as August 2011 and conducted its first attack against a State Security branch in Damascus in December a month prior to going public. Rania Abouzeid, “The Jihad Next Door”, *Politico*, 23 June 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214.html#ixzz35jd05BRf>.

As will be treated more extensively later, the question of whether it was established as a Syrian branch of ISI or merely with its support has become polemic.

<sup>68</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>69</sup> According to Aron Lund AS comprised 27 armed units in May 2012, to 50 in July and 100 by mid-January 2013 Lund, “Syria’s Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front”, 17.

country, within its ranks. The two further expanded their operational activities to include social work, aid distribution, *da'wa*, (proselytizing and preaching), and rebel governance.<sup>70</sup> As for their position within the broader topography of the armed uprising, AS formalized their alliances with several other larger armed groups in the establishment of first The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (*Jabhat Thuwwar Suriya*, SRF)<sup>71</sup> and later the Syrian Islamic Front (*al-Jabha al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya*, SIF) - one of the largest fronts outside the "FSA umbrella". JN for their part did not join any such group, but increasingly engaged in military cooperation with a large number of other armed groups. Whereas both exemplified a broader trend of groups proclaiming their adherence to "the Righteous Predecessors" and conceptualizing their fight as jihad, and similarly rejected the efforts of the political opposition in exile, this did not necessarily entail a rejection of FSA linked groups as collaborators on the ground. And even if JN was presumed by many observers and armed groups alike to be an al-Qa'ida affiliate, the group's military efficiency and potency seemingly made it a convenient ally regardless of apparent ideological differences. An illustrative example of this is the broad support JN received when US authorities put it on its list of global terrorists arguing it was a sub-branch of ISI and under the direct control of its leader. The decision sparked a wave of protest within all three camps of the opposition with central figures of the political opposition in exile condemning the decision and activists organizing pro-JN rallies under banners such as "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra". A common trait in these statements of public support for JN, was the seeming irrelevance of the groups presumed affiliation with AQ and the branding of the regime as the "real terrorist".<sup>72</sup> By April 2013 when ISI entered the conflict under its own banner, AS and JN were arguably among the largest and most influential groups of the armed uprising.

### 3.2 The entrance of ISIS

The official entrance of the Iraqi-based al-Qa'ida of worldwide reputation came in the form of a statement/audio speech when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,<sup>73</sup> confirmed the group's links with JN and announced the merger of the two under the new name of the

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<sup>70</sup> In the case of AS this was alleged evolution from an armed group to a broader movement, was exemplified with changing its name from Kataib (battalions) to Harakat (movement), a namechange which further corresponded with a merger with several co-factions of SIF.

<sup>71</sup> AS was a member of SRF from June 2012 to early fall the same year. Not to be confused with its namesake, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front established by 15 Free Syrian Army factions in December 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Abouzeid, "The Jihad Next Door".

<sup>73</sup> Aka Abu Du'a, real name Ibrahim 'Awwad Ibn Ibrahim ibn 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Badri.

Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.<sup>74</sup> ISI's decision to enter the conflict under its own name, as well as its proposed merger with JN, seemingly took place without consulting or even informing over-all leader of al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, nor the leader of JN, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani. The latter responded few days later expressing his surprise over the announcement and confirmed their support of ISI, but rejecting the merger of the two. Instead he renewed the group's allegiance to "Shaykh of Jihad, Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri", thus confirming the existence of a previous (secret) pledge, whilst also vouching to "the people in al-Sham" that its now public affiliation with al-Qa'ida would change nothing on the ground.<sup>75</sup> The two referred the matter to 'Ayman al-Zawahiri'<sup>76</sup> who subsequently ordered al-Baghdadi to drop "al-Sham" from its name and its agenda, and return to Iraq, whilst JN was to remain in Syria.<sup>77</sup> As for the fall-out between the two it was to end immediately. To act as al-Zawahiri's representative in Syria in regards to the implementation and follow-up of his command, he

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<sup>74</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "I'lan al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-l-Sham" (Announcement of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham), *Mu'assasat al-Furqan li-l-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 8 April 2013, 21:30, <http://jihadology.net/2013/04/09/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraqs-shaykh-abu-bakr-al-%E1%B8%A5ussayni-al-qurayshi-al-baghdadi-announcement-of-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-an/>.

The full name of the group in Arabic is *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi-l-'Iraq wa-l-Sham*. There are (at least) three commonly used acronyms to refer to the group; ISIS, ISIL, IS or Da'esh. The two first acronyms derives from alternative translations of al-Sham, which denotes the geographical area of the current state of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, either into the Levant (ISIL), Syria or al-Sham (ISIS) – of which I have chosen the latter. The third acronym, refers to the latest re-branding of the group as a caliphate, or The Islamic State (IS), which took place 29 June 2014 and will only be used when addressing the group's actions and existence after this date, just as the acronym of ISI will be used when addressing the actions and existence of its forbearer, The Islamic State of Iraq. The fourth is the Arabic acronym of the group.

<sup>75</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording], *Mu'assasat al-Manara al-Badya' li-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 10 April 2013, 07:15, <http://jihadology.net/2013/04/10/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-al-golani-about-the-fields-of-al-sham/>.

<sup>76</sup> In a later speech by al-Zawahiri (May 2014), he claimed he ordered to the groups to "freeze" the matter already in April, until the matter had been resolved by the al-Qa'ida leadership – a claim confirmed by the two groups. 'Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Testimony to Stop the Bloodshed of the Mujahidin in al-Sham", *Mu'assasat al-Sahab al-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 2 May 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/05/02/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-media-presents-a-new-release-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-witnessing-the-bloodshed-of-the-mujahidin-in-al-sham/>.

Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "Adhran 'Amir al-Qa'ida", (Apologies Amir of al-Qa'ida), *Mu'assasat al-Furqan li-l-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 11 May 2014, 32:05, <http://jihadology.net/2014/05/11/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-sorry-amir-of-al-qaidah/>. Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, "An Interview with Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir", *Mu'assasat al-Basira' li-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 12 March 2014, 44:57, <http://jihadology.net/2014/04/12/al-ba%E1%B9%A3irah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-an-interview-with-abu-sulayman-al-muhajir/>.

<sup>77</sup> 'Ayman al-Zawahiri, [Untitled letter], 23 May 2013, published by al-Jazeera (Basma Al-Atassi) via <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/710586-ayman-zawahiri.html#document/p1>.



appointed Abu Khalid al-Suri, a commander of Ahrar al-Sham and veteran of the jihadi-scene.<sup>78</sup>

The entrance of ISI(S) into the Syrian conflict, the unclocking of JN as an al-Qa'ida affiliate, as well as the apparent fall-out between the two, sparked heated discussions within the broader Salafi-Jihadi movement. As for the Syrian opposition with all its flanks, councils and factions, few would argue that JN's affiliation with al-Qa'ida and/or ISI(S) came as a complete surprise.<sup>79</sup> That said, many considered its public affiliation with al-Qa'ida to be surprising, and more so, a disadvantage for the group and the opposition as a whole, AS among them.<sup>80</sup>

As for the ripple effects on the ground following ISIS announcement and subsequent expansion – particularly in northern Syria - there were several reshufflings of alliances and allegiances following ISIS.<sup>81</sup> Whilst the extent and scope of such changes (from JN and AS to ISIS, as well as the opposite) is difficult to assert with certainty,<sup>82</sup> anecdotal evidence and media reports indicated a trend of foreign fighters jumping ships from JN, AS and other armed oppositional groups, to join ISIS. On the ground, JN and AS continued to collaborate extensively as before; they joined several joint operation rooms together alongside other armed groups, cooperated in large-scale operations and even signed a joint statement in late September alongside other major factions.<sup>83</sup> As for their relations with ISIS they cooperated at

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<sup>78</sup> Al-Zawahiri did not offer any further details on al-Suri's credentials or background, nor his leading position in Ahrar al-Sham at the time.

<sup>79</sup> As argued by al-Tamimi, the greater shock had been the way JN's affiliation was revealed and the following public pledge rather than the affiliation in itself. Thus previous collaborators of JN, whether linked with FSA, SIF, or SILF, generally condemned the group's affiliation with , whilst refraining from harsher critique or a general rebuke. As such, AS relatively mild reaction to the pledge (4 May 2013) is somewhat illustrative of the responses from other groups. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Jabhat al-Nusra's Relations With Other Rebels After the Bay'ah to Zawahiri", *Jihadology* (Blog), 14 May 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/14/guest-post-jabhat-al-nusras-relations-with-other-rebels-after-the-bayah-to-zawahiri/>.

<sup>80</sup> "Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla 'I'lan 'al-Dawla al-'Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada'iyatihi 'ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-'Iqlimiyya" (A statement and clarification regarding the announcement of 'the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham' and its implications for the domestic and regional field), *ahraralsham.net* (Website), 4 May 2013, <http://ahraralsham.net/?p=1324>.

<sup>81</sup> Whilst initially expanding in the northern parts of Syria as far west as Idlib, ISIS had by the end of 2013 established a presence in Aleppo (city and overnorate), Idlib, al-Raqqa, Dayr al-Zur, Latakia, Homs and Rural Damascus. "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4", 5.

<sup>82</sup> During the first three months following the ISIS-JN fall-out in April, the two's media wings were on hiatus. However activists and journalists reported of armed factions, smaller units and individuals leaving JN and AS to join ISIS and pledge their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. It was likewise reported of factions shifting from JN to ISIS in April, only to return to JN after the publication of al-Zawahiri's letter. In certain areas, particular eastern parts of Syria, observers noted an overlapping presence and seemingly blending of JN and ISIS faction. "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4", 5.

<sup>83</sup> In addition to JN and AS the statement was signed by Liwa' al-Tawhid, Liwa' al-'Islam, 'Alwiyat Suqur al-Sham, Harakat Fahr al-Sham al-'Islamiyya, Harakat al-Nur al-'Islamiyya, Kata'ib Nur al-Din al-Zangi, Tajammu' Fa-staqim Kama 'Umirat, al-Firqat al-Tas'a 'Ashar and Liwa' al-'Ansar. "Ba'Bayan Raqm 1: Hawla al-'I'tilaf wa-l-Hukuma al-Muftarida" (Statement Nr. 1: Regarding the Coalition and the Alleged Government),

some fronts, remained peacefully operating side-by-side in some areas, whilst competing for influence and clashing in others. In the same timeframe ISIS' relations with other armed groups varied from cooperation, relatively peaceful co-existence as well as growing instances of armed clashes and fall-outs.

Another key event of autumn 2014 was the dissolution of SIF in November 2013 and the announcement of a new, larger front with the similar sounding name of The Islamic Front (*Jabhat al-Islamiyya*, IF) 22 November 2013 where Ahrar al-Sham was one of the co-founding factions.<sup>84</sup> Other member factions included former groups of the Syrian Islamic Front, as well as large parts of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), making IF overnight the most numerous,<sup>85</sup> and arguably the most influential front within the landscape of armed oppositional group.<sup>86</sup> Compared to the SRF and SIF, the charter of the newly established IF assured a complete but gradual merger of its joining factions, both organizationally, economically, military and politically<sup>87</sup> – a merger which, at the time of writing has yet to manifest itself.

### 3.3 The emergence of a parallel intra-jihadi war

From the outset of 2014 the scattered intra-rebel fighting escalated into a full-fledged intra-rebel war pitting JN, AS and several FSA-affiliated groups against ISIS.<sup>88</sup> Armed clashes

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24 September 2013, re-published in Pieter van Ostaeyen, "Syria – a new Islamic Union or an informal alliance", *pietervanostaeyen* (Blog), 28 September 2013, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/09/28/syria-a-new-islamic-union-or-an-informal-alliance/>.

<sup>84</sup> According to Aron Lund, the process which proceeded the founding of the Islamic Front began already in September 2013 with the co-signing of a joint statement against the National. Subsequent meetings reportedly took place in Reyhanli (Turkey) where the signatories failed to pressure or convince Salim Idris of the SMC into the establishment of a joint rebel leadership where the armed forces were to have the dominating role. The following establishment of IF was the manifestation of their threat to create their own rival body, claims Lund. Lund, "Say Hello to the Islamic Front".

<sup>85</sup> Estimates of group or front numbers are impossible to verify, however IF has been estimated at between 45 000 and 60 000 fighters. Aaron Y. Zelin, "Rebels Consolidating Strength in Syria: The Islamic Front", *Policy Watch 2177*, The Washington Institute, 3 December 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebels-consolidating-strength-in-syria-the-islamic-front> According to the calculations from Carter Center, IF comprised nearly half of all armed oppositional groups at its peak. "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4", 12.

<sup>86</sup> IF joined together seven of the country largest armed groups with strongholds in Aleppo, Idlib, al-Raqqa, Dayr al-Zur, Homs, Damascus, Latakia and Hama. "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4", 12.

<sup>87</sup> In an interview with Al-Jazeera in December, Abbud stipulated the period of transition to last approximately three months. Hassan 'Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

<sup>88</sup> At the forefront of the FSA "flank" of the opposition were two newly established coalitions of armed groups supported by foreign powers and seemingly created with the explicit aim of confronting ISIS; the Mujahidin Army (Jaysh al-Mujadidin) and Syria Revolutionaries Front (Jabhat al-Thuwwar Suriya). For more on the establishment and composition of these two, see Aron Lund, "The Mujahideen Army of Aleppo", *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 8 April 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55275>, and Aron Lund, "The Syria Revolutionaries' Front", *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 13 December 2013,

erupted against ISIS in various locations of the country, of a scope and scale unprecedented.<sup>89</sup> Intra-rebel conflicts were now also mirrored in a heated war of words as enmity was now publically recognized JN, AS and other armed groups, as well as ISIS, to a much greater extent than seen previously. There were also apparent splits within both JN, AS and other IF-factions regarding whether or not to partake in rebel infighting. During this first month of open intra-rebel war, there were attempts of arbitration and reconciliation, however they proved largely futile<sup>90</sup> and ISIS seeming dismissal of these initiatives hardened the others critique of the group. By the second month, Ayman al-Zawahiri publically disavowed ISIS – a first in the history of AQ.<sup>91</sup>

Territorially speaking, ISIS was first pushed out of its strongholds in the northwestern parts of the country by early January and subsequently barricaded itself in al-Raqqah. Over the course of winter and spring 2014 ISIS gradually retook some of its former strongholds in the north and northeast through confrontations with other rebel groups (including JN and AS).<sup>92</sup>

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<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53910&reloadFlag=1>, Aron Lund, “Pushing Back Against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: The Syria Revolutionaries’ Front and the Mujahideen Army”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 7 January 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54103>, Ruth Sherlock, “US secretly backs rebels to fight al-Qaeda in Syria”, *The Telegraph*, 21 January 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10588308/US-secretly-backs-rebels-to-fight-al-Qaeda-in-Syria.html>.

<sup>89</sup> The intra rebel-war against ISIS erupted 3 January 2014 primarily in Aleppo and central border areas and subsequently spread to several of the countries northern and eastern governorates and cities where the group were present.

<sup>90</sup> Most prominently the “Umma initiative” proposed by Saudi preacher ‘Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini gained a broad recognition from, among others, JN and AS. Al-Muhaysini proposed a seize fire followed by the establishment of a “legitimate court formed by independent judges agreed upon by all parties.” Rather than a blunt dismissal (as it was described by some), ISIS issued a statement demanding as a prerequisite that the groups involved were to “articulate a clear and unambiguous theological position” concerning the political opposition in exile (SNC, NC and SMC) as well as the “ruling regimes in the region (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE and Turkey). However in the light of the statements harsh critique of these oppositional bodies and countries, and with the subtext of the well-known links between them and several of the involved armed groups, ISIS’ dismissal was evident. ‘Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini, “Mubadarat al-’Umma” (the Umma Initiative). 23 January 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/23/new-statement-from-dr-abd-allah-bin-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-mu%E1%B8%A5aysini-mubadarah-al-ummah/> Bayān Ta’ yid li-Mubādarat al-’Umma” (Statement for the support of the Umma Initiative), published via Twitter (@islamic\_front), 26 January 2014 [https://twitter.com/islamic\\_front/status/427562465715425280](https://twitter.com/islamic_front/status/427562465715425280). Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, “Risalat Da’ m wa-Ta’ yid li-’Mubadarat al-’Umma’ li-l-Shaykh al-Fatih ‘Abi Muhammad al-Jawlani” (Letter of Support to the ‘Umma Initiative’ from Shaykh the Conqueror Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 24 January 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/24/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-a-message-of-support-and-endorsement-for-mubadarah-al-ummah-for-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani/>. “Position on the Initiative of Shaykh al-Muhaysini”, 27 January 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/27/new-statement-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-position-on-the-initiative-of-shaykh-al-mu%E1%B8%A5aysini/>.

<sup>91</sup> Muhammad al-’Ubaidi and Nelly Lahoud, “The War of Jihadists Against Jihadists in Syria”, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 7 Issue 3, 26 March 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-war-of-jihadists-against-jihadists-in-syria>.

<sup>92</sup> By January ISIS had regained control over former key cities in the eastern parts Aleppo governorate (Minbij, Jarablus, al-Bab and al-Maskana). By February the group pushed forward in al-Hasakah (against both YPG and AS) and further launched a largely unsuccessful offensive in the Dayr al-Zur governorate against both AS and

Simultaneously in Iraq, the group carved out new territories with its victory in Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014, and more so, its wave of successful offensives in June 2014 taking Mosul, and large parts of the Anbar, Ninawa and Tikrit governorates.<sup>93</sup>

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JN. In March ISIS commenced a new offensive in the Dayr al-Zur region which led to a long back-and-forth struggle which ISIS won Summer 2014. "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4" 6.

<sup>93</sup> "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report #4", 7.

## 4 Self-identified Similarities and Differences

*The practice (manhaj) of the battalions in faith and conduct is like the practice (manhaj) of the Sunna and first troop (al-ra'īl al-'awwal)<sup>94</sup> and those among the religious scholars who followed their example in adhering to the book of God and the (genuine) Sunna of his Prophet, may God's peace and prayer be upon him. (...) [T]hey are the righteous predecessors of the umma in all but contemporary affairs.<sup>95</sup>*

*From Ahrar al-Sham's official web-page (undated)*

*Jabhat al-Nusra are from the sons of Islam and Sunni Muslims (ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a). They took up arms and joined for the victory of their religion and the victory of their umma.. (...) [T]hey are from the followers of the righteous predecessors (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ), following the methodology of Sunni Muslims in creed ('aqīda), behaviour (sulūk) and practice (manhaj).''<sup>96</sup>*

*Sami al-'Uraydi of Jabhat al-Nusra, October 2013*

*"We seek absolution from God from every statement contradicting to the methodology (manhaj) of the people of the Sunna, which is the known as the methodology (manhaj) of the Islamic State by which all of our commanders ('umarā') govern."'<sup>97</sup>*

*Statement by ISIS, March 2014*

As shown in the quotes above the three groups define themselves as (Sunni) Muslims, and more specifically as adherents of the practice and creed of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). In addition to their self-definition as mujahidin (holy fighters), and less frequently as revolutionaries, this constitute the key pillars of their self-definition. As such they present themselves first and foremost as Sunni Muslims acting on behalf of the larger Muslim community or the *umma*, subsequently specifying that they follow the creed and practice of the righteous predecessors. This religious self-identification is repeatedly highlighted in their publications. Further, whether recounting military operations or addressing political issues, their publications are sprinkled with frequent quotes and references to the religious scripts (the Quran and the Sunna). Their successes are always attributed to God, and their actions, strategies and decisions are often accompanied by a suiting reference from the religious script.

This fundamental similarity notwithstanding, the groups *do* differ. And, whilst upholding the ideal of creedal unity, the groups have acknowledgement their differences to

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<sup>94</sup> An alternative way of referring to the «righteous predecessors».

<sup>95</sup> «Man Nahnu?» (Who are we?), *ahraralsham.com* (Website), [Undated], [www.ahraralsham.com/Archive/?page=pages&id=3](http://www.ahraralsham.com/Archive/?page=pages&id=3) (last accessed: 2 September 2013).

Whilst the self-presentation is undated it portrayed on the group's older webpage when the group went by the name of Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham.

<sup>96</sup> Sami al-'Uraydi, «Minhajuna wa 'Aqidatuna» (Our Practice and Creed), *Mu'assasat al-Manara al-Bayda' li-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 21 October 2013, 29:44, <http://jihadology.net/2013/10/21/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhah-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-our-manhaj-and-our-aqidah-a-meeting-with-dr-sami-al-aridi/>

<sup>97</sup> «Bayan Mawqif al-Dawla al-'Islamiyya min Maqalat al-Muftarin».

various degrees. In the following I will first review how the group themselves have conceptualized their similarities and differences, the extent to which they have addressed them. I will also touch upon whether or not their disagreements have amounted to the pronouncement of *takfīr* or excommunication from Islam by proclaiming someone to be *kāfir* (infidel). As leaving Islam either by conversion to another religion or in other ways ceasing to believe in Islam is considered to be punishable by death,<sup>98</sup> the act of excommunication is a highly sensitive matter and generally requires extensive proofs of “disbelief”. The principle of *takfīr* is further the primary vehicle for legitimating killings in Salafi-Jihadism. Whilst the exclusionist understanding of Islam which characterizes Salafi-Jihadism entails the endorsement of *takfīr*, the conditions and frequency of its application arguably constitute one of the key distinguishers within the movement.

## 4.1 Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra

Commencing with the frequency of which AS and JN have included the other in their official publications we find a large number of references to military collaborations whereas evaluative statements regarding the other are few in comparison. The extensive collaboration between the, has thus seemingly two been mirrored in what might be interpreted as a silent acceptance and endorsement of the others role in the conflict. On the other hand the two have consistently framed their efforts as part of a larger movement of “mujahidin” joint by their common aim of establishing an Islamic ruling system in Syria – counterpoised not only the regime and its supporters, but also (in less harsh terms) the propagators of a future democratic, secular ruling system.<sup>99</sup> Seemingly considering each other as part and parcel of this same largely undefined community or movement of “mujahidin”, JN and AS’ praise and critique of the other have been framed within this implied ideological kinship. Thus, in so forth as the two have praised the other explicitly, and not simply implied the other in their praise of “the mujahidin” in general, they have highlighted the other’s commitment, military efficaz and collaboration with other groups towards this joint aim.

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<sup>98</sup> Both the punishment for apostasy and caution against excommunication are noted in the Qur’an and the Hadith literature. For examples see Quintan Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 28, 2005, page 77.

<sup>99</sup> The consistency of their self-definition as mujahidin is analysed more thoroughly in chapter 5, where also AS alternation between describing itself as revolutionaries and mujahidin is addressed. Their explicit distance and at times blunt dismissal of the Free Syrian Army and /or the political opposition in exile and the aim of establishing a democratic, secular Syria is addressed at greater length in the same chapter.

For instance, with the outbreak of rebel infighting against ISIS in January 2014, Hassan ‘Abbud of AS interestingly praised JN as an example to follow for ISIS describing it as a group which “doesn’t differ in ideology and authority from ISIS” but which have been able to “work hand in glove with other militias” due to their shared commitment to first and foremost repel the regime.<sup>100</sup> JN has for their part recognized the burdens bore by the Islamic Front (and by extension AS) in the fight against ISIS and renounced accusations by ISIS of the front being “infidel” (*kāfir*) or having fallen into apostasy.<sup>101</sup>

The few instances where the two have criticized each other, it has been directed against on the other’s perceived step away from the common aim, the movement, or against actions perceived as harming the larger movement as a whole. Their critique of the other has thus taken the shape of advice or disappointment, rather than blunt condemnation, dismissal or a breach of their long-standing extensive cooperation of the ground.

A clear example of this is AS critique of JN and Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani’s public pledge of allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Interestingly AS was amongst those who went out in support of JN when it was listed by the US Treasury Department as a terrorist group listing its then presumed links with ISI as the official reason given for the classification. ‘Abbud dismissed it as an irrelevant Western classification based on religious affinity; “Let them classify us.”<sup>102</sup> However when JN officially pledged their allegiance to al-Qa’ida, AS offered “advice and a reminder” (*al-nash wa-l-tadhkir*) (questioned the usefulness and efficacy of this official statement – whilst seemingly not questioning the allegiance itself.<sup>103</sup> As noted shortly after by ‘Abbud; “Our rejection of this [pledge] was because the most important duties now

<sup>100</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, “Mudakhalat Hassan ‘Abbud (Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Hamawi) ‘ala al-Jazira bi-khusus Jama‘at al-Dawla fi-l-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham 3-1-2014” (Participation of Hassan ‘Abbud (Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Hamawi) on al-Jazeera regarding the Group the State in Iraq and al-Sham). YouTube video. 9:48. From an interview televised by al-Jazeera on 3 January 2014. Posted by “Akhbar Rif Hama”. 3 January 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AODr2LkX6b0&html5=1>.

<sup>101</sup> Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Shami, “La-Tubayyinunahu li-l-Nas wa la Taktumunahu” (Make it Clear to the People and do not Conceal it), *Mu‘assasat al-Basira ‘li-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 4 March 2014, 01:15:42. <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/04/al-ba%E1%B9%A3irah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-audio-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-shaykh-abu-abd-allah-al-shami-you-must-make-it-clear-to-the-people-and-not-conceal/>.

<sup>102</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>103</sup> Ahrar al-Sham, “Bayan wa tawdih hawla ‘i‘lan ‘al-dawla al-‘islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham wa tada‘iyyatihi ‘ala al-saha al-dakhiliyya wa-l-‘iqlimiyya”.

Further JNs links to al-Qa’ida has not been addressed or commented on later in AS’ official publications - neither when these links became increasingly emphasized in JNs own self-presentation over the course of winter and spring 2014 (see section 5.4). As has been suggested by al-Tamimi, the greater shock had been the way JN’s affiliation was revealed rather than the affiliation in itself. Thus previous collaborators of JN, whether linked with FSA, SIF, or SILF, generally condemned the group’s affiliation with AQ, whilst refraining from harsher critique or a general rebuke. As such, the response from AS (4 May 2013) is somewhat illustrative of the responses from other groups. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Jabhat al-Nusra’s Relations With Other Rebels After the Bay’ah to Zawahiri”, *Jihadology* (Blog), 14 May 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/14/guest-post-jabhat-al-nusras-relations-with-other-rebels-after-the-bayah-to-zawahiri/>.

are to push the unjust aggressor enemy of our nation and our people. This is not the time to enforce the particular projects of each group, if they so have.”<sup>104</sup> When questioned explicitly about AS ideological, intellectual and systematic differences with JN, the leader of AS, Hassan ‘Abbud, noted vaguely;

*As with other Islamic groups (...) we agree with them on certain points and disagree on others and military we agree on some points and tactics, and disagree with others tactics. In other words, they have their own way in presenting their approach and adopting ideas and we may agree with in as far as Islam is the ruling principle of our work and we may differ in some of the rulings.*<sup>105</sup>

In the same interview however ‘Abbud further praised the efficacy of JN on the ground, their commitment to fighting the regime (rather than other “elements of the Syrian revolution”) and concluded; “So as long as it remains like this, we welcome working with them against the regime.”<sup>106</sup>

In a similar manner JN criticized AS’ (and IF’s) perceived step away from the aim of establishing an Islamic State when co-signing the so-called “Revolutionary Covenant”<sup>107</sup> – a statement Sami al-‘Uraydi (a religious authority in JN) described as “weak and submissive”.<sup>108</sup> Whilst heated debate ensued between Hassan ‘Abbud and al-‘Uraydi on Twitter,<sup>109</sup> it did not transform into any larger ideological (or methodological) debate in their official publications or a breach of their extensive collaboration on the ground.

## 4.2 Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS

Whilst ISIS first commented on AS existence and role in the conflict when the two fell out in January 2014, AS expressed their skepticism towards ISIS early on. Whilst acknowledging ISIS’ efforts towards the joint aim of removing the regime and establishing an Islamic ruling system in its place,<sup>110</sup> AS criticized ISIS claim of “statehood”, their views and relations with other groups<sup>111</sup> and later their categorizing of these other groups as *ṣaḥawāt* - alluding to the primarily Sunni Muslim, American sponsored, anti-ISI “awakening” in Iraq.

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<sup>104</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>105</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> “Revolutionary Covenant”, 17 May 2014, published via Twitter (@IslamicFront\_En), 17 May 2014, 6:02 a.m., [https://twitter.com/IslamicFront\\_En/status/467651278605414401/photo/1](https://twitter.com/IslamicFront_En/status/467651278605414401/photo/1).

In addition to the memberfactions of the Islamic Front, the other signatories included; Afnan al-Sham Islamic Union, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Faylaq al-Sham and ‘Alwiyyat al-Furqan.

<sup>108</sup> Abdallah Suleiman Ali, «Nusra, Islamic Front dispute ‘code of honor’ among rebel factions», *al-Monitor*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/security/2014/05/syria-dispute-jabhat-nusra-islamic-front-honor-code.html#>.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.



Whilst AS acknowledged the shared aim of establishing an Islamic state,<sup>112</sup> its leader criticized the “nature, shape and timing” of ISIS “state-project” - considered to be colliding “with the priorities of the battle in al-Sham”.<sup>113</sup> Over the course of autumn 2013 AS criticized the practise of ISIS in their relations with other groups in several specific cases, for instance with the outbreak infighting between ISIS and ‘Asifat al-Shumal in ‘Azaz; “We consider them above spilling the blood of Muslims or rushing to describe them as infidels and apostates.” Whilst remaining vigilant and vocal in regards to what they considered to be the flaws of ISIS, AS arguably still referred to the group as part of the same largely undefined community or movement of “mujahidin” as itself.

By late December 2013 and January 2014 this was arguably no longer the case as AS’ critique of ISIS hardened mirroring the deteriorating relations between the two on several fronts - in particular the killing of an AS commander at the hands of ISIS<sup>114</sup> and its seeming dismissal of initiatives of resolution. Whilst the main focal points of their critique remained the same - namely ISIS’ claim to statehood and their armed and vocal enmity towards other oppositional factions - AS, or more specifically Abu Khalid al-Suri added “extremism” to the list. He lamented how the “extremism” (*ghuluww*) and the killing of fellow Muslims which “destroyed jihad in Algeria threatens to destroy the jihad in al-Sham.” He further criticized the “behaviour of superiority and arrogance towards the rest of the mujahidin and Muslims in general” seen in “the field [of jihad] today”. Whilst not explicitly naming any group in particular, his critique of a group “ruling by excommunication (*takfir*) and apostasy (*ridda*), and accusing (and imprisoning) factions on the grounds of being *ṣaḥawāt* (with no proofs) clearly implied ISIS. Finally and noticeably, al-Suri rejected the association of key Jihadi-ideologues (and personal acquaintances) including Usama bin Ladin, ‘Ayman al-Zawahiri, ‘Abullah ‘Azzam, Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri and Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi, with “crimes and

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<sup>112</sup> Ahrar al-Sham, “Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla ‘I‘lan ‘al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada‘iyyatihi ‘ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-‘Iqlimiyya”.

<sup>113</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>114</sup> ISIS returned the body of AS commander Dr. Hussayn Sulayman (aka Abu Rayyan) to the group 2 January 2014. Sulayman who allegedly had gone to negotiate with ISIS regarding a local dispute in Maskana (Aleppo Governorate) was killed and his body showed clear signs of torture. IF subsequently released a statement where they condemned the act and demanded ISIS to hand over the responsible. Few days later Hassan ‘Abbud publicly criticized ISIS’s torture of prisoners, its attack and theft from other groups and detention of activists and rebels as well as going further in condemning ISIS’ self-professed statues as a state rather than a group. ‘Abbud, Hassan. “Mudakhalat Hassan ‘Abbud (Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Hamawi) ‘ala al-Jazira bi-khusus Jama‘at al-Dawla fi-l-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham 3-1-2014”.

incorrect practices being committed under the name of jihad and the establishment of the Islamic state.”<sup>115</sup>

When Abu Khalid al-Suri was killed shortly after, allegedly by ISIS,<sup>116</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud lashed out against the group whom they increasingly referred to as *khawārij*.<sup>117</sup> The reference alludes to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>118</sup> oppositional (almost anarchistic) sect who declared any Muslim disagreeing with them to be an apostate,<sup>119</sup> and is regarded by most religious scholars for showing excess in religion (*ghuluww -fī-dīn*) – itself a cause for excommunication. Thus, Hassan ‘Abbud to a greater extent attacked its ideology and its excessive practice of excommunication. ISIS excommunication of factions with links to foreign countries, was further transformed into an accusations against ISIS for, following this logic, having excommunicated Taliban and Mullah Umar who famously expressed a wish to maintain a “good relationship with the rest of the world’s country.” He further highlighted an alleged utterance by an ISIS shar‘ia official that when a leader commits apostasy, those who have pledged allegiance to him also become apostates. ‘Abbud thus argued that ISIS by extension thus considered al-Zawahiri, a man who had pledged allegiance to Mulla Umar, an apostate.<sup>120</sup>

By June ‘Abbud described ISIS as “bearded versions of *shabīḥa*” claiming ISIS did not “reflect Islam in any way” but rather representing “the worst image ever of Islam”. Whilst the exclusion of ISIS from the movement AS considers itself (and JN) to be a part of, and

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<sup>115</sup> Considering the many “hats” of Abu Khalid al-Suri in the context of the Syrian war - a “jihadi veteran”, an AS commander and al-Zawahiri chosen mediator all at once – it could be argued that the statement, lacking the characteristic marks of an official AS/IF publications thus falls outside of this category. But if al-Suri’s explicit critique of not solely ISIS actions, but also its, in his eyes, its wrongful religious legitimation of such actions, had not been a part of AS/IF’s official line towards ISIS, it certainly was adopted after. And, whilst Abu Khalid al-Suri was not officially a publically recognized part of AS’ ranks and public image, he certainly became so after he was killed - allegedly by ISIS.

<sup>116</sup> Abu Khalid al-Suri was killed 23 February 2014 allegedly due to an explosion caused by two suicide bombers detonating themselves within an AS military compound in Aleppo. According to both AS and JN, ISIS is the main (and seemingly sole) accused. ISIS rejected this accusations (PUBLICATION) and at the date of writing, no groups or individuals have yet taken the blame for this attack. “Bayan Mawqif al-Dawla al-’Islamiyya min Maqalat al-Muftarin” (Statement Regarding the Stances of The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant on the Sayings of the Imposters), *Mu’assasat al-Furqan li-l-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 1 March 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/01/new-statement-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-stance-of-the-islamic-state-on-the-articles-of-the-liars/>.

<sup>117</sup> “Bal Hadha Manhajuhum” (This is Their Methodology), *Mu’assasat al-Basira’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 18 April 2014, 18:12, <http://jihadology.net/2014/04/18/al-ba%E1%B9%A3rah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-but-this-is-their-manhaj/>

<sup>118</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East*, 2.ed. (Chicago: Open Court: 1993), 278.

<sup>119</sup> Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, 228.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Ahrar al-Sham leader criticizes head of Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham”, *Long War Journal*, 29 January 2014, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/ahrar\\_al\\_sham\\_leader.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/ahrar_al_sham_leader.php).

their harsh critique notwithstanding, AS has not (publically) went as far as publically excluding or excommunicating ISIS from Islam altogether.<sup>121</sup>

ISIS for their part offered no statement on AS, nor a response to AS' critique of the group, prior to the outbreak rebel infighting in January 2014. Mirroring the escalating fighting and the hardening critique from AS/IF alongside other starch critiques such as Jamal Ma'rouf (leader of Syria's Revolutionaries Front), the two became the subjects of ISIS' harshest accusations. ISIS critique of AS/IF was firstly against their attacks against ISIS-members,<sup>122</sup> secondly against their presumed links and alliances with the political opposition in exile and regional states<sup>123</sup> and thirdly partaking in what they described as a "plot to eradicate the Islamic State."<sup>124</sup>

### 4.3 Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS

ISIS for their part praised JN upon joining the conflict portraying it as a mere extension of itself.<sup>125</sup> As such their praise of JNs successes and degree of popularity were presented as a merit of their own making. When JN subsequently dismissed the proposed merger, ISIS' spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani described JN as "rebellious defectors" claiming it name had simply been a "security and media cover for the presence and operations of the state in al-Sham."<sup>126</sup> Al-'Adnani further criticized al-Zawahiri's acceptance of their pledge of allegiance for causing division amongst the mujahidin.<sup>127</sup>

ISIS subsequently went quiet in their critique of JN until the outbreak of rebel infighting January 2014. Whilst firstly directing their enmity towards Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Syria's Revolutionaries Front and the Islamic Front, by March they dusted off their previous accusations against JN of "treachery" and added "insidious evil-doer" to its characteristics.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> "Defiant Syrian rebels offer stark choice," *BBC*, 3 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27687018>.

<sup>122</sup> "Bayan Mawqif al-Dawla al-'Islamiyya min Maqalat al-Muftarin" (Statement Regarding the Stances of The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant on the Sayings of the Imposters), *Mu'assasat al-Furqan li-l-'Intaj al-'I'lam*, 1 March 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/01/new-statement-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-stance-of-the-islamic-state-on-the-articles-of-the-liars/>

<sup>123</sup> The critique drew from the fact that central factions of IF, most prominently Jaysh al-Islam, were well-known recipients of Saudi financial support. This became the basis for the nicknaming the front "'Al Salul-Front".

<sup>124</sup> "Bayan Mawqif al-Dawla al-'Islamiyya min Maqalat al-Muftarin".

<sup>125</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "'I'lan al-Dawla al-'Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-l-Sham".

<sup>126</sup> Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun"-(Ignore them with their false accusations), *Mu'assasat al-Furqan li-l-'Intaj al-'I'lam*, 19 June 2013, 22:26, <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/20/new-audio-visual-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-ignore-them-and-their-false-allegations/>

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Al-'Adnani, "'Adhran 'Amir al-Qa'ida".

Additionally the group and its members created a number of wordplays on the name of Jabhat al-Nusra (the supporting front) emerged, referring to it as “*jabhat al-khusra*” (“the front of loss” or “the loosing front”) and “*jabhat al-ḍarrār*” (“the front of destruction”).<sup>129</sup>

ISIS enmity against the group was primarily against four factors; 1) JN’s break with ISI(S) in April 2013, 2) its “betrayal and treason” by joining in on the attacks on ISIS from January, 3) its impure alliance with groups considered by ISIS to be “criminal bands” and “lackeys of the West”, and 4) spreading lies about ISIS. In the words of al-‘Adnani, JN stood accused of «launching campaigns to distort the faith and method of jihad” and equalled enemies of the State with “enemies of Islam”<sup>130</sup> – whilst stopping (very) short of explicitly and publically excommunicating JN altogether.

JN for their part first spoke critically of ISIS with the outbreak of rebel infighting in January 2014. Whilst it dismissed (or more specifically ignored) the proposed merger with ISIS in April 2013, al-Jawlani had nothing but praise for the group. Not only did he express gratitude for the initial help the group receive upon its establishment, but al-Jawlani further praised the virtues of ISIS stating; “God almighty knows that we saw only great goodness and generosity from our brothers in Iraq and their virtues cannot be counted.” And whilst asserting their independence from ISIS, al-Jawlani described its links with the group as one of patronage, assistance and respect, rather than subservience. JN and al-Jawlani subsequently kept quiet on what was largely described as a fall-out between the two by jihadi-forums<sup>131</sup> and analysts alike. First in an interview with al-Jazeera in December 2013 al-Jawlani commented on the incident, describing it simply as a “brief disagreement” between the two which had been largely exaggerated by the media.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Additionally, English speaking ISIS-supporters online has created additional “rebrandings” of JN, such as “Jabhat al Shaytan” (alt. spelling “Jabhatul Shaytan”, the Front of Satan),<sup>129</sup> or “nusrats”.<sup>129</sup> The former expression seen used by Twitter user @UmmLayth\_, in a post dated 13 June 2014. Interestingly the same user had referred to JN as Jabhat Al Nusra earlier on 23 October 2013. The latter expression was used by Twitter user @AkhiAbdulAhad, in a response to user @AbuhafsAk dated 28 April 2014.

<https://twitter.com/AbuhafsAk/status/460823135231938560>

<sup>130</sup> Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “Thumma Nantahilu fa-Naj’ alu La’ nat Allah ‘ala al-Kadhibin” (Then we Pray and Invoke the Curse of God on the Liers), *Mu’assasat al-Furqan li-l-’Intaj al-’I’lam*, 7 March 2014, 22:07, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/07/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-then-we-pray-for-gods-curse-to-be-on-the-liars/>

<sup>131</sup> For instance by October the top-tier jihadi-forum, Shumukh al-Islam, addressed a growing tension between ISIS and JN and their supporters online, lamenting the dispute. The online forum claimed a neutral stance in the middle. <http://justpaste.it/d6mq> (via Cole Bunzel) Cole Bunzel, “The Islamic State of Disobedience: al-Baghdadi Triumphant”, *Jihadica* (Blog), 5 October 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/the-islamic-state-of-disobedience-al-baghdadis-defiance/> .

<sup>132</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni, *Liqa’ al-Yawm* (Today’s Meeting), Al Jazeera, 19 December 2013, 51:38, <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/bc2ecd1b-4a65-4a82-87c4-ebadb167fa8a>

With the fall-out of January 2014, al-Jawlani first criticised ISIS and its attackers alike.<sup>133</sup> The latter were described as “some traitor parties (...) exploiting the situation in order to achieve Western objectives” or “personal interests”, whilst ISIS was partially blamed for “augmenting the conflict” due to their “wrong policy (*al-siyāsa al-khāṭi’a*)”.<sup>134</sup> As for its own role, al-Jawlani declared “their innocence” from the ongoing fighting, but stated that JN would defend itself if attacked.

Over the course of January JN’s criticism of “the attackers” muzzled, while the condemnations of ISIS hardened – in particular after the killing of one of their own commanders, Shaykh Abu Sa’d al-Hadrami<sup>135</sup> and even more so after the killing of Abu Khalid al-Suri (23 February 2014). JN’s gradually hardening critique of ISIS was largely centered around the same topics as uttered against the group by AS, namely ISIS’ claim to statehood,<sup>136</sup> their fight against other groups and their reluctance to solve their issues with these groups.<sup>137</sup> ISIS’ ideology became increasingly under criticism with accusations of extremism, indicated by referring to the group as *khawārij*. ISIS’ alleged excommunication of anyone not agreeing with them, was further presented as a sign that the group had deviated from the ideology of al-Qa’ida (and by extension JN itself).<sup>138</sup> Whilst suggesting excommunication (through the accusations of excessive excommunication) of ISIS, JN did

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<sup>133</sup> A statement seemingly from JN was issued 5 January 2014, where the group stated it had undertaken military action to stop the transgressions of ISIS after attempts by JN’s shar’ia officials had failed. However the statement has later been discarded as fake. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Jabhat al-Nusra statement from Raqqa announcing operations against Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham [ISIS]”, *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi* (Blog), 5 January 2014, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/01/jabhat-al-nusra-statement-from-raqqa-announcing> There were however reports of JN joining the fight in al-Raqqa in mid-January, but the group first openly acknowledged the armed fall-out by the end of January.

<sup>134</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham” (God God in the Field of al-Sham), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 7 January 2014, 09:18, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/07/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-fear-god-in-the-field-of-al-sham/>

<sup>135</sup> The commander in question was Shaykh Abu Sa’d al-Hadrami, JN’s leader in al-Raqqa, who had for a brief period switched allegiance to ISIS in April 2013 just to return to JN after the publication of al-Zawahiri’s letter in May. According to JN al-Hadrami returned after witnessing ISIS commit “crimes and torture against innocent people at the smallest suspicion and silliest of reasons.” Back in the ranks of JN and shortly after re-establishing the group’s presence in al-Raqqa in September, al-Hadrami was reportedly abducted by ISIS and months later executed on charges of apostasy. “Raddan ‘ala I’tiraf Jama’at al-Dawla bi-Qatl al-Shaykh ‘Abi Sa’d al-Hadramiyy (Taqqablahu Allah) ‘Amir Jabhat al-Nusra fi al-Raqqa” (In Response to the Confession of the Group the State to the Killing of Abu Sa’d al-Hadramiyy (My God accept him) Amir of Jabhat al-Nusra in al-Raqqa), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 15 January 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/15/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-in-response-to-the-recognition-of-the-islamic-state-killing-abu-sad-al-%E1%B8%A5a%E1%B8%8Drami-amir-in-al-raqqah/>

<sup>136</sup> This was constantly indicated by referring to the group consistently as jamā’t al-dawla (the group the state) after January 2014, as seen in Abu Himam al-Suri, “Silsala al-Shahada”, *Mu’assasat al-Basira’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 23 March 2014, 23:18, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/23/al-ba%E1%B9%A3irah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-shaykh-abu-himam-al-suri-faruq-al-suri-testimony-ahead-of-the-deadli/>

<sup>137</sup> Abu Himam al-Suri, “Silsala al-Shahada” (Chain of Testimonies), *Mu’assasat al-Basira’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 23 March 2014, 23:18, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/23/al-ba%E1%B9%A3irah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-shaykh-abu-himam-al-suri-faruq-al-suri-testimony-ahead-of-the-deadli/>

<sup>138</sup> Al-Shami, “La-Tubayyinunahu li-l-Nas wa la Taktumunahu”.

not officially cross the line. And whilst the group continued to encourage a resolution of the conflict with ISIS, and continued to collaborate with ISIS in some areas, it had ousted the latter from their category of allied mujahidin in their discourse.

#### **4.4 What is the extent to which they conceptualize their differences and does it include *takfir* (excommunication)?**

To sum up, the three groups' officially pronounced opinion of the each other has firstly changed over the course of the conflict, largely mirroring the groups changing relations on the ground. Secondly, whilst JN and AS have continued to frame their praise and critique against each other within the framework an implied ideological kinship, the fall-out with ISIS in January 2014 entailed the exclusion of ISIS from this implied community. Thirdly, whilst ISIS on the one hand, and JN and AS on the other, have come close to the pronouncement of excommunication of the other, they have not explicitly done so in so many words. At the same time their key arguments for potentially doing so is arguably interlinked with diverging views on the necessary conditions for excommunication in itself.

## 5 Centrality of Jihad

*So we announce a general call to arms for the sons of the Front in particular and the people of jihad in general in the land of al-Sham.*<sup>139</sup>

*Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani of Jabhat al-Nusra, May 2012*

*The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham opens the door of recruitment to every Muslim who wants to do jihad for the sake of God, from emigrants (muhājirīn) and helpers (ʿanṣār), so come O' youth of Islam from everywhere (...) come to the good of the world (dunyā) and hereafter, come to the life, since there is no life without jihad*<sup>140</sup>

*Abu Muhammad al-ʿAdnani of ISIS, January 2014*

*To our people, the reluctant and free we say: By God, we did not depart but for jihad in the path of God to oppose the injustice amongst you, and put an end to the period of humiliation and enslavement which that criminal band has conducted upon you.*<sup>141</sup>

*From Ahrar al-Sham's official web-page (undated)*

Whilst it is God who, according to the three groups, will ultimately decide the future of the Assad-regime, they have for their part contributed to its fall by mobilizing to (armed) jihad. All three have announced a general call to arms (*naḥḥir*) to waging (armed) jihad against the current regime in Syria.<sup>142</sup> They conceptualize their warfare as jihad in the path of God (*jihād fi sabīl illāh*), and describe themselves as mujahidin (lit. those who fight jihad). As such their commitment to (armed) jihad has become a central part of their self-presentation and self-perception.

To be sure, the Syrian war has fostered a number of groups, which by endorsing a democratic future Syria disqualify as typical Salafi-Jihadis, but nonetheless conceptualize their fight as “jihad” and their fighters as mujahidin.<sup>143</sup> As such it could be argued that “jihad” has become integrated in the broader discourse of opposition in the Syrian conflict, just as the typical Salafi beard has become symbol of opposition.<sup>144</sup> Thus the conceptualization of the war as jihad, as well as the use of religious terminology, symbolism, and Salafi rhetoric and

<sup>139</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, «al-Nafir al-ʿAm» (General Call to Arms), *Muʿassasat al-Manara al-Bayda li-ʿIntaj al-ʿIlam*, 31 May 2012, 09:18, <http://jihadology.net/category/individuals/leaders/abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-al-golani/page/2/>

<sup>140</sup> Abu Muhammad al-ʿAdnani, “al-Raʿid la yakdhibu ʿAhlahu” (The Leader does not Lie to his People), *Muʿassasat al-Furqan li-ʿIntaj al-ʿIlam*, 7 January 2014, 36:59, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/07/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-the-leader-doesnt-say-his-people-are-lying/>

<sup>141</sup> “Man Nahnu?”

<sup>142</sup> A-Jawlani, «al-Nafir al-ʿAm». Zelin and Lister, “The crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front”.

<sup>143</sup> An illustrative example in this regard is the alliance of fighting factions which calls themselves Jaysh al-Mujahidin (Army of Mujahidin). Whilst affiliated with the FSA, central figures of the leadership sport the typical “Salafi-beard” (for instance Tawfiq Shahab al-Din) and has hinted at a possible future unity with the Islamic Front who for their part has disavowed the FSA/SMC and the political opposition in exile. Lund, “The Mujahideen Army of Aleppo”.

<sup>144</sup> OʻBagy, “Jihad in Syria”, 22.

discourse is *not* a key characteristic setting the three clearly a part from the majority of the groups, nor a distinguisher between themselves.

However whereas the three groups expresses similar, if not identical, views on the legitimacy and obligation of jihad in the Syrian civil war, an in-depth read of their publications reveal some differences regarding what might be referred to as the *centrality* and exclusivity of (armed) jihad, for instance; 1) consistency of their self-presentation as mujahidin, 2) the role of armed jihad juxtaposed other non-violent forms of activism, 3) the necessity (or lack thereof) of waging jihad after an eventual fall of the Syrian regime, and 4) their identification (or lack thereof) with a broader transnational jihadi movement.

## 5.1 Consistency of their self-presentation as mujahidin

Firstly, a review of the frequency of the word jihad in the three groups' official publications reveals less consistency in the framing of the war as jihad in the discourse of AS, than JN and ISIS.

Commencing with the former, AS has alternated between framing the ongoing events in Syria as a revolution (*thawra*) and jihad, and its partakers as both revolutionaries (*thuwwār*) and mujahidin,<sup>145</sup> as exemplified by the following quote by its leader Hassan 'Abbud: "[T]his revolution is a revolution of the people and this jihad is the jihad of the *umma*."<sup>146</sup> Whilst the distinction between revolutionary and mujahid is used, at times, to indicate different flanks of the opposition (though rarely pointing out which groups they consider to belong to which category)<sup>147</sup> we also find the two conflated in the description of other fighters<sup>148</sup> as well as to denote AS itself. The founding charter of SIF interestingly steered away from applying both the concept of revolution and revolutionary as well as jihad and mujahid in describing itself as well as its actions and aims, whilst simultaneously emphasizing its adherence to shar'ia and cooperation with other groups based on a shared religious understanding.<sup>149</sup> In the charter of

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<sup>145</sup> For instance, in one of its earliest self-presentations, the group described a popular uprising (*intifāda*) a revolution whilst conceptualizing its own engagement as jihad. See, "Man Nahnu?"

<sup>146</sup> Hassan 'Abbud, interviewed by Taysir 'Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>147</sup> See for instance AS' response to the announcement of ISIS, where the group speak of "the people's revolution and their jihad" as well as "mujahid and revolutionaries". Ahrar al-Sham, "Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla 'I'lan 'al-Dawla al-'Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada'iyatihi 'ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-'Iqlimiyya".

<sup>148</sup> An example is Hassan 'Abbud speaking of "the revolutionary mujahidin" as brothers. Hassan 'Abbud, interviewed by Taysir 'Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>149</sup> "Mithaq al-Jabhat al-'Islamiyya al-Suriyya" (Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front), 21 January 2013, published via syrianif.wordpress.com, <https://syrianif.wordpress.com/%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9->



IF however it presented the front as factions “united in jihad” aiming to further unite “mujahid factions” in Syria whilst at the same time speaking of the “path of the revolution”.<sup>150</sup> On Twitter its self-definition as mujahidin is seemingly more frequent than revolutionary,<sup>151</sup> whilst in his interviews with Al Jazeera Hassan ‘Abbud uses the concepts of “revolution” and “revolutionaries” at a substantial higher frequency than “jihad” and “mujahid”.<sup>152</sup>

As for JN and ISIS, the concept of jihad and mujahidin is mentioned in every speech of their leaders, as well as those of their scholars. Whilst there are some examples of JN referring to the broader uprising in Syria as a revolution,<sup>153</sup> the religious framing of their *own* fighting as jihad is highly consistent. In the case of ISIS, a sole reference to “the revolutions of the Arab spring”<sup>154</sup> constitutes the exception to the rule. As for other concept of revolt and popular resistance, they have even advised against their use of such “words and concepts alien to the mujahidin” – most prominently in al-Adnani’s critique of over-all leader of al-Qa’ida ‘Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>155</sup>

## 5.2 The role of armed jihad juxtaposed other non-violent forms of activism

As seen, the legitimacy and the virtues of jihad constitute central and repeated themes in the three groups’ publications. However, some of their statements and utterances suggest

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[%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9/](#)

<sup>150</sup> «Mithaq al-Jabha al-‘Islamiyya» (Charter of the Islamic Front), 22 November 2013, published on Twitter (@islamic\_front) 26 November 2013, [https://twitter.com/islamic\\_front/status/405366487428255744/photo/1](https://twitter.com/islamic_front/status/405366487428255744/photo/1)

<sup>151</sup> For instance a review of @S\_IslamicFront (active from 20 June 2013 to 31 March 2014), first as the official Twitter-account of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) and later for the political office of Islamic Front (IF), we find AS refer to themselves or their fighters explicitly as mujahidin 44 times as opposed to one time as *thuwwār* (revolutionaries). As this Twitter-profile has been used to report the military operations multiple co-factions of SIF and later IF, I have only included here the times AS has been explicitly mentioned.

<sup>152</sup> In both the longer interviews with Hassan ‘Abbud on Al Jazeera, broadcasted 11 June 2013 and 21 December 2013, ‘Abbud referred to the conflict as a revolution respectively 16 and 17 times. In comparison, ‘Abbud referred to jihad and mujahid twice in the June-interview and left the concepts unmentioned in the December interview. Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013) and Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

<sup>153</sup> Al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording].

<sup>154</sup> Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “al-Silmiyya Din Man?” (Peacefulness is the Religion of Whom?), *Mu’assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 30 August 2013, 32:01, <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/30/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-who-is-the-peaceful-religion/>

<sup>155</sup> Amongst the other concepts al-‘Adnani warned against were *al-sha‘b* (the people), *al-jamāhir* (the masses), *al-kifāh* (strife) and *al-niḍal* (struggle). Al-‘Adnani, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa’ida”, Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “Ma Kana hadha Minhajuna wa lan Yakun” (This is not our Methodology nor will it be), *Mu’assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 17 April 2014, 17:32, <http://jihadology.net/2014/04/17/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-this-is-not-our-manhaj-nor-will-it-ever-be/>

different stands on the “exclusivity” of jihad as a way to establish an Islamic State and unite the *umma* amongst the three. Put differently, the groups endorse a slightly different repertoire of methods, manners and means of activism and protest they consider to be legitimate and/or in accordance with Islam, a part from (armed) jihad. And, similarly the groups show various degrees of acceptance towards other groups’ and individuals’ diverging preferences in this regard.

To be sure, none of the three include (party) politics, popular elections or democracy as part this repertoire. However they show varying degrees of acceptance and rejection towards other groups or organizations who either oppose the regime through political channels or fighting with the establishment of a democratic system as an end-goal. Whereas AS and JN have expressed their skepticism towards the “secular ideology” fronted by the FSA leadership, their links to the political opposition in exile, their lack of unity and efficiency,<sup>156</sup> and their support from Western power, they have largely refrained from criticizing FSA-linked groups directly on the basis of their ideology. Rather, both AS and JN have spoken of the jihad as driven forward by “mujahidin” as well as “revolutionaries.” ‘Abbud has even stated that the aim of establishing an Islamic State is one shared by the FSA.<sup>157</sup> And whilst both groups have highlighted the religious character of the uprising, they have with few exceptions refrained from criticizing any presumed lack of religiosity and piety of other armed groups explicitly, seemingly elevating the importance of military cooperation above that of ideological and methodological uniformity; “The front [JN] found a formula to harmonize with all the non-marginalized factions, especially those who pledged to fight *al-nuṣayriyya* (derogatory term for ‘Alawites<sup>158</sup>), resulting in narrowing the effort (...) to serve jihad, the religion, and *ṭawḥīd* (unity in creed and rank) (...) despite divergence in thoughts and methodology.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud described FSA in June as “more a concept than an entity.” Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> The term Nusayri refers to the founder of the sect, Muhammad ibn Nusayr, and used to be the common name for the sect prior to the French colonialism. Whereas the now preferred term of ‘Alawite alludes to ‘Ali a figure of great importance to both Sunni and Shi‘ite Muslims, Nusayri arguably alludes to the perception of the sects “man-made” origin. Whilst scholars disagree as to whether or not the term Nusayri constitutes a derogatory term, or whether it is simply a neutral historic term, the way it is used by the three groups leaves little doubt as to whether or not they consider it to be derogatory – and it will as such be treated as a derogatory term in this analysis.

<sup>159</sup> Abu ‘Abd Allah, “Wa law Annahum Fa‘alu ma Yu‘azuna bihi la-Kana Khayran lahum” (If they had done what they were admonished to do, it would have been better for them), *Mu‘assasat al-Basira’ li-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 16 March 2014, 24:56, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/16/al-ba%E1%B9%A3irah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-shaykh-abu-abd-allah-al-shami-but-if-they-had-done-what-they-were-in/>.

The fact that ISIS has criticized other armed groups on this basis has become a key argument in JN and AS' critique of the group.<sup>160</sup> At the same time the two have been keen to disavow ISIS' claims that they themselves are coordinating with the political opposition in exile (and by extension the West and America).<sup>161</sup>

ISIS for their part has consistently referred to the implementation of democracy, a civic state or a nation-state as “a plan from the enemy”<sup>162</sup> - conceptualized either as *al-rawāfiḍ*,<sup>163</sup> the West or even the Saudis.<sup>164</sup> The armed groups which support this “plan”, and consequently oppose the aim of ISIS and “the state” itself, are branded as *ṣaḥawāt*<sup>165</sup> or alternatively referred to as an “an agent and participant with the Jews and crusaders, and a new tyrant”.<sup>166</sup> By January 2014 it even declared the National Coalition and the Supreme Military Council to be a “sect of apostasy and unbelief (*kufur*)” and a legitimate target for the groups.<sup>167</sup>

As for *da'wa* (proselytizing and preaching) this constitutes a priority for all three groups, forming part of their training, their public outreach and their Islamic image. All three groups have published a number of film clips showing *da'wa*-sessions, and, in the case of JN and AS, created separate media wings or social media profiles for the dissemination of *da'wa*-related material, speeches or film, clips.<sup>168</sup>

However whereas *da'wa* appears to be an essential supplement to (armed) jihad by JN and ISIS,<sup>169</sup> quotes from AS might suggest that *da'wa* could potentially surpass jihad in importance in the future, such as the following; “And if the reasons for carrying arms in our country should fall away, then a Call to the Truth (*al-da'wa 'ilā al-ḥaqq*) will still be resolute/unwavering (as it) outlines the path to insight, and pave the way for the restoration by

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<sup>160</sup> An example of this is Faruq Abu Hamma al-Suri's accusations against ISIS members allegedly accusing JN for collaborating with *murtaddīn* (apostates) on the basis of their collaborations with FSA-affiliated groups. Al-Suri, “Silsala al-Shahada” (Chain of Testimonies).

<sup>161</sup> Al-Shami, “La-Tubayyinunahu li-l-Nas wa la Taktumunahu”.

<sup>162</sup> Al-'Adnani, “al-Ra'id la yakdhibu 'Ahlahu”.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Al-'Adnani, “al-Ra'id la yakdhibu 'Ahlahu”.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> AS has a separate Facebook-page for the purpose of *da'wa* (<https://www.facebook.com/AlaBasseerah>). JN launched a separate media wing, *Mu'assasat al-Basira li-'Intaj al-'Ilamiyy* (or al-Basira Media Productions) to publish Islamic lectures and lessons by scholars of the group where advised in the conduct of *da'wa* has been the subject of several films.

<sup>169</sup> In the case of ISIS it has additionally been argued that the group has used *da'wa*-sessions as well as distribution of aid as a door-opener to subsequently establishing a stronger military presence in new territories, for instance in Saraqib. Robin Yassin-Kassab, “The rise and fall of ISIL in Syria”, *Al-Jazeera*, 19 January 2014, <http://m.aljazeera.com/story/201411572925799732>.

building the true Muslim (hu)man.”<sup>170</sup> In comparison, I have not found a similar opinion expressed in the publications of the other two groups.

The difference between the three groups is most clear however when it comes to their stands on engaging in non-violent activism. Whereas statements from AS (and by extension SIF and IF) have described non-violent activism as insufficient to force regime change at the current,<sup>171</sup> they have not dismissed such efforts or rejecting them as un-Islamic all together. JN and ISIS on the other hand, have described what they consider to be the futility of non-violent activism *per se* - in the context of the Syrian civil war and beyond.

JN for their part portrayed armed warfare as not only as the sole legitimate way to remove the sitting Syrian regime, but also as the only way possible;

*The people of Sham must realize that this regime will not fall but with the strength of God and then by the strength of weapons. So taking up arms for the people of al-Sham is not a shame or blameworthy, whereas being ruled by the laws of the jungle rather than the law of God (shar'ia) is.*<sup>172</sup>

ISIS has for its part has rendered peaceful measures to implement an Islamic state, peaceful coexistence and as well as the goal of peace itself, to be un-Islamic, inadequate<sup>173</sup> and submissive.<sup>174</sup> In the words of al-'Adnani; “if peaceful means really could preserve dignity or end falsehood, then the Prophet, God’s peace and prayers upon him, would not have let a drop of blood be shed and God Almighty would spare us the burden of jihad.”<sup>175</sup> Al-'Adnani has even equaled peace to an idol or false god, and, following this logic, thus equaling pacifism to polytheism.<sup>176</sup> In sum, ISIS has explicitly annulled the legitimacy of anything but armed jihad (supplemented with *da'wa*) as means to reject the current regime, as well as change the current predicament of the Islamic *umma*.

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<sup>170</sup> “Man Nahnu?”

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> “‘Ilan ‘an Jabhat al-Nusra” (Declaration of Jabhat al-Nusra), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 24 January 2012, 16:48, <http://jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhah-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-front-of-victory/>. The futility of peaceful protests has further been echoed in interviews with the groups fighters, see for instance; Abu al-Khayr al-Shami (Suicidebomber of JN) in “Sidq al-Wa’d 1” (Fullfilment of the Promise 1), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 22 May 2012, 54:23, <http://jihadology.net/2012/05/22/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-fulfillment-of-the-vow-1/>

<sup>173</sup> Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha’” (They will not Harm you but with a Slight Annoyance), *Mu’assasat al-Furqan li-l-’Intaj al-’I’lam*, 30 July 2013, 35:40, <http://jihadology.net/2013/07/30/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-they-will-not-harm-you-except-for-some-annoyance/>

<sup>174</sup> Al-'Adnani, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”

<sup>175</sup> Al-'Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha’”.

<sup>176</sup> Al-'Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

### 5.3 Jihad after Assad

Whereas the three groups all agree on the legality, validity and duty of (armed) jihad in Syria at the current, they have expressed different stands on whether or not to continue waging jihad after the eventual fall of the Assad-regime. This relates to the geographical scope of the groups' agenda, their hierarchy of enemies and whether or not they base the legitimacy of jihad on the Syrian context or not. Commencing with their geographical scope (chapter 8) AS has to a greater extent than the other two upheld a national narrative of the conflict, ISIS the most explicitly regional and potentially also global, whilst JN occupies the grey areas between them. As for their "hierarchy of enemies" (treated more extensively in chapter 7) AS and JN have to a larger extent upheld endorsed the targeting of actors or parties active in the Syrian war, whilst ISIS operates with less contextualized perception of enemies.

Finally the third indication relates to the contextualization of jihad and whether jihad is deemed legitimate due to the severity of the conflict, or alternatively whether jihad is legitimate *per se* at this current juncture of history.

Commencing with AS the group has consistently contextualized and legitimized "their jihad" by emphasizing the gravity of the Syrian conflict, as exemplified in the following self-presentation from the group's official web-page;

*To our people, the reluctant and free we say: By God, we did not depart but for jihad in the path of God to oppose the injustice amongst you, and put an end to the period of humiliation and enslavement which that criminal band has conducted upon you. We shall not be but an armor protecting you, and a drawn sword upon your enemies. (...) So continue on the path of revolution and do not turn away from this blessed choice.<sup>177</sup>*

As such, the group has emphasized the insufficiency of non-violent activism in the face of regime brutality, rather than the "holiness" of jihad in itself.<sup>178</sup> Thus, AS commitment to jihad appears to be temporary until their main goals are achieved, namely regime removal and the establishment of an Islamic State - at least judging by the group's official statements. In comparison, the publications of JN, and even more so ISIS, to a greater extent present an idealized and de-contextualized perception of jihad *per se* lasting from now and until judgment day. At the extreme end of the scale in this case is ISIS who has promoted a meta-narrative of an eternal jihad since their entrance into Syria. (Armed) jihad in their view is not solely limited to the countries it operates in at the current, but rather part and parcel of a larger

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<sup>177</sup> "Man Nahnu?"

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

borderless jihad between Muslims and non-Muslims, faith (*'imān*) and disbelief (*kufr*),<sup>179</sup> and the truth (*al-ḥaqq*) and the wrong (*al-bāṭil*). By seeing themselves as part of an eternal fight, against eternal enemies their timeframe of their jihad thus becomes infinite. As such, there is no apparent deadline or logical end-date to ISIS's jihad but judgment day.<sup>180</sup>

In the middle of the three we find JN which alternates between contextualizing and eternalizing jihad. On the one hand we find examples where al-Jawlani expresses a far more pragmatic and gradualist view on jihad than found in the discourse of ISIS where the receptiveness for jihad amongst Syrians is emphasized in the legitimation of (armed) jihad has a means – as opposed jihad being unquestionably legitimate *per se*;

*“Al-Sham wouldn't be ready for it [jihad] if it hadn't been for the Syrian revolution. (...) As the regime here was very oppressive it meant that the people were very far from the idea of carrying arms, or accepting the methodology which we carry. (...) That is why this revolution pushed away and removed many obstacles and paved the way for us.”*<sup>181</sup>

Whilst the superiority and legitimacy of jihad is unquestioned, al-Jawlani seemingly claims its success presupposes certain conditions, such as a degree of popular accept. For instance, in the group's first public statement, al-Jawlani described a popular Islamic uprising within the country where “the call for jihad” and the willingness to wage armed jihad presupposed JN's establishment and engagement in the conflict. As such the group did not portray itself as a vanguard or pioneer in spreading Salafi-Jihadism or even armed jihad to Syria, but rather as a faction which joined a current already on the rise. Thus, according to al-Jawlani the engagement of JN in the conflict was “called for” and wanted by the “people of al-Sham” as they realized the necessity of (armed) jihad.<sup>182</sup> There are quotes from al-Jawlani indicating that similar conditions are under development in Lebanon, however the group has primarily framed its actions in the country against Hizballah rather than the prelude to a larger uprising.<sup>183</sup> Parallel to this gradualist approach to jihad, JN has presented a vision of an eternal jihad much like the one seen in the discourse of ISIS; “The blessed Jihadi movement on the land of Al-Sham has proven that it will restore to Islam its role in the region that was plundered to stand as an impregnable barrier and fortified bastion before all that is being plotted from cunning against this land.”<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Al-'Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum 'Illa 'Adha”.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir 'Alluni.

<sup>182</sup> “‘Ilan ‘an Jabhat al-Nusra”.

<sup>183</sup> See Chapter 8, section 8.1.1.

<sup>184</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-'Ayam Khayrun min Madiha» (The Coming Days are Better than the Past Ones), *Mu'assasat al-Manara al-Bayda' li-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 22 July 2013, 26:22, <http://jihadology.net/2013/07/22/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a>

## 5.4 Identification with a broader Salafi-Jihadi movement and other fronts of jihad

The final aspect to be treated here related to the centrality of jihad in the groups' discourse, and arguably also in their self-perception, is the three groups' identification with a larger jihadi movement - or the lack thereof.

Commencing with AS, the group has to some extent presented itself as part of a broader movement, seen for instance in addressing “our brothers in the rest of the factions of mujahidin» or “we praise our brothers and the rest of the mujahidin.”<sup>185</sup> At the same time, the group has repeatedly asserted its independence from any transnational group, organization or state – whether AQ or the political opposition in exile.<sup>186</sup> This ambiguity is further visible in its stands regarding JN and its AQ-affiliation. AS first defended JN when it was put on the US Treasury Department's list of global terrorist based on its presumed affiliation with ISI.<sup>187</sup> However when JN's al-Jawlani publically pledged his allegiance to 'Ayman al-Zawahiri, AS described the pledge as being disruptive whilst not criticizing the affiliation with AQ explicitly.<sup>188</sup>

Whilst the group has included central jihadi- and reportedly AQ-veterans admits it ranks, most prominently Ayman al-Zawahiri's chosen mediator in Syria ' Abu Khalid al-Suri, the former engagements and affiliations of its founding members prior to 2011 and their preexisting stature within the jihadi movement has not formed part of their self-presentation.<sup>189</sup> Rather AS has been stingy on the biographical details of their members, even when deceased.<sup>190</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that central parts of the group's leadership were veteran fighters from uprising against the regime in the 1970-82 uprising, fighters with

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[new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-and-met-the-good-days-of-the-past/](#).

<sup>185</sup> A Tweet by @S\_IslamicFront, published 1 February 2014.

<sup>186</sup> “Man Nahnu?”. Hassan ' Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan, *Talk to Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 10 September 2014, 25:00, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2013/12/hassan-abboud-will-fight-our-rights-20131217132919290655.html> And Hassan ' Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ' Alluni (11 June 2013). «Mithaq al-Jabha al-' Islamiyya».

<sup>187</sup> Hassan ' Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ' Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> As a member of AS Abu Khalid al-Suri (aka Muhammad Bahaya) went by the more anonymous nom de guerre of Abu ' Omayr al-Shamiyy and his Jihadi credentials and background never entered the AS propaganda machinery, despite (or perhaps because of) being a central figure of the group's leadership, a known and respected figure of the broader jihadi-movement and (since summer 2013) al-Zawahiri's representative in Syria. First after his death (February 2014), and well after it was publically known that al-Suri was in fact a member of the group, the group official acknowledged his involvement in the group.

<sup>190</sup> Whereas keeping the identity of one's fighters and leaders hidden might be a necessary security measure, prominent members, jihadi-veterans and popular members are often lauded after their death (sometimes with extensive biographical details).

previous experience from other “fronts of jihad”, and/or former inmates of the notorious Saydnaya prison.<sup>191</sup> Amongst these former inmates were the over-all leader of the group, Hassan ‘Abbud (alias Abu ‘Abdullah al-Hamawi) of whom we still know little more than his (potential) origin in the Syrian city of Hama as implied by his *nom de guerre*. In addition to al-Suri, AS’ top leadership included several other known “jihadi-veterans”, amongst them Muhammad Ayman ‘Abd al-Tut (alias ‘Abd al-‘Abbas al-Shami) and Baha ‘Mustafa Jughl (alias Abu Hamza Jughl).<sup>192</sup>

It could perhaps be argued that the group has not actively sought the endorsement or approval of key Salafi-Jihadi groups or central ideologues, by primarily publishing their material on their own webpages and social media rather than top-tier jihadi forums.<sup>193</sup> Thus whereas there the group seemingly included the necessary key personas with a past and a prominence to promote the group as a part and parcel of a broader transnational jihadi-group, it seemingly chose to actively distance itself from such an image. Whilst AS has presented itself as part of a larger community of mujahidin, the self-presentation as a home-grown phenomenon is more salient in its discourse.

As for JN, the group has since its foundation identified themselves as “people of jihad” and as mujahidin with a commitment to the imperative of armed jihad preceding the establishment of JN and the Syrian crisis. Already in the group’s first statement, al-Jawlani vaguely insinuated that the group’s members were in fact operating somewhere else prior to their engagement in Syria, and merely *returned* to “their” land from an undefined place to protect “their” people.<sup>194</sup> - thus hinting of a commitment to (armed) jihad preceding the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Although suggested and speculated at the time whether this undefined place was in fact neighboring Iraq, this was neither confirmed nor denied by the group until April 2013. What the passage did show however was that the group (or more

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<sup>191</sup> Felix Legrand, “The Resilience of Moderate Syrian Rebels”, *Policy Alternatives*, Arab Reform Initiative, September 2014, [http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/20140922\\_Legrand\\_FSA\\_EN\\_formatted\\_final.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/20140922_Legrand_FSA_EN_formatted_final.pdf), 2.

<sup>192</sup> The former engaged in the 70-80s uprising in Syria and Afghanistan, and the latter from Pakistan in the early 2000s. Aron Lund, “Who and What Was Abu Khalid al-Suri? Part II”, *Syria in Crisis* (Blog) *Carnegie*, 25 February 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54634>.

<sup>193</sup> Whilst AS-publications are found in top-tier jihadi forums such as Shumukh al-Islam (<https://shamikh1.info/vb>) the group has not had its own “profile” there, as has JN and ISIS, nor systematically published all their material there. There are similarly scattered publications of the group to be found in other jihadi forums such as Hanayn ([www.hanayn.info/vb](http://www.hanayn.info/vb)). In comparison however, the groups presence on social media has been far more substantial and the efforts which has gone into the design and maintenance of their official webpage far greater than the groups “profile” in jihadi forums.

<sup>194</sup> This use of possessive pronouns can be interpreted as indicative of the group consisting of Syrian nationals. However considering the frequent conceptualization of Islamic land as transcending national borders in Salafi-Jihadi rhetoric, as well as the recurrent portrayal of the Islamic *umma* as a symbolic kinship of all Muslims, the formulation “our people and our land” should not be over-emphasized as indicative of the group’s Syrian credentials.



specifically its founding members) identified themselves as “people of jihad” and as mujahidin with a commitment to the imperative of armed jihad prior to the establishment of JN.

The group’s spatial and temporal adherence to a broader jihadi movement has later been emphasized more extensively, as illustrated by a later speech by al-Jawlani;

*“We are the fruits of the global jihad that emerged, and part of the long history of struggles and sacrifices of the umma. For example, if it hadn’t been for the jihad in Egypt in the sixties, it [ed. jihad] would not have moved to Afghanistan, and if it was not for the jihad in the eighties against this regime in Syria it would not have moved to Afghanistan, and if it was not for the brothers who gave sacrifices in Afghanistan, the jihad would not have moved to Iraq, and if it wasn’t for the brothers who gave sacrifice and were steadfast in Iraq jihad would not have moved to the land of al-Sham.”<sup>195</sup>*

Thus parallel to their self-portrayal as defenders of the people in al-Sham/Syria and as part of a Syrian “jihadi awakening,” JN identify themselves as a part of a broader Salafi-jihadi movement transcending the Syrian conflict. In comparison, I have found no similar quotes from AS.

Whereas the above mentioned aspects of their self-portrayal in statements and films have been consistent throughout the group’s existence, the portrayal of their link with ISI and al-Qa‘ida has not. Rather the group’s affiliation with al-Qa‘ida Central evolved from vague denial to actively sporting the brand. Despite widespread and long-standing rumors claiming JN was in fact allied with the Iraqi al-Qa‘ida affiliate and by extension the leadership of al-Qa‘ida itself, the group refrained from commenting such allegations. From its founding statement, the group’s preference for using top-tier jihadi forums for the dissemination of their statements and film clips rapidly gained them the reputation as the “al-Qa‘ida-linked”<sup>196</sup> or “al-Qa‘ida-like.”<sup>197</sup> But neither then, nor when accused of being an al-Qa‘ida affiliate by the US treasury, did the group deny or approve these claims. First after the group’s affiliation with ISI(S) and al-Qa‘ida was revealed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al-Jawlani addressed its affiliation with the two. However where al-Baghdadi had described JN as part and parcel of the Iraqi “franchise”, al-Jawlani portrayed the relations between the two as one of patronage and assistance rather than sub-ordinance. Whilst rejecting the announced merger of the two, al-Jawlani instead renewed the group’s pledge allegiance to “Shaykh of Jihad, Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri”; “we give a pledge of allegiance for obedience in good and bad, in emigration

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<sup>195</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>196</sup> O’Bagy, “Jihad in Syria”, 7.

<sup>197</sup> Rania Abouzeid, «Is al-Qaeda Intervening in the Conflict?», *TIME*, 14 May 2012, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2114788,00.html>.

(*hijra*) and jihad, and [pledge to] not to dispute with our superiors unless we see clear proofs of disbelief.”<sup>198</sup>

As for the cause of the secrecy surrounding its affiliation with al-Qa‘ida, al-Jawlani stated;

*The issue of postponing the declaration of the affiliation was not due to a softness in religion or inaction that occurred to the men of the Front. Rather it was an enlightened wisdom based on shar‘ia principles and a long history and spending an effort in understanding the shar‘ia policy that is appropriate for the reality in al-Sham.*

However whilst acknowledging al-Zawahiri as his superior, al-Jawlani further addressed “the people in al-Sham” emphasizing that the group would not change but continue as before.<sup>199</sup>

However from late fall, and in particular after its fall-out with ISIS evolved into armed conflict January 2014, the group’s affiliation with al-Qa‘ida evolved from being a neglected and seemingly irrelevant fact, to an increasingly emphasized credential. Observers noted in late autumn that in some areas the group has changed the logo of their banners from “Jabhat al-Nusra” to “Tanẓīm al-Qā‘idat fī Bilād al-Shām” or “Tanẓīm Qā‘idat al-Jihād fī Bilād al-Shām.”<sup>200</sup> By spring references to JN as al-Qa‘ida in al-Sham started appearing in the group’s official publications.<sup>201</sup> The group’s official media wing further posted film clips showing the group’s training camps named after AQ-authorities, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri camp and Abu Ghadiya camp.<sup>202</sup> However, most notably in this regard are the publications of a several film-clips posted from March/April 2014 via JNs own media wings, showing central al-Qa‘ida figures and veterans speaking favourably of the group whilst criticizing ISIS, seemingly from inside the country. In several of this film clips, the speakers were introduced by a biographical presentation where their personal links with AQ-authorities such as Usama bin Ladin and Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi were emphasized.<sup>203</sup>

Finally, more than simply considering itself a part of the broader jihadi movement, ISIS have increasingly described itself as its vanguard challenging the position long held by AQ and its leadership.

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<sup>198</sup> Al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording].

<sup>199</sup> Al-Jawlani, “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham”.

<sup>200</sup> For some visual examples, see Pieter van Ostaeyen, “Jabhat an-Nusra is the only official al-Qaeda in Syria”, *pietervanostaeyen* (Blog), 14 November 2013, <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/11/14/guest-post-jabhat-an-nusra-is-the-only-official-al-qaeda-in-syria/> Also mentioned in Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol 16, March 2014, [http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1393/ct\\_16\\_posting.pdf](http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1393/ct_16_posting.pdf), 7.

<sup>201</sup> In the an English-language film clip of Shaykh Faruq Abu Himam al-Suri produced by one of JN’s official media wings, JN was referred to as; “Qaedatul Jihad in al-Shaam, Jabhat al-Nusra”(translation into English by the media front itself). Abu Himam al-Suri, “Silsala al-Shahada”.

<sup>202</sup> Abu Ghadiya was a central recruiter of fighters to Iraq via Syria, and who was killed near Albu Kamal in Syria by US troops in October 2008. Bill Roggio, “Al Nusra Front names training camps after top al Qaeda leaders”, *the Long War Journal*, 17 March 2014,

[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/al\\_nusra\\_front\\_name.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/al_nusra_front_name.php).

<sup>203</sup> Al-Suri, “Silsala al-Shahada” (Chain of Testemonies).

To be sure, the history of its affiliation with al-Qa‘ida includes a number of examples where the recommendations and demands of the latter were ignored by ISIS and its forbearers. Whether or not the group was technically subordinate or not to the leadership of al-Qa‘ida prior to al-Zawahiri’s rebuke (February 2014) relates to two interlinked questions to which ISIS and the leadership of al-Qa‘ida have given different answers; 1) whether a new (secret) pledge of allegiance (*bay‘a*) was made to the Usama bin Ladin after the death of al-Zarqawi – the only one who *publically* pledged such an allegiance on behalf of the group, and 2) whether by declaring the Islamic State of Iraq (October 2006) the group surpassed the authority of the leadership of al-Qa‘ida itself bound by its pledge of allegiance to Mullah Omar in Afghanistan.

In its first statement as ISIS upon its entrance into Syria these questions had yet to be addressed by the group as well as the al-Qa‘idan leadership however already then the group indicated that their authority over ISIS was more of a symbolic character.<sup>204</sup>

When al-Zawahiri subsequently rejected the re-labelling of the group as ISIS and the geographical expansion the name symbolized, al-Baghdadi bypassed al-Zawahiri’s authority - explicitly considering the judgement of their own shar‘ia council’s superior to that of al-Zawahiri.<sup>205</sup> In the subsequent months ISIS’ propaganda machinery commenced a campaign to legitimize the group’s continued presence in Syria where the encouraging of groups and individuals to pledge allegiance (*bay‘a*) to al-Baghdadi became a central component. Thus, rather than issuing a general call of arms encourage people to join the mujahidin in Syria in general, they encouraged them to join their own ranks;

*We call on the people of the Sunna [Sunni Muslims] in general and the people of Iraq in particular: to join the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. (...) Verily the State opens its doors of recruitment for every Muslim who wished to jihad against the apostates (rawāfid) for the victory of the people of al-Sunna [Sunni Muslims].*<sup>206</sup>

Further, proceeding al-Zawahiri’s official rebuke of ISIS (February 2013) ISIS commenced a media campaign to highlight their loyalty and adherence to “the original goals and aims” of AQ as represented by the speeches of central AQ ideologues and figures,

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<sup>204</sup> Al-Baghdadi, “I‘lan al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham”.

<sup>205</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “Baqiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham” (Remaining in Iraq and al-Sham), *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 14 June 2013, 07:23, <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/15/new-audio-visual-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-abu-bakr-al-%E1%B8%A5ussayni-al-baghdadi-remaining-in-iraq-and-al-sham/>

<sup>206</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”.

including Anwar al-‘Awlaki,<sup>207</sup> Usama bin Ladin,<sup>208</sup> Shaykh Abu Yahya al-Libi,<sup>209</sup> Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi,<sup>210</sup> Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi<sup>211</sup> and Shaykh Abu Hamza al-Muhajir.<sup>212</sup>

In these promotional videos, speeches from these key figures were accompanied with ISIS’ own photos and films to directly interlink and legitimize their operations and the targeting of their (new) enemies amongst Syrian rebel groups.

In sum, al-Baghdadi fall-out with the over-all leader of al-Qa‘ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been portrayed as exactly that in the group’s publications, rather than as a more fundamental departure from the ideology, goals and agendas al-Qa‘ida arguably represents. Put differently, ISIS critic of al-Qa‘ida has largely been reserved to al-Zawahiri, rather than al-Qa‘ida as a whole. As such ISIS has not distanced itself from the al-Qa‘ida brand after being officially rejected by the group. On the contrary they have highlighted themselves as the “true inheritors” of Bin Ladin, al-Awlaki and al-Libi’s legacy – implicitly as well as explicitly rejecting al-Zawahiri’s legitimacy. The group has come to describe themselves increasingly as the only real and true mujahidin at the expense of (and with harsh critique) of other factions.

## 5.5 What is the centrality of (armed) jihad in their discourse?

Whilst the three groups have supplemented their (armed) jihad with other non-combat activities, such as *da‘wa*, aid-work and rebel governance, they have explicitly (and repeatedly) stated that it is

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<sup>207</sup> “The Establishment of the Islamic State Part 1”, *Mu‘assasat al-I‘tisam li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 10 December 2013, 03:19, <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/10/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-the-islamic-stat/>, “The Establishment of the Islamic State Part 6”, *Mu‘assasat al-I‘tisam li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 11 March 2014, 04:15 <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/11/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-5/>

<sup>208</sup> “The Establishment of the Islamic State Part 2”, *Mu‘assasat al-I‘tisam li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 25 December 2013, 05:48, <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/25/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-2/>

<sup>209</sup> “The Establishment of the Islamic State Part 3”, *Mu‘assasat al-I‘tisam li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 4 January 2014, 05:02, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/04/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-2/>

<sup>210</sup> “The Establishment of the Islamic State Part 4”, *Mu‘assasat al-I‘tisam li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 8 February 2014, 07:16, <http://jihadology.net/2014/02/08/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-3/>

<sup>211</sup> “The Establishment of the Islamic State Part 5”, *Mu‘assasat al-I‘tisam li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 25 February 2014, 05:51, <http://jihadology.net/2014/02/25/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-4/>

<sup>212</sup> “The Establishment of the Islamic State Part 7”, *Mu‘assasat al-I‘tisam li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 21 March 2014, 07:07, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/21/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-6/>

(armed) jihad (“and the will of God”) which will cause the fall of the Assad regime, and clear the path for the subsequent establishment of an Islamic state. However whilst AS consider armed jihad to be the only *possible* way to remove the regime, JN and ISIS have on the other hand described it as the only *legitimate* way. And, whilst statements from AS indicate that armed jihad is amongst their top two priorities for now (alongside *da‘wa*) their actions *could* be limited to the latter in the future. Thus whilst AS legitimation for the armed jihad at the current predicament and in the current crisis is contextualized with the Syrian crisis, and the fight against the Assad-regime, it is a de-territorialized and de-contextualized legitimation of jihad found in the discourse of JN, and more so, ISIS. In sum, it could be argued that ISIS and JN evokes jihad as part of their *raison d’être* to a larger extent than AS.

## 6 Visions and manifestations of an Islamic State

*What concerns us is that the shar‘ia be implemented and justice prevailed and lifting the injustice over the people and the righteous Islamic government established on the methodology of the prophet hood that’s seek to liberate the Muslim lands, and implements the shar‘ia of God Almighty, and threats the people fairly and lifts the injustice over the people, this is our quest.”<sup>213</sup>*

*Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani of Jabhat al-Nusra, January 2014*

*We want to put an end to this period of injustice, tyranny and coercion and replace it with a state which confines with the aspirations of the people in so forth that it is a state governed by the true shar‘ia (al-shari‘a al-ḥanīf).<sup>214</sup>*

*Hassan ‘Abbud of Ahrar al-Sham, June 2013*

*As for our political project, it is the project of the umma. Our goal is to establish an Islamic State on the methodology (manhaj) of the prophet, which doesn’t recognize borders nor differentiate between an Arabs and non-Arab, Easterner or Westerner, except with piety. Its loyalty is to God alone (...).<sup>215</sup>*

*Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani of ISIS, July 2013*

The opposition’s *raison d’etre* can be boiled down to the dual mission of firstly removing the Assad-regime and secondly replacing it with “something better”. For Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, this “something better” has since the start of the conflict been conceptualized as some version or another of an Islamic state. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), for their part, considers itself to be that very Islamic State manifested, as indicated by its chosen name. The three groups thus share the key objective of establishing a politico-religious entity with Islam at the fundament. In the following I will explore how and where their visions and ambitions regarding an Islamic state differ, primarily seen through the lens of their discourse but complimenting with examples from their actions in rebel governance.

### 6.1 An Islamic state vs. *the* Islamic state

First of all, the aim of establishing some version or another of an Islamic state has been explicit, consistent and long-standing for JN and ISIS - less consistently for AS.

Commencing with JN, the group has from an early phase expressed their explicit aim of replacing the current regime with an Islamic state<sup>216</sup> - alternately conceptualized as an

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<sup>213</sup> Al-Jawlani, “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham”.

<sup>214</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

<sup>215</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”.

<sup>216</sup> “‘Ilan ‘an Jabhat al-Nusra”.

Islamic state<sup>217</sup> or as “an Islamic rule,” “Islamic governance,”<sup>218</sup> or “the governance of God.”<sup>219</sup> The continued commitment to this aim has further been repeated and underlined in numerous statements and speeches.<sup>220</sup>

AS has for their part expressed a similar aim in a number of central speeches, statements and charters. Similar to JN, AS has alternated between described their vision for a post-Assad Syria as an “Islamic state”,<sup>221</sup> “an Islamic, just and rightly guided (*rāshid*) system of governance”,<sup>222</sup> and “an Islamic, civilized society in Syria ruled by the law of God”.<sup>223</sup> Whilst the conceptualization of this aim has varied, it has remained consistent with one clear exception. Noticeably the “Revolutionary Covenant” co-signed by IF articulated the aim of establishing “a state of law, justice and freedom” with no reference to shar‘ia or Islam whatsoever.<sup>224</sup> However when questioned about it shortly after ‘Abbud stated that what kind of state the signatories wanted for the future was simply not a topic of discussion at the time whereas unity among ranks at the current was.<sup>225</sup> Later statements from the group have confirmed that a future state founded upon Islamic rulings is still of preference – whilst a reluctance of conceptualizing it as an Islamic State (a phrase increasingly associated with ISIS) was arguably identifiable.<sup>226</sup>

Finally, whereas the label of an “Islamic state” or a “rightly guided system of governance” says little about its build-up, power structures etc., there are indications that the JN and AS share some sort of similar vision in this regard. For instance the two co-signed a joint

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<sup>217</sup> Al-‘Uraydi, “Minhajuna wa ‘Aqidatuna”.

<sup>218</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-‘Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>219</sup> Al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording].

<sup>220</sup> Whilst JN’s aim of establishing an Islamic state and/or implement shar‘ia is not a fixed element in all of the groups publications, the statements where it is not mentioned are generally military communiques, eulogies or statement primarily criticizing ISIS where the group’s own aims are not mentioned.

<sup>221</sup> «Mithaq al-Jabha al-‘Islamiyya».

<sup>222</sup> “Man Nahnu?” Ahrar al-Sham, “Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla ‘I‘lan ‘al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada‘iyyatihi ‘ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-‘Iqlimiyya”.

<sup>223</sup> “Mithaq al-Jabhat al-‘Islamiyya al-Suriyya”.

<sup>224</sup> “Revolutionary Covenant”.

<sup>225</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, “Tafasil | Khass .. Mudakhalat Hassan ‘Abbud ‘ala Barnamij Tafasil” (Tafasil | Special ... Participation of Hassan ‘Abbud on the Program Tafasil). YouTube video. 11:03. From an interview televised by Orient News on 19 May 2014. Posted by “Orient News”. 19 May 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIOjIIfCSBU&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>226</sup> In an interview with BBC in June 2014, Abboud was quoted saying “Our ideal governing model is based on Sharia [sic.]”. “Defiant Syrian rebels offer stark choice”, *BBC*, 3 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27687018>.

statement 24 September 2013 alongside nine other armed factions<sup>227</sup> where they agreed on the common aim of “establish[ing] an Islamic state under shar‘ia in Syria”.<sup>228</sup>

ISIS, on the other hand, *did* already pronounce the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 which according to the group marked its transformation from a mere group into a fully functioning Islamic state. This self-perception (and self-presentation) as a state did not change when it officially entered the Syrian conflict and added al-Sham to its title. Rather, the move into Syria and the proposed merger with JN was presented by its official spokesman as a territorial expansion and a symbolic “elevation” of the existing state.<sup>229</sup> The group’s insistence to “statehood” was emphasized explicitly in a speech by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS’s official spokesman, few months after entering. Largely responding to critique from other groups, Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani stated that ISIS was not a “cardboard state” (*dawla kartūniyya*), nor “an illusionary state” or only “existing on the Internet” but rather a real entity.<sup>230</sup> Their self-perception and self-presentation of being a state was further presented by al-‘Adnani as indicative of their advanced efforts in implementing the rulings of shar‘ia; “As for our insistence on being called “the State” it is because we continue to be the spearhead facing the disbelief (*kufur*) and injustice (*zulm*) which to its best efforts seeks to establish the law of God (shar‘ia), and cooperate with other Muslims for its complete implementation.”<sup>231</sup>

As I have mentioned briefly previously and will go further into in the following ISIS (and later IS’) self-pronounced role as a state and later caliphate has been rejected as illegitimate by both JN and AS. Thus, immediate and arguably overarching difference between the three is found in the role they portray for themselves in the establishment and daily management of the Islamic state. Whereas ISIS claims to be *the* Islamic state JN and AS have to a greater extent portrayed themselves as the proponents and facilitators of a *future* Islamic state. As will be discussed at greater length in the following, this key difference between ISIS and JN/AS is further reflected in most other issues related to the groups’ conception of an Islamic state.

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<sup>227</sup> In addition to JN and AS the statement was signed by Liwa’ al-Tawhid, Liwa’ al-‘Islam, ‘Alwiyat Suqur al-Sham, Harakat Fahr al-Sham al-‘Islamiyya, Harakat al-Nur al-‘Islamiyya, Kata’ib Nur al-Din al-Zangi, Tajammu‘ Fa-staqim Kama ‘Umirat, al-Firqat al-Tas‘a ‘Ashar and Liwa’ al-‘Ansar.

<sup>228</sup> “Bayan Raqm 1: Hawla al-‘I‘tilaf wa-l-Hukuma al-Muftarida”

<sup>229</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “‘I‘lan al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham”.

<sup>230</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun”

<sup>231</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”.



## 6.2 Visions of an Islamic State

Whilst specific details on their preferred ruling system are scarce, there appears to be a stronger clarity as well as a consensus amongst the three regarding what it should *not* be. The three have rejected fundamental ideological or political principles such as democracy, secularity and nationalism - either explicitly for being “contradictory to Islam,”<sup>232</sup> “imposed by foreign countries”,<sup>233</sup> or implicitly embedded in their rejection of the efforts of the National Coalition<sup>234</sup> or their inadequacy exemplified by the failure of the Morsi-led government in Egypt.<sup>235 236</sup>

Whilst AS has simply dismissed such political systems, ruling principles and/or ideologies as incompatible with Islam,<sup>237</sup> JN and ISIS has went further in portraying them as (in their views) against human nature or even human decency. For al-Jawlani the “abnormality” of a parliamentary ruling system is illustrated by some countries, “who claim civilization and progress”, [but] have approved same-sex marriages in parliament despite this (according to the text) even if this “contradicts human and even animal nature”.<sup>238</sup> The official spokesman of ISIS has for his part branded “the civil democratic state” and “the local nationalist state” labelled “Islamic” (their regional and international propagators included) as the two primary enemies to their own Islamic state.<sup>239</sup>

Regardless of the different ways they reject such ruling systems, the three groups present them, as well as the current ruling system in Syria, as the constituent others of their utopian vision of an Islamic state.

## 6.3 Institutions and ruling principles of the Islamic State

Moving on from the superlative-loaded visions to the concrete details regarding the institutions, mechanisms of power distribution and even the geographic scope of the groups’ envisioned Islamic State, the three share a similar vagueness. As such neither of the three has published attempts to re-formulate the historic experiences and the holy visions of an Islamic state into a distilled, detailed theory of statesmanship.

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<sup>232</sup> ‘Abbud, Hassan. Interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>233</sup> Al-Shami, “La-Tubayyinunnahu li-l-Nas wa la Taktumunahu”.

<sup>234</sup> “Bayan Raqm 1: Hawla al-’I’tilaf wa-l-Hukuma al-Muftarida”.

<sup>235</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “I’lan al-Dawla al-’Islamiyya fi al-’Iraq wa-l-Sham”.

<sup>236</sup> Al-’Adnani, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”.

<sup>237</sup> See for instance article XV of «Mithaq al-Jabha al-’Islamiyya».

<sup>238</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-’Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>239</sup> Al-’Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ’Illa ’Adha”.

With the exceptions of a few scattered details, all three show a seeming irrelevance of stating their stances on such issues at greater length and in greater details. There are however three aspects of this state where we find some comparable information, 1) the head of state, 2) the principle of *shūrā* and power-sharing, and 3) the implementation of shar‘ia.

Firstly, all three groups envision a leader for their envisioned state and agree upon some absolute demands and requires such as being male, Muslim and “qualified”. In the words of Hassan ‘Abbud of AS;

*According to Islam, the head of state should be a Muslim. This does not mean however that we want an authoritarian, dictatorial regime which deprives people of their rights. To the contrary, if you look at our history in the revolution, we have protected the properties of the Christians.*<sup>240</sup>

Al-Jawlani has laid out certain characteristics required of a future ruler, stating; “(...) the ruler whoever he is, should adhere the regulations of shar‘ia as well as being suitable and competent.”<sup>241</sup> Whilst remaining vague on how this future ruler will be elected, al-Jawlani has not proclaimed ownership over this position but rather emphasized on several occasions that JN “will not monopolize the leading of the society.”<sup>242</sup> Rather, “what the *umma* accepts, we will accept.”<sup>243</sup>

The most elaborate list of qualifications for a future head of state is arguably found with ISIS. To be sure, the group has not provided any general, universal guidelines regarding the necessary qualifications required, the selection process or the leader’s mandate. However seeing as they consider themselves to be *the* Islamic state and refers to their leader by the honorary title of “commander of the faithful” (*‘amīr al-mu‘minīn*),<sup>244</sup> their current chosen leader constitutes an illustrative example of the groups practice in this regard. According to the group, his legitimacy as a leader, and later as a caliph, rests upon his experience, capabilities, religious knowledge as well as his bloodline as he allegedly is a descendant of the Quraysh tribe.

Secondly, all three have groups have endorsed the principle and model of *shūrā* or “consultation” as an authoritative organ in their own organizational structure as well as in a future Islamic state. Whilst the possibility of including the local populace in political

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<sup>240</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

<sup>241</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>242</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni. Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, “An Interview with Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir”.

<sup>243</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>244</sup> *‘amīr al-mu‘minīn* a title historically reserved for the position of caliph. This symbolic superiority was further heightened/consolidated in 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2014 when the group pronounced him caliph Ibrahim of their reborn caliphate.

processes through parliamentary elections and political parties is discarded by the three as un-Islamic or foreign, *shūrā* is presented by the three as the Islamic, superior counterpart.

Commencing with ISIS, the group has on the one hand endorsed the principle of *shūrā* as part of their own system of governance, where the state's own *shūrā* -council (*majlis al-shūrā*) consultates with “the commanders (*al-wulāt*), the governors (*al-’umarā*’), the students of knowledge and the leadership and members of the state”.<sup>245</sup> The group has further noted the presence of “emigrants” (*al-muhājirīn*) represented in their *shūrā* -council.<sup>246</sup> On the other hand, ISIS’ al-’Adnani warns against the application of the concept of *shūrā* simply as an Islamic veil for what he considers “secularity” or “worshipping democracy” – a claim exemplified with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>247</sup>

Whilst there are no such clear indications that the principle of *shūrā* is mere cover for democracy in their statements, AS and JN are more inclusive in their views on the process of consultation. AS, in the words of ‘Abbud, sees *shūrā* as a ruling principle where consultation and “the cooperation with the Umma” constitute oversees or supervises the leader.<sup>248</sup> JN and al-Jawlani has for their part endorsed the principle of *shūrā* in the future process of setting up the future Islamic state,<sup>249</sup> whilst continuously emphasizing how it as a collective effort not to be monopolized by any one group alone.<sup>250</sup> Further statements such as the following from al-Jawlani shows their reluctance to *shūrā* being conflated with namely democracy, but rather presents it as part and parcel of an “Islamic ruling system”; “As Muslims we don’t believe in political parties or processes, nor parliamentary elections, but we believe in an Islamic ruling system where *shūrā* prevails and justice is spread.”<sup>251</sup>

Thirdly, all three groups consider shar‘ia to be the juridical and legal basis for the future state. All three have (repeatedly) emphasized their commitment to implementing shar‘ia both in a future post-Assad state and in areas currently under their control, just as shar‘ia is the ruling principle of their own actions.<sup>252</sup> The praising and glorification of shar‘ia is further a common thread in the publications of the three. In the words of ‘Abbud;

*[Shar‘ia] is a system which regulates the social relationships between people and regulates the system of state regarding trade and transactions, and it guarantees freedom for all and forbids people from transgressing*

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<sup>245</sup> Al-’Adnani, “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun”.

<sup>246</sup> Al-Baghdadi, “Baqiyya fi al-’Iraq wa-l-Sham”.

<sup>247</sup> Al-’Adnani, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”.

<sup>248</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni, *Hadith al-Yawm* (New of Today), Al Jazeera, 27 December 2013, 44:17, <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/bd6a07c5-19ab-476f-8dd5-c1a429236392>.

<sup>249</sup> Al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording].

<sup>250</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-’Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> “Man Nahnu?”, Al-’Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ’Illa ’Adha”.

against each other. It commands the spread of morality and virtue, and promoting the good and forbidding the evil.”<sup>253</sup>

The element social justice is similarly attributed to shar‘ia in the words of al-Jawlani; “The Islamic ruling system (based on) shar‘ia seeks to establish justice among all people; the powerful and weak, the rich and the poor, the big and the small among them.”<sup>254</sup> In the same speech he further added; “(...) the Islamic ruling system (based on) shar‘ia obliges itself to protect the oppressed (*al-musta‘dafin*) and those under the pressure of tyrants.”<sup>255</sup> In a similar appraisal of shar‘ia, al-Jawlani emphasizes how “shar‘ia has rights from women and rights for men” even for the “farmer in his land and the worker in his factory.”<sup>256</sup>

Whilst the endorsement and the glorification of shar‘ia is shared by the three, the main difference between them in this regard is whether or not they support and implement the *hudūd* penal code. In brief, the *hudūd* punishment constitutes the harshest penal measures of Islamic Law and includes for instance the cutting of hands for theft and stoning for infidelity. Although this penal code is part and parcel of shari‘a in theory, it is not the sole penal code but its application generally limited crimes considered to be against religion itself. The conditions required for *hudūd* to be legitimate is, and has been, a divisive issue amongst scholars and ideologues.<sup>257</sup> Most argue that the required conditions for *hudūd* is an ideal, equal and just Islamic state or caliphate where incentives for crime such as poverty, hunger and fundamental inequality are void. Following this logic, some consider the *hudūd* punishments to be called for in a future Islamic State, whilst others “postpone” its implementation to a post-apocalyptic era.

In war-ridden Syria, ISIS is the sole group of the three (and to my knowledge of all groups) which has systematically implemented the *hudūd* penal code and included the undertaking of some of its most brutal punishments in their official propaganda.

ISIS has not only implemented *hudūd* but fronted it as an example of their aversion against partial implementation of shari‘a - something they consider al-Qa‘ida of al-Zawahiri to do.<sup>258</sup>

The group has not offered any explicit religious argumentation legitimizing the

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<sup>253</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan

<sup>254</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-‘Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Carra de Vaux, B. Schacht, J. Goichon, A.-M, "Hadd." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2.edt., P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (ed). Brill Online, 2014.  
[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hadd-SIM\\_2586](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hadd-SIM_2586).

<sup>258</sup> Al-‘Adnani cites a speech from ‘Usama bin Ladin where he claims the “incomplete implementation of shar‘ia equals major disbelief (*kufir ‘akbar*) which causes one to be expelled from religion,” then subsequently laments how the current al-Qa‘ida has changed away from this. Al-‘Adnani, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa‘ida”.

implementation of the penal code in their official publications, but has explicitly disavowed “slogans like moderation” in the context of the implementation of shar‘ia.<sup>259</sup>

Considering however how the group argues that the conditions required for pronouncing the establishment of such an Islamic State are met at the current, following the same logic, so might the case for the necessary preconditions for *hudūd*.

In comparison, the leaders of AS and JN have for their part repeatedly emphasized the distinction between shari‘a and the *hudūd* penal code. Rightfully one might say, ‘Abbud pointed out in an interview in June 2013 that the two are conflated in the beliefs and rhetoric of many harboring negative opinions towards shari‘a, particularly in the West;

*(...) the West suffers from a misconception regarding Islamists in general. We know for example they are mistaken regarding shar‘ia (...) and think it is just a penal code forced on people, and they don’t know that it is a complete way of life.*<sup>260</sup>

In the interview ‘Abbud continued by emphasizing the virtues and even functionality of shar‘ia whilst concluding the argument by stating how “shar‘ia can’t simply be reduced to punishments such as cutting of hands and whipping.”<sup>261</sup> A similar argument is found in al-Jawlani’s interview with the same channel in December 2013; “For shar‘ia does not imply the narrow understanding of implementing (one of) the *hudūd* punishments (*hudūd Allāh*), but rather to liberate man - all mankind everywhere - from the chains forced upon them, from laws made by humans to enslave people to their desires and limited theories making them think they know the meaning of well(fare).”<sup>262</sup> To be sure, neither ‘Abbud nor al-Jawlani dismiss the *hudūd* penal code *per se* nor its potential implementation in a future post-Assad Syria. However, they seemingly consider shari‘a implementable without the *hudūd* penal code, and has subtly attempts to disassociate themselves from such practices, most clearly shown with ‘Abbud’s almost blasé remark on “cutting of hands and whipping”.<sup>263</sup>

The fourth contentious issue in regards the establishment and running of their envisioned future Islamic State relates to whether or not they endorse the principles of power-sharing with groups or individuals not officially part of their own organization and potentially of different ideological and religious inclinations. Again we find a similarity of ideas

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<sup>259</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>260</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>263</sup> The two leaders laudation of shari‘a and their reluctance (and potentially dismissiveness) towards the *hudūd* penal code is further descriptive of the groups practice in rebel governance. As mentioned previously, the two have co-established several courts and/or shar‘ia committees where shar‘ia constitutes the basis for judgments and rulings. Whereas reportages from these courts, reports from observatories and testimonies from activists and former inmates have reported use of torture, I have yet to come across clear indications or proofs that the *hudūd* penal code has been systematically implemented.

expressed by JN and AS and a certain distance between the two and ISIS. JN and AS has continuously emphasized that the establishment of this future state is a collective effort and portrayed their role as primarily that of facilitators and contributors rather than sole authorities. Al-Jawlani of JN has for instance claimed that; We do not seek to rule the country rather we seek the implementation of shar‘ia in the country – whether or not we are to be the rulers, doesn’t concern us.”<sup>264</sup> Al-Jawlani does not however exclude JN from partaking in the set-up and subsequent ruling of the state itself; “The Islamic State in al-Sham is built by the hands of everyone, without excluding any of the main people from among the jihadi factions, the authentic Sunni Shaykhs, and our emigrant brothers, nor the leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra and its *shūrā* council itself, who [all] participated in jihad and the fighting in al-Sham.”<sup>265</sup> As seen here however, the group’s preferred partners include individuals and groups of similar ideological and political outlook. Similarly AS, and by extension IF has emphasized that their effort is collaborative; “[The Islamic Front] does not see itself as an alternative to the *umma*, nor a monopolist of the Islamic project, rather it thanks the efforts of all loyal men working on the scene.”<sup>266</sup>

As for ISIS, similar quotes or statements indicating any lenience toward power-sharing are largely void unless invitations to join the group itself is to be considered.

## 6.4 Ethnic and sectarian minorities

Another important issue related to the three groups’ visions of an Islamic rule of governance is that of the roles and rights of non-Muslim citizens.

Commencing with ISIS, it has explicitly and repeatedly stated its dismissal of religious coexistence with Shi‘ite Muslims.<sup>267</sup> Whilst clearly embedded in the upper echelons of their enemy “hierarchy” (Chapter 7) no such dismissal is found in regards to Jews and Christians. Judging by their statements Christians are allowed to remain in lands which has fallen under the control of the group whilst under strict restrictions and in under the condition that they pay the religious tax (*jizya*).<sup>268</sup> By February 2014, the group established the first *dhimma*-pact

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<sup>264</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>265</sup> Al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording].

<sup>266</sup> «Mithaq al-Jabha al-‘Islamiyya».

<sup>267</sup> See for instance, Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha” and “Fa-qtulum innahum Mushrikun”.

<sup>268</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa‘ida”.

(Pact of protection)<sup>269</sup> with the Christians of al-Raqqa which, under the condition that they pay the religious tax of *jizya*, are allowed to remain in the area, continue to practice their religion – but away from the public eye.<sup>270</sup>

Whilst AS and JN did not implement such measures in areas under their control during the time frame of this analysis, they have seemingly endorsed the institution of protected minorities (*dhimma*) and the tax of protection (*jizya*) with their many references to historic co-existence between Muslims and Christians as a model for their own treatment of minorities.

AS has repeatedly emphasized their commitment to protect the lives of non-Muslim citizens as well as their livelihood and right to practice their religion - at the current as well as in their envisioned post-Assad Syria. An example of this stand is provided by Hassan ‘Abbud in an interview with Al-Jazeera in June 2013;

*They [religious minorities] have absolute freedom in practicing their religion. We are the ones who guarantee them this, and we guarantee them protection, and security and protect their businesses and so on. However when it comes to the head of state being from a minority, being a Christian, we say according to Islam, the head of state should be a Muslim. This does not mean however that we want an authoritarian, dictatorial regime which deprives people of their rights. To the contrary, if you look at our history in the revolution, we have protected the properties of the Christians.*<sup>271</sup>

Their position on securing coexistence between religious and ethnic minorities is stated in charter of both SIF<sup>272</sup>, IF<sup>273</sup> and the Revolutionary Covenant.<sup>274</sup> It is further presented as part and parcel of their legal obligations as prescribed by shari‘a rather than lenience towards Western demands. It is noticeable however how his exemplification of “minorities” consistently leaves the Shi‘ite, ‘Alawite or Druze religious communities unmentioned, always referring to the Christians as an example. ‘Abbud has however stated in an interview with BBC, that ‘Alawites would not be ejected from a hypothetical future Syrian state ruled by the Islamic Front.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Cahen, Cl., « *Dhimma*. », *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2 ed., P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (ed), Brill Online, 2014, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/dhimma-SIM\\_1823](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/dhimma-SIM_1823)

<sup>270</sup> The pact forbids the practice of religion in public, showing Christians symbols in public, the building or reconstruction of Christian places of worship, chiming of churchbells, sell pork or alcohol and follow the laws and dresscodes imposed by the group. Christians are further forbidden from bearing armed.

“‘Awwal ‘Aqd Dhimma fi al-Sham bayna al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya wa Nusara Wilayat al-Raqqa” (The First Dhimma-Pact in al-Sham between the Islamic State and the Christians of the State of al-Raqqa), Published on <http://justpaste.it/ejur>, 26 February 2014.

<sup>271</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

<sup>272</sup> “Mithaq al-Jabhat al-‘Islamiyya al-Suriyya”.

<sup>273</sup> «Mithaq al-Jabha al-‘Islamiyya».

<sup>274</sup> “Revolutionary Covenant”.

<sup>275</sup> “Defiant Syrian rebels offer stark choice”, *BBC*, 3 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27687018>.

JN has in a similar manner outlined the rights of minorities in an Islamic state by reference to Islamic history; “minorities have existed side by side Muslims for 1400 years under an Islamic system which has a conceivable ruling over the minorities, and in this system there are rights that should be done to these minorities, and obligations that these minorities should do.” The group has however presented an alternative version of the history of al-Sham narrating the central battles which have taken place there; where the Romans, Jews, Crusaders, colonizers, the “corrupt, oppressive, immoral regimes” “planted” by the West in the region, and the “*rāfiḍa* (rejectionists) of Persia” – all have opted for domination.<sup>276</sup> In this “version” the Shi‘ite and Jewish minority explicitly (and Christians implicitly) are presented as eternal enemies to (Sunni) Islam and Muslims in the region. In sum, the group upholds a stand of acceptance towards the co-existence of religious minorities in their envisioned future Islamic state, whilst invariably categorizing them as either historic (or current) enemies to this project.

## 6.5 Timing and conditions of its establishment

As touched upon previously, one of the most obvious disagreements between the three related to the issue of an Islamic state is the timing and preconditions of its establishment. ISIS clearly believes them to be met at the current as they claim to be the Islamic state reborn. The other two have rejected the legitimacy of this claim whilst vague in their own stands.

Prior to ISIS’ official entrance into Syria neither JN nor AS offered the issue of the timing or necessary preconditions for establishing an Islamic state any greater attention in their discourse or publications. Seemingly the official establishment of an Islamic state was treated as a task postponed to a post-Assad scenario. The issue of the timing and the necessary preconditions for officially pronouncing an Islamic state gained new relevance with the entrance of ISIS and its claim to be the Islamic state manifested.

Firstly, JN and AS have stipulated that the official establishment of an Islamic state (or alt. an Islamic governance) will take place after the fall of Assad,<sup>277</sup> or in the words of al-Jawlani, when “Damascus, or larger parts of it falls, or when almost 80% of it has been liberated.”<sup>278</sup>

Secondly, both JN and AS has argued that amongst the prerequisites for the establishment of an Islamic state, is the consultation with a broader spectrum of scholars and

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<sup>276</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-’Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>277</sup> «Mithaq al-Jabha al-’Islamiyya».

<sup>278</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.



groups through *shurā* (consultation).<sup>279</sup> They argue that the establishment of an Islamic state must be the result of a collaborative, inclusive effort, rather than the project of one group alone. ISIS exclusivist claim to statehood is thus criticized for disrupting the unity such an Islamic state aims to create.<sup>280</sup>

Thirdly, both JN and AS have arguably fronted a gradualist approach of their jihad, their implementation of shar‘ia, as well as an eventual state building process. Both groups have highlighted the particularities of the Syrian situation in their argumentation for a gradualist approach.

AS for their part proclaimed that the establishment of the Islamic state would take place “through legitimate means and strategic foresight taking into consideration the situation of our people in Syria after the decades of illdoings by the Ba‘th regime and its persistent attempts to distort the practice (*manhaj*) of excommunication (*al-takfir*) midst the sons of our people.”<sup>281</sup> The group further emphasized the imperative of *da‘wa* (proselytizing and preaching) as a prerequisite for the establishment of this Islamic order.<sup>282</sup>

JN has for their part encouraged a “softer” and “more patient” *da‘wa* as Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir of JN notes; “Especially since these people have lived under centuries of repression, under a tyrannical, oppressive, disbelieving and sinful rule - so be easy with our family in al-Sham!”<sup>283</sup> This considered, the envisioned Islamic state of JN and AS is draped with popular legitimacy as it is framed not merely as their own choice or preference, nor as the sole religiously legitimate option, but also as reflecting the “will of the people”. Describing a state ruled by shar‘ia, ‘Abbud has claimed it is “a state which confines with the aspiration of the people”<sup>284</sup> and that it’s establishment is a goal shared by “the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.”<sup>285</sup> Al-

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<sup>279</sup> Ahrar al-Sham, “Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla ‘I‘lan ‘al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada‘iyyatihi ‘ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-‘Iqlimiyya”. Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, “An Interview with Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir”.

<sup>280</sup> Ahrar al-Sham, “Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla ‘I‘lan ‘al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada‘iyyatihi ‘ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-‘Iqlimiyya”. Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, “An Interview with Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir”.

<sup>281</sup> “Man Nahnu?”

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, “Durus wa ‘Ibar min Hayat Sadat al-Bashar” (Lessons and Examples from the Lives of the Masters of Humans), *Mu‘assasat al-Basira li-‘Intaj al-‘Ilamiyy*, 26 February 2014, 19:33, <http://jihadology.net/2014/02/26/al-ba%E1%B9%A3irah-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhah-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-shaykh-abu-sulayman-al-muhajir-lessons-and-learning-points-from-the-lives-of-the-mas/>

<sup>284</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

Jawlani has for his part stated that their envisioned plan is one they share with “the general public and all the factions”.<sup>286</sup>

ISIS for their part has repeatedly and explicitly defended the legitimacy of the establishment of an Islamic State at this particular juncture of history and under the existing condition. One of the group’s main arguments can be boiled down to “if not now when, and if not us who”. As argued by Abu Jihad al-Shishini, leaving the establishment of shar‘ia to others after the successful liberation of new land has not borne fruit, seen in the examples of Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Rather “the infidels sent hypocrites onto the liberated lands and they set up their laws through them”. Al-Shishani vows that this will not happen again, and that ISIS rapid implementation of sh‘aria in territories under their control is to prevent this.<sup>287</sup>

## 6.6 What are the conditions and prerequisites for the establishment of an Islamic State?

Whilst the three have clearly endorsed the establishment of *an* Islamic State, JN and AS have not acknowledged the claimed establishment of *the* Islamic State (of Iraq and al-Sham) – and even less its self-claimed caliphate. Paradoxically their criticism of these establishments have been centered in technicalities (such as timing, the necessary preparation such as *da‘wa*), whilst their own envisioned future states are lacking in just that – technicalities – whilst lulled in an almost utopian haze. Rather, all three offer plenty of superlatives to describe the virtues and qualities of this envisioned state, but have so far been stingy on concrete details regarding its power structures, governmental bodies and leadership. Their engagement in rebel governance further adds pieces to the puzzle constituting indices of how they could eventually choose to set up and organize the management of their envisioned Islamic state. Yet, the conditions of rebel governance in a state of war, just as the transparency and accountability of their actions, appear highly restricted.

The clearest overarching difference between the three however is the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham’s self-professed claim to already *being* this very Islamic State, and the other

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<sup>286</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>287</sup> Abu Jihad al-Shishani, “Hawla al-Mu‘amarat didd al-Dawla al-Islamiyya 3” (Regarding the Conspiracies against the Islamic State 3), *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 5 March 2014, 31:17, <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/05/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-testimony-of-the-commander-abu-al-jihad-al-shishani-about-the-plot-against-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-a-2/>

two's rejection of the legitimacy of this claim. As such it could be argued that the main divisive issues, at least for now, are those related to the timing and prerequisite conditions needed for the establishment of an Islamic states, its geographical borders, the role the groups envision for themselves in the establishment and management of the state, and finally the groups' willingness (or unwillingness) to collaborate and potentially compromise in its establishment, organization and management.

Much like legitimacy and value is bestowed upon their envisioned Islamic state by counterpoising it with, in their view, dysfunctional or even perverted political principles and ruling structured, the self-perception of the group gains significance through the framing of their enemies. Or put differently, how they define their enemy, gives us insight as to how they perceive themselves and their role in the conflict, to be treated in the following.

## 7 Enemy perception

*It has become clear that the conflict is between right and falsehood, between the treacherous international community that wants to give roses to Ahli Sunnah while it hits them with knives in their backs, and a ferocious Safavid fighting at all costs to kill the children of the Sunnah before their men and between Jews lurking at Ahli Sunnah who are exploiting the general situation and expanding their settlements and extending their siege.*<sup>288</sup>

*Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani of Jabhat al-Nusra, December 2013*

*This which is called the crescent is nothing but a sickle stabbed in the side of this umma. The purpose of the Persian Shi'ite Safavid sickle, my brother, is to be an obstacle to the revival of the umma and the restoration of its glory. (...) Now the party of the Iranians in Lebanon is the spearhead of the regime in many of the locations abandoned by its soldiers. Israel is the tyrannical enemy of the umma, the usurper of its land and this is indisputable to anyone with the slightest awareness of the deprived rights of this umma in their heart.*<sup>289</sup>

*Hassan 'Abbud, June 2013*

*[T]he Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham is facing the most malicious of wars, as it has three opponents; the infidels (kuffār) with all their mouthpieces and medias, the apostates (murtaddun) from among ourselves with all their visions and evil scholars, and the people with their heretic tendencies and their Gods of innovation and followers of deviated methodologies (al-manahij al-munḥarifa) from among the Muslims, some of them even considered mujahidin. And the third category is most painful to us.*<sup>290</sup>

*Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani of ISIS, July 2013*

As indicated by the quotes above, the three groups share a complex and multi-layered perception of the collective of their perceived enemies. Whether the regime, its allies or other fighting parties – the enmity is often based upon what the “other” *does* as well as what it is perceived to *be*. Further, the role the regime and that of its actual (and perceived) allies is commonly intertwined to the point of no distinction. Actions on the ground are linked to “the West” and “the Jews” who stand accused of either working actively to promote the regime’s further survival and/or securing its interests in the building of a future post-Assad Syria. And, finally, their enemies are often embedded in larger narratives of an ongoing regional struggle and/or a sectarian eternal battle of historic precedence.

Finding a structure for addressing and analysing the three groups own multi-layered, hydra-headed constituent “other” - the collective, intertwined net of their perceived enemies – thus comes with certain challenges. Separating the layers to distinguishing the actors from each other, differentiating national from regional, “the near” from “the far”, political from religious, actions from perceived inherent evilness for the sake of an orderly analysis, ultimately becomes imprecise. Instead I have approached the topic by identifying and analysing several overlapping narratives of the conflict in the discourse of the three where the

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<sup>288</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir 'Alluni.

<sup>289</sup> Hassan 'Abbud, interviewed by Taysir 'Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>290</sup> Al-'Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum 'Illa 'Adha”.

part of “enemy” is filled by states, groups and/or foreign parties. I will both review the frequency of these narratives in the groups’ publications and whether or not their proclaimed enemies are considered legitimate targets for their operations. The combination of these approaches arguable indicate the extent of their enmity towards certain groups, parties, countries and systems, and the place which they inhabit in the groups’ hierarchy of real or perceived enemies.

## 7.1 The Syrian, ‘Alawite, Shi‘ite enemy

The three groups have framed their own engagement in Syria as a defense of the innocent, the oppressed *ahl al-Sunna* (Sunni Muslims) against the oppression and tyranny of the Syrian regime and its national and regional supporters.<sup>291</sup> There are some noticeable differences as to how they conceptualize these enemies.

Commencing with JN and AS they have largely referred to the Syrian regime as *al-nizām* (the regime) whilst deploying a broad repertoire of derogatory term to denote what they consider to be its oppressive as well as its sectarian, Shi‘ite, ‘Alawite character, amongst them *tā’ifiyy* (sectarian),<sup>292</sup> *tāghiy* (tyrannical)<sup>293/294</sup> *zālim* (oppressive),<sup>295</sup> *kāfir* (infidel),<sup>296 297</sup> *al-rawāfiḍ* (“rejectionist”, a derogatory term to denote Shi‘ite Muslims) and *al-nuṣayriyy* (‘Alawite).<sup>298</sup> They have further expressed their enmity towards the army and the pro-regime militias referred to as *shabīḥa*.

The leader and spokesman of ISIS has in comparison left references to the regime or the army unmentioned<sup>299</sup> whilst consistently referring to enemy currently ruling Syria as *al-nuṣayriyya* (‘Alawites). Much like the group has declared war on *al-rawāfiḍ* (the

<sup>291</sup> “‘Ilan ‘an Jabhat al-Nusra”. “Man Nahnu?”. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “‘Ilan al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham”.

<sup>292</sup> “Man Nahnu?”

<sup>293</sup> A-Jawlani, «al-Nafir al-‘Am».

<sup>294</sup> Ahrar al-Sham, “Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla ‘Ilan ‘al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada‘iyatihi ‘ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-‘Iqlimiyya”.

<sup>295</sup> A-Jawlani, «al-Nafir al-‘Am».

<sup>296</sup> A-Jawlani, «al-Nafir al-‘Am».

<sup>297</sup> “Ghazwat al- Tha’ir li-Hara’ir al-Sham” (Battle of Revenge for the Free [Women] of al-Sham), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Baya’ li-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 26 February 2012, 45:27, <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/27/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-battle-of-revenge-for-the-free-of-ash-sham-syria/>

<sup>298</sup> A-Jawlani, “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham”, “Ghazwat al- Tha’ir li-Hara’ir al-Sham” (Battle of Revenge for the Free [Women] of al-Sham).

<sup>299</sup> Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani’s one reference to the “shabīḥa of the regime” constitutes the sole exception. Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “La-ka Allah ‘ayyuha al-Dawla al-Mazluma” (May God be with you O’ Oppressed State), *Mu’assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 30 September 2013, 21:30, <http://jihadology.net/2013/09/30/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-for-you-god-oh-the-oppressed-state/>

rejectionists), a derogatory term seemingly applicable to denote both the Iraqi leadership and Shi'ite Muslims, the group does not distinguish between the Syrian leadership or civilians of 'Alawite faith in their declared war on al *al-nuṣayriyya*.

Embedded in the narrative of a sectarian regime is its links with its regional allies. As such all the three groups have since their announcement (and in the case of ISIS prior to its entrance into Syria)<sup>300</sup> upheld a narrative of an Iranian Shi'ite regional plot encompassing Syria. As such the Syrian regime, or *al-nuṣayriyya*, is but *one* head of a hydra, Iran, Hizballah and Iraqi Shi'ite militias constituting the others. Iran is referred to by the three either as Iran, the Persians or the Safavid.<sup>301</sup> As for Hizballah (the Party of God) it is rarely referred to as such, but rather as *ḥizb 'Irān* (the Party of Iran), *ḥizb al-shaytān* (the Party of Satan) or *ḥizb al-lāt*.<sup>302</sup>

Overlapping with the abovementioned narrative of an ongoing Sunni-Shi'ite war where the latter is seen as the expansionist oppressor, is a narrative of an eternal, de-territorialized, de-contextualized Sunni-Shi'ite conflict where the Syrian conflict is but the latest chapter. This is narrative predominantly salient in the discourse of JN and ISIS, whilst not seen to a similar extent in the official publications of AS. For instance has al-Jawlani accused Shi'ite Muslims of seeking to “annihilate Sunnism (...) under the pretext of wanting to revenge the son and daughter of the Prophet.”<sup>303</sup> The lack of historic and geographic specificity gives it a de-territorialized, de-contextualized eternal character. A similar framing of 'Alawites as an eternal enemy of Sunni Muslims is also found in the discourse of JN, in the words of an unidentified preacher of the group;

*“Before Salahuddin conquered bayt al-maqdis (Jerusalem) he fought al-nuṣayriyya. And after Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah fought the Tartars, he fought al-nuṣayriyya. They are the spear in the side of the Islamic umma (...) I see the conquest of bayt al-maqdis (Jerusalem) after the victory over al-nuṣayriyya.”*<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, “al-'Iraq al-'Iraq ya 'Ahl al-Sunna” (Iraq, Iraq – O Sunni Muslims), *Mu'assasat al-Furqan li-l-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 24 February 2012, 33:38, <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/24/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraqs-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-iraq-iraq-oh-ahl-al-sunnah/>.

<sup>301</sup> “Ilan 'an Jabhat al-Nusra”. Whilst the founding statement of AS is no longer available or retrievable online, however Marwan Qabalan has recounted and translated these central aspects of the founding statement in the following report. Marwan Qabalan, “The Armed Syrian Opposition: Common Aim but No Vision”, *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies*, August 2013. <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/4bd15c98-978f-427c-9856-3cb727a56f5b>, 13. The narrative of a “Safavid” expansion is further included in «Mithaq al-Jabha al-'Islamiyya».

<sup>302</sup> Al-Lāt refers to one of the pre-Islamic goddesses worshipped in Mekka. Referring to Hizballah as the Party of al-Lāt thus alludes to polytheistic practices.

<sup>303</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-'Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>304</sup> “Al-'Isdar al-Mar'iyy: al-Da'wa li-l-Jihad” (Visual Publication: Call to Jihad), *Mu'assasat al-Manarah al-Bayda' li-'Intaj al-'Ilam*, 12 April 2012, 24:01, <http://jihadology.net/2012/04/12/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-call-to-jihad/>.

The rationale given for the fight against ‘Alawites is that their “unbelief” described as “greater than both the Jews and Christians,” their perceived immoral, un-Islamic practices<sup>305</sup> as well as constituting a test or obstacle sent by God for the people to return to the truthful religion.<sup>306</sup>

To sum up, the regime and its allies are conceptualized in different ways, however its sectarian oppressive character is highlighted by all three groups. As for their enmity towards the regime (or alternatively *al-nuṣayriyya*) the three have framed their opposition against it based on its repression and brutality against the population - largely and consistently described as sectarian motivated. Whilst explicit accusations of sectarian killings are pronounced,<sup>307</sup> it is commonly implied by the consistent use derogatory terms to denote the regimes perceived sectarian character as Shi‘ite, ‘Alawite and/or *nuṣayriyy* in the critique of its brutality. Their incentives for opposing the regime are thus presented as both humanitarian and religious emphasizing the severity of the oppression of the Syrian regime and its perceived sectarian character. ISIS and JN has further tapped into a narrative of an historic, eternal fight between Sunni and Shi‘ite Muslim – less on what they do now, but rather what they inherently are.

### **7.1.1 The extent to which sectarian killings are considered permissible**

Whilst the three groups have adopted a sectarian narrative of the conflict as pitted between Sunni Muslims and a Shi‘ite axis, and further accused the regime for sectarian motivated killings, they differ in so forth as to whether or not Shi‘ite and ‘Alawite Muslims constitute legitimate targets *per se*. Whereas all three groups are accused of sectarian motivated killings of Shi‘ites and ‘Alawites,<sup>308</sup> as well destroying Shi‘ite or Sufi religious sites<sup>309</sup> only ISIS have included such acts in their publications.<sup>310</sup> JN and AS on the other have gone to some lengths to distance themselves from such accusations.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> The unidentified Imam claims that ‘Alawites approve of incest and use homosexual practice as a way to worship God. “Al-’Isdar al-Mar’iyy: al-Da‘wa li-l-Jihad” (Visual Publication: Call to Jihad).

<sup>306</sup> “Al-’Isdar al-Mar’iyy: al-Da‘wa li-l-Jihad” (Visual Publication: Call to Jihad).

<sup>307</sup> A-Jawlani, «al-Nafir al-‘Am».

<sup>308</sup> For instance were three three accused of sectarian motivated killings of ‘Alawite civilians during a joint attack on villages in the Latakia governorates August 2013. “You Can Still See Their Blood: Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside”, *Human Rights Watch*, 11 October 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/10/10/you-can-still-see-their-blood>.

<sup>309</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part II)”, *Policy Watch 2138*, The Washington Institute, 11 September 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-ii>.

<sup>310</sup> In a film clip released in November 2013, ISIL showed the destruction of Sufi sites in the Aleppo governorate. “Nawafidh ‘ala ‘Ard al-Malahim” (A Window upon the Land of Epic Battles 27), *Mu’assasat al-*

AS has explicitly denied the targeting of the regime and regime-loyalist on a sectarian basis on a number of occasions;

*(...) we do not engage in battles or fights with the transgressors on the basis of their belief or disbelief, but on the basis of their part in the hostilities taking place. Thus the shabiḥa, the soldiers and members of the secret service are legitimate targets regardless of their sectarian adherence or descent.*<sup>312</sup>

JN, for their part, *did* publish a sermon by an unidentified imam early 2012 where the brutality of the regime, and the violent killing of civilians in the Syrian conflict was directly linked with the faith (or lack thereof) of the ‘Alawites - continuously referred to *al-nuṣayriyy* (coll. *al-nuṣayriyya*). Armed jihad against the enemy of *al-nuṣayriyya* was portrayed as both the only way the violence, brutality and indirectly also the sheer presence of ‘Alawites would come to an end, and subsequently make way for the building of a righteous society.<sup>313</sup> Whilst ‘Alawites has continues to be associated with the regime and their faith characterized as un-Islamic and heretic in the group’s discourse, the group has since only exceptionally endorsed retaliatory attacks against civilians based on their religious affiliation and thus perceived support of the regime.<sup>314</sup> Rather, perhaps taking lesson from the experiences of ISIS in Iraq where its reputation for brutality caused its rejection by other Sunni insurgency groups, JN has made efforts to downplay the civilian casualties caused by its actions - ‘Alawites or not.<sup>315</sup>

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*Furqan li-l-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 16 November 2013, 08:05, <http://jihadology.net/2013/11/20/al-iti%E1%B9%A3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-a-window-upon-the-land-of-epic-battles-27/>.

<sup>311</sup> In the particular case of the accusations by Human Rights Watch in regards to sectarian killings in Latakia, AS responded with a statement discarding these accusations. “Bayan al-Maktab al-Siyasiyy: Hawla al-Ittihat al-’Human Rights Watch’ wa Ma’ rakat al-Sahil” (Statement from the Political Office: Regarding the Accusations of ‘Human Rights Watch’ and the Battle of the Coast), *ahraralsham.com* (Official website AS), 14 October 2013, <http://ahraralsham.net/?p=3165>.

<sup>312</sup> “Man Nahnu?”

<sup>313</sup> “Al-’Isdar al-Mar’iyy: al-Da’wa li-l-Jihad” (Visual Publication: Call to Jihad).

<sup>314</sup> I have since only once registered a case where a retaliatory attack against ‘Alawites was deemed legitimate targets in the group’s official publications following the chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta. Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, “al-’Ayn bi-l-’Ayn” (An Eye for an Eye), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 24 August 2013, 03:31, <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/25/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-an-eye-for-an-eye/>

<sup>315</sup> The group has published film clips allegedly showing the abortion of military operations so as not to put civilians in danger; “Sidq al-Wa’d 1”. The group has on a different occasion claimed that the group has aborted military operations to avoid civilian killings on many occasions. “Bayan Raqm 9: Tafjir al-’Amn al-’Askariyy wa-l-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya fi Dayr al-Zur” (Statement nr. 9: The Blowing up the Military Security and the Air Force Intelligence in Dayr al-Zur), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 20 May 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/05/20/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-bombing-of-the-headquarters-of-the-military-security-and-air-force-intelligence-in-dayr-az-zur-deir-al-zour/>.

For more on the incident and the possibility of the regime blaming insurgency groups for the attack, see Aaron Y. Zelin and Andrew J. Tabler, “Syrian Jihadis: Real and Exaggerated”, *Policy Watch 1937*, Washinton Insitute for Near East Policy, 17 May 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-jihadis-real-and-exaggerated>



In the word of its leader, the group operates with three categories of enemies; the security branches, the army division and finally some of the ruling figures.<sup>316</sup> Similarly, most of its communiqués have listed attacks on military compounds, road blocks, security installations and airbases, with occasionally description of attacks on non-military targets with links to the regime, such as the Iranian Cultural Council in Damascus and pro-regime press agencies.

ISIS on the other hand have explicitly (and repeatedly) endorsed the killing of Shi‘ite and ‘Alawite Muslims seemingly without regards to whether or not they have any direct affiliation or supporting role to the Syrian (and/or Iraqi) regime; “All of those who follow the [Shi‘ite] creed are disbelievers and their blood and money are permissible, and killing them is a way to get closer to God.”<sup>317</sup> The group’s enmity towards Shi‘ite Muslims and ‘Alawites is further emphasized in the collective reference to both the leadership and their perceived supporters amongst civilians and armed cadres collectively as *al-nuṣayriyya* (‘Alawites) seemingly makes them all accountable for the oppression of the people ISIS vow to defend (Sunni Muslims).

## 7.2 “The Far Enemy” of the West

As for the three groups’ stands on the West, the United States and the International community, or “the far enemy”, they share an inherent scepticism towards their intentions in Syria as well as in the region. However the three differ in regards to the extent of which this scepticism is augmented into enmity, threats and the endorsement of attacks.

Commencing with AS a review of its publications reveals few if any positive attributed the West, Europe and US and the international community, whilst overt threats or narratives of historic destructive involvement are equally void.

Rather, in so forth as the West has been addressed it has been to discourage its involvement in the conflict by claiming their fears for an alternative to the regime, commonly envisioned as an Islamic governance system, are unsubstantiated. Hassan ‘Abbud have even explicitly said that “the Syrian revolution” and its “goals” (as understood by AS), contains nothing that “should give rise to fear in the West.”<sup>318</sup> However should the West, or any other

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<sup>316</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>317</sup> Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “Fa-qtulum innaḥum Mushrikun” (Fight them for verily they are polytheists), *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 15 June 2013, 18:57, <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/15/new-audio-visual-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-so-fight-them-verily-they-are-polytheists/>

<sup>318</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Sami Zeidan.

“invading force”, involve themselves militarily in the conflict “whether to support the regime or to allegedly stop aggression it will be treated as an occupying force.”<sup>319</sup>

In comparison the West, and the US in particular, are clearly embedded in JN’s repertoire of perceived enemies – in the current conflict as well historically;

*There is a struggle of influence in the region, and that struggle is divided between the Muslims and Jews, between the crusader forces and international powers (...) and the Safavid forces represented in what the people call the “Shi’ite school” (madhab). These forces have struggled for 3000 years, so this struggle is not new, but what changed is that after the emergence of Islam it managed to defeat all those great empires like the Persian and the Roman Empire. Islam further expelled the Jews from the Arabian Peninsula. All these powers that dominated this land are gathered here, especially here is the cradle of civilizations, here is the cradle of religions, and here is the cradle of the conflict.*<sup>320</sup>

Rhetoric attacks on the West, the United States, “the international system” and the “crusaders” are among the recurrent themes in the speeches of the group’s leader, whilst not a “fixed element”.<sup>321</sup> As for concrete accusations against the vaguely defined “West”, “the international system” and the United States they are repeatedly accused of either “collaborating with,” “supporting” or “reviving”<sup>322</sup> the Assad regime - favouring its continued rule over the population.<sup>323</sup> The group has further claimed that “the international system” is benefiting from the “Safavid” expansion in the region due to its oil-related interests in the region, and as such is abandoning “its former allies in the Gulf replacing them with the new Iranian allies”.<sup>324</sup> Al-Jawlani has also directed concrete accusation of the West, or the alternatively “the international system’s” direct involvement in the crimes of the regime

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<sup>319</sup> Zelin and Lister, “The crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front”.

<sup>320</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>321</sup> The labelling of Western powers, and the United States in particular, as crusaders is seen in founding announcement of the group as well as another four speeches of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani. Al-Jawlani, “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham”, “Ahl al-Sham: Fadaynakum bi-’Arwahina”, «Wa Qabilu al-’Ayam Khayrun min Madiha», Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, “al-’Ayn bi-l-’Ayn” (An Eye for an Eye), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 24 August 2013, 03:31, <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/25/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-an-eye-for-an-eye/> “‘Ilan ‘an Jabhat al-Nusra” And out of the seven speeches of al-Jawlani published within the timeframe of this study, four contains criticism against the west and/or the “international system”.

<sup>322</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>323</sup> For instance, when the US appointed the group as a “global terrorist”, al-Jolani stated that the US’ engagement in the conflict was simply to “prolong the life of the regime: by giving time limits, sending observers and attempting to make truces.” Al-Jawlani, “Ahl al-Sham: Fadaynakum bi-’Arwahina”. Another examples is al-Jawlani’s response to the appointment of JN as a global terrorist by the US Treasury Department, which he considered an act by the “enemies of Islam”, US and its supporters in the West, to sabotage the “jihadi movement” as “it was getting closer to its goal.” Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-’Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

“Hudna wa ’Ayya Hudna??” (A Truce, What Kind of Truce??), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Bayda’ li-’Intaj al-’Ilam*, 4 May 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/05/06/new-article-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-a-truce-what-kind-of-truce/>

<sup>324</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

against civilians.<sup>325</sup> But whilst characterizing the US and “its supporters in the West” as “enemies of Islam”,<sup>326</sup> threats are largely made on the grounds of self-defence rather than a more offensive stand; “And America and the West have to know that any step taken towards demolishing the project of Islam in the region politically or militarily will revive the *umma* after its revival two or three times, and they will taste their own medicine”.<sup>327</sup>

ISIS have much like JN included the West and the United States - alternatively referred to as the “the infidel West”<sup>328</sup> “America and the apostate West”,<sup>329</sup> «the tyrants (*al-tawāghīt*) in the West»<sup>330</sup> “the devils of America,”<sup>331</sup> and crusaders – amongst their enemies. Out of the 13 official speeches made by the two within the timeframe of the analysis, crusaders are mentioned in nine<sup>332</sup> whilst references to “the West” and/or America have appeared in ten.<sup>333</sup> In addition to the accusations embedded in the abovementioned characterisations, the West and America is repeatedly accused of conducting a campaign to lure Muslims in the region to endorse their “religion of democracy” and call for a “civil state.”<sup>334</sup> They will allegedly “never accept the establishment of an Islamic state”<sup>335</sup> and “hates shar‘ia.”<sup>336</sup> Based on this, the West is accused of conducting a “relentless media campaign” against the group,<sup>337</sup> as well as directly targeting the group with its armies as well as through the support of the *ṣahawāt* in Iraq<sup>338</sup> and the groups fighting ISIS in Syria.<sup>339</sup> As for whether the West and the United States constitute legitimate targets, the following quote from al-‘Adnani not only affirms this but indicates its priority; “We have to always

<sup>325</sup> Al-Jawlani, “al-‘Ayn bi-l-‘Ayn”. Al-Jawlani has bade similar accusations against the US in regards to its alliance with the Maliki-government in Iraq. Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>326</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-‘Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “La-ka Allah ‘ayyuha al-Dawla al-Mazluma”.

<sup>329</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Thumma Nantahilu fa-Naj‘alu La‘nat Allah ‘ala al-Kadhibin”.

<sup>330</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “Wa la-yumkinnunna la-hum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum” (He will Establish for them their Religion which he has Preferred for them), *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 3 April 2014, 16:14, <http://jihadology.net/2014/04/03/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-he-will-surely-establish-for-them-therein/> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha””, “La-ka Allah ‘ayyuha al-Dawla al-Mazluma”, “al-Ra‘id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa‘ida”, “Thumma Nantahilu fa-Naj‘alu La‘nat Allah ‘ala al-Kadhibin”, “Fa-qtulum innahum Mushrikun”, “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun”. Abu Bakr al-Baghdhadi, “Wa Allahu Ya‘lam wa ‘antum la Ya‘lamun”.

<sup>333</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha””, “La-ka Allah ‘ayyuha al-Dawla al-Mazluma”, “al-Ra‘id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”, “Wa la-yumkinnunna la-hum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum”, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa‘ida”, “Fa-qtulum innahum Mushrikun”, “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun”, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?” and Abu Bakr al-Baghdhadi, “Wa Allahu Ya‘lam wa ‘antum la Ya‘lamun”.

<sup>334</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”.

<sup>335</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra‘id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>336</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Wa la-yumkinnunna la-hum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum”.

<sup>337</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “La-ka Allah ‘ayyuha al-Dawla al-Mazluma”.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Thumma Nantahilu fa-Naj‘alu La‘nat Allah ‘ala al-Kadhibin”.

remember the reality of the conflict, and that our war is with the Jews and crusaders, and we have to bring them back to direct confrontation with us.”<sup>340</sup> Similarly al-Baghdadi himself has warned the United States; “beware you protector of the ‘Cross’ that the war by delegation won’t help you in al-Sham, as it didn’t in Iraq, and soon you will be in full confrontation (...) and that the sons of Islam have prepared themselves for that day.”<sup>341</sup> That said, *al-rawāfiḍ* (the rejectionists) is explicitly described as a more dangerous enemy, against the group, and more so, against the Muslim *umma*.<sup>342</sup>

### 7.3 Regional states

ISIS has in addition to the regional states of Iran and Iraq in league with the Syrian regime, expressed their opposition against other regional states of two categories – both considered to be in league with their claimed enemies in the West. Firstly there are the “tyrants of the land of Muslims” who support the creation of a democratic civil state in Iraq and al-Sham.<sup>343</sup> Secondly, ISIS offer staunch critique against Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states for their monetary and religious support<sup>344</sup> to the establishment of a “national state” in Iraq and Syria – a state described as “Islamic from the outside” but which “succumbs to the tyrants in the West.”<sup>345</sup> This second state-formation is further described as one “that doesn’t frighten America, the Jews and the infidel West, and in which *al-nuṣayriyya* and the religions of disbelief are safe and polytheism and its followers are not humiliated.”<sup>346</sup> Out of the regional states, or more precisely its rulers, critique against the Saudi royal family is particularly salient in the discourse of ISIS,<sup>347</sup> described as the head of the tyrants.<sup>348</sup>

JN and al-Jawlani has not expressed the same enmity towards other region countries, but on one occasion we find al-Jawlani claiming that regional Sunni states are be subjected to

<sup>340</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>341</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “Wa Allahu Ya‘lam wa ‘antum la Ya‘lamun” (God knows but you do not know), *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 19 January 2014, 16:17, <http://jihadology.net/2014/01/19/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shams-abu-bakr-al-%E1%B8%A5ussayni-al-baghdadi-god-knows-and-you-do-not-know/>

<sup>342</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

In the same speech al-‘Adnani cites a similar quote by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi where “al-rafida” is described as a larger enemy the “far enemy” in the West.

<sup>343</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”.

<sup>346</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>347</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”, “Thumma Nantahilu fa-Naj‘alu La‘nat Allah ‘ala al-Kadhibin”, “Wa la-yumkinnunna la-hum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum” and “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa’ida”.

<sup>348</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Wa la-yumkinnunna la-hum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum”.

the same treat of an Iranian expansion as Syria as Western alliances in the region as shifted from the Gulf to Iran. According to al-Jawlani “the international system has turned against them [the Sunni regional states] and opened a very wide door for the Safavid regime which now threatens all these regimes with demise.”<sup>349</sup> Whilst implying a previously more extensive collaboration with “the international system” of which JN as shown deep scepticism towards, this is not a subject we see further elaborated in the official statements of the group.

In sum, whilst ISIS considers the regional states ruled by Sunni Muslims to be in cahoots with their proclaimed Western enemies, JN for their part considers them to be imminent victims of an Iranian regional plot.

## 7.4 “A Jewish Plot”

As for Syria’s neighbouring country to the south, Israel is never mentioned by name, whilst all three groups have implied the existence of a “Jewish”, “Zionist” plot in the region, however to varying extents and frequency. Interestingly the three has further embedded the “Jews” in different categories of enemies.

AS has for their part suggested collaboration between “the Jews” and “the Shiite Muslims” in the region.<sup>350</sup> However, whilst this accusation figured in the group’s first publication it has not become a recurrent theme in their publications.

Similar to AS, JN has portrayed Hizballah and the Syrian regime as convenient allies of “the Jews” and Israel, the former for its attacks on Sunni Muslims, and the latter for “guarding the borders for more than 40 years”.<sup>351</sup> “The Jews” are further accused of exploiting the “Safavid killing of the children of al-Sunna (Sunna Muslims) (...) to expand their settlements and extend their siege” of the Palestinian territories.<sup>352</sup> In addition to claims that “the Jews” are exploiting the current conflict to their own benefit, they are further presented as an “historic enemy” of Muslims in the region alongside “crusader forces and international powers” and “the Safavid forces”,<sup>353</sup>

*There is a struggle of influence in the region, and that struggle is divided between the Muslims and Jews, between the crusader forces and international powers (...) and the Safavid forces represented in what the people call the “Shi’ite school” (madhab). These forces have struggled for 3000 years, so this struggle is not new, but what changed is that after the emergence of Islam it managed to defeat all those great empires like the Persian and the Roman Empire. Islam further expelled the Jews from the Arabian Peninsula. All these powers that*

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<sup>349</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>350</sup> “Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition”, 15.

<sup>351</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-’Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

dominated this land are gathered here, especially here is the cradle of civilizations, here is the cradle of religions, and here is the cradle of the conflict.<sup>354</sup>

ISIS has similarly described “the Jews” as enemies of either the group and/or Sunni Muslims – today or historically – in ten out of thirteen speeches.<sup>355</sup> In these speeches ISIS enmity against “the Jews” are seen as both allied with the enemies of the West - “the crusaders”,<sup>356</sup> ‘*ulamā’ al-ṣulṭān*’ (clerics of the sultan), “those who call for a civil state,”<sup>357</sup> – as well as “*al-nuṣayriyya*.”<sup>358</sup> They are further accused of “fight[ing] God and His Messenger”.<sup>359</sup> Whilst ISIS has not engaged in fights with “the Jews” or Israel directly within the timeframe of this analysis, quotes such as the following clearly shows that ISIS not only endorses attacks on “the Jews”, but sees it as a priority; “We have to always remember the reality of the conflict, and that our war is with the Jews and crusaders, and we have to bring them back to direct confrontation with us.”<sup>360</sup>

## 7.5 Religious scholars

Embedded in ISIS’ critique of regional states are the religious scholars considered by ISIS to be co-opted by these regimes. Such scholars are rarely mentioned by name,<sup>361</sup> but rather referred to alternately as ‘*ulamā’ al-ṣulṭān*’ (clerics of the sultan),<sup>362</sup> ‘*ulamā’ Āl-salul*’ (the clerics of Saudi Arabia<sup>363</sup>)<sup>364</sup> and ‘*ulamā’ al-sū’*’ (evil scholars).<sup>365</sup> The critique of these scholars has figured in six out of ten speeches by the group’s spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani.<sup>366</sup> ISIS enmity towards these scholars based on their acceptance and support of what

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<sup>354</sup> Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni.

<sup>355</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha’”, “La-ka Allah ‘ayyuha al-Dawla al-Mazluma”, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”, “Thumma Nantahilu fa-Naj’alu La‘nat Allah ‘ala al-Kadhibin”, “Wa la-yumkinnunna lahum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum”, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa’ida”, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”, “Fa-qtulum innahum Mushrikun” and “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun” Al-Baghdhadi, “Wa Allahu Ya‘lam wa ‘antum la Ya‘lamun”.

<sup>356</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Al-Baghdhadi, “Wa Allahu Ya‘lam wa ‘antum la Ya‘lamun”.

<sup>359</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”.

<sup>360</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>361</sup> In his speech by al-‘Adnani regarding the events in Egypt and the military takeover of the rule in the country from the Muslim Brotherhood-government, he explicitly criticized “shaykh al-Azhar” referring to Grand Imam or Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar considered amongst the highest authorities in Islamic jurisprudence, whilst also occupying a position closely linked with Egyptian political leadership. Al-‘Adnani al-Shami, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”.

<sup>362</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha’”.

<sup>363</sup> ‘*Āl-Salul*’ is a derogatory name for the Saudi royal family.

<sup>364</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha’”.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha’”, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa’ida”, “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?” and “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun”.

ISIS considers to by tyrant regimes and un-Islamic governance systems,<sup>367</sup> for spreading false allegations regarding ISIS, encouraging coexistence with “*al-rāfiḍa*”<sup>368</sup> and discouraging armed jihad.<sup>369</sup>

Whilst the narrative of religious scholars obstructing the call to armed jihad, is identifiable in some film clips of the group<sup>370</sup> it is not frequent nor voiced by its leader nor the scholars which have been profiled in its official publications. Rather we find a member of JN’s shar‘ia council, Abu ‘Abdullah al-Shami, claiming “the scholars of the Islamic *umma*” had stopped “urging people to stay away from jihad and mujahidin” now calling for their support and “for God to grant them victory.”<sup>371</sup> Coinciding with the intensification of the rebel infighting against ISIS, al-Shami emphasized the collaboration between JN and these “scholars of the Islamic *umma*” indicating a broad religious legitimation for the position of JN juxtaposed a scholarly isolation of ISIS.

## 7.6 What constitute the groups’ hierarchy of enemies and target selection?

Whilst the three groups have expressed enmity towards largely the same parties, flanks and states, largely “the usual suspects” in Salafi-Jihadi discourse, their hierarchy of enemies arguably differ. The near enemy, as conceptualized as the Syrian regime and its supporters, is for obvious reasons a higher priority in the groups’ operational activities as well as the most recurrent object of vocal attacks in their publications. As for the “far enemy” JN and ISIS have to a greater extent than AS expressed enmity against “the West” and “the international society” for their perceived direct involvement in the conflict.

The three further differ in so forth as their pronounced enemies overlap (or not) with whom they consider to be legitimate targets for their operations. This is clearest when it comes to their sectarian framing of the conflict, where one can arguable distinguish between sectarianism (AS and JN) and violent sectarianism (ISIS). As such ISIS stands out from the rest regarding the degree of brutality they choose to expose in their online self-projection of themselves and promotion of their actions. Whereas other groups have been known to kill

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<sup>367</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu” and “al-Silmiyya Dīn Man?”.

<sup>370</sup> “Ghazwat al- Tha’ir li-Hara’ir al-Sham” (Battle of Revenge for the Free [Women] of al-Sham), *Mu’assasat al-Manara al-Baya’ li-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 26 February 2012, 45:27, <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/27/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-battle-of-revenge-for-the-free-of-ash-sham-syria/>

<sup>371</sup> Al-Shami, “Wa law Annahum Fa’alu ma Yu‘azuna bihi la-Kana Khayran lahum”.

alleged criminals without a trial or assassinated pro-regime militia members or Alawites, as far as I'm have registered, none have chosen to record and spread video-clips of this online to the extent that ISIS has.

It can further be argued that the groups' perception of enemy compliments their self-perception. Much like legitimacy and value is bestowed upon their envisioned Islamic state by counterpoising it with, in their view, dysfunctional or even perverted political principles and ruling structured, the self-perception of the group gains significance through the framing of their enemies. Or put differently, how they define their enemy, gives us insight as to how they perceive themselves and their role in the conflict. Whilst AS, and to a lesser extent JN, have limited their battle, their enemies and proclaimed targets to the ones they confront in Syria, ISIS fronts a perception of a de-territorialized conflict and de-territorialized enemy further enforcing their self-perception as an eternal force.



## 8 The geographical scope of their operations and aims

*We have said from the start that we aspire to return the governance of God to His land then revive the umma to implement his shar‘ia and spread his methodology.*<sup>372</sup>

*Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani of Jabhat al-Nusra, April 2013*

*[W]e announced that we wish to establish an Islamic state in Syria, and this state will replace the current regime. As for our aspirations we yearn for the day when these states come together and unite as is the case with the [states in the] European Union which removed the borders between themselves.*<sup>373</sup>

*Hassan ‘Abbud of Ahrar al-Sham, June 2013*

*We will not forget to renew the pledge to the Umma that we won’t enjoy life until we liberate the Muslims everywhere, and until we regain Al-Quds, return Al-Andalus, and conquer Rome, God willing.*<sup>374</sup>

*Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani of ISIS, July 2013*

The aim of (re-)creating a unity of the Muslim nation (*umma*) transcending geographical borders, racial divides, and state-citizenship is considered a key trait of Salafism. As illustrated by the quotes above, it is also an aim shared by JN, AS and ISIS. The spectrum of other groups, movements and ideologues – from Jamal al-Din al-Afghani to al-Qa‘ida, who have endorsed the same “mission” – further illustrates that the aim in itself does not dictate the measures, nor the short-term geographical scope of one’s agenda. Rather, the manifestation of this aim into plans and actions, and in particular the geographical limitations of these plans may vary greatly. In short, some have confined their struggle to the national state and explicitly “postponed” any larger regional or global “revolution” to the far-future. Others have argued that the establishment of a regional caliphate is imminent and thus operates with a geographical scope transcending existing borders – rhetorically as well as operationally. Others again might harbor regional or global ambitions, but are (for the time being) more locally focused due to economic and/or operational hindrances. Finally, there are numerous instances of groups shifting their geographical priorities over the course of their lifespan, al-Qa‘ida itself arguably constituting a well know example. This notwithstanding, a group’s geographic priorities and ambitions, and whether or not its “national”, “regional” or

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<sup>372</sup> Al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording].

<sup>373</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>374</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”.

“global” (or alternatively “state-oriented”, “nation-oriented”, “umma-oriented”<sup>375</sup> or “transnational *salafiyya*”<sup>376</sup>) constitute a common key distinguisher in comparative analyses of salafi/salafi-jihadi movements.

In the following I will move beyond the idealized vision of a united, transnational *umma*, state or caliphate shared by the three, and look into the way they have explicitly expressed their geographical ambitions and self-imposed territorial limitations.

I will first review in brief where the groups did in fact operate during the timespan of this study (January 2012 and May 2014). Secondly, I will approach the overarching question of whether they are primarily nationally, regionally or globally by posing three sub questions;

- 1) To what extent have the group identified themselves as Syrian?
- 2) To what extent have they expressed regional aims?
- 3) To what extent have they expressed global aims?

## 8.1 The geographical locus of their operational activities

Aside from discourse, the most apparent indicator of a group’s regional or global ambitions is perhaps whether or not they are in fact active and has a public presence in other countries.<sup>377</sup> In this sense ISIS and JN stand out as the most regional, as both have established a presence and launched attacks in several countries.

Commencing with the former, and its predecessors, they were primarily operating in Iraq prior to entering Syria in April 2013 under the name of ISIS. The group did also claim responsibility for an attack in Jordan in November 2005 as well as being instrumental in establishing JN summer/fall 2011. Since April 2013 the group has publically conducted operations concurrently in both Syria and Iraq - and from late 2013 adding Lebanon to the list.<sup>378</sup>

As for JN and its nascence in Iraq considered, it did not claim responsibility for any attacks in the country within the timeframe of the study. Whilst it declared fighting Hizballah

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<sup>375</sup> Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries?” 259.

<sup>376</sup> Madawi al-Rashid, “The Local and the Global in Saudi Salafi-Jihadi Discourse”, in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, Roel Meijer (ed.) (London: Hurst & Company, 2009). 301-302.

<sup>377</sup> I will not consider here trans-border activities which are related primarily to logistic, such as recruitment, transportation, smuggling, establishment of safe houses and the like, but rather whether or not they have/have had a public presence, affiliated branches and/or launches attacks in multiple countries.

<sup>378</sup> Jennifer Cafarella, “Syrian Jihadists Signal Intent for Lebanon”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 5 March 2015, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian\\_Backgrounder\\_approved\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian_Backgrounder_approved_0.pdf), 3.

in Syria as a top priority July 2013,<sup>379</sup> it first announced its presence in Lebanon December 2013<sup>380</sup> and officially endorsed attacks on the group in Lebanon by 24 January 2014.<sup>381</sup>

Compared to the abovementioned two, AS did not claim responsibility for any attacks outside Syria within the timeframe of the study, nor has it claimed or admitted to having any sub-group or factions operating outside Syria.

### 8.1.1 Why Lebanon?

Whilst the group's actions, recruitment networks and transnational links<sup>382</sup> to groups in other countries falls outside the scope of this study, it is relevant to see how JN and ISIS have framed their activities in Lebanon largely as part of the Syrian conflict and a defence against what they perceive to be an Iranian, Shiite project in the region.

JN (in Lebanon) did not express any explicit aim to establish territorial control in Lebanon, but framed their attacks as retaliation against Hizballah, referred to interchangeably as either the party of Iran (*ḥizb 'Irān*) or the party of satan (*ḥizb al-shayṭān*), for their “continuous killings and arrests of the *ahl al-Sunna* (Sunnite Muslims) in Lebanon,”<sup>383</sup> “crimes against the women and children of *ahl al-Sunna* in Syria,”<sup>384</sup> “their tyranny and criminal acts” in both countries<sup>385</sup>, and “the coward act” of “placing their bases amongst civilians.”<sup>386</sup> These allegedly sectarian motivated killings and oppression was further framed as part of Iran's “project” in the region – namely spreading “*wilāyat al-faqīh*” (the

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<sup>379</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-'Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>380</sup> A Twitter-account by the name of Jabhat al-Nusra in Lebanon (Jabhat al-Nuṣra fī Lubnān) (username: @jabhalb) was launched 24 December 2013. Whilst the official media wing of JN did not release an official communique verifying the authenticity of the alleged Lebanese branch, it neither disavowed its presence online nor its actions in Lebanon as had been done with other namesakes or false-flag attacks previously. Additionally as Jabhat al-Nusra in Lebanon did publish their statements through the same channels as Jabhat al-Nusra (a privilege offered no other armed group) was seen as clear evidence that the link between the two exceeded the mere similarities in name.

<sup>381</sup> “Bayan 4: Nida' 'Ajil li-'Ahl al-Sunna fī Lubnan” (Statement 4: Urgent Call to Sunnite Muslims in Lebanon), 24 January 2014, <http://justpaste.it/e72w>

<sup>382</sup> There has been a number of reports describing links between both JN and ISIS to pre-existing armed groups based primarily in Lebanon. See for instance, Mitchell Prothero, “Al Qaida-linked Nusra Front rebels blamed for bloody fight against Lebanese army in Sidon”, *McClatchy*, 25 June 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/06/25/194944/al-qaida-linked-nusra-front-rebels.html#.Udu08fkvmic>

<sup>383</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra fī Lubnan (Jabhat al-Nusra in Lebanon), Twitter post, 24 December 2013, <http://twitter.com/jabhalb> (access date: 25 January 2014).

<sup>384</sup> “Bayan 2: 'Amaliyya Istishhadiyya 'ala Ma'qal Hizb Iran fī al-Harmal” (Statement 2: Martyrdom Operation against the Base of the Party of Iran in Hermel), 16 January 2014, <http://justpaste.it/esthrml>

<sup>385</sup> “Bayan 9: Risala 'ila 'Uqala' Lubnan” (Statement 9: Letter to the Reasonable of Lebanon), 24 February 2014, <http://justpaste.it/bayan9>

<sup>386</sup> In this context JN in Lebanon has repeatedly warned people (and Sunnite Muslims in particular) to stay away from Hizballah controlled areas, as well as the group's bases and strongholds. “Bayan 2: 'Amaliyya Istishhadiyya 'ala Ma'qal Hizb Iran fī al-Harmal”.

guardianship of the Islamic jurist).<sup>387</sup> Additionally, JN (in Lebanon) offered implicit warnings for the Lebanese army which they accused of facilitating the crossing of Hizballah fighters into Syria as well as guarding their positions in Lebanon in the meanwhile.<sup>388</sup>

In sum, JN (in Lebanon) framed their operations against Hizballah as an extension of their fight in Syria – namely as revenge for what they consider to be sectarian killings against Sunni Muslims. However, whilst the end-goal for their operation in Syria has been conceptualized as the fall of the Syrian regime and the establishment of an Islamic state in its place, there are no pronounced larger aim for Lebanon other than to forcing Hizballah out of Syria, end their alleged arrests, oppression and killing of Sunni Muslims – and consequently sabotage Iran’s involvement in the region. Whilst Lebanon’s Sunni Muslims are encouraged to “form ranks against Hizballah”,<sup>389</sup> JN (in Lebanon) did not issue an official *nafir* (call to jihad) specific for Lebanon as it did with Syria or al-Sham, nor did it issue any territorial claims, aims of implementing shar‘ia or establish an Islamic state in the country.

Even prior to ISIS official establishment in Syria, ISI’s spokesman Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani lashed out against Hizballah (as well as Iraqi Shi’ite militias) for sending their “snipers and criminals to Syria to shed the blood of defenseless people.”<sup>390</sup> By June 2013, al-‘Adnani swore on behalf of the group that they would remove the current borders and attack “*al-rawāfiḍ*”, “*al-nuṣayriyya* and *ḥizb al-lāṭ*” “from Diayala to Beirut”<sup>391</sup> – showing their ambitions for entering Lebanon. A part from joining Sunni Muslims in a borderless entity, their motivation for entering Lebanon is their opposition against “*al-rawāfiḍ*” and their rule and ravaging against Sunni Muslims there, just as in Iraq and Syria;

*Al-rawāfiḍ (the rejectionists) have cooperated and collaborated, made a pledge to fight you everywhere and you have seen their real face in al-Sham, and it began to reveal in Iraq, and soon you will see the Safavid warplanes and tanks shelling your neighbourhoods, and storming your homes. You will see the rāfiḍiyy (rejectionist) militias plundering your money, and killing your sons, and raping your women, in the streets of Sidon, Beirut, Diyala and Baghdad.*<sup>392</sup>

In sum, the two groups have presented their operations in Lebanon firstly as an extension of the Syria/Iraq offensive against the multi-headed enemy of Iran, the Assad regime and Hizballah (and in the case of ISIS also including the Iraqi leadership and Shi’ite militias).

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<sup>387</sup> “Bayan 9: Risala ‘ila ‘Uqala’ Lubnan”.

*Wilāyat al-faqīh* here refers to the politico-religious doctrine for the Islamic governance developed by Ruhollah Khomeini and implemented in Iran after the revolution in 1979.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> “Bayan 2: ‘Amaliyya Istishhadiyya ‘ala Ma‘qal Hizb Iran fi al-Harmal”.

<sup>390</sup> Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, “al-‘Iraq al-‘Iraq ya ‘Ahl al-Sunna” (Iraq, Iraq – O Sunni Muslims), *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘Ilam*, 24 February 2012, 33:38, <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/24/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraqs-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-iraq-iraq-oh-ahl-al-sunnah/>

<sup>391</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun”.

<sup>392</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “al-Ra’id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu”.

Secondly, their operations in Lebanon are portrayed as defensive in order to protect Sunni Muslims in the country. Finally whilst both groups speak of (Sunni) Muslims unity transcending the borders, and endorse the ideal of a Sunni Muslim territorial unity, ISIS is the most explicit of the two in their ambitions of making it happen.

## 8.2 To what extent have the groups identified themselves as Syrian?

### 8.2.1 Syria as self-identification

The three commonly alternate between *'ahl al-Shām* (the people of the Levant or greater Syria), *'ahl al-Sunna* (lit. the people of tradition, Sunni Muslims), *al-'umma* (the Muslims community or nation) when addressing their adherence, as well as who they claim to represent, support and defence. The three concepts contain a transnational dimension indicating an adherence to and/or self-identification with a community transcending the borders of the Syrian state. Simultaneously, all three have incorporated al-Sham into their respective names indicative of the (immediate) priority of this geographical area; however whereas AS are “the Freeman of al-Sham”, JN and ISIS respectively claim to be the protectors of al-Sham and the larger state overarching al-Sham sidelining it with Iraq.<sup>393</sup> This nuance in their chosen name is arguably identifiable in the way they frame their role in the conflict in so forth as the former to a larger extent than the latter two has added the attribute of “Syrian” to their characteristics and self-definition.

Commencing with JN, a review of the official speeches and statements by the group’s leader and leadership we find multiple references to al-Sham as “our land”<sup>394</sup> “the people of al-Sham” as “our people”.<sup>395</sup> In comparison, the same source material is void of expressions such as “us” or “we” when speaking *of* and *to* Syrians or the people of al-Sham. A review of the speeches of al-Baghdadi and al-‘Adnani reveals the same result, the group frequently

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<sup>393</sup> As mentioned ISIS eventually removed the geographical references to al-Sham and Iraq from its name when it renamed itself the Islamic State (*al-Dawla al-Islamiyyah*) by 29 June 2014.

<sup>394</sup> “‘Ilan ‘an Jabhat al-Nusra”.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid. Al-Jawlani, “‘Ahl al-Sham: Fadaynakum bi-‘Arwahina”, “al-‘Ayn bi-l-‘Ayn”, „Wa Qabilu al-‘Ayam Khayrun min Madiha“, [Untitled audio recording], and “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham”.

speak of or to “our people of al-Sham”<sup>396</sup> whilst a self-definition as Syrian or *shāmiyy* (from al-Sham) is not to be found. Whilst both frame their work as *for* “the people of al-Sham” whom they praise, and willing show and address Syrians admits their ranks - Syrians as a whole are continuously addressed as in second person or spoken of in third person and not included in a first-person self-definition as such.

AS has on the other hand has to a greater extent than the other two added the attribute of “Syrian” to their characteristics and ultimately their self-definition, whether in quotes by Hassan ‘Abbud saying; “we, as Syrian people”<sup>397</sup> or in the chosen name of the group and its alliances (Syrian Islamic Front and Syria’s Revolutionaries Front). The group has further framed their establishment and engagement in the conflict as an extension of the popular uprising which commenced in March 2011 framing the group as predominantly a Syrian movement.

## 8.2.2 Foreign fighters

The three groups are known recipients of foreign fighters, and have according to some contributed to the funneling, relocation and training of some of them.<sup>398</sup> With the entrance of ISIS into the conflict, anecdotal evidence has indicated the tendency of foreign fighters have left other groups such as AS and JN to join forces with ISIS, whilst far from sufficient to estimate numbers.<sup>399</sup> Whilst the question of the number of foreign fighters in their ranks remains unanswered by the groups themselves,<sup>400</sup> the saliency of foreign fighters in the self-projected public image of the various groups is however measurable. In this regard ISIS clearly stands out compared to JN and AS.

All three have publically, at various times, endorsed the presence of non-Syrian fighters amongst the ranks of the opposition, praised their efforts and sacrifices, and invited

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<sup>396</sup> Al-Baghdadi, “I‘lan al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham”, “Wa Allahu Ya‘lam wa ‘antum la Ya‘lamun” and “Baqiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham”. Al-‘Adnani, “Fa-qtulum innahum Mushrikun”, “Fa-qtulum innahum Mushrikun”, “al-Ra‘id la yakdhibu ‘Ahlahu” and “Fa-dhurrhum wa ma yaftarun”.

<sup>397</sup> ‘Abbud, Hassan. “Tafasil | Khass .. Mudakhalat Hassan ‘Abbud ‘ala Barnamij Tafasil”.

<sup>398</sup> For instance Abouzeid claims that JN operated “half-way homes” in the border cities in Turkey and designated “emirs of the borders” to facilitate the entry of such non-Syrian volunteers into the country. Inside Syria (most commonly stationed in Atmeh) the fighters would then be re-distributed to the armed units across the country. Abouzeid, “The Jihad Next Door”.

<sup>399</sup> With the entrance of ISIS into the Syrian conflict, several reports suggested that a large number of foreign fighters detached themselves from JN to join ISIS. Some martyrdom eulogies might indicate there is some truth to this, however as the numbers of such eulogies are rather few, this is difficult to assess.

<sup>400</sup> Sheikh Abu ‘Abdullah al-Shami of JN have stated whilst their “ranks are full of muhajirin (emigrant) the “number of ansar (helpers) are greater”. Al-Shami, “Wa law Annahum Fa‘alu ma Yu‘azuna bihi la-Kana Khayran lahum”.

them to join their own ranks. Further, all three has condemned the targeting of foreign fighters *per se*/regardless of group affiliation following with the uprising against ISIS from January 2014.<sup>401</sup> The three groups have consistently referred to foreign fighters as *muhājirūn* (sgl. *muhājir*) or “emigrants” – a title used to denote the followers of the Prophet which followed him from Mekka to Medina. Similarly, Syrians when referred to in the context of foreign fighters are commonly referred to as *ʿanṣār* or “helpers” – a title used to denote the inhabitants receiving Muhammad and his followers in Medina.<sup>402</sup>

However, whilst JN and ISIS have on several occasions “renewed” their seemingly open invitation<sup>403</sup> for foreign fighters to join the fighting in Syria,<sup>404</sup> AS seemingly altered their stands on the need for non-Syrian fighters in May 2014.<sup>405</sup> Whilst this constituted a clear departure of their former stands on foreign fighters, ʿAbbud subsequently clarified that their critique was primarily directed against ISIS deceiving “the emigrants” to become a “tool of killing the Syrian people” whilst no a “war declaration” against foreign fighters *per se*.<sup>406</sup> AS did not however seize to collaborate with foreign fighters following this statement - whether in the ranks of other groups such as JN, or in foreign fighter led groups. However, in comparison with the other two, AS has largely refrained from glorifying these non-Syrian fighters at the length and frequency as ISIS and JN.

Al-Jawlani has emphasized the presence of non-Syrian fighters as of “the utmost importance for the kinship of Islam in this historic struggle.”<sup>407</sup> He has further referred to them as the “pure and sincere brothers»<sup>408</sup> and praised them for their “sacrifice of money and

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<sup>401</sup> Al-Jawlani, “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham”. Al-ʿAdnani, “al-Raʿid la yakdhibu ʿAhlahu”. “Kalima Ṣawtiyya li-l-Shaykh ʿAbi ʿAbd Allah al-Hamawiyy ʿan ʿAhdath al-Sham al-ʿAkhira 27-1-2014” (Audio Message from Shaykh Abu ʿAbdullah al-Hamawi on the recent events in al-Sham 27-1-2014), YouTube video, 19:08, Audio speech by Hassan ʿAbbud from 27 January 2014, posted by “Al-Hamawiyy Abu Khalid”, 28 January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYa7Mnqeql&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>402</sup> The denominations of *muhājirūn* and *ʿanṣār* are common amongst a broad number of groups and not unique for the three under scrutiny here. They are not however used by the opposition to denote non-Syrian volunteers fighting defending the Syrian regime nor from the pro-regime flank to denote such volunteer fighters.

<sup>403</sup> Whilst both groups have encouraged volunteers to come to Syria, online communication on jihadi forums and social medias between foreign fighters have shown that both JN and ISIS require one to two witnesses to vouch for and recommend the inclusion of new (foreign) recruits individually.

<sup>404</sup> Al-Shami, “Wa law Annahum Faʿalu ma Yuʿazuna bihi la-Kana Khayran lahum” and “La-Tubayyinunnahu li-l-Nas wa la Taktumunahu”. Al-ʿAdnani, “al-Raʿid la yakdhibu ʿAhlahu”.

<sup>405</sup> Alongside other IF-factions and some other armed factions, AS took an explicit dismissive stand on foreign fighters by co-signing the so-called “Revolutionary Covenant”.

<sup>406</sup> In a subsequent interview ʿAbbud again asserted that “the Syrian people are the only component of the revolution” whilst also moderating their stands on non-Syrian fighters following the critique of JNs ʿUraydi. ʿAbbud emphasized that the covenant was not a “declaration of war” against the “emigrates” (foreign fighters) whom he still considered to be the brother of the people of al-Sham” and whose efforts in in coming to aid the Syrian people he praised. Rather ʿAbbud lamented how many had been, and would continue to be, Hassan ʿAbbud, in “Tafasil | Khass .. Mudakhalat Hassan ʿAbbud ʿala Barnamij Tafasil”.

<sup>407</sup> Al-Jawlani, “Allah Allah fi Sahat al-Sham”.

<sup>408</sup> Al-Jawlani, “Ahl al-Sham: Fadaynakum bi-ʿArwahina”.

wealth (...) to come to our land and accompany our people” – an “emigration” which makes them stand above the rest, according to Abu ‘Abdullah al-Shami of the groups shar‘ia-council.<sup>409</sup> Praising sacrifice of the foreign fighters is similarly a common theme in the publications of ISIS,<sup>410</sup> and their flocking to ISIS (as recruits or from other groups) is portrayed as proof of the group’s own sincerity and pureness.<sup>411</sup>

### 8.3 Regional aims

As seen in the above, JN, AS and ISIS have continuously applied transnational concepts, such as Sunni Muslims and the Muslim *umma*, in their self-definition as well as to denote the people they claim to represent and support. As for the explicit aim of removing the borders currently dividing Sunni Muslims and the people of al-Sham, the three groups have on different occasions rejected the legality and legitimacy of the current borders separating the regional powers, commonly conceptualized as a rejection of the Sykes Picot-agreement based on which the current borders between Syria, Lebanon and Jordan were drawn. The three differ however whether or not they have added eradication of these borders to their pending “check-list.”

AS, in the words of Hassan ‘Abbud, have explicitly denied that they are aiming for the establishment of a larger caliphate whilst noting their “aspiration” of larger union of similar states on a model of the European Union;

*“(...) we announced that we wish to establish an Islamic state in Syria, and this state will replace the current regime. As for our aspirations we yearn for the day when these states come together and unite as is the case with the [states in the] European Union which removed the borders between themselves.”<sup>412</sup>*

The group further warned about the potential “dangers of regionalizing the conflict” with the establishment of ISIS and JN’s pledge of allegiance to al-Zawahiri.<sup>413</sup> The group’s limitation to Syria, has been repeated on a number of occasions.<sup>414</sup>

ISIS for their part made the rejection of what they refer to as “man-made borders” a central component in the legitimation of their entrance into Syria;

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<sup>409</sup> Al-Shami, “La-Tubayyinunnahu li-l-Nas wa la Taktumunahu”.

<sup>410</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Thumma Nantahilu fa-Naj‘alu La‘nat Allah ‘ala al-Kadhibin”.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Hassan ‘Abbud, interviewed by Taysir ‘Alluni (11 June 2013).

<sup>413</sup> Ahrar al-Sham, “Bayan wa Tawdih Hawla ‘I‘lan ‘al-Dawla al-‘Islamiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham wa Tada‘iyyatihi ‘ala al-Saha al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-‘Iqlimiyya”.

<sup>414</sup> See for instance the BBC interview with Hassan ‘Abboud, “Defiant Syrian rebels offer stark choice,” *BBC*, 3 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27687018>.



*“We have gone past the borders that were drawn by the evil hands between the lands of Islam to restrict our movement and make us stay inside them. And we will work, God willing, to remove them. This blessed march will not stop until we put the last nail in the coffin of the conspiracy of Sykes-Picot.”*<sup>415</sup>

Its steadfastness to remaining in Syria, despite al-Zawahiri’s orders of returning to Iraq, was sloganized by the phrase *bāqiyya* (remaining) or *bāqiyya fī al-‘Iraq wa-l-Shām* (remaining in Iraq and al-Sham). The phrase was initially the title of a speech by al-Baghdadi<sup>416</sup> but it quickly turned into the group’s unofficial slogan recurrently appearing in their own official publications and frequently voiced by its supporters online.

The aim of expanding their operations – and attack the enemies of the *umma* in other areas - has further been portrayed as a longstanding aim of the group, in particular after al-Zawahiri’s rebuke of the group. In the words of al-‘Adnani, what had stopped them so far from launching attacks regionally (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia), had been their respect for the “advice and guidance” of AQ leadership – not their agreement nor operational or organizational subordination.<sup>417</sup> With al-Zawahiri’s official disavowal of the group in February 2014, this respect has seemingly vaporized and the advices of the AQ leadership no longer constitute an obstacle for the group’s propagating its regional aspirations;

*So lions in Anbar, Ninawa, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, Diyali, Baghdad and the south – continue to expand and redraw the maps. For today you complete the hope of the oppressed in all lands. The prisoners await you in Baghdad, Rumiyya (Lebanon), in Aleppo, in al-Ha’ir (Saudi Arabia) and in Abu Za’abl (Egypt). Verily you have an appointment in Baghdad, in Damascus and in Jerusalem (al-Quds) in Mekka and Medina. Verily you have an appointment in Dabiq, in Ghouta and in Rome (God willing).”*<sup>418</sup>

As seen above, their territorial aims further expand the closer regional power to territories which historically has been part of the Islamic caliphate, such as Rome and al-Andalus. In comparison, JN have neither pronounced an equally dismissive stand towards military engagement outside Syria (and Lebanon) as AS, nor as explicit aims of expanding regionally and globally as ISIS in their official publications. Rather, the group have consistently presents itself as part of a “project of Islam in the region,” “a new era for ahl al-Sunna in the region” or the “blessed jihadi movement on the land of al-Sham”<sup>419</sup> whilst not its sole component. And, whilst this jihadi movement in al-Sham will, according to al-Jawlani, “restore to Islam its role in the region”<sup>420</sup> he does not specify if this will involve their own military involvement in regional powers, or if an eventual fall of Syria will simply be the first tipping domino-piece.

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<sup>415</sup> Al-Baghdadi, “Baqiyya fi al-‘Iraq wa-l-Sham”.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “‘Adhran ‘Amir al-Qa’ida”.

<sup>418</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Wa la-yumkinnunna la-hum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum”.

<sup>419</sup> Al-Jawlani, «Wa Qabilu al-‘Ayam Khayrun min Madiha».

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

Further, geographically unspecific expressions such as «God’s land» in the following quote is another example of the groups vagueness on a potentially larger regional scope for its operations; “We have said from the beginning that we aspire to return the governance of God on His land then reviving the *umma* to implement His shar‘ia and spread His methodology (*manhaj*).”<sup>421</sup> With similar vagueness the group’s leader has expressed the vision of “the conquest of *al-Quds* (Jerusalem)” after victory in Syria, whilst leaving the question of whether or not JN will be the conquerors unanswered.<sup>422</sup>

## 8.4 Global aims

Whilst the three share great scepticism for America, the West and the international society and to various extent categorize such entities amongst their enemies, only ISIS have emphasized its broader geographic ambitions, at least rhetorically. The leadership of ISIS have repeatedly expressed the aim of returning the Islamic caliphate “to all of the areas from which it withdrew and lost its control; primarily al-Andalus<sup>423</sup> as well as to conquer the heart of the West symbolized by Rome; “we do not forget to renew the pledge to the *umma* that we won’t enjoy life until we liberate the Muslims everywhere, and until we retrieve Al-Quds and regain Al-Andalus, and conquer Rome.”<sup>424</sup> Retaking these territories has become almost a formulaic expression repeated in several speeches by spokesman al-‘Adnani,<sup>425</sup> and leader al-Baghdadi.<sup>426</sup> Similar expression has further been repeated by several of their fighters in promotional film clips,<sup>427</sup> and even the group’s Twitter posted «today in al-Raqqa and tomorrow in Rome»<sup>428</sup>

<sup>421</sup> Al-Jawlani, [Untitled audio recording].

<sup>422</sup> “Al-‘Isdar al-Mar‘iyy: al-Da‘wa li-l-Jihad” (Visual Publication: Call to Jihad).

<sup>423</sup> Al-Andalus refers to the parts of the Iberian peninsula which were under Muslim rule between 711 and 1492.

<sup>424</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”.

<sup>425</sup> Al-‘Adnani, “Lan Yadurrukum ‘Illa ‘Adha”, “Ma Kana hadha Minhajuna wa lan Yakun” and “Wa la-yumkinnunna la-hum Dinahum al-Iladhi Irtada la-hum”.

<sup>426</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “Message to the Mujahidin and the Islamic Umma in the Month of Ramadan”, *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 1 July 2014, 19:47, <http://jihadology.net/2014/07/01/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-abu-bakr-al-%E1%B8%A5ussayni-al-qurayshi-al-baghdadi-message-to-the-mujahidin-and-the-islamic-ummah-in-the-month-of-rama/>

<sup>427</sup> See for instance, “Salil al-Sawaarim 4” (Clanging of the swords 4), *Mu‘assasat al-Furqan li-l-‘Intaj al-‘I‘lam*, 17 May 2014, 62:22,

<http://jihadology.net/2014/05/17/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-clanging-of-the-swords-part-4/>.

<sup>428</sup> Raja Abdulrahim, “In Syrian province, Islamist militant group flexing its muscle”, *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-islamists-20140314.0,1928246.story#axzz2xW1Cyxru>.

In comparison there are no similar expressed aim to (re)take al-Andalus and Rome, nor any other historic or existing non-regional geographic entity, in the official discourse of AS and JN. Rather, as seen earlier, the two upholds a defensive position in regards to the West - vowing to strike if attacked first.

## **8.5 How do the groups prioritize between territorial and creedal unity vs. explicit geographical aims?**

The three groups share a complex relation to the ideal of territorial and creedal unity, which to various extent overlap with their explicit geographical aims. A central part of the groups' self-definition is heir self-identification as part of the (transnational) entities of the *umma* and Sunni Muslims. The three further considers the enemies they confront in Syria to be a threat to these transnational entities transcending the country's borders. Out of the three however, AS has distinguished themselves from the other two by emphasizing the attribute of Syrian in their self-definition and similarly the geographical scope they limit their operations to. Whilst the group has included foreign fighters admits its ranks it has seemingly not considered them to be essential to the uprising nor its aftermath.

In contrast JN and ISIS have framed their efforts, their ranks and their perception of the conflict as a transnational affaire. However whilst JN has extended its fighting to Lebanon, it has largely framed it as an extension of its Syria-operations, rather than the accomplishment of a territorial expansion. Whilst the group certainly does not exclude the possibility of fighting in other countries, it is seemingly not a priority – at least until the fall of Assad.

ISIS on the other hand has described its expansive regional aims as curbed by its (former) respect for the leadership of al-Qa'ida and their commands. With the evaporation of this respect the group's regional ambitions has been unleashed and the multinational cadre of its fighters set to expand the borders of their self-professed state regionally and potentially stretching into the West.

## 9 Concluding remarks

Due to the ongoing nature of the Syrian conflict and the unpredictability of its future evolution this study has not offered any clear-cut conclusion, but rather constitutes a snapshot of the ideological discourse and debate within one flank of the Syria uprising within the time-frame of January 2012 and May 2014. Valuating which ideological difference is more substantial or characterizing for each of the three is however a question I have deliberately left unanswered as I consider it to be too subjective and largely dependent on the groups' further evolution which arguably is based on opportunity as well as ideology in a highly unpredictable conflict.

As for the status of today (30 May 2015) the Syrian conflict is well into its fifth year with the material destruction multiplied, an American-led coalition against ISIS/IS arisen and neither any political nor military solution seems any closer. As for the three groups, JN, AS and ISIS/IS, they continue to occupy large territories, influence large ideological influence on other armed groups and arguably also globally. Some of their discursive nuances have evolved into actual differences on the ground, most prominently has ISIS further elevated its state building project symbolically and territorially with the announcement of an Islamic caliphate and a rapid branching regionally. Whilst the top leadership of AS is largely changed after a mysterious explosion wiped out Hassan 'Abbud and a large number of commanders, its operational cooperation with JN has continued as before. Similarly, the two's ideological arguments and sporadic fighting with ISIS has continued – largely regarding relations with other groups and the exclusionist self-perception as an Islamic State. Finally, JN and ISIS both uphold their claim to be the guardians and inheritors of the legacy of bin Ladin – JN as the most successful affiliate of al-Qa'ida, and IS/ISIS as the increasingly successful renegade.

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