

Haytham Manna

Jabhat al-Nusra



From **Baghdadi's** Assignment, to the **Presidential Palace**

Translation: Mouhib Al-Dimashqi
Edits to the English Version: Renee Yaseen

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"I'm more concerned that as we focus on ISIS we may lose focus on other Islamic extremist groups out there, the most important of which are AQAP [Al-Qaïda in the Arabian Peninsula] in Yemen, AQSL [Al-Qaïda Senior Leadership] in Pakistan, and quite frankly the Khorasan group that is part of Jabhat al-Nusra [in Syria]. All three of those groups have the capability to conduct attacks both in Western Europe and the United States. It is very important that we remain focused on those other threats, which, from a homeland perspective today, are still a greater threat than ISIS."

Michael Morell, retired deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"They will scream and scream, and they will fill the world with their shouting. The sound of their loudspeakers will rise, and their bombs will multiply and explode, and their bullets will crackle. In the end, they will be the victims of everything they do, and they will pay a heavy price when everyone despises them, rejects them, and chases them."

Farag Foda, Egyptian writer, and human rights activist,
assassinated by Al Jamaa' Al Islamiyah on charges of blasphemy in 1992.

A word from the translator

Like thousands of Syrian civilians, in an inescapable under siege town, my family and I congratulated each other on yet once again surviving hours of exchanging bullets in our neighborhood. Though, this time was a little different! While the clock was ticking, while we were counting every beat, while witnessing the emergence of peaceful silent instants that are full of hope for life, time stopped! The rising noise of a herd of raging animals shattered the silence with their shouting voices and the scaring sound of their arms breaking doors and hearts looking for defenseless civilians to kill for joy, revenge, and fulfillment of an unfulfillable satanic void. They reached our door, cracked it and our conscious together, and took me down to the street while I was assuring my wife and kids that I would be back in a blink of an eye. Downstairs, I saw my neighbors kneeling before ferocious hideous unearthly monsters, with guns pointing at their heads, and with their families and children shakingly sneaking a peak from the windows, afraid of what destiny is awaiting their beloved ones. This was in a blink of an eye, an instant that ended with hundreds of simultaneous kicks breaking my barefoot dragged body and forcibly kneeling me down to beg. Taking a bloody breath, the other eye blinked, feeling like centuries of human cruelty carving upon my torn body. Like the sound of the mighty thunder,

the guns were fired, and the sky was raining bullets; bullets that were striking through my neighbors' bodies, before the hiding eyes of their families. Amidst these moments of death, the monster's boot crushed into my face breaking my eyeglasses and destroying my nose, I was woken up to live my capture. We were six, dragged on the streets we knew by heart, in the middle of the day, and in front of thousands of helpless defenseless civilians that were thinking one thing: when will it be my turn? A family member saw that, and he instantly broke down and had a heart attack when he realized the harsh reality of his incapability to do anything for me. No one could, anyway! For the next hours they tortured us, blackmailed our families, and were laughing on the phones and manipulating any hope or shed of light that those on the other side of the line got. We were killed under torture later that night and found like a thrown trash the next morning.

Perhaps, today I am not with you, but my last words are, and the fact that I never got back is. Today, my story lives to tell that human savagery: killers and killing machines, regardless of the color, the propaganda, or the ideology, are no different from one another. A helpless defenseless civilian's killing is not comparable nor context dependent. This to say that regardless of who killed me and my neighbors, regardless of who shed a drop of any Syrian blood, regardless of who was in power and who is in power

today, regardless of intersection of thoughts and stances between you and them, if ever you were saddened by the killing of a helpless defenseless civilian, reflect for a blink of an eye how you perceive power dynamics shift and the correlating growing bias. I translated the book for this very purpose, fruits for thoughts to yet see again a reality from another lens, with the aspiration of galvanizing the reader to reflect.

A blink of an eye is what is needed for deciding to kill, a blink of an eye is what is needed to reflect and make a decision that changes the course of time.

Unanswered Questions

Despite its early classification by the U.S. Department of the Treasury as a terrorist organization—less than a year after its first operation—"Jabhat al-Nusra" can, without exaggeration, be considered the "favored child" among the Jihadi-Salafist movements, not only in the Levant, but worldwide. Despite the publication of dozens of books and reports about it, this "phenomenon" continues to be a mystery to many.

We had been looking for aid and donations— fifty dollars here, a hundred euros there—to educate a child deprived of school, home, and village due to the violence in Syria, when I came across an audio recording of Abu Mohammed al-Joulani speaking about a waste of money *exceeding one billion dollars*. I also received an email from a French journalist in Jerusalem saying: "What is the comment of the 'democratic opposition' on the presence of wounded members of 'Jabhat al-Nusra' in Israeli hospitals?" Attached was an article in the French newspaper *Libération* discussing reports from the UN peacekeepers stationed on the Golan

ceasefire line, which mentioned meetings between armed groups in the south, including "Jabhat al-Nusra," and the Israeli army: "From March 1 to May 31, 2014, the Blue Helmets counted 59 meetings between the two sides in the buffer zone" (*Libération*, December 7, 2014).

In an internal message from an activist in the National Coordination Body in Turkey, it was noted: "Jabhat al-Nusra faces no problems on Turkish territory, and it enjoys military, financial, and medical facilitation, similar to the factions in the Free Syrian Army operations room in the north. According to our information, the Turkish authorities have not stopped even one *Khaligi* carrying financial aid to Al-Qaïda, despite the presence of some names on the U.S. terrorism list."

The praise for Jabhat al-Nusra from the opposition aligned with the alliance known as "Friends of the Syrian People" was striking. I can't understand how, for example, a Syrian opposition journalist from a Christian family could say on Al Arabiya that "the nuns kidnapped in Maaloula are guests of Nusra," or how a Lebanese "socialist" leader from the Druze community could court its favor.

How is it possible that an organization formed years ago by one of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Syrian recruits could possess such abundance in money,

weapons, and men, and enjoy such favor with a broad sector of Islamists (and even some secularists)? What is the relationship between "Jabhat al-Nusra" and regional intelligence agencies? What is the significance of the media's highlighting of Al Nusra—from the arrival of Ahmad Muafaq Zidan¹, an Al Jazeera correspondent at a Syrian air defense base destroyed by Al Nusra in the Aleppo countryside in 2012, to interviews by Taysir Alouni, Ahmad Mansour and others from Al Jazeera with the man dubbed, "*Al Fatih*"—"the conqueror"? Is it by sheer coincidence—or perhaps, sheer foolishness—that Muslim Brotherhood leader Farouk Tayfour stood with the first president of the Syrian National Coalition in Marrakesh to demand that "Jabhat al-Nusra" be removed from the U.S. terrorist list because "any weapon fighting the regime is sacred"? And how could the former president of the Syrian National Council declare, after extremists entered Maaloula: "We defended Jabhat al-Nusra more than it defended itself"? Do members of the French Socialist Party realize what could result for the security of the French citizen from the statement by their foreign minister Laurent Fabius, "Al Nusra is doing a good job," and what is

¹ Media advisor to the Transitional President of Syria Ahmad Sharaa today!

the price of such a statement? How did Jabhat al-Nusra manage to disprove the media reports of Qatari mediation to cut its secret ties with Al-Qaïda, only for al-Joulani to return months later, accompanied by a "sharia" official from Egypt and another from Syria, to announce what the media had reported, as if he were repeating a Reuters story—one his group had previously denied?

A message sent to me from a United Nations official on terrorism issues stated literally: "We have confirmed information about the transfer of large sums of money to Jabhat al-Nusra via a member of the Coalition², Mr. ... Do you have any idea about the relationship between this group and Al-Qaïda?" I replied candidly and briefly: "I believe it is part of the intelligence services provided by the aforementioned individual to a Gulf state." It is certain that Jabhat al-Nusra members received dozens of passports printed in printing presses provided by the French government to a Syrian-French citizen who achieved great wealth and provided significant "services".

Who tasked three research centers in Istanbul and Doha to write about the virtues of separating from Al-Qaïda? Is the world aware that the first public

² The Syrian National Coalition

support meeting for Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) took place in Fatih, Istanbul on July 30, 2016?

How short is the memory of some people?

The Supreme Negotiations Committee in Riyadh explained to its allies the difficulty and danger of separating the moderate fighters from "Jabhat al-Nusra," with a delegation of "defected officials" whose statements did not inspire confidence in what they said and demanded. Was it not Dr. Riyadh Naasan Agha, the former Syrian minister of culture, who declared on camera to Al Jazeera's journalist Yousri Fouda: "We handed them over (to the Americans) a large number of those who wanted to infiltrate Iraq because they are not part of the Ummah; they wanted to stir up discord there"... "We discussed great cooperation between us and them (the Americans) to eliminate terrorism, we cooperated with the United States because of the terrorism that would come against our people and our nation"? (Top Secret, Crossing into the Unknown, Al Jazeera, 2006)? A number of factions that were fought by al-Nusra — if not outright eliminated by it — ended up signing, along with others, a statement defending Al Nusra. And just as

the “The National Council Represents Me” Friday³ was planned and staged, a similar Friday was organized for Jabhat al-Nusra.

What is the appeal? Is it attraction? Admiration? Is it “ferocity in fighting,” or the myth of “*al-hadina al-shabia*”⁴—some imagined base of popular Sunni support? Is it the idea of ally ship, even if the alliance is with the devil? Or is it the sweet fragrance wafting up from the gas, perhaps, the “oud” of Gulf-based pseudo-politicians and Salafi businessmen who carry black money to launder it through suicide operations?

This hypocrisy, which tastes and smells of blood—where has it led us?

During the preparation of this book, I stopped writing several times and made the decision more than once not to publish it. Then I returned to the idea that it was necessary to publish it. The reason for this was not fear nor exposure to accusations, but simply that I hate self-censorship. I had already delayed the publication of the book *The Arab Islamic Society from Muhammad to Ali* for five years because the Beirut publisher asked me for some

³ Activists during the Syrian revolution would often dedicate and name Fridays—the weekly day of communal prayer in Islam—in honor of particular ideas or symbols in attempts to unify the people behind shared themes.

⁴ The alleged popular base

minor modifications, until I finally found a Parisian publishing association that printed it in 1986. So, how can I myself undertake the process of determining "what can and cannot be published"?

This book has not been cut or censored, but it does not contain all the chapters I worked on. It was similar to the decision not to publish the section "The Tal Afar Group in ISIS" in the book *The Caliphate of ISIS*⁵. I think I did the right thing back then by delaying the publication of that section. I am doing the same today with parts of this book, such as: "Jihadist Salafism: From/To Jordan."

The current considerations for not publishing the entirety of the research, in brief, are: First, because the book falls under what could be called "hot political history" (*à chaud*), and thus, there are those who may pay a price for many of the events. It is well known that in our region, there is no proportionality between the act (or crime, as it is called) and the punishment. I have rebelled against this lack of proportionality throughout my entire life as a human rights activist.

Second, because "returning from error is a virtue," and, though this doesn't apply to the leaders of al-

⁵ Haytham Manna, DAECH, L'Etat de la barbarie, Les points sur les I, Paris, 2014

Nusra and HTS, this principle *does* apply to hundreds of people who entered a sphere foreign to them and were misled by corrupt preachers, black locust media⁶, intelligence agencies that lack values and ethics, mercenary pens⁷, and petty figures of political hatred that destroyed both themselves and others. And perhaps the later appeals made by some of these people — which included calls for a firm and strict stance against takfir and al-Nusra — are examples of this principle of ‘returning from error.’

Finally, because the series of takfiri jihadism will not stop at names like "ISIS," "JFS," and "HTS." There are still bloody, functional wars between Muslims, which remain on the roadmap to destroy trees, humans, and stones. And because the strongest tools in the war against darkness today are still tainted by tyranny, sectarianism, and corruption, there are seeds that will allow extremism to survive and live on for a long time.

⁶ Media advocating for Islamic Factions such as ISIS in Syria

⁷ Mercenary pens symbolize the writers who glorify the highest bidder

The Black Autumn

The autumn of 2016 marked a pivotal turning point in revealing the true nature, formation, and function of *JFS* (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham). During this period, it became clear that the black media's ⁸ portrayal of this jihadist group as exceptional and elite was nothing more than a polished façade, crafted by those who had made sectarian hatred a guiding principle in policy studies, alliance-building, and mapping of friendships and enmities (to support polishing the image of *JFS*).

Abdullah al-Muhaysini, the Saudi media minister of the "Army of Conquest,"⁹ who was appointed as its judge, announces the grand battle to liberate Aleppo in a video in which he says: "In minutes and hours, the greatest battle in the history of the Syrian jihad will begin... Where are those who want seventy-two beautiful wives from the houris¹⁰? O Martyr, if one of those wives were to spit in the sea, the sea would become sweet. If she kissed your mouth, she would

⁸ Media advocating for Islamic Factions such as ISIS in Syria

⁹ "Army of Conquest" is another term for "Jaish al-Fatah" an Islamist Syrian rebel coalition

¹⁰ They are described in Islamic tradition and the Qur'an as beautiful companions in paradise. See Glossary.

fill it with honey and nectar. If she perspired, she would fill paradise with fragrance. So, what then of her embrace? What then of her singing?”

Who can say how a British, French, or American expert, assigned to oversee the northern operations room, would respond to hearing this kind of rhetoric — would they regard it as nothing more than ordinary propaganda and combat mobilization? The reality appears otherwise. On October 3, 2016, U.S.-led coalition forces targeted Abu Faraj al-Masri (Ahmed Salama Mabrouk) on the outskirts of Jisr al-Shughur, On November 2, they struck Haydar Karkan, one of the key figures responsible for Al-Qaïda's attacks abroad. More importantly, on November 18 near Sarmada, they targeted “Abu al-Jihad al-Afghani,” the final nom de guerre of Egyptian Abd al-Rahman al-Ali — better known as Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir — author of *Issues in the Jurisprudence of Jihad*, a book the world knows as *The Jurisprudence of Blood*. This revealed—intentionally or not—that the book’s author was not a member of ISIS, but actually belonged to Al-Qaïda, and was even involved in jihadist teaching and guidance within JFS. The group the U.S. calls “Khorasan” is not an American invention; this organization is settled in northern Syria. The list would continue to include Abu Hani al-Masri (Hani

Heikal) and other senior, “sharia”, and Khorasani leaders.

The joint leadership of the Syrian Army and its allies have exploited the boastful rhetoric of Al Muhaysini’s speech to put an end to the armed presence in the city of Aleppo. Those who handed over their leadership to *JFS* (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) have nothing left to do but discuss but the humanitarian situation and offer explanations for military defeat. The president of the 'Revolution and Opposition Coalition Factions', speaking from Istanbul, talked about the “66 Shiite militias that were behind the victory of the Russian and Iranian invaders”, but neglected to mention the incursion of 120,000 fighters from 66 nationalities across the Syrian–Turkish border to supply ISIS and al-Nusra with fighters; meanwhile, 'Jafsh' (JFS) was burning five of the green buses heading to Kafraya and Foua. The opposition of 'hypocrisy and opportunism' has learned nothing from the Aleppo tragedy. Yet, it is Al-Qaïda’s branch in the Levant that chose to 'dissolve' itself and merge into HTS 'Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham,' transitioning into a secret organization within the new body, maintaining control over the security apparatus and its hard core of sharia officials and foreign fighters, and waiting for the calm after a storm of targeting.

The final chapter in the 'Salafi Jihadist Experiment' has yet to be written. In Idlib province, which is paying the price for a crime it did not commit, the latest massacres have begun based on the principle of “upon me, and upon my enemies” (If I go down, you're going down with me.) ...

The Lebanese Abu Hamza al-Zoubi, from the Shura Council¹¹ of Al Nusra, was the first to speak about Al Nusra's internal structural and organizational crisis. Just before carrying out a suicide attack in the Ghab plain on 28/7/2015, he tweeted: 'Now I will rest from the organization's problems and internal divisions, and I will choose my fate myself.' Saleh al-Hamawi wrote on October 1, 2016: 'Al-Qaïda swallows up factions until it fattens, then it gets slaughtered like sheep.' As for one of the repentant former members, he simply quoted the poet:

'And whoever has the crow as a guide will be led over the carcasses of dogs.'

¹¹ A “Shura Council” (in Arabic, “Majlis Al-Shura”) is a consultative or decision-making body.

The Jurisprudence of Blood

The “industry of brutality” did not descend from Mars, nor was the assassination of Islam’s great civilizational foundations carried out by “heretics and infidels.” Likewise, it was not Orientalism, leftist thought, progressive ideologies, or liberal cultural institutions that drove the production of “fascist” ideologies in religious garb. There is a fundamental issue that many Muslims attempt to overlook in order to absolve themselves of responsibility for the emergence of takfiri (excommunicatory) ideologies in Islamic societies or for failing to confront them.

The Islamic world entered modern times with outdated and obsolete tools that crumbled before the armies of colonialism and their economic, military, and cultural invasions. Instead of shaking the rust off the Islamic legacy of bygone eras, figures like Abu al-Hasan al-Nadwi described this condition simply as “the decline of the Muslims.” The legacy of that period — with all its flaws and virtues — was embraced wholesale as **identity, culture, ideology, creed, and way of life**. Reverence for the forebears (*salaf*) obliterated the reasoning of successors—indeed, it assassinated the very foundations of Islamic rationality. What resulted was the resurrection of pseudo-hadiths and

pseudo-fatwas under banners like Islamic revivalism, awakening, divine sovereignty (hakimiyyah), and jihad.

I have not encountered a single takfiri argument without a "source." But when figures like Abu Huraira, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Kathir, and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab become more authoritative than the explicit Quran and the established prophetic tradition, no rational person can expect the production of enlightened thought or righteous action.

Islamic schools have not dared to purify their heritage or to approach their jurisprudential history as a product of its time and place. They have failed to distinguish firmly between universal values and principles on the one hand, and propagandistic rhetoric or reactionary fatwas on the other. As a result, fatwas have become more powerful than the Quran, weak narrations have overshadowed books of wisdom, and the worst aspects of the forebears' legacy have been upheld as the purest expression of Islam.

Today, the takfiris (excommunicators) have become the foremost force driving people away from Islam in our lands, the largest producers of disbelief in religions, and the true marginalizers of any active and historical role for "Sunni Arabs." They are also

the primary architects of what many call the "Sunni grievance¹²." It is now essential to stop hiding behind talk of a Safavid conspiracy here or the Zionist staff of Moses there. For, as the saying goes, the worm in the vinegar comes from within.¹³ And if a billion Muslims cannot muster the courage to confront the takfiri "industry of savagery" then, they are—undoubtedly, and with all our respect and solidarity toward all non-Muslim victims of this savagery—its largest group of victims.

The seed of modern takfirism¹⁴ was sown in the womb of the prison, with Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayyid Qutb's adoption of the Leninist concept of the "revolutionary party," alongside ideas of divine sovereignty (hakimiyyah), jihad, and the division of the world into the Abode of Islam (Dar al-Islam) and the Abode of War (Dar al-Harb). Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj did with Sayyid Qutb what Joseph Stalin did with Lenin. In 1980, Faraj published *The Neglected Duty (al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah)*, the first manifesto of Salafi jihadism. It does not begin with the Quranic command to "Read" (*Iqra*), but with distorted

¹² The grievance associated with Sunni Muslims' perceived marginalization or exclusion from power in Shia-led countries.

¹³ A Syrian proverb refers to the fact that the rot (problem) starts (is caused) from within

¹⁴ See the Glossary.

hadiths that reduce the prophetic biography and religion to a grotesque caricature of faith and worldly life:

"I was sent with the sword just before the Hour, so that God alone is worshiped with no partner. My sustenance has been placed under the shadow of my spear, and humiliation and disgrace are decreed for those who oppose me. Whoever imitates people, become one of them."

"Listen, people of Quraysh! By the One in whose hand is Muhammad's soul, I have come to you with slaughter."

Faraj finds in the debris of Islamic heritage whatever suits his aims, selecting, for instance, Ibn Taymiyyah's *Fatwas*:

"It is a matter known by necessity in the religion of Muslims, agreed upon by all Muslims, that whoever permits adherence to a religion other than Islam or a law other than the law of Muhammad—peace be upon him—is an unbeliever, as much as one who believes in parts of the Book and disbelieves in other parts, as God said: 'Indeed, those who disbelieve in God and His messengers and wish to make a distinction between God and His messengers, and say, "We believe in some and disbelieve in others," and wish to adopt a way in

between—those are the true disbelievers, and We have prepared for the disbelievers a humiliating punishment.” Surah Nisa 4:150

Faraj then divides the world into the Abode of Disbelief, the “near enemy” (apostate regimes in Arab and Islamic countries), and the “far enemy” (external non-Muslim, non-Arab powers like the United States and Israel). He labels his opponents as adherents to a “creed of desires” while deeming only his supporters to be of the “victorious sect.”

Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj regarded the “rulers of the era as apostates from Islam, raised on the tables of colonialism.” Citing Ibn Taymiyyah’s fatwas, he endorsed: *“The apostate must be killed, even if incapable of fighting”* and *“Any sect that abandons an established and widespread aspect of Islamic law must be fought by consensus of the Muslim leaders, even if they recite the two testimonies of faith.”*

Faraj ultimately anchored his argument in what is called the “Verse of the Sword” (Surah At-Tawbah, verse 5): “When the sacred months have passed, kill the polytheists wherever you find them...” (Quran 9:5). Quoting al-Dahhak ibn Muzahim, Faraj stated that this verse *“abrogated every treaty between the Prophet and any of the polytheists, along with every pact and term.”* He further cited al-‘Awfi: *“From the*

moment Surat al-Bara'ah (Repentance) was revealed, no polytheist retained any covenant or protection.” And from Muhammad al-Juwayzi al-Kulli, who abrogated 114 other verses across 54 surah's-verses that had called for treaties, contracts, negotiations, forgiveness, patience, and coexistence. Faraj escalated beyond the “Verse of the Sword” to verses he deemed even harsher on the disbelievers, such as: “When you meet those who disbelieve, strike their necks until you have subdued them. Then bind them firmly, and thereafter either release them as a favor or ransom them...” (Quran 47:4).

After laying the groundwork for the *ideology of the sword*, Faraj moved on to its applications. Within his group, this took the form of oaths pledging to fight and die; externally, it manifested in all types of warfare. He **permitted deceiving disbelievers and advocated “freedom to choose the most suitable methods of combat, as long as deception—i.e., victory with minimal losses—is achieved by the simplest means.”** This included the permissibility of lying, infiltrating enemy armies, launching raids without warning, using projectiles even if they killed women and children, and cutting down or burning the trees of disbelievers, among other actions.

But the Salafi jihadist movement did not make great efforts to develop the views Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj. Rather, it relied on key texts like Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones (Ma'alim fi al-Tariq)* and *The Future of This Religion (Mustaqbal Hadha al-Din)*, Ibn Taymiyyah's¹⁵ fatwas, and smaller instructional booklets for use in Afghan training camps and similar locations, including prisons¹⁶. It wasn't until the U.S. occupation of Iraq that significant developments emerged. In 2004, two influential books were published that clarified operational jihadist jurisprudence—the foundational legal principles of jihad:

1. **“The Call to Global Islamic Resistance”** by Abu Musab al-Suri (Omar Abdel-Hakim, Mustafa Set mariam Nasar).
2. **“Issues in the Jurisprudence of Jihad”** (known as *The Jurisprudence of Blood*) by Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir (Abd al-Rahman al-Ali).

¹⁵ See: Glossary.

¹⁶ For example: "Jihad in the Path of Allah" by Abou al-A'la al-Mawdudi, "Striving in the Pursuit of Jihad" by Ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi, "The Provision of the Mujahid" by Abou Hamza al-Muhajir, "The Book of Jihad" by Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak, "Jihad and Striving" by Abou Qatada al-Filastini, and "Why Jihad in the Path of Allah" by Abou Basir al-Tartusi*, among others.

Additionally, early articles that would later be compiled into the book *Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr Naji (Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah)

It is worth noting that Abu Musab al-Suri, Syrian by birth, disappeared after being handed over to Syrian authorities by Western intelligence in 2005. As for the other two (both Egyptians), Abu Bakr Naji was killed in U.S. airstrikes in Waziristan in 2008, and Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir was killed in Idlib in 2016, both while being under the protection of Al-Qaïda and Jabhat al-Nusra.

The Ideologue of Lone Wolves and Global Jihad

Despite his significant influence—alongside Ayman al-Zawahiri—on the ideological and political transformation of Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Suri¹⁷ has rarely received due recognition as the most prolific writer among the "Arab Afghans" on combat doctrine, the self-historicization of jihadist movements, and the jurisprudential grounding of strategies for identifying the near and far enemies. He also extensively analyzed priorities in combat, criticized traditional organizational structures, examined the reasons behind the failures of jihadist experiments, and proposed a blueprint for

¹⁷ See: Glossary.

overcoming these failures. This included revisiting fundamental questions such as: *“Who are we?”*, *“What is the camp of apostasy and disbelief?”*¹⁸, methods of combat and organization, financing strategies, alliances, and the boundaries of permissible and impermissible actions in warfare.

Abu Musab al-Suri held great respect for Abdullah Azzam but was less convinced of Osama bin Laden’s character and competence. He elaborated on this in several letters and books. For example, he described bin Laden as follows:

*"Bin Laden and most of the Saudi mujahideen regarded the Saudi government as legitimate, believing King Fahd and the Al Saud family to be Muslims and lawful rulers despite their sins and injustices. They held immense respect for the official scholars in the Council of Senior Scholars and adhered to their fatwas. At the time, there was no significant common ground between us as jihadists and those brothers, including Sheikh Osama himself, except for shared general Islamic principles and a mutual commitment to supporting the Afghan jihad. However, the methodological contradictions, differences in jihadist ideology, understanding of

¹⁸ Referencing the idea of dividing the world into two camps: that of the believers, and that of the apostates.

reality, and foundations of legal politics were stark between us as jihadists and them.

Over time, Sheikh Osama, may God preserve him, gradually came to accept, internalize, and embrace jihadist thought, eventually becoming one of its symbols."¹⁹

From the very first pages of his writings, Abu Musab al-Suri collects Quranic verses on combat, such as: "And what is [the matter] with you that you do not fight in the cause of Allah..." (An-Nisa 75), "What is [the matter] with you that when you are told to go forth in the cause of Allah, you adhere heavily to the earth..." (At-Tawbah 38), and "So fight in the cause of Allah..." (An-Nisa 84). He frames his work as a comprehensive guide for jihad: *"A method for jihad, a movement's ideology, and an operational plan—a complete program of action."* He described it as the culmination of *"my experiences and expertise gained over a quarter-century of following the Islamic awakening and working within the jihadist current amid internal and external upheavals from 1980 to 2004."* He noted that the work evolved over 14 years and was finalized during three years of dedicated effort. He considered it *"the book of my*

عمر عبد الحكيم (أبو مصعب السوري)، دعوة المقاومة الإسلامية العالمية، 2004، 19
طبعة إلكترونية 709

life, the essence of my experiences, thoughts, and beliefs.”

A recurring theme among Arab Afghan writers is the collective identity of jihadists, expressed through terms like *“the manifest group upon the truth”* (at-Ta’ifa az-Zahira) or *“the victorious group”* (at-Ta’ifa al-Mansura). This group, they argue, is a subset of *“the saved sect”* (al-Firqa an-Najiya), identified as Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama’ah (the people of the prophetic tradition and consensus). This subset is composed of individuals who carry weapons and raise the banners of jihad, alongside efforts in scholarship, proselytization, and enjoining good and forbidding evil²⁰.

This *“victorious group”* is defined by its resolution on contemporary challenges, specifically:

1. The occupation of all Muslim lands: *“From end to end, Muslim lands are occupied by the raids of Jews, Christians, atheists, communists, or pagan polytheists.”*
2. The rule of apostate leaders: *“Throughout all Muslim lands, the apostate rulers have replaced God’s law, opposed it openly, and ruled by other than what Allah revealed. They*

²⁰ Ibid P: 86-83 ‘

have altered His laws and allied with His enemies.”

3. "In all Muslim lands, Muslims in general—and particularly those devoted to religion, proselytization, and commitment—suffer from oppression, injustice, and tyranny.²¹"

This, according to Abu Musab, necessitates three points:

1. *“Revolting against a ruler who apostatizes from Islam or is a disbeliever is an obligation upon Muslims by consensus.”*
2. *“Islamic law unanimously decrees the disbelief and apostasy of Muslims who collaborate with or assist disbelievers, and it mandates fighting them.”*
3. *“Islamic law prescribes the obligation or permissibility of fighting anyone who aggresses against the religion of Muslims, their lives, honor, or wealth, even if that aggressor is a Muslim.”²²*

Abu Musab attempts to present a concise history of humanity from a "jihadist" perspective, spanning from Cain to George Bush. He concludes by

²¹ Ibid. 85

²² Ibid 134

asserting that religion's triumph is inherently tied to combat and that the establishment of governments is rooted in violence. He claims:

"Throughout human history, no government has ever risen, no state has been established, and no civilization—ancient or modern—has emerged except through the spearheads of lances and under the shadow of swords."²³

Like most of Al-Qaïda's writers and its affiliates, Abu Musab connects Arab nationalism to Arab Christians and Jewish Masonic influence²⁴. He further alleges that the Arab communist movement was *"founded by Jews."* He accuses over 200 religious and political figures of being agentic, including King Abdulaziz Al Saud, Sharif Hussein, King Faisal bin Abdulaziz, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, Saud al-Faisal, Imam Muhammad Abduh, Aaidh al-Qarni, Saad al-Buraik, Abdulmohsen al-Obaikan, Salman al-Ouda, Said Ramadan al-Bouti, and al-Shaarawi. He confirms too that the "crimes" of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi included "breaking the psychological barrier between disbelievers and Muslims."²⁵

²³ Ibid.191 .

²⁴ Ibid.559 .

²⁵ Ibid.559 .

While he attributes *"the Arab nationalist movement in Syria to the machination of the disciples of crusading Orientalists, most of whom were Christians²⁶,"* he also does not shy away from declaring:

"King Faisal is the founder of modern Saudi Arabia and the founder of secularism within it.²⁷"

As for "Islamic democrats," he regards them as:

"An essential part of the new world order opposing the jihad and resistance campaigns within the Muslim nation²⁸."

Unsurprisingly, he likens the term *"Democrat-Muslim"* to placing *"the word 'halal' on a bottle of wine."* He concludes by declaring:

"We openly proclaim: democracy is disbelief and polytheism against Allah. Its adherents are disbelievers, atheists, or apostates and heretics.²⁹"

The only party seemingly spared from criticism in this wave of accusations and charges is the Emir of Qatar, **Hamad bin Khalifa**, who, despite being involved in actions similar to those for which many

²⁶ Ibid.442 ,

²⁷ Ibid.453 ,

²⁸ Ibid673 ,

²⁹ Ibid.1035 ,

rulers and religious figures are accused of treachery and apostasy, receives veiled praise and a notable lack of criticism. For what Abu Musab considers a primary reason behind the alleged apostasy of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—the establishment of American military bases—he comments:

"The current Emir of Qatar ousted his father in the late 1990s and assumed power. Under his rule, Qatar began striving for a regional role in the area, opposing Saudi policies, and witnessing bold political reforms compared to the authoritarian systems of governance in the Arabian Gulf. One of its most successful strategies was the establishment of the renowned, daring Al Jazeera satellite channel.³⁰"

He continues: *"During the 2003 Iraq invasion, the United States, as is well-known, relocated the leadership of its forces operating in what it called the military operations region to Doha, Qatar. This command was responsible for overseeing nearly a million soldiers across a region spanning from Central Asia to the westernmost part of North Africa. From the Al Udeid base near Doha, the U.S. directed airstrikes, missile attacks, electronic*

³⁰ Ibid549 .

warfare, and the ground invasion of Iraq, which advanced from Kuwaiti territory. It also hosted the U.S. military's media center during the war. Indeed, to Allah we belong, and to Him, we shall return.³¹"

The author outlines the doctrine of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in 28 articles, which are essentially borrowed from the "Qadiri Creed"³² but are enriched with principles of a "militant jihadist ideology." This doctrine incorporates new elements reflective of the contemporary era, such as:

- Considering "all principles of secular ideologies, including communism, socialism, democracy, and nationalism, as calls to disbelief and deviation" (Article 21).
- Declaring anyone who supports apostate rulers and fights Muslims and jihadists

³¹ Ibid.559 ,

³² For the first time in the history of Islam, an official document was issued that defined the creed of Muslims and mandated adherence to its provisions. This "Creed" (Al-I'tiqad) was issued in 1018 AD (409 AH) by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Qadir Billah under the influence of the Hanbali school and the pressure of its jurists. It begins with the statement: "This is the creed of Muslims, and whoever opposes it has committed immorality and disbelief..." For further details on this topic, refer to: Haytham Manna, Short Universal Encyclopedia of Human Rights, Part One, Al-Ahali and Bisan, Bayreuth 2000 (Second edition in 2018).

alongside them as belonging to a sect of apostasy (Article 12).

- Asserting that the principles of democracy are tantamount to disbelief in God (Article 18).
- Advocating for the “assassination of prominent leaders of disbelief and corruption and the elimination of their institutions” (Article 29).

Despite his extensive criticism of, and accusations against, various groups—labeling them as apostates and disbelievers—Abu Musab reiterates that his call is one of jihad, not mass excommunication (takfir). He adopts the principle of “individualized takfir” instead of blanket accusations of apostasy. This approach is reflected in his “three circles of alliance,” where he prioritizes:

1. Jihad alongside Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah as the primary circle.
2. Cooperation with Muslims in the broader sense (Ahl al-Qibla) as the second circle.

3. Seeking assistance from sincere non-Muslim allies who oppose America and its allies as the third circle.³³

The book strongly critiques early jihadist funding strategies, particularly reliance on state-sponsored funding. Abu Musab offers an insightful analysis of what he terms the “policy of financial entrapment,” where funding begins generously and unconditionally but later imposes harsh conditions once jihadists become financially dependent. (This strategy, he notes, applies to all organizations—secular or religious, military or civilian—as he detailed in his book *Civil Resistance*.)

Abu Musab identifies contributions from fighters as the most important source of funding, followed by donations from wealthy, committed supporters. He emphasizes that both physical and financial jihad are individual obligations (fard ‘ayn)³⁴. Finally, he underscores the importance of organizing and legitimating loot and spoils from disbelievers, specifying:

- The appropriation of public funds and assets of apostate governments and their elite criminals.

³³ دعوة المقاومة، مذكور، 1114

³⁴ Ibid 1453 .

- The seizure of assets belonging to all foreign non-Muslims in Muslim lands.
- The confiscation of property from all non-Muslims residing in Muslim territories.
- The expropriation of assets from apostates.
- The plunder of assets belonging to non-Muslims in nations hostile to Muslims.³⁵

Abu Musab critiques previous organizational methods for their localized and centralized nature, as well as their failure to adapt to the globalized context we live in. Hence, he emphasizes moving away from hierarchical organization and the restrictions of national and regional borders; instead, he believes that individual jihad and small cells should be the starting point. This "lone wolves" approach can be summarized as follows:

- Highlighting the necessities that compel the use of individual terrorist jihad.
- Identifying key areas of operation for individual terrorist jihad.
- Developing a terrorist culture, an "instinct" for terrorism, and acquired traits for fighters.

³⁵ Ibid1431 ٤.

- Emphasizing that terrorizing enemies is a religious obligation, and assassinating their leaders is a prophetic tradition.

In doing so, Abu Musab al-Suri laid the foundations for the "lone wolves" doctrine, backing it with Islamic jurisprudential justifications based on his personal interpretations of Quranic verses, prophetic traditions, and fatwas—selectively fragmented and reassembled to fit the ideological framework he sought to construct.

It is worth noting that the media strategies he advocates can be observed in ISIS propaganda, including his repeated invocation of a phrase that echoes Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels in German literature: "You must use a simple, emotional, and populist approach."³⁶

"The Ethics of Assassination (Fatk) and Treachery (Ghilah)"³⁷

Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir did not employ the same approach in his writings. His characterization of the era is more condensed, and his primary focus is the jurisprudential foundation of jihadist Salafism in

³⁶ Ibid. 1439 .

³⁷ "Fatal surprise (Fatk) and treachery (Ghilah): *Fatk* refers to killing someone by sudden attack, while *Ghilah* involves lying in ambush for an enemy to kill them secretly."

general, and Al-Qaïda and its affiliates in particular. This is evident in his book *"Issues in the Jurisprudence of Jihad,"* which centers on providing the necessary justification and interpretation to position the jihadist movement as the true and essential representative of the "Victorious Sect" (al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura) or the righteous members of the "Saved Sect" (al-Firqa al-Najiya), portraying its practices as intrinsic to Islamic law and religion.

In al-Muhajir's perspective, the world is divided into two realms: the *Abode of Islam* (Dar al-Islam) and the *Abode of Unbelief* (Dar al-Kufr). Any rule not based on God's law is invalid, as its origins are worldly and human. Al-Muhajir echoes Sayyid Qutb's concepts of *Hakimiyyah* (God's sovereignty), *Wala'* (loyalty), and *Bara'* (disavowal), using these principles to classify anyone who does not govern by what God has revealed as unbelievers, wrongdoers, and corrupt. From this premise, he aligns with Abu Musab al-Suri in rejecting international humanitarian law and all human rights treaties. He outright dismisses the principles of the modern state, including concepts such as citizenship, sovereignty, rule of law, and both democratic and authoritarian political systems, whether liberal or socialist.

For instance, he addresses the concept of "civilians" by stating: ***"This term, along with the rulings associated with it, is invalid and disconnected in origin and application from the law and religion of Islam, both linguistically and conceptually. Islam does not differentiate between civilians and combatants; it only differentiates between believers and unbelievers. The blood of a Muslim is sacrosanct, regardless of their profession or location, while the blood of an unbeliever is permissible to spill, regardless of their profession or location."***³⁸

Abu Abdullah holds no distinction between permissible and impermissible weapons. Thus, after citing religious texts and issuing rulings, he concludes:

"It becomes clear to us: the permissibility of striking and killing combatant disbelievers and fighting them by any means that achieves the goal of exalting the word of God, eliminating the fitna (sedition) of disbelief and corruption in the land, and over the heads of the people. This includes methods described today as 'weapons

³⁸ Abu Abdullah Al-Muhajir, Issues of the Jurisprudence of Jihad, electronic edition, pp. 140-141.

of mass destruction,' such as nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, among others.³⁹

In his explanation of the chapter "*War is Deception*" from the Book of Jihad in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Abu Abdullah derives the following:

"The permissibility of employing all possible methods and means of trickery, deception, and stratagems, including stealthily assassinating the heads of disbelievers, and killing them in the most severe and devastating manner, as an act of ultimate anger for the sake of God, His Prophet, and His religion.⁴⁰"

Regarding the enemy using human shields, Abu Abdullah provides a straightforward perspective:

"The jurists of the major established schools agree on the permissibility of targeting disbelievers with catapults, even if it leads to the killing of women, children, or those who are not directly intended to be killed. This is the position of the majority of scholars and jurists.⁴¹"

As for sieges, his view is equally clear:

³⁹ Ibid.184-183

⁴⁰ Ibid72 .

⁴¹ Ibid.167

"A siege is a form of combat. Among the benefits of a siege may be the destruction of some palm trees for better visibility, strengthening the siege, humiliating the enemy during the blockade, and demonstrating their inability to protect their possessions. This may provoke them to defend their properties and wealth, causing them to emerge from their fortifications, making it easier to eliminate them.⁴²"

Abu Abdullah concludes his destructive enthusiasm with the statement:

"It becomes clear to us the permissibility of acts of sabotage on enemy lands, properties, and installations—anything the blessed hands of the mujahideen can reach—to subdue, suppress, and enrage the enemies of God wherever they may be. These acts leave their hearts consumed with grief as they witness their lands, properties, and infrastructure destroyed, along with other worldly blessings God has bestowed upon them." (p. 234)

Whenever Al Muhajir presents an idea, he looks for a phrase or juristic citation to uphold it or attempts to attribute it to scholars of Islam. For example, "Islamic scholars agree on the permissibility of destroying animals and killing them during

⁴² Ibid.225

combat⁴³", "The permissibility of severing and decapitating the heads of wicked combatant disbelievers, whether they are alive or dead⁴⁴", citing Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwa on apostate groups: "These must absolutely be killed⁴⁵", The permissibility of burning and drowning [the enemy]⁴⁶, or sayings like "*O Quraysh, by the One in whose hand is Muhammad's soul, I was sent to you only to slaughter you.*⁴⁷⁴⁸ "

Out of mercy for the pure Islamic religion and the reader, I will stop here with these examples, which represent just a fraction of the pathological creation of barbarism born from the jurisprudence of blood. This ideology has been taught and practiced in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and beyond, within the camps of Al-Qaïda, Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, Jund al-Aqsa, and their affiliates.

It is worth noting that the book's author did not join ISIS but rather aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra. He was killed in an international coalition airstrike in

⁴³ Ibid.236

⁴⁴ Ibid.277

⁴⁵ Ibid.267

⁴⁶ Ibid.172

⁴⁷ Ibid.277

⁴⁸ Editor's note : This is a controversial saying sometimes attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in extremist circles.

Idlib province, an area under the control of Jaysh al-Fatah.

Management of Savagery

The book "*Management of Savagery*" has received significant attention in terms of publication, translation, discussion, and analysis. However, after editing the book "ISIS's Caliphate," it became clear to us that "*Management of Savagery*" does not offer anything new compared to what is already found in the writings of Abu Musab, Abu Abdullah, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, and others. The use of the term "*Management of Savagery* " to denote one of the phases of jihad (among them: the phase of attrition and exhaustion, the phase of "managing savagery", and the phase of establishing empowerment) along with the discovery of some of the book's pages in Osama bin Laden's residence, have likely granted "*Management of Savagery*" more influence and recognition than is due.

This is particularly true since the book's most significant ideas had already appeared in earlier writings dating back to 2004 and earlier. Moreover, the central thesis of the book—shifting focus from the "near enemy" (apostate regimes in Arab and Islamic countries) to the "far enemy" (the United States and Israel)—is no longer a strategic priority for any group, whether Al-Qaïda, Jabhat al-Nusra,

or their affiliates, or ISIS and those who have pledged allegiance to it, spanning from Sinai to Boko Haram.

Although the author is keen to distinguish between what he proposes and the "creative chaos"⁴⁹ so dear to the hearts of neo-conservatives, he nonetheless describes this state in Islamist terms, encapsulating its essence with the following statement:

"This is not about managing a commercial company, an institution suffering from disorder, a group of neighbors in a residential area or even a peaceful community struggling with chaos. Instead, based on our contemporary world, similar historical precedents, the presence of wealth, ambitions, competing forces, human nature, and the scenario we anticipate in this study, this situation goes beyond mere chaos.

Before coming under management, the zone of savagery will resemble Afghanistan before the Taliban's control—a region subjected to a primitive version of the law of the jungle. The good people

⁴⁹ Editor's note : Sometimes translated as 'constructive chaos'. This refers to an idea—popularly associated with former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, that the deliberate destabilization of an existing political, social, or economic order can create the conditions for the emergence of a new order from chaos.

within it, as well as the rational among the wicked, will thirst for someone to manage this savagery. They may even accept any group, whether made up of good or bad individuals, to take control. However, the management of this savagery by bad actors could lead the region to even greater levels of savagery!"⁵⁰

Perhaps the identification of the key regions for this phase is what undermines the book's future significance. The author designates these areas as Jordan, the Maghreb, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula, and Yemen. However, the trajectory of events has veered in different directions. While Al-Qaïda's establishment in Yemen, northern Pakistan, and Nigeria was no secret during the first decade of this century, the true determinants of the outcomes, strategies, conflicts, and paths of the jihadist movements as a whole lie in the countries omitted from his analysis, such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt.

As for what he and others mention about the conflict with Israel, it reminds me of a story told to me by the head of an international human rights organization after I returned from a fact-finding mission in Pakistan. He said:

أبو بكر ناجي، إدارة التوحش، طبعة إلكترونية 11. 50

“At a dinner in Paris with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, he said something that caught all of our attention. He remarked, *‘It wasn’t Mossad, but Abdullah Azzam, who diverted the Arab jihadists away from Israel.’*”

Time has proven the accuracy of this statement. Today, those being killed in Sinai are Egyptian soldiers and the people of Sinai, while injured fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra are treated in Israeli hospitals in broad daylight. Meanwhile, jihadist leaders—both Palestinian and Jordanian—issue fatwas to fight "infidels" and "apostates" from among Arabs and Muslims, far from the longest border with Palestine.

The Turkistan Islamic Party thanks Jund al-Aqsa for killing more than 140 Free Syrian Army prisoners in cold blood, as well as for causing the deaths of over 200 "mujahideen," who were given a choice: either join their ranks or be granted safe passage—not to Al-Aqsa, but to the city of Raqqa in Syria.

Origins, Structure, and Formation

On orders from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a member of his organization—along with several Iraqi and Syrian fighters—was sent to Syria on a special mission. The appointed individual was a young Syrian who had arrived in Iraq with only a minimal religious background, limited to lessons from "Abu al-Qaqa" and the youthful fervor of Syrians opposing the American occupation. He fought within the ranks of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group, *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, and earned the trust of the leadership of the Islamic State in Iraq, which was searching for a Syrian figure to entrust with the mission of "jihad" in Syrian territories.

However, this appointee, known as Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, lacked the qualities of a leader with a distinguished background, culture, and the charisma needed to reveal his face publicly. As a result, he became the first Al-Qaïda leader to remain faceless, with ambiguous lineage and a contradictory biography. Speculations abounded about his real name, his story, his education, and the trajectory of his "jihadist" involvement.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his inner circle were not confident in Abu Mohammed al-Joulani's ability to manage the affairs of Jabhat al-Nusra. Consequently, they assigned Samir Abd al-Muhammad al-Abidi al-Dulaimi (commonly known as Hajji Bakr), a former Iraqi army colonel, to travel covertly to northern Syria and develop a military strategy for the organization. Hajji Bakr had served on the military council of the Islamic State of Iraq and had extensive experience in military manufacturing and combat operations. Additionally, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani—who would later become the spokesperson for ISIS—was tasked with overseeing the Idlib region. Simultaneously, the key elements of Al Nusra's organizational structure were consolidated into a single framework, consisting of:

1. **The Saydnaya Prison Group:** These were individuals with historical ties to Al-Qaïda who did not join Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, or Suqour al-Sham, instead choosing to maintain contact with the parent organization. These groups were known in prison for their loyalty to Al-Qaïda and included figures from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

2. **Syrian Fighters in Iraq:** Most of these fighters were instructed to return to Syrian territories starting in late 2011.
3. **Recruits from Al-Qaïda Affiliates:** These recruits came from Lebanon, Libya, Jordan, Central Asia, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Western Europe, Russia, and other regions, to join the organization in Syria.

In 2003, Al-Qaïda issued a fatwa designating Syrian territory as a transit area (a corridor), not a destination (a settlement). This was based on the priority of targeting the primary enemy in Iraq: the American occupation and its allies. However, international pressure on the Syrian authorities, combined with their fears of growing jihadist cells within Syria, led to the arrest of hundreds of individuals directly linked to the war and occupation in Iraq. According to lists compiled by the Arab Committee for Human Rights, the number of Islamist detainees from various affiliations in 2007 was approximately 1,400. These included individuals with direct connections to Al-Qaïda and Fatah al-Sham, as well as those laying the groundwork for groups like Jund al-Sham.

The affiliations of figures like Abu Muadh (Abu Medyan al-Filistini), Muayyad al-Lubnani, and his successor Fawwaz al-Lubnani with Al-Qaïda were

well-known. Even Abu al-Adl's advocacy and the calls of al-Ghab (Hassan Abud) were recognized among prisoners as being aligned with Al-Qaïda's ideology. Abu Hamza al-Jaghl, one of the Syrian Afghans, was actively disseminating the views of Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir among the detainees.

According to Dr. Mazhar al-Wais⁵¹, one of the most important cadres of Jabhat al-Nusra in Deir ez-Zor at its inception, there was a wing in Saydnaya Prison known as "Wing 33," named after a lawsuit involving a group of 33 individuals from Afghanistan. However, this Afghan group lacked ideological and organizational cohesion; ideological alignment was more apparent among the groups returning from Iraq, who were influenced by the Zargawi strain of Al-Qaïda, which included doctrines such as absolute rejection of the "excuse of ignorance⁵²", declaring individual parliamentarians as apostates by name, takfir of Shiites, and excommunicating those who appeal to man-made laws or secular courts, etc.

⁵¹Editor's note: In March 2025, al-Wais was named Minister of Justice under the Syrian transitional government led by Ahmad Al Sharaa (a.k.a. Abu Mohammed Al-Joulani)

⁵² Editor's note : This refers to the debated idea that if a person commits an act of disbelief without knowing the correct ruling, they may be excused.

The Afghan group was split between Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, while al-Nusra managed to recruit most of those returning from Iraq. Saydnaya's groups provided Jabhat al-Nusra with ready-made, trained cadres who took on key positions within the organization. Among them were:

- **Abu Malik al-Talli/al-Shami (Jamal Hussein Zaydiyah):** The emir of Jabhat al-Nusra in Qalamoun.
- **Abd al-Rahim Atoun (Abu Abdullah al-Shami)**⁵³: A member of the Shura Council and a religious authority in the organization, who would continue with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*.

These groups were well aware of the negative perception of Al-Qaïda within Syrian public opinion and the lack of popular support for Salafi-jihadist movements in Syria. The dominant moderate Islamic discourse within Syrian society further compounded this issue. As a result, Jabhat al-Nusra focused its operations on targeting key nodes of power within the regime rather than emphasizing ideological rhetoric. It only declared its allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri out of necessity.

⁵³ See: Glossary

The group also sought to win over public support by carrying out high-profile operations against security agencies, specialized military units, and political and military leadership. However, some of its early operations, such as the **Midan bombing**, resulted in a majority of civilian casualties.

"The availability of money makes it easier to win over and recruit men."

The announcement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the establishment of ISIS (*the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*) played a pivotal role in uncovering significant hidden aspects. This announcement forced Jabhat al-Nusra to reveal its allegiance to Al-Qaïda. Abu Mohammed al-Joulani's speech on this occasion sheds light on key issues related to Al Nusra's origins, funding, and loyalty:

Al-Joulani stated: *"Allah, the Most High, honored me with getting to know Sheikh al-Baghdadi, that noble sheikh who fulfilled the rights of the people of al-Sham and repaid their due in double. He agreed to the project we proposed to him to support our oppressed people in the land of al-Sham. **He also provided us with a portion of the State's**⁵⁴ **funds**, despite the difficult times they were enduring, and placed complete trust in this humble servant,*

⁵⁴ Editor's note: He is referring here to the Islamic State (IS)

*entrusting me with establishing the policies and plans, **and reinforcing me with brothers**. Though they were few in number, Allah, the Most High, blessed them and their efforts."* (Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, *Regarding the Al-Sham Front, 1434 AH/2013 CE, Minbar al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad*).

On the relationship with Al-Qaïda, he clarified: *"The delay in announcing the affiliation was not due to a weakness in religion or a lack of resolve among the men of the Front. Rather, it was a deliberate decision based on sound principles, a deep understanding of legitimate policy appropriate for the reality in al-Sham, and an agreement reached by the leaders of the Front and its scholars in al-Sham. This agreement was also supported by leaders of other factions and their scholars, as well as the honorable sheikhs and advisors who assist us from abroad."* (See the full speech in the appendices).

At this critical moment of separation from their initial financier and primary sponsor, al-Joulani sought to maintain a delicate line of connection, to minimize losses and scandals as much as possible. He stated: *"I say: This is a pledge of allegiance from the sons of Jabhat al-Nusra and their overall leader. We renew it to the Sheikh of Jihad, Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri (may Allah protect him). We pledge to*

listen and obey, in ease and hardship, in migration and jihad, and to not dispute authority unless we witness clear disbelief with proof from Allah".

The banner of the Front will remain as it is, unchanged, **despite our pride in the banner of the State** and those who bear it, as well as the sacrifices and bloodshed of our brothers under its flag.

We assure our people in al-Sham that what you have seen from the Front in defending your religion, your honor, and your blood, as well as its good conduct toward you and the fighting groups, will remain as you have known it. The announcement of the pledge of allegiance will not change anything in its policies."* (*Same source*).

This statement reinforces what we have long affirmed, dating back to a report produced by the Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights in 2012: the initial cells of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, as well as its primary and foundational funding, originated from the Islamic State in Iraq and specifically from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The statement also underscores that the most significant fracture within *Jabhat al-Nusra* occurred when al-Joulani refused to join the ISIS project. Since that announcement, splits, restructurings, and shifting alliances have impacted all groups associated with *Jabhat al-Nusra* or *ISIS*

(such as *Jabhat Ansar al-Din*, *Jund al-Sham*, *Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar*, *Jaysh al-Khilafah*, *Harakat Sham al-Islam*, *Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiyya*, *Jund al-Aqsa*, *Liwa al-Qadisiyya al-Islami*, *Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyya*, *Katibat Ansar al-Sham*, *Liwa al-Ummah*, *Ajnad al-Sham*, *Shuhada al-Yarmouk*, and others).

Foreign fighters also split between *Nusra* and *ISIS*. Chechens, Europeans, Tunisians, Saudis, and others divided between the two camps, fighting one another. Only one Iraqi sided with al-Joulani—Abu Maria al-Qahtani (Maysar bin Ali al-Jubouri). A former member of Saddam Hussein's *Fedayeen*, he "converted and embraced Islam" (a phrase commonly used in Salafi-jihadist discourse to describe former Iraqi army officers who joined Al-Qaïda). Al-Qahtani burned all bridges for reconciliation with *ISIS* and embraced the "Syrianization" of *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

One young man from Daraa who met al-Qahtani after he fled from Deir ez-Zor to southern Syria reported: "*He told me he had come to know and love the people of al-Sham. He feared the bloody experience of Al-Qaïda and ISIS in Iraq and wanted to avoid bringing that violence to Syria, a concern he had from the earliest days of his role as the general Sharia officer of Jabhat al-Nusra.*"

In testimony by a Saudi defector (Jazrawi) from ISIS, he explained his decision to support the Islamic State during the split: *"I stood with the State after what I heard from Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and other leaders about the unlimited financial support al-Joulani received. They used to call al-Joulani "al-ghaddar" ("the traitor") because they gave him things they deprived themselves of, and he betrayed them."*

Sultan al-Otaibi (Abu Laith al-Tabuki), in his testimony, addressed internal issues after approximately 700 fighters and their families withdrew from Deir ez-Zor to the south. He said:

"The eastern region of Syria fell completely into the hands of the Islamic State and collapsed entirely. There was financial and administrative corruption, and Abu Mohammed al-Joulani never called for any investigation. Instead, he ordered us to withdraw to Daraa.⁵⁵"

⁵⁵عن أبو عمر الحاج، صحيفة ميدل ايست آي، ترجمة عربي 21، الأحد 1 فبراير 2015.

Al-Otaibi also mentioned that al-Joulani allegedly received \$1 million from Syrian Salafi cleric Adnan al-Arour (*Al-Hayat*, October 26, 2014)⁵⁶.

Al-Joulani did not deny the support that enabled him and his group to become the strongest faction in

⁵⁶ For the sake of memory only, we convey this conversation with Adnan al-Arour. We are still at the end of 2011, during the period when the Arab League was sending observers to Syria. After criticizing the Arab League and its observers, the topic shifts to NATO, and he says: "One politician, echoed by some of the opposition, said that raising the issue to the Security Council risks NATO intervention! By God, a thousand NATOs over Iranians, a thousand NATOs over Russians—communists who have no respect for sanctity. We may have even wished for Assad's rule in comparison. Today, Syria is under the command of Iran and the Russian intelligence, teaching them torture methods, and they brought in new devices, stole our gold, and emptied the central bank. They transferred the gold onto Russian ships so that Russia could celebrate its position if the regime fell by stealing the gold. They talk about NATO, but I went to conduct a military reconnaissance in Libya to witness the bombing, and this is not in defense of NATO, no, but I observe with my own eyes. God Almighty says, 'And let not the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness.' We testify to the truth. Despite the mistakes made during the bombing in Libya... I bring you good news: do not think Libya is destroyed. No, by God, only about thirteen buildings in Tripoli, and even then, the building wasn't entirely destroyed. I went there myself and saw it with my own eyes. The building only a meter or two away was not damaged because they used smart, precision bombs that targeted and destroyed only the designated building. The young men told me they stood only 50 to 100 meters from the bombing due to its precision. I passed by the Ministry of Interior and Security, which was bombed, and a friend whose house was next to the ministry invited me, and it was neither destroyed nor affected at all. This means that the claims by some of the opposition that NATO bombing in Syria would cause widespread destruction are incorrect because they do not understand these matters." (This conversation aired on *Wesal* channel and coincided with the first operation by *Jabhat al-Nusra*.) Al-Arour is now one of Syrian mosques Imam!

uniting the cells aligned with Al-Qaïda's ideology. Perhaps the most significant lesson he learned after beginning the mission assigned to him by Al-Baghdadi was the importance of controlling financial resources as much as possible and diversifying their sources. He also prioritized appointing non-Syrians to religious and leadership positions to ensure funding from the Gulf—particularly Qatar and so-called "benefactors of jihad"—and to weaken any potential Syrian rivals for leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra.

In an audio interview with *Al-Manara Al-Bayda Media Foundation* in November 2014, Al-Joulani acknowledged this policy, stating: "Before the conflict between us and the Islamic State group, around 70% of Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership was composed of foreign fighters. After the split, this percentage declined to about 40%. As for the fighters, they currently constitute around 30-35% of the total number of fighters in the group." What Al-Joulani did not say, however, was that the key positions in the organization were entrusted to non-Syrians. In 2015, Mujahid Ma'mun Diraniyah, in his study *"They Asked Me About Jabhat al-Nusra"*, even asserted: **"Nine-tenths of its emirs, religious**

leaders, and security and military commanders are now non-Syrians.⁵⁷

It was impossible for Al-Joulani to retain leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra or decide the fate of its alliances while maintaining a Syrian leadership or merging with other jihadist factions that might undermine his position. While it is difficult to reach definitive conclusions in a judicial sense regarding the assassination of the leadership of the *Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement*, this event was not particularly troubling for Abu Mohammad Al-Joulani. He would have found it difficult to surpass a charismatic figure like Hassan Abboud or to sideline prominent figures from Sednaya Prison and other Syrian prisons through a speech, fatwa, or conflict. For example, Ahrar al-Sham lost several of these former detainees in the explosion, including but not limited to:

- Abu Talha Al-Ghab (Abdul Nasser Al-Yassin)
- The religious scholar Abu Abdullah Al-Malik (Mahmoud Ali Tayba)
- Engineer Talal Ahmad Samoua
- Dr. Youssef Al-Asi

⁵⁷ Mujahid Ma'mun Diraniyah, *They Asked Me About Jabhat al-Nusra*, electronic edition, page 35.

- Abu Yazan Al-Shami (Mohammad Al-Shami)
- Dr. Abu Sariya Al-Shami
- Talal Ahmad Tamam.

Abu Mohammad al-Joulani lacks a cohesive Islamic discourse and profound political analysis. He interprets and reduces the events in Syria to a struggle to support Sunni Muslims against the *Nusayri* (a derogatory term for the Alawite sect, to which the Assad family belongs) regime and the *Rawafid* (a pejorative term used by some Sunni extremists for Shia Muslims). His rhetoric thrives on fueling the notion of defending Sunnis in Syria, and for a time, his call extended to defending Sunnis in Lebanon:

"We must take the battle to Lebanese territory, to its areas of presence in the south and the southern suburbs. We must target sensitive locations for them and bring the battle to where Hezbollah resides in Lebanon so that they may understand the dangers of their intervention in Syrian affairs and their alliance with Bashar's regime against the Sunnis in the Levant. This has already had very significant positive results, and Jabhat al-Nusra, praise be to God, is at the forefront of defending Sunnis through Qalamoun and inside Lebanon." (Al-Manara Foundation, referenced).

The media of jihadist and takfiri movements could not have effectively conveyed their messages, particularly those centered on sectarian mobilization, without a substantial media arsenal supporting their narrative. Gulf media played an early role in igniting this discourse through channels like Safa and Wesal, in addition to Al-Hadath, Al-Jazeera Mubasher, and Al-Arabiya. Al-Jazeera, in particular, focused on Islamic figures and the sectarian nature of the conflict, facilitating jihadist groups' framing of the regime as "Nusayri" and the militias as Shiite, while sidelining the narrative of democratic change. For example, on one day during Ramadan in August 2011, 17 Islamist figures appeared as speakers on Al-Jazeera.

And under the media's sedative influence, events like the destruction of the statue of Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, the assassination of Sheikh Al-Bouti and other moderate clerics, the bombing of shrines and places of worship, and attacks on non-Sunni minorities went largely unnoticed. By the latter half of 2012, militarization, sectarianism, and extremism had become normalized.

Militarization, however, entails redrawing the political and social map around new centers of power. Before these new power centers confronted each other directly, their first target was the

peaceful, democratic, civilian movement. Many Free Syrian Army factions aligned with jihadist and takfiri groups in opposition to the peaceful movement, whether through co-optation, subjugation, or accusations of treason and apostasy. Since the Syrian authorities had already begun this effort on March 18, 2011, one could speak of a broad front against the peaceful popular movement for dignity, freedom, and democratic change.

The assassination of the peaceful revolutionary movement for democratic change marked a shift from the project of a democratic revolution—for which hundreds of thousands of Syrians demonstrated—to an all-encompassing war where sectarian, political, and local Syrian dynamics intertwined with regional and international conflicts. Peaceful activism was demonized, and foreign military intervention became a celebrated demand among institutions "approved" by what was called the "Friends of the Syrian People"—a group better described, since the Tunis conference, as the "enemies of the Syrian people."

Undoubtedly, what is known as Salafi jihadism (Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates) played a central role in bolstering militarization and framing any political solution as inherently serving the continuation of authoritarian rule.

The internal structure of Jabhat al-Nusra was not institutionalized, allowing local leaders to form their own teams and establish their own organizational and combat methods in their respective areas. A clear example is the Qalamoun region, where Abu Malik al-Talli/al-Shami (Jamal Hussein Zaidieh) played a central role, especially after the death of Abu Azzam al-Kuwaiti (Majdi Twairish al-Anzi) in March 2014. This demonstrates the presence of strong local leadership, but also the ability of Jabhat al-Nusra's central leadership to contain and limit their influence to a local level.

Al-Nusra's most important battles—as well as its operations and institutions—were driven by a reprehensibly sectarian background. This was evident in al-Nusra's choice of battles such as the one in Maaloula, the battle of Kasab, and the siege and shelling of Shiite villages— what al-Joulani called "reprisal operations." They also took control of judicial institutions, turning them into partisan and sectarian bodies under al-Nusra's control. The reckless application of what al-Nusra deemed "establishing hudud (Islamic penalties) and disciplinary measures," combined with blind hostility toward democracy and democrats, marked their ideology. Al-Nusra denounced democracy as disbelief, secularism as atheism, and civil society as

a Western import. According to the testimony of a fighter from Ahrar al-Sham:

"The al-Qaïda-inspired faction within Ahrar al-Sham carried out the same activities under the name of Ahrar. One can notice the use of the same phrases and sometimes the exact same rhetoric" (2016).

Even more disturbing were al-Nusra's judicial rulings, issued in the name of God and Islam, which provoked outrage and grief over the state of the areas under their control. For example, *Dar al-Qada'* (the "House of Justice"), a sharia court administered by al-Nusra in Khan Sheikhoun, posted a video on Twitter titled *"Dar al-Qada' enforces God's ruling on a blasphemer."* The video shows a man dressed in Afghan-style clothing announcing a sentence through a loudspeaker. The accused—handcuffed, blindfolded, and kneeling—is surrounded by a large crowd of armed, masked fighters and civilians in a public square in the town of Khan Sheikhoun. The flogger proceeds to carry out the sentence.

The statement detailed the case, claiming that *"Mu'tasim Abdul Karim is accused of apostasy for cursing the religion, punishable by death. However, because he publicly repented, his sentence was reduced to the shaving of his head, 80 lashes, and release after three days in detention (already served*

before the flogging). His image was also documented and stored in Dar al-Qada's archive."

The charge against him? *"Cursing the religion of electricity."*⁵⁸ Members of the Nusra-affiliated court, assigned to address electricity violations in the village of Latamneh, reportedly overheard Abdul Karim saying, *"Damn the religion of electricity."*

The statement added that the punishment was carried out publicly because the crime was committed publicly. It warned Abdul Karim against repeating the offense, stating: *"If he does, his blood will be considered forfeit, and he will be denied washing, shrouding, or burial with Muslims, with his inheritance distributed to the Bayt al-Mal (the Muslim public treasury)"* (August 13, 2014).

Jabhat al-Nusra's practices were not subject to criticism from the opposition groups based in Istanbul, Doha, or Riyadh. Both the Syrian National Council and the Syrian National Coalition remained silent about the ideology and actions of Jabhat al-Nusra; indeed, some even acted as its defenders and admirers. To be fair, however, independent Islamic voices stood as critics, documenting the true

⁵⁸ Translators' note: "Cursing the religion" of something—especially something that causes physical or psychological harm or fails to work as intended, e.g. electricity—is a common rhetorical expression of frustration in the Levant.

nature and dangers of this organization at a time when certain groups of "hypocrites and opportunists" were glorifying and cheering for the supposed conqueror.

In their writings, many intellectuals and religious scholars from the opposition critiqued:

- *The practice of takfir ("Takfir (excommunication) is the great evil that Jabhat al-Nusra has unleashed upon the revolution and upon jihad in Islam.")*
- *"Imposing authority through force and repeating the acts and crimes of ISIS without public declarations or media campaigns."*
- *"Monopolizing the administration of cities and rural areas, issuing laws to impose levies and taxes under the guise of zakat (charity), flogging, stoning, imprisoning, and torturing in the name of enforcing hudud (Islamic penalties)."*
- *"Teaching the nullifiers of Islam before teaching Islam itself."*
- *"Imposing levies on smaller organizations."*
- *"Confiscating people's property under the pretext of them being apostates, whether*

they were Syrian government employees or members of opposition factions.”

- *“Establishing courts under their control and opening prisons where torture and other forms of human rights violations are practiced.”*
- *“Prioritizing battles for personal gain and influence over battles based on legitimate Sharia principles or national interests.”*
- *“Appointing non-Syrians in critical positions of security, judiciary, and combat.”*

Most of these criticisms did not receive the attention they deserved in the media or newspapers, so we documented them on social media and archived them while preparing this research. Perhaps the most adept at following and organizing these viewpoints and criticisms was Sheikh Mujahid Ma'mun Diraniyah, who compiled his observations in an important booklet titled *"They Asked Me About Jabhat al-Nusra,"* written in the fall of 2015. Among its contents was the following:

"An impartial observer would note that the mistakes are scattered among the various factions but converge in Jabhat al-Nusra. In some factions, you might find enmity toward others—though rarely you do find factions that actually fight each other. Some

factions seize weapons from others, some divide the ranks and monopolize administration and judiciary, and some isolate, pursue, and suppress scholars and preachers who oppose their methods. Some factions unjustly arrest, harm, or impose their own laws on people. However, there is no faction in which all these transgressions converge and are repeatedly committed except for Jabhat al-Nusra.⁵⁹"

"Over the course of ten months, Jabhat al-Nusra single-handedly attacked and dismantled twelve factions under the pretext of fighting renegades and traitorous groups (*Sahawat*).⁶⁰"

"We used to say that those entering the regime's prisons were as good as lost, and those leaving them were reborn. Unfortunately, this 'trademark' has become a shared feature between Assad's regime and Jabhat al-Nusra.⁶¹"

Dozens of writings and speeches that had previously been confined to private or organizational circles entered the public sphere with the arrival of the armed opposition factions' delegation to Astana and the start of Jabhat Fath al-Sham's (JFS) attack on the Jaish al-Mujahideen (Army of Mujahideen),

⁵⁹ Mujahid Ma'mun Diraniyah, *They Asked Me About Jabhat al-Nusra*, electronic edition, p. 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid.23

⁶¹ Ibid.43

before the release of any official statement about the attack. On Dar al-Iman channel, Sheikh Hassan Al-Dagheem revealed publicly what he had previously stated in private about the functional role of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in suppressing revolutions for freedom and turning them into sectarian and civil wars. He said:

"Since the spread of takfiri ideology and systematic arrogance within military ranks, with the rise of ideas promoting the caliphate state, emirates, and insular projects similar to what we saw in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Algeria, these entities have ultimately served to rehabilitate regimes and suppress revolutions. In the end, they end up collaborating with the authoritarian regimes that people revolted against in their pursuit of freedom. This outcome is not new. It is a repeat of the Iraqi experience, the Somali experience, and others being constantly reproduced here. Regrettably, our collective memory is short, and we keep repeating these same mistakes, crashing against the same wall."

He highlighted the tragedy of judges and scholars killed by extremist jihadist groups, such as Sheikh Thabit Al-Kharqi, Judge Hussein, Khaled Al-Sayyid, Judge Safar Al-Safar, Judge Yaqoub Al-Omar,

Sheikh Osama Al-Yateem, and his deputy Bashar Al-Nuaimi.

Major Issam Al-Rayes spoke candidly, explaining that *“the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS is solely about interests, not ideology”* and that the [Syrian] Coalition was too cowardly to take a firm stance against Jabhat al-Nusra⁶².

Ahmed Tumeh offered a self-critical assessment of an entire phase of misleading narratives and promoting Al-Qaïda. He said: *“First, we need to establish certain truths. We were very late in describing Jabhat al-Nusra for what it is. Jabhat al-Nusra is a global organization, not a national or Syrian one, and it does not serve the goals of the Syrian revolution. From day one, Jabhat al-Nusra caused disasters for the revolution. It changed the fundamental narrative of the Syrian revolution—from one of a tyrannical regime versus a people seeking freedom—to a new narrative: a tyrannical regime that the world could adapt to in order to confront extremist and terrorist groups. This organization has committed countless errors, fundamentally aligning with tyranny. It does not*

للخبر بقية/ تلفزيون العربي، كانون الثاني/يناير 2017. ⁶²

*accept a civil state, democracy, pluralism, or anything of the sort.*⁶³"

In the interest of giving credit where it is due, it is necessary to highlight the courageous stance of the Syrian writer and journalist Ali al-Abdallah. He sent me two articles by Hussein Aloudat on "Minorities, Sectarianism, and the Revolution in Syria," which discussed the issues of jihadism, takfirism, and sectarianism. In the second article, he wrote:

"The emergence of 'jihadist' movements added an explosive dimension to the religious and sectarian scene, as the political programs and projects of these movements, which are based on Salafi thought, with its doctrinal and political foundations, ranging from 'loyalty and disavowal'⁶⁴ to the establishment of an Islamic state, the traditional Caliphate model where the Caliph rules over the people, and its policies governed by strict standards which include the killing of apostates, stoning adulterers, and cutting off thieves' hands, etc., raised concerns and fears among followers of

⁶³ Ibid. For the record: When I wrote "Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Present Absence in Marrakesh" in December 2012, I was met with a widespread attack from a large number of "opposition" members on various Gulf television channels.

⁶⁴ Editor's note: this idea popularly refers to loyalty to the (Islamic) religion and its adherents, and disavowal of those deemed to be outside of it.

Christianity and Islamic sects which Salafi thought considers to be in violation of, or deviance from, the true faith. Their acceptance in the society of the Islamic state is tied to their return to Islam, that is, adherence to the Sunni school of thought.”

The emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra and 'ISIS,' and their brutal practices against Christians (such as kidnapping priests, removing crosses from churches, and preventing the ringing of church bells) and members of non-Sunni Islamic sects, escalated the violence—take for example the crimes in Ishtabraq, which claimed the lives of dozens of citizens from the Alawite sect, or the massacre in Qalb Lawza, which resulted in the death of twenty Druze citizens, along with executions, crucifixions, enslavement, hanging, flogging, confiscation of property and wealth, and the imposition of a strict behavioral code on all citizens. This code dictated acceptable modes of dress, behavior in markets and doctors' visits, travel between provinces, and even prohibited smoking, among other restrictions. These violations deepened and magnified the concerns and fears of Christians and non-Sunni Muslims, escalating hatred, animosity, and division between people of the same nation, and even between those of the same religion.

Let us not forget to mention the role played by the media, especially the satellite channels, in escalating sectarian tensions in Syria. These channels—for example, the Sunni channels Wisal, Safa, Al-Majd, Sila, and Al-Resalah, and the Shiite channels Ahl al-Bayt, Al-Naim, Al-Ghadir, and Al-Manar—were full of takfiri rhetoric against members of other sects, broadcasting fatwas that promoted sectarian hatred and incited sectarian violence (for example, fatwas from Adnan al-Arour and the slogan, "the blood of Sunnis is one," or sermons from some Shia clerics inciting hatred and justifying the killing of Sunni children). These channels also hosted some citizens, eyewitnesses, and field activists who were politically uninformed and under psychological pressure due to witnessing killings, destruction, and the deaths of loved ones. When hosts asked them about the motives behind the killings, massacres, and beheadings carried out by the regime, these guests found no answer other than sectarian motives. As one of them expressed: "They are killing us because we are chanting: 'Our leader is our master, Muhammad'." This narrative was an imagined point of entry by which the management of these channels used to attract popular segments to participate in the revolution.

In addition, regional states, Salafi movements, and public figures interacted with the rebels in ways that

aligned with their sectarian agendas—by directing financial, humanitarian, and military aid to certain groups, empowering them, and placing them at the forefront of the political scene. Major countries also incited sectarianism against Shiite Iran as a tactic to isolate, besiege, weaken, and counter its influence in the region. This, in turn, shaped the image of the revolution and the rebels on one hand, and had serious repercussions on Syrian society, on the other.⁶⁵

The Weak “Emir” is Frightening

To maintain his leadership position, Abu Mohammed al-Joulani regarded the "Syrianization" of Jabhat al-Nusra and severing ties with Al-Qaïda as direct threats to his authority and position. He opposed both strategies until the pressure from Qatar and Turkey⁶⁶ became so intense that he could no longer maintain allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri. In a carefully staged event, al-Joulani himself announced the dissolution of "Jabhat al-Nusra" and the birth of "Jabhat Fatah al-Sham" (JFS). However, he secured a key condition: that the new

⁶⁵ العربي الجديد، 20 أكتوبر 2015

⁶⁶ With utmost politeness and care, Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah stated to Al-Araby TV: "We hope that Jabhat al-Nusra will sever its ties with al-Qaïda, especially the Syrians within Jabhat al-Nusra. We hope to see them announce their split from al-Qaïda and focus solely on their own country." (Orient Net, 06/08/2015).

organization's centers of power remain under his control, primarily dominated by non-Syrian operatives, with an enhanced role for the security apparatus.

During the transitional period, Jabhat al-Nusra removed some of its Syrian leaders, such as Abu Mohammed Saleh al-Hamawi, and sidelined others from decision-making circles, like Dr. Mazhar al-Wais, known as Abu Abdulrahman al-Shami. JFS leadership then turned its attention to factions likely to pledge allegiance and join—willingly or by coercion—such as the "Imam al-Bukhari Battalion," primarily composed of Uzbek fighters led by Abu Ismail al-Bukhari; "Ajnad al-Kavkaz" (Soldiers of the Caucasus), led by Abdulhakim al-Shishani with Hamza al-Shishani in charge of military operations; "Junud al-Sham" (Soldiers of the Levant), led by Muslim al-Shishani (Abu al-Walid); and "The Caucasus Emirate," led by Salahuddin al-Shishani with Abdulkarim al-Qurmi (the Ukrainian)⁶⁷ as his deputy for military operations. As for the "Turkistan Islamic Party," which played an active role in battles in Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur, JFS sought high-level coordination rather than direct integration, as doing so risked provoking a confrontation with Turkish

⁶⁷ The name is attributed to Abdulkarim's origin – Crimea Ukraine

intelligence, which held leverage over various Turkistani factions.

This strategy rendered the issue of severing ties with Al-Qaida largely marginal, especially since the United States possessed a detailed map of the organization's internal structure. From its experience with ISIS, Washington had learned that pledges not to target Western, Turkish, or Gulf interests were no guarantee of compliance. For instance, the promises Abu Muslim al-Turkmani made to Turkey and European nations not to attack their territories evaporated with his death in August 2015. Even the hadith he cited to justify this stance—*"Leave the Turks as long as they leave you"*—was swiftly dismissed by consensus among scholars and narrators. Before his death, al-Adnani ensured to call on all jihadists abroad to tear apart the "disbelievers and apostates" wherever they were.

Since the Syrian jihadist factions were unwilling to engage in a direct confrontation with JFS, the American leadership of the international coalition decided in the fall of 2016 to target the organization's non-Syrian centers of power. The resulting operations clearly focused on eliminating non-Syrian elements within the organization.

Expired?

"Over five years, we fought intense political battles with many of these factions, not to provide security or military information about Jabhat al-Nusra, as some claim, but to demand an end to the refrain, 'They are part of us, and we are part of them.' When I raised this issue, even the polite among them would direct harsh words at me, while others resorted to insults, accusations of treason, and even takfir (declaring me an infidel). None of the jihadist or nationalist factions ever attacked Jabhat al-Nusra; instead, it was Jabhat al-Nusra that continually attacked, oppressed, and forced others into taking our position by putting knives to their throats." (Testimony of a Free Syrian Army fighter).

Perhaps this bitter testimony, from someone wounded in an al-Nusra attack on his location, encapsulates the crisis faced by many Syrian fighters. They were caught between a politically compromised opposition, beholden to decisions made by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, countries which regarded Jabhat al-Nusra as a political and military asset, on the one hand. And on the other, there were those fighting on the ground, who experienced a stark dissonance over this collusion with such strange ideology—and with itinerant extremists who controlled access to water, food,

and medicine—and endured corruption and oppression reminiscent of the dictatorship they had rebelled against.

The ability to gloss over and whitewash Jabhat al-Nusra has come to an end. The convergence of interests between regional powers and *Al-Qaïda in the Levant* no longer justifies the cost of supporting or covering for the group. The expense of allowing Nusra to remain has far exceeded that of engaging it in open confrontation. Separate from the Lavrov-Kerry agreement, intelligence-sharing between regional states and U.S. coalition leadership concluded that it was necessary to directly target Nusra's non-Syrian leadership. Apart from the killing of senior figure Mustafa Al-Saleh (Abu Rabee Al-Mara'i), whose vehicle was struck by coalition aircraft in January 2017, coalition strikes primarily targeted Nusra's foreign leaders. Syrian casualties were often incidental, those simply in the vicinity of the strikes.

Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership has struggled to act rationally. In a chaotic and unclear situation, however, it is hard to determine if its behavior is more erratic than that of others. Trust between factions has nearly vanished, simplifying Nusra's approach to confrontation into the crude binary of George W. Bush: *"Anyone who is not with us is*

against us.” Assassinations driven by security, financial, or military priorities, which claimed 12 armed factions, have turned into a general policy. Under the guise of unifying factions, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) imposed impossible conditions in December, which many saw as an attempt to “swallow up the factions” under the pretext of merging.

Among these conditions, **Al-Joulani demanded:**

1. Appointing himself as the supreme military leader of the new entity with absolute authority.
2. Seizing all factions’ weapons and placing them under his control.
3. Granting himself exclusive authority to appoint and dismiss military commanders.
4. Pre-approving members of the political body and its leader.
5. Forcing the new entity to sever ties with Turkey and boycott Operation Euphrates Shield⁶⁸.

⁶⁸ Several sites and sources, Al-Joulani's conditions for merging with the factions, Madar Al-Youm, 2016/12/20.

In response to Joulani's demands, Mujahid Diraniyah, the first to expose these conditions, addressed him bluntly: *"Be honest, Mr. Joulani. Admit that you want to swallow all the factions and stain the Syrian revolution in black. Say that you are seeking absolute power, a desire which has possessed you entirely. Admit that, in your pursuit of it, you do not care about burying the revolution and setting fire to Syria and its people."*

Dr. Hudhayfa Abdullah Azzam (who today seems to consider HTS to be the liberator of the Syrian people) previously remarked that "Fatah al-Sham is dragging the Syrian revolution to its doom." He reiterated his position by stating: *"Fatah al-Sham and ISIS were once a single organization. The truth, and I have said this in front of faction leaders for years, is this: the leaders and factions of the Syrian revolution committed a grave crime against the revolution when they criminalized one part of this ideology—namely ISIS—while legitimizing another part—namely Fatah al-Sham, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra. These groups originate from the same source and carry the same ideology."*⁶⁹

⁶⁹ A comment by Huzaifa Abdullah Azzam on the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and its consequences in an interview with Dar al-Iman Channel, January 2017.

Despite such critiques, there is no shortage of voices of unconditional support for the "security apparatus of al-Nusra," which put Abu Jabir (Jaber Sheikh)—a man previously ousted from the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham—in the line of fire to lead the newly merged organization, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This sparked a renewed battle of separation—not only between a Salafi-jihadist takfiri faction and one that was more Syrian in its composition and politics and closer to the Muslim Brotherhood movement—but also for separation imposed through the logic of annexation or elimination by force of arms.

Perhaps Syrian citizen Ibrahim Sataifi best illustrates this reality with a story he shared on *Al-Jisr TV*, an opposition channel, on January 30, 2017: *"In a forest, there was a wolf, a fox, and a hyena. Together, they caught a donkey, a rabbit, and a gazelle. The hyena said to the wolf, 'Divide the spoils for us, O wolf.' The wolf replied, 'I'll take the gazelle, the fox can have the rabbit, and you, with all due respect, can eat the donkey.' The hyena raised its claw and killed the wolf. Then it turned to the fox and said, 'Now you divide the spoils, little fox.' The fox replied, 'The rabbit is for your breakfast, the gazelle for your lunch, and the donkey, pardon me, is for your dinner.' The hyena*

asked, 'Where did you learn such manners?' The fox answered, 'From the carcass hanging above.'"

For example, the *Nur al-Din al-Zanki Movement*—known for its populist sectarian zeal and chaotic conduct—not to mention its outright political backwardness—is far from an ideologically-driven Salafi-jihadist faction. In this way, it resembles others who have chosen "self-preservation" over elimination.

The role of fatwas and the manipulation of religion manifested most egregiously through the positions of individuals whom Nusra had appointed as "sheikhs of the Syrian jihad." Among them, Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi, Abu al-Harith al-Masri, Abdullah al-Muhaysini, and Musleh al-Alyani issued a fatwa that stated: *"We have received news of fighting between Fatah al-Sham and Jaysh al-Mujahideen. We issue this fatwa to the leadership and soldiers of Fatah al-Sham, obliging them to cease fighting their brothers in Jaysh al-Mujahideen, withdraw their forces, and urgently refer the matter to a Sharia court. Fatah al-Sham must present its evidence for attacking its brothers—whether it is a criminal or political grievance or an accusation of treason. The judges must announce their findings publicly. If the fighting is justified, Jaysh al-Mujahideen must repent and return to the truth, and a ruling will be*

issued. If the accusations are proven false, Fatah al-Sham must be restrained from its aggression. We remind Muslim youth of the impermissibility of this aggression.” (See Annex).

When reading these lines, one might think that the fatwa would carry weight and that its authors would take a firm stand. However, al-Nusra’s security apparatus quickly reached out to these "sharia officials," reminding them of the old saying about judges in tyrannical regimes: *"Blessed is the judge who knows his limits and stays within them."* The four jurists, joined by Syrian supporters Abu Yusuf al-Hamawi and Abu Taher al-Hamawi, then signed a new six-person statement: *"We believe that the formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham under the leadership of Engineer Abu Jaber Sheikh is the best outcome that could be achieved. This merger represents an entity capable of addressing the imminent dangers... Therefore, we have decided to join this blessed body."* (January 28, 2017) (See Appendices).

As soon as Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi secured his own safety, however, he withdrew from this "blessed body." No more sharia court, no more sanctity of blood, no more oppression, no more aggression. And when even the "we've come to you with slaughter" jurist forgets the very sharia mandate for

which he was appointed, who is there to remind him of it?

Jabhat al-Nusra liquidated fifteen armed factions, all of them Sunni, with more than half of them carrying the banner of "There is no god but Allah" as they fought against the Syrian regime. Yet, some fools still defend them in the name of the "Sunni grievance"?

Meanwhile, the subpar Egyptian iteration of jihadi Brotherhood ideology, embodied by Wajdi Ghoneim, exhorts the Syrian people and fighters to persist in patience and jihad without deviating from the path of elevating the word of Allah: *"Let me be completely honest: if anyone's goal is anything other than elevating the word of Allah, they should stay home because they will die and go to Hell. Your revolution is the true armed revolution that has so far led to the liberation of the land... I say, have more patience. Yes, there is pain, but what pain? Houses are destroyed, but better ones will be built. People are dying, but they are martyrs, God willing."*⁷⁰

However, the field calculations no longer align with the generosity of those who once supported al-Nusra. The pretense of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has

⁷⁰ Interview with Egyptian preacher Wagdy Ghoneim about the ongoing fighting between factions in Syria, Dar Al-Iman Channel, January 2017

failed to convince anyone. In the new international and regional consensus, there is no place for either ISIS or JFS. Their expiration date has passed, and drastic measures are now necessary to preserve the Al-Qaïda movement, embedding it this time within factions willing to align with it. This is seen as the only way to stem the hemorrhaging of Al-Qaïda leadership, primarily based in Idlib province, parts of Aleppo's countryside, Quneitra, and Qalamoun. The resulting organization will be a chaotic mix of factions, something that won't deter the jurists from granting their blessings and distributing promises of *hur al-'ayn* (heavenly maidens) to all, without discrimination.

Leadership Struggles and the Jurisprudence of Necessity: The Case of Hashim al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber)

There is no need for a narrative biography of Engineer Hashim al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber), as the internet is replete with such accounts. However, there are key points missing from his biography that merit review.

His supporters introduce him by stating: *"Sheikh Abu Jaber was born in 1968 in the city of Maskanah, east of Aleppo. He has ten children and holds a degree in mechanical engineering. He held*

a high-ranking position in the Governmental Institute for Applied Sciences in Aleppo and worked in the field of Islamic preaching, for which he faced harassment." (Notably, this passage reveals that despite his involvement in Islamic preaching, the Syrian regime granted him a high-ranking position in the Governmental Scientific Research Center in Aleppo.)

"During the Iraq War (2003–2005), Abu Jaber assisted in facilitating the departure of fighters to Iraq through Syrian territory. According to accounts by his associates, he coordinated with Mahmoud Qul Aghasi (Abu al-Qaqa), whom Dr. Mazhar al-Wais, the chronicler of the Saydnaya Prison events, describes as 'a product of military intelligence.'"

"Abu Jaber was arrested in 2005 and was transferred between various security branches before ending up in the infamous Saydnaya Prison. He witnessed the Saydnaya massacre and was tried on charges of Wahhabism. The court sentenced him to eight years in prison, but he was released in September 2011 after serving six years as part of a pardon for political prisoners who had completed three-quarters of their sentences." (Notably, no secularist, leftist, or liberal has ever benefited from such sentence reductions since 1970 to the present day.)

"After his release, he founded the Mus'ab bin Umair Battalion in the city of Maskanah. Under his leadership, the battalion played a role in the capture of several cities and areas, including Raqqa, Tabqa, Jirah Military Airbase, Khanasir, and Maskanah. The battalion joined the Islamic Dawn Movement, which later merged with Ahrar al-Sham after the capture of Jirah Airbase in March 2013. Abu Jaber was appointed a member of the Shura Council of Ahrar al-Sham and served as emir of the eastern sector, later becoming emir of Aleppo following the assassination of Abu Khalid al-Suri." (It is worth noting that after his release, Abu Jaber did not initially join Ahrar al-Sham but opted to form his own local faction. When he realized the limitations of his faction and Ahrar al-Sham's success in building an armed organization across Syria, he joined the group, leveraging his connection to the Al-Qaïda-linked Abu Khalid al-Suri, whom Abu Jaber served as deputy before Abu Khalid's assassination.)

On September 10, 2014, Abu Jaber was appointed the General Commander of Ahrar al-Sham after the assassination of the group's leader, Sheikh Hassan Abboud (known as Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi), along with more than 45 other leaders of the organization, including provincial military commanders for Aleppo, Raqqa, and Idlib. The attack targeted a meeting in

the town of Ram Hamdan in rural Idlib, northern Syria.

Supporters of Abu Jaber claim that on September 12, 2015, he declined to renew his term for another year, leading the group's Shura Council to select Mohannad al-Masri (known as Abu Yahya al-Ghab) as his successor. However, other accounts from within the movement suggest that he was dismissed for several reasons. Five days later, Abu Jaber left for Mecca to perform the Hajj pilgrimage, during which he reportedly met with Salafists from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, according to a Qatari Salafi sheikh's testimony to the author⁷¹.

In **February 2016**, it was announced that nine factions from Aleppo had agreed to unify their military efforts under a joint force headed by Hashim al-Sheikh, also known as "Abu Jaber al-Sheikh." The nine factions that joined this force, in addition to Ahrar al-Sham, were:

1. **Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement**
2. **Fastaqim Kama Umirt Gathering**
3. **Division 101**
4. **Division 16**

⁷¹ The author of the Arabic version of the book Haytham Manna

5. **First Regiment**
6. **Al-Montaser Brigade**
7. **Mountain Hawks Brigade**
8. **Sultan Murad Brigade**

Notably, as pointed out by Aqil Hussein, the eight factions that authorized Abu Jaber to lead this new coalition, or its joint military operations room, were all formations of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that had managed to maintain their presence and operations in the north. In contrast, Islamist factions of various ideological leanings were entirely absent from this coalition⁷².

It is worth noting that Abu Jaber's alliances and ties with Al-Qaïda-affiliated elements within Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) did not prevent him from accepting leadership of what was known as the "Aleppo Army," despite the complete absence of any Salafi-jihadi factions in it. Supporters of Abu Jaber rarely discuss this not only **'militarily-failed' but also 'opportunely-jihadist' experience** today, as it was conducted under well-known regional directives.

⁷² Aqil Hussein, "Threatened Aleppo seeks the expertise of Ahrar al-Sham man Taqwi," Al-Modon, 02/18/2016.

In an attempt to reclaim an important role within Ahrar al-Sham or a unified new structure, the **Qaïda-aligned faction** formed what became known as **Jaish al-Ahrar (Army of the Free)** on December 10, 2016. In the founding statement, it was declared:

"In order to ensure unity within Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement and to enhance military effectiveness on the battlefield, the following brigades and battalions (16 names) announce their merger under the name 'Jaish al-Ahrar,' led by engineer Hashim al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber)" (see the full statement in the annex).

Members of Ahrar al-Sham revealed that **Abu Jaber** had previously refused to pledge allegiance to **Abu Ammar al-Omar**, the new leader, and rejected the results of internal elections, in addition to a prior attempt to stage a coup against the movement (as reported by Zaitoun Online). In response, the leader of the movement issued a statement, saying:

"What we have just seen on social media regarding the announcement of the formation of 'Jaish al-Ahrar' was neither authorized by the leadership of the movement nor known to us except through the media, unfortunately. The leadership of the movement will address this matter, God willing, in

accordance with the rulings of Islamic law and the known regulations and policies of the movement."

Abu Jaber al-Sheikh defended his actions on Twitter, stating: *"Jaish al-Ahrar was never a secessionist project, nor will it ever be. It is not an alternative to the movement but a part of it, one of its arrows"* (December 13, 2016).

It was clear, however, that Abu Jaber's actions were supported by figures like **Abu Saleh al-Tahan** and the movement's former religious authority, **Abu Mohammed al-Sadiq**, among others from the Qaïda-aligned faction⁷³.

⁷³ I have not come across any significant political writings by Abu Jaber al-Sheikh. His output appears limited to phrases he has adopted from others without attribution, such as: "Politics without religion is secularism, which contradicts our identity, and religion without politics is monasticism invented by those whose understanding failed to grasp the words and purposes of religion." There is no need to delve into his "memorable statements" about adherents of "false religions" or "abrogated religions," or his remarks about the "dogs of Hellfire" in ISIS, or those "mourning Karbala while burning Zabadani in search of Hussein's killer." Similarly, his declarations such as, "We fought the Nusayris with the sword of Abu Bakr, and we will fight the Kharijites with the sword of Ali, and we care not which of them dies by it" require little elaboration, etc. (In mid-2025, Abu Jaber al-Sheikh has been appointed as the official in charge of the Manbij region in the eastern Aleppo countryside).

To justify his approach and recent alliances, **Abu Jaber** recounted a story he claimed to have experienced with Ahrar al-Sham founder **Hassan Abboud**. On December 24, 2016, he wrote: *"I once sat in a gathering with Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi (Hassan Abboud) and Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, where unification was discussed. Abu Abdullah responded, saying, 'The primary obstacle to our unification is your connection to Al-Qaïda.'"*

He further outlined the demands Ahrar al-Sham had made to Al-Joulani for unification:

1. **Severing ties with Al-Qaïda,**
2. **Internal religious authority,**
3. **The unification should not be limited to Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra but must include other factions as well.**

During the leadership of Abu Yahya (Mohannad al-Masri), an additional condition was added:

4. **The leader of the new unified formation must not be from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.**

When **Abu Ammar al-Umar** led the movement, **Jabhat al-Nusra** had already severed its ties with Al-Qaïda, changed its name, and altered its banner. During his tenure, Abu Ammar signed an agreement

for a merger under a unified leadership that included **Jabhat Fath al-Sham**, **Nour al-Din al-Zenki**, and other factions. The agreement stipulated the following:

- Abu Ammar al-Umar as the **general leader**
- Abu Mohammed al-Joulani as the **military commander**
- Hajj Tawfiq as the **head of the Shura Council**

Two days after these developments (December 26, 2016), **Abu Jaber al-Sheikh** publicly declared: *"I call for a single administration for the liberated areas, one leader, a Shura Council of people with authority, a unified political office, a unified military office, a unified judicial authority for the region, and a single judiciary. If you do not respond, I disavow your actions."*

Later, after being appointed the **general leader** of **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**, he tweeted on the 28th of the same month: *"I announce my resignation from Harakat Ahrar al-Sham."* This was shortly before his Twitter account was deactivated.

We will not revisit **Al-Joulani's** stance or his conditions regarding the aforementioned agreement, but it is important to present this

perspective. It evokes the timeless relevance of **al-Hasan al-Basri's** response, 14 centuries ago, when asked about the **Kharijites**: *"They are people of worldly desires."*

The internal conflicts and personal struggles for dominance and power among the "jihadists" bear little difference from those observed among leftists or liberals. The same individual who wrote on January 30, 2015, *"O Allah, grant victory to our brothers in Suqour al-Sham and the rest of the factions. O Allah, guide their strikes and defeat our enemy and theirs. Their victory is our victory, and their honor is our honor,"* later accepted leadership of **HTS** following operations carried out by **Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS)** to eliminate these same factions.

Likewise, the one who wrote on June 15, 2015, *"When a fighter loses mercy and knowledge but retains weapons, he becomes a highway robber,"* repeatedly sought military alliances to strengthen his personal position.

This raises the critical question: was Abu Jaber truly entrusted with leadership and allegiance, or was he simply a figurehead chosen to project an image of a leader from outside **Jabhat Fath al-Sham**? The intention seemed to be to create a merger that could mitigate the consequences of regional and

international consensus that **Jabhat al-Nusra's** time had expired. Freezing their allegiance to **Ayman al-Zawahiri** and changing their name were insufficient to remove the group from terrorist lists.

In a leaked video, **Sadruddin al-Bayanouni**, the former General Supervisor of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was tasked along with **Ahmed Ramadan** and **Ubaidah al-Nahhas** to act on behalf of the "National Work Group," stated: *"Burhan Ghalioun is an academic liberal figure who originally had communist leanings. We nominated him for this position (head of the Syrian National Council) to be the face of national action. We are not operating as the Muslim Brotherhood; we are operating as a national front. We have a National Council that includes all factions, and we chose this figure acceptable to the West and domestically so that the regime could not exploit the presence of another figure at the helm of the Council."*

Finally, **Abdullah al-Omari** revealed to **Al-Quds Al-Arabi** (February 6, 2017) the scenario devised and orchestrated for this latest "film": *"Sources within the Syrian armed opposition disclosed a meeting in one of the towns in Idlib near the Turkish border. In this meeting, **Abu Mohammed al-Joulani** convened with several leaders of **Jabhat Fath al-Sham**, instructing them to follow every directive issued by*

*the leader of **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Hashem al-Sheikh Abu Jaber.**"*

A source from the Syrian opposition, residing in a Turkish city near the Syrian border, stated that **"the past week witnessed a broad meeting headed by Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, leader of Jabhat Fath al-Sham, with the attendance of the Saudi preacher Abdullah al-Muhaysini, who announced his joining Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The meeting included several senior leaders of the group, scholars, preachers, and Sharia figures."**

The source indicated that the meeting discussed **"several issues on the Syrian scene that have been circulating in the media and on social media platforms in ways that exacerbate and deepen disagreements,"** as he put it.

The attendees reportedly agreed that **Abu Jaber Hashem al-Sheikh** is the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and that all factions and individuals within it must obey him. Furthermore, al-Joulani informed the attendees that he had handed over all his previous powers and disclosed the archives, funds, and weapons under his control, placing them under Abu Jaber Hashem al-Sheikh's authority.

The source added that this declaration **"comes in response to rumors in the media and among certain factions suggesting that the leader of HTS is merely a figurehead, with the real authority resting in Abu Mohammed al-Joulani's hands."** The source further claimed that **"activists from Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat Tahrir Syria, and other factions are behind these rumors."**

On another note, the source, quoting what he described as a **"senior leader within HTS,"** revealed that the meeting held on Friday discussed the idea of **"a final dissolution of Jabhat Fath al-Sham, with its members merging into HTS as individuals."**

According to the source, **"the dissolution of Jabhat Fath al-Sham is being widely debated after the series of targeted strikes by the international coalition on its headquarters following the fall of Aleppo to the regime."**

He added that Jabhat Fath al-Sham is **"considering removing all pretexts that make it a target for the international coalition at this stage."** He elaborated, stating that **"the group's leadership is contemplating that the best course of action might be to dissolve itself to protect its members and headquarters from coalition strikes."**

The source quoted the senior HTS leader as saying, **"Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and those present expect an increase in coalition airstrikes on its bases in the coming days, so it is advisable to expedite the announcement of the group's dissolution."**

The attendees reportedly linked the increase in coalition strikes to recent attacks by the group on the positions of **Jaysh al-Mujahideen** and others. However, the source dismissed rumors about **"collaboration between some factions and coalition forces in providing information on the locations and movements of Jabhat Fath al-Sham leaders targeted by the strikes."**

The source confirmed that the coming days or weeks would witness **"practical steps toward the dissolution of Jabhat Fath al-Sham and the absence of Abu Mohammed al-Joulani from the forefront, limiting his role to the Shura Council of HTS,"** according to what the source told **Al-Quds Al-Arabi**.

There is little need to comment on this report. Public trust in those who claimed to champion the Syrian people's cause appears to have been irreversibly eroded. It has become clear that their ultimate goal was domination and leadership. As for those who claimed revolutionary purity, as Sheikh Diraniyah

once remarked, all they exhibited was **"revolutionary hooliganism."**

They betrayed the legitimate and civil demands of the Syrian citizen rebelling against dictatorship, portraying themselves as the **shadow of God on Earth.**

The downfall of the **takfiri project** began first and foremost with the **"miraculous" crimes and practices** it committed. As for its military elimination, this has become subject to regional calculations and the fear of geographic transition—from the land where their so-called jihad for the past five years overlapped with the interests of regional and Western states—to other Arab and Western countries!

Al-Joulani's New Clothes

Abu Mohammed Al-Joulani was born as Ahmad Hussein al-Sharaa⁷⁴. Before leaving to join the "Islamic resistance" in Iraq (the "Zarqawi group"). He was first influenced by the religious circles in the Sheikh Saad neighborhood of Damascus's Mezzeh district, and later began following a sheikh and charlatan in the north named Abu Al-Qaqaa (Mahmoud Qul Aghasi), who used to submit reports on his disciples to the authorities. After his sheikh

⁷⁴ See Glossary

was assassinated, Al-Joulani joined a group heading to Iraq to "resist."

When Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi became the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq, he tasked Al-Joulani and two former Iraqi army officers who served during Saddam Hussein's rule—Colonel Samir Abdul Muhammad Al-Ubaidi (Haji Bakr) and Maysar bin Ali Al-Jubouri (Abu Maria Al-Qahtani)—along with several other Iraqis, with establishing an Al-Qaïda branch in Syria. Al-Joulani describes his mission:

"I arrived from Iraq, and by the grace of God, I met Sheikh Al-Baghdadi, a noble man who fulfilled his duty to the people of Sham, paying them back in double. He approved the project I proposed to help our oppressed people in Sham, provided funds from the State's treasury despite their hard times, and entrusted me with planning and executing the policy while also assigning some brothers to assist me. Although their numbers were few, God blessed them and our mission."

One of the Iraqi officers was killed by a coincidence in Aleppo, after which the son of Hussein assumed leadership, relying on Abu Maria Al-Qahtani and later recruiting three Syrians from the old Fighting Vanguard group who had fled to Afghanistan. According to the "martyr" records of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), all these individuals died except for Al-

Joulani, who always surrounded himself with a group of foreign fighters of various nationalities.

Initially, Al-Joulani harbored deep hostility toward Turkey, aligning with the views of the former Iraqi officers who had converted to Islam. In his first audio statement announcing the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra, he said:

"Undoubtedly, I include in this crime the Turkish regime, which has become America's new stick in confronting the rational minds and methodologies. It flatters Muslims to win their favor while poisoning them. The version of Islam represented by the Turkish regime is hollow, a form without substance, a body without a soul. The greatest flaw in Turkey's project is America's approval of it, as the verse states: 'And never will the Jews or Christians approve of you until you follow their religion.'"

However, after the split with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al-Joulani began establishing security relations with Turkey. Since Turkey became the sole conduit for arms and trade, HTS gradually saw the integration of Turkish fighters, some with official approval from Turkish authorities, and others under the guidance of the Turkish intelligence agency, MIT. Oddly enough, the shared ground between Al-Joulani and Al-Baghdadi became their

agreement on a hadith fabricated by Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani, Al-Baghdadi's deputy:

"Abu Huraira said: Leave the Turks alone as long as they leave you alone,"⁷⁵ effectively preventing any operations by foreign supporters within Turkey.

Can Abu Mohammed Al-Joulani Be Trusted by Syrian Military Factions and Political Forces?

Al-Joulani has signed agreements with various factions, including the People's Protection Units (YPG), Hazm Movement, Ahrar al-Sham, and Free Syria Army, among others, yet honored none of them. Strong evidence suggests his involvement in the assassination of Ahrar al-Sham's leadership—including Hassan Abboud and 24 of his staff—in a gas bottle explosion. He was not opposed to exiling or assassinating anyone who opposed him. His operations depended on financial and military support from two regional states, which enabled him to pay his fighters ten times the salary of the fugitive Bashar Al-Assad's Prime Minister.

In one recorded speech, Al-Joulani criticized the waste of Nusra's resources, reportedly amounting to \$1 billion, commenting:

⁷⁵ Attributed Hadith

"We must save money as much as possible because financial resources make it easier to recruit and win over men."

It can be said that Ahmad Al-Sharaa's Salafi cultural background was limited and unremarkable. If we revisit his interviews with the channel that sought for years to mythologize him, we find a rigid and closed-minded discourse rooted in the concept of Sunni victimhood and Jabhat Al-Nusra's mission to build a Sunni front to combat the Rafidah (Shiites), Alawites, and other "infidel" sects. Despite consistently surrounding himself with non-Syrian religious jurists to compensate for his weak jurisprudential knowledge, he continuously adopted a rhetoric of extremism. This rhetoric portrayed discussions of a civil state as a departure from Sharia law and labeled democracy as shirk (polytheism).

This approach became especially evident in his conflict with the "Islamic Front," when he allowed non-Syrian jurists to respond to the "Revolutionary Honor Pact." Days later, Jabhat Al-Nusra issued statements through non-Syrians to pave the way for an official response, which remains a dark stain in the group's history (refer to the annex for the text). However, for those who lived through that period, it was hard not to notice a critical aspect of Ahmad Al-

Sharaa's personality since his appearance alongside Abdulrahim Atoun and Abu Al-Faraj Al-Masri on July 28, 2016. This characteristic—solidified during his time at Camp Bucca, where he mingled with a mix of former Iraqi army officers and Al-Qaïda operatives who collectively laid the foundation for ISIS—was his firm belief that security and military dominance are the sole paths to power, regardless of the form, cost, or guise.

This conviction led him to select Atoun (from Idlib) to solidify his rule in Idlib⁷⁶ and a jurist of Egyptian

⁷⁶ Among the Salafi-jihadist prisoners in Sednaya Prison, who were released by Bashar al-Assad through a presidential pardon in 2011, the most prominent public appearance of Abdul Rahim Atoun was during the recording in which he appeared alongside Abu Muhammad al-Joulani and Abu al-Faraj al-Masri to announce the disassociation of Jabhat al-Nusra from al-Qaïda and its transformation into Jabhat Fatah al-Sham on July 28, 2016. All available testimonies confirm that Abdul Rahim Atoun was one of the most enthusiastic proponents of severing ties with al-Qaïda, advocating openness toward Western nations and collaboration with them while simultaneously issuing religious rulings to justify pragmatism. At the same time, he sanctioned attacks on Free Syrian Army factions and their eradication. Atoun announced his resignation from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on January 27, 2018, and was subsequently appointed head of the fatwa council in areas under its control. His appearance at a seminar organized by the Directorate of Culture under the "Salvation Government" in Idlib on September 15, 2021, titled *"Jihad and Resistance in the Islamic World—The Taliban as a Model,"* sparked widespread controversy. He appeared in new attire, bareheaded and abandoning his dark-colored traditional Arab garments.

origin to secure the loyalty of foreign fighters. This strategy was critical both in his battle against Syrian factions and in suppressing dissenting voices objecting to his split from Al-Qaïda. It also helped him forge a close relationship with Turkish military intelligence (MIT), aiming to counter the international consensus labeling him as a war criminal, a criminal against humanity, and a figure on the UN's terrorism lists.

Contrary to the very principles for which he fought against other factions, Al-Joulani began to adopt a different tone toward Western countries and even their intelligence agencies. He sought to convince these "former enemies" that he was a reliable ally by detaining and liquidating anyone opposing his new policies under accusations of collaborating with Western agencies or ISIS.

During the years of retreat into Idlib, he solidified his priorities by building an organized and powerful security apparatus to attempt control over the entire northwestern region of Syria. However, the Turkish authorities repeatedly intervened to curb this ambition, preferring to maintain directly affiliated factions organized into the "National Army" and the "Interim Government."

Researcher Khaled al-Khatib viewed this as part of a broader transformation Atoun himself and HTS as a whole are undergoing.

The Turkish authorities retained the upper hand by establishing two de facto governments and multi-functional military formations. These formations served several purposes: dismantling the military presence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), forcibly displacing Kurdish populations, eliminating the "Afrin Canton" established by the People's Protection Units (YPG), using these factions for cross-border missions (such as in Libya and Azerbaijan), and organizing the "Operation Peace Spring" campaign on October 9, 2019, to establish a loyal military force in northeastern Syria near the Euphrates.

However, the complexities of the international and regional landscape yielded limited results due to the presence of international coalition forces in the region and the geopolitical intricacies accompanying this operation.

The official Syrian regime's refusal to engage in a political resolution played the largest role in prompting Turkish authorities to revisit the "Army of Conquest" scenario, which had successfully entered Idlib in a coalition led by Jabhat al-Nusra. However, this time, it involved a more organized military structure (HTS), allied with factions incorporated into the "National Army," aiming to break the stalemate within a global and regional context

dominated by the Russian-Ukrainian war and the assault on Gaza.

This comes at a time when Turkey can no longer bear hosting over four million Syrian refugees on its territory, in addition to the continued control of vast northeastern Syrian regions by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Thus, Jabhat al-Nusra returned in new clothing and with ties—superficial formalities that the shallow Western perspective fixates upon. Yet, it remains shackled by the UN designation of its leaders as terrorists and by economic sanctions that obstruct any potential vision for reconstruction. Meanwhile, HTS adopts a narrow and insular approach toward dealing with Syrians, dismantling what remains of the Syrian Armed Forces and internal security. This is coupled with a nauseating sectarian rhetoric and religious mobilization spearheaded by masked foreign fighters in major Syrian cities, alongside a "Party of Revenge and Retaliation," which recruits members into internal security through forms affirming "pure Sunni affiliation" and readiness for religious indoctrination courses.

Is it necessary to remind anyone that Abu Mohammed al-Joulani (Ahmad Hussein al-Sharaa) is the only military leader who has never once apologized for any crimes he committed, nor has he

ever reconsidered his actions despite all the contradictions and political blunders he has made? He was "right" when he served as al-Baghdadi's envoy, "right" when he broke ties with him, "right" when he liquidated members of other jihadist or nationalist factions, "right" in building 11 prisons in Idlib where conditions for detainees are no different from Assad's prisons, and "right" today as he constructs a one-party state, a single ideological army, and an all-encompassing doctrine.

I tried to explain the most important aspects of the new jihadi Junta composed by HTS in my book "Manifeste contre le fascisme djihadiste" (2025). I find necessary to give an idea about what happen in Syria today in my intervention in Washington in the end of this edition of the book: "Syria Under the Rule of Jihadi Fascism »⁷⁷

⁷⁷ <https://glocalworkshop.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Haytham-Manna-Manifeste-FR.pdf>

The Jihadi Brotherhood: From and To Syria

**"This revolution is an extension of the
1980 revolution."**

Hussam Al-Ghodbaan, Deputy General Supervisor of the
Muslim Brotherhood (2016)

Back to the Beginning

The Brotherhood's jihadist venture, which began in the second half of the 1970s and left its mark on today's most prominent Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria, eludes the informational transparency, standards of documentation, and scholarly integrity relied upon by serious researchers, human rights advocates, and politicians. A key factor contributing to this obscurity is the early loss of its founding Sheikh, engineer **Marwan Hadid (1934–1976)**, the deaths of its entire first generation of leaders (Abdel Sattar Al-Zaim, Mowaffaq Ayash, Ghalib Haddad, Hosni Aabo...), and the disappearance of a significant number of leaders from its second generation. Additionally, the relationship between this movement and the traditional organization of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, marked by conflict and

competition—with only brief periods of coordination and cooperation—further clouds the picture.

These factors shaped how the movement was presented to the world, often in ways shaped by external forces uninvolved in the experience, or by individuals and groups who occasionally capitalized on it and at other times renounced it. The handful of Western researchers writing on the subject had to rely on limited documents and even fewer testimonies. While some books were later authored by members of the generation succeeding the first leadership, and recorded testimonies were gathered from its leaders during documentation of gross human rights violations between 1978 and 1982, much remains unsaid. Much of the untold story resides with those still alive today or within political elites of the Muslim Brotherhood, who wrote history based on a principle of self-exoneration while blaming this generation of young Syrians who led the first "jihadist experiment" in the region, preceding the Arab Afghans, Al-Qaïda, and the Taliban.

Some figures from this movement managed to leave significant marks on the global jihad movement and the takfiri-jihadi trend, influencing doctrines, methodologies, and techniques of confrontation with society, states, and armies.

After returning from Egypt in 1964, engineer **Marwan Hadid** arguably represented an entirely different persona and approach than that of the young man who had been mentored in the ideas of Dr. **Mustafa Al-Sibai**. While the works of **Sayyid Qutb** were being distributed both secretly and openly in Syria by the late 1960s, Marwan Hadid introduced the first Syrian interpretation of Qutb's ideas. He connected Qutb's last four works (*This Religion, The Future of This Religion, Milestones, and Toward an Islamic Society*) to the idea of jihad for establishing the rule of God on Earth.

In the second half of the 1960s, the theory of the "savior party" and armed struggle gained traction across both the political left and right. The Ba'ath Party's national leadership published a book titled *The Revolutionary Party*, which identified the ailment and prescribed the remedy. Most traditional political parties were ideologically and politically shaken, prompting the **Arab Nationalist Movement** to adopt Marxist-Leninist ideology. Meanwhile, the notion of the "Party of God" versus the "Parties of Satan" gained increasing strength among political Islamists.

After the defeat of June 5, 1967, when Israel commenced a series of preemptive strikes on Egypt and Syria, **Nasserism** suffered its most severe

psychological, social, and political blow since the proclamation of the Republic in Egypt. The newly empowered Ba'ath Party's structures were shaken, the Saudi model disappeared entirely from the aspirations of the youth, and Arab liberal movements were marginalized, becoming associated in the collective consciousness of young people with support for Israeli occupation and the Zionist project in the region. In light of these events and in this atmosphere, the course of action pursued by Marwan Hadid was not incidental; it was simply what he and his followers considered the Islamic interpretation of salvation.

The contours of the new organization began to take shape in the early 1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood warned its youth against interacting or becoming involved with Marwan Hadid. The new secret organization established its own structures in several major provinces, such as Hama, Aleppo, and Damascus. The arrest of Marwan Hadid on June 30, 1975, marked a turning point for the organization. Around this time, members of the group in Hama were arrested, and two of them were subjected to brutal torture that led to their deaths. Following this incident, the leadership decided to immediately begin armed operations, despite having no contact with their imprisoned leader in Damascus.

On **February 16, 1976**, they carried out the assassination of Major Mohammad Ghara, the head of National Security in Hama, who had tortured the two young men to death. This marked the beginning of the new **"Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood"** and its armed operations in Syria. The news of Marwan Hadid's death in Harasta Hospital, where he had been transferred for treatment in June 1976, escalated the organization's activities and opened the door to a large-scale armed conflict that Syria experienced until the **Hama massacre in February 1982**⁷⁸

The assassination of Dr. Mohammad Al-Fadel, an acclaimed legal scholar and the president of Damascus University, along with additional assassinations of other Alawite figures in the military, political, and academic spheres, marked the beginning of the group's broader operations. These initially targeted the civil, syndicate, and political movements that sought democratic change. One leader of the Fighting Vanguard described the chosen approach to confronting the regime of General Hafez al-Assad as follows:

"The leadership chose Dr. Mohammad Al-Fadel, the President of Damascus University, a

⁷⁸ لكل من يريد التوسع في هذه الفقرة مراجعة كتاب: هيثم مناع، السلفية والإخوان وحقوق الإنسان المعهد الإسكندنافي لحقوق الإنسان وعدة طبعات أخرى، 2004

member of the Baath Party's National Command, and the President's legal advisor. He was the greatest legal mind in the Middle East and one of the masterminds of the Nusayri sect, to execute God's judgment against him. Brother Abdul Sattar assigned me to monitor him, limiting our task at this stage to reconnaissance only. After about a month of precise monitoring, the brothers assassinated him on July 11, 1976, inside the university. Brother Abdul Sattar Al-Za'im carried out the operation using a 7mm submachine gun, firing sixteen consecutive bullets into the criminal's body. Brother Faisal Ghannama provided protection during the operation, while Brother Mahdi Al-Alwani drove the motorcycle that transported the operatives. The brothers were able to withdraw safely, praise be to God."⁷⁹

"A thousand verbal bullets do not equal a single iron bullet"—this was Marwan Hadid's response to

⁷⁹ Ayman al-Sharbaji, *Memoirs of the Fighting Vanguard* in Syria, p. 32, e-version. The assassinations continued, claiming the lives of Colonel Ali Muhanna, Assistant Head of Military Intelligence in Aleppo in December 1976; Brigadier General Abdul Karim al-Razzouk, Commander of the Missile force in Damascus in June 1977; Dr. Ali bin Abdul Ali, Professor of Agriculture at Aleppo University and Head of the Agricultural Research Center in Aleppo in November 1977; Dr. Ibrahim Na'ama, Head of the Syrian Dental Syndicate in Damascus in March 1978; and Colonel Ahmed Khalil, Director of Officers' Affairs at the Ministry of Interior in Damascus in August 1978.

anyone who advocated for preaching and guidance instead of armed struggle. The **"League of Syrian Writers"** of the Muslim Brotherhood gave him the title **"Pioneer of Jihad and Advocate of Martyrdom for the Second Half of the Twentieth Century"**. There is no doubt that he was the first to firmly embrace membership in the Muslim Brotherhood while openly aligning himself with the jihadist current. He consistently emphasized the necessity of remaining focused on the goal: establishing an Islamic state that rules by what God has revealed and adopting jihad with one's life and wealth as the chosen method.

The **Hama massacre** marked the end of an era for the *"Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood"* as attempts to revive its military organization in Syria failed. The remaining military cadres dispersed into various new paths. After a general feeling of abandonment by the official Muslim Brotherhood leadership—combined with the Iraqi regime's support of this leadership, its good relations with the Jordanian government, and the restrictions the fighters faced, the **Afghan War** became a new outlet for these groups. It allowed them to reorganize and reshape themselves within the broader framework of the Afghan jihadist movement, offering initial opportunities to develop

jihadist ideology and reflect on their Syrian experience.

At this point, **new figures** began to emerge—individuals who were not originally in primary leadership roles but united around **four core principles**:

1. **Emphasis on "Al-Wala' wal-Bara" (loyalty and disavowal)**, the concept of *Hakimiyya* (God's sovereignty), the path of jihad, and the ultimate goal of establishing a state modeled after the **Rashidun Caliphate**.
2. Affirming their role as faithful successors to **Abul A'la Maududi** and **Sayyid Qutb**.
3. Identifying points of convergence with the **Salafi-jihadist ideology** brought from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, particularly the teachings of **Ibn Taymiyyah** and the early **Wahhabi movement**.
4. Declaring that the jihad and caliphate project is a cause of *Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jama'a*⁸⁰, targeting not only the "*Crusader-Zionist alliance*" and secular parties and states but also "*all deviant infidel sects*", such as the

⁸⁰ "The People of the Sunnah and the Community" or "The People of Tradition and Consensus" it is a term commonly used to refer to **Sunni Muslims**

Nusayris (Alawites), Druze, Ismailis, and Rafidah (Shiites) etc.

Those who emerged from this experience and exile lived through a prolonged period of **fragmentation and diaspora**, scattering across diverse paths and approaches. Some rejoined the official Muslim Brotherhood movement, others continued briefly with **Adnan Aqla** until his arrest, but the majority gravitated toward the Afghan jihad, becoming part of the "**Arab Afghans**" experience.

From Migration to Return

The final category can be traced as having actively engaged in the **Afghan experience**, playing a key role in shaping its **ideological framework, strategic vision, and methods of struggle**. This group drew on the painful lessons of its **Syrian experience** and sought to contribute those insights to the global jihadist movement. These included:

1. Expertise in **armed struggle** and **guerrilla warfare**.
2. Military self-reliance techniques.
3. The construction of a **non-hierarchical, unconventional organizational structure** capable of sustaining itself despite intense security and military crackdowns.

4. The concept of the **"lone-wolf operative"**—individuals carrying out missions based on general guidance and messaging. This model was later adopted by **Al-Qaïda** and promoted by **Abu Mohammed al-Adnani** during the formation of the international coalition against ISIS.

Discussing individuals who emerged from the **"Fighting Vanguard"** experience naturally leads to reviewing its key members who played pivotal roles in the **jihadi movement**—from **Afghanistan** to **Bosnia, Algeria, Yemen, and Iraq**. Additionally, it includes the children of victims from the armed conflict between the Syrian regime and the Islamist movement from **1978-1982**, and finally, multiple militant groups that carried the name *"Fighting Vanguard"*. These groups viewed themselves as a continuation of the original experiment, though they largely failed⁸¹. Others joined militant factions such as **Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra**, or the **Abdullah Azzam Brigade**, while some individuals had limited and weaker involvement with **ISIS**.

⁸¹ On November 8, 2012, a video was released announcing the return of the "Fighting Vanguard" to the city of Aleppo and its countryside. The masked spokesman in the video said that the organization consisted of battalions named after the organization's leaders in the 1970s and 1980s, namely: Marwan Hadid Battalion, Adnan Aqla Battalion, Ibrahim Mangani Battalion, Husni Abu Battalion, and Ayman Barbouri Battalion.

Four prominent figures stand out in this context:

1. **Abu Khalid al-Suri** (Muhammad Bahaya)
2. **Abu Musab al-Suri** (Mustafa Abdul Qadir Setmariam Nasar al-Rifa'i)
3. **Abu Faras al-Suri** (Ridwan Mahmoud Namous)
4. **Abu Basir al-Tartousi** (Abdul Munim Mustafa Halima).

Abu Khalid al-Suri

The **Aleppan high school student** Muhammad Bahaya (1963–2014) joined the **Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood** before turning sixteen. Although he did not participate in any notable operations, Bahaya relocated to **Turkey** following the **Hama Massacre** in February 1982, where he served as a **logistics officer** responsible for smuggling fighters in and out of Syria. He narrowly escaped arrest—and likely death—after breaking his leg on the very day he was planning to re-enter Syria with the group's leader, **Adnan Aqla**⁸². Aqla's

⁸² Adnan Aqla was born on January 1, 1951, in the village of Khusfin in the Golan Heights. He grew up and completed his secondary and university education in Aleppo, where he was active in Islamic cells at the University of Aleppo, from which he graduated with a degree in architecture. He assumed leadership responsibilities in the fighting vanguard after the killing of the first leadership. He was arrested in an ambush while attempting to return to Syria in 1983 and has been missing since that day.

fate remains unknown, as it was later revealed that all those who entered Syria that day fell into a security forces **ambush**.

By late **1987**, Bahaya decided to join the **jihād in Afghanistan** under one of its most prominent leaders, **Sheikh Abdullah Azzam**—a figure who, according to several Fighting Vanguard officials, was himself a member of the organization and had ties to its founder, **Engineer Marwan Hadid**. Azzam had established a facility in **Pakistan** known as "*Bayt al-Ansar*" (The House of the Supporters), where Bahaya arrived immediately upon his arrival and adopted the **nom de guerre Abu Khalid**.

Bayt al-Ansar eventually evolved into "*Bayt Qa'idat al-Jihad*" (The House of the Jihad Base), where Abu Khalid became a trainer for the incoming fighters.

During this time, Abu Khalid reunited with his childhood friend and former Fighting Vanguard colleague, Abu Musab al-Suri.

Abu Musab al-Suri.

Mustafa Setmariam Nasar born in 1958 in Aleppo, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar joined the Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood at an early age. He recounted this period and his journey in his writings, where he detailed his military training under Syrian army defectors in Jordan and officers

from the Iraqi and Egyptian armies in Baghdad and Cairo. Nasar specialized in explosives engineering, urban guerrilla warfare, and special operations. He later worked as a trainer in the military bases of the Brotherhood's organization in Jordan and its camps in Baghdad.

During the **Hama uprising**, the organization's leadership appointed him as a member of the **supreme military leadership** under **Sheikh Sa'id Hawwa**, the Brotherhood's military leader, and as deputy commander for northwest Syria. This phase came to an abrupt end with the **Hama Massacre** and the collapse of the Brotherhood's confrontation strategy with the regime. Nasar broke ties with the Muslim Brotherhood in protest against their participation in the **"National Alliance"** with **secular, communist parties** and the Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath Party. He then embarked on what he called the phase of **reviving jihad in the Levant**.

This effort led him to **Pakistan**, where he connected with **Abdullah Azzam** in **Peshawar** and joined the ranks of Arab mujahideen. In cooperation with his friend **Abu Khalid**, Nasar trained many fighters in **explosives** and other military skills.

Nasar's military, combat, and organizational experience blended with the **jurisprudential methodology** of **Abd al-Qadir ibn Abd al-Aziz**,

author of "Al-Umda" and "Al-Jami'". Ibn Abd al-Aziz permitted Nasar to publish his book *"The Syrian Experience"* and *"The First Statement of the Call for Global Islamic Resistance"*; he approved the included fatwas too. Nasar did not stop there; during his jihadist period in **Pakistan and Afghanistan**, he studied the works of **Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam**, and various Salafi-jihadi authors.

Describing the ideological influences shaping his thinking, Nasar wrote: *"In 1990, during the Gulf War, all Islamic currents—from revivalist to jihadist— were present in Peshawar. The stance of Arab governments, clerics, and the people towards the war caused an earthquake among us. With the establishment of the new world order, it became clear that the Islamic revivalist movements had failed and that a new approach was needed to counter the new global system. At that point, I wrote a statement calling for the establishment of the Global Islamic Resistance. This call was symbolized by the 'three sanctuaries'— the Kaaba, Al-Aqsa, and the Prophet's Mosque— depicted as being under the spears of crosses and six-pointed stars, referencing the Crusader and Jewish occupation of these sanctuaries, whether direct or indirect, for 50 to 60*

years. The statement explicitly called for terrorism across the globe to challenge this new system."

Nasar left behind several foundational writings for the jihadist movement, including:

- *"Observations on the Syrian Jihadist Experience,"*
- *"The People of al-Sham in the Face of the Nusayris, Crusaders, and Jews,"*
- *"The Call for Islamic Resistance."*

He summarized his vision for jihadist organization, saying: *"Each jihadist generation must create its own practical theory, born through its own experience, and develop it in light of the lessons of past attempts. Practical jihadist theories are not born in the minds of authors and thinkers in fancy offices, nor do they descend upon leaders sitting at the top of hierarchical organizations. They are born in the trenches of battle, during preparation, and in the crucible of trials and tribulations. These theories are hard-won, requiring their creators to pay the price for every mistake and lesson with their blood and suffering. The failures are costly, but they are often more enriching to the movement than victory, as they combine experience with the experienced. If one remains steadfast and determined, these*

failures form the groundwork for the decisive victory to come, God willing.

"Abandon the blasphemous democracy and join the caravan of jihad to achieve the Islamic caliphate."

With the collapse of **Najibullah's Soviet-backed government** and the subsequent developments in the Afghan jihad—particularly the infighting among warlords—**Abu Khalid al-Suri** returned to **Turkey** in mid-1992, spending a few months there before moving to **Spain**, where his longtime companion **Abu Musab al-Suri** was residing. He stayed in Spain until mid-1994, after which he returned to Turkey, while Abu Musab moved to **London** to collaborate with the "**London Cell**" of Algerian jihadists. This group published the "**Al-Ansar Bulletin**", which supported the **Armed Islamic Group (GIA)** in Algeria and other jihadist factions, operating from the British capital.

During his more than two years in Spain, **Abu Khalid** fully embraced Abu Musab's views and ideas. After returning to **Turkey**, he maintained a close connection with Abu Musab and regularly traveled between **London and Istanbul**, which allowed him to stay well-informed about developments in **Algeria**. However, ideological disputes emerged between them regarding the

Algerian jihad, culminating in debates that led to a doctrinal **break** and accusations of **takfir**.

By late 1997, both Abu Musab and Abu Khalid returned to **Afghanistan**, one year after the **Taliban** came to power. Their earlier connections with **Osama bin Laden** deepened, and Abu Khalid served for a period as **bin Laden's personal escort**. While in **London**, they had leveraged their ties with Western media, facilitating a notable **CNN interview** with bin Laden in late 1997. Through Abu Musab's former classmate, **Tayseer Allouni**, they arranged for him to work as a journalist in Afghanistan. This opened the door for **CNN** and **Al Jazeera** to acquire licenses to operate in Kabul.

In Afghanistan, Abu Khalid and Abu Musab became involved in **military and religious training**, pledging allegiance to **Mullah Omar** and the **Taliban emirate**. They helped establish the "**Camp of Strangers**" in coordination with the emirate's Ministry of Defense. However, after the **United States and its allies declared war on the Taliban** in October 2001, Abu Khalid and Abu Musab withdrew to **Pakistan** under mounting pressure and heavy losses among the "**Arab Afghans**." According to Abu Musab, **75% of the fighters** were either killed or captured during this period.

In Pakistan, U.S. forces arrested Abu Musab on May 5, 2005, and his companion Abu Khalid was also arrested on November 3, 2005, in Pakistan. They were imprisoned in Pakistani facilities to extract important information about Al-Qaïda. Abu Musab spent a year in Pakistani prisons before being transferred in early 2006 to Diego Garcia (under British control) and then handed over to Syrian authorities. Abu Khalid, meanwhile, was handed over to Syrian authorities as part of security coordination at the time.

Abu Musab was held in intelligence branches in Damascus and Aleppo until all news of him disappeared. At the same time, Abu Khalid al-Suri was incarcerated in Sednaya Military Prison, where he spent over seven years. This period allowed him to communicate and coordinate with jihadist groups within the prison. He was summoned to trial in late November 2011 on charges of affiliation with Al-Qaïda. While denying direct ties to the organization, he admitted to being connected with the Taliban, which occasionally fought factions of the Arab Afghans.

He was sentenced to seven years (which he had effectively served) and was released by Syrian authorities following a presidential amnesty issued in May 2011 that resulted in the release of key

jihadist detainees from prison. Although the release of Abu Musab al-Suri was announced at the same time, no confirmation of this could be obtained. Foreign media announced his release twice in 2012, but the evidence available indicates that he remained in an intelligence facility, isolated from the world, for five years.

Abu Khalid al-Suri was released on December 17, 2011, and began reconnecting with the “Sednaya Group,” which he found to be the most capable faction at combining jihadist, social, and religious work. He provided his expertise to the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (Ahrar al-Sham Movement) and served as a theoretical and organizational link between the group and Al-Qaïda. His network of ties with Gulf-based Salafi jihadists secured significant financial, media, and humanitarian support for the movement, not to mention attracting a large number of foreign fighters to Syria.

He also communicated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and exerted efforts to prevent conflict between factions he viewed as sharing the same ideological foundation. Ayman al-Zawahiri tasked him with mediating between the two groups. However, Abu Khalid declined to join Jabhat al-Nusra and distanced himself from ISIS, focusing his efforts on strengthening the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham.

According to one of its leaders, he formally joined the movement at the end of 2012.

He began training its fighters in training centers in western rural Aleppo, where he adopted a new nom de guerre, **Abu Umeir al-Shami**, in honor of a Salafi sheikh from Qatar who had supported him during periods of persecution. Starting in early 2013, he assumed the role of emir for Harakat Ahrar al-Sham in Aleppo.

On February 23, 2014, Abu Khalid al-Suri was killed in a **martyrdom operation** involving five suicide bombers. While evidence strongly pointed to ISIS as the perpetrator of the attack, the group denied responsibility.

Abu Firas al-Suri

The third prominent figure emerging from the militant wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, who came from Yemen to assume the role of official spokesperson for **Jabhat al-Nusra** in 2013, is Abu Firas al-Suri (*Ridwan Mahmoud Nammous*).

Born in Madaya in the Damascus countryside in 1950, Ridwan Nammous joined the Military Academy and graduated with the rank of lieutenant. He was dismissed from the military following the artillery massacre in the Ramouseh district of Aleppo in 1979. Subsequently, he became involved

in training the fighters of the Combatant Vanguard, to which he had belonged since 1977.

He participated in several military operations until 1980, when he left for Jordan. After facing harassment from Jordanian authorities, he was redirected to Afghanistan in 1981, becoming one of the first Syrians to join the Arab Afghans. During his final months in Jordan, he focused on studying Wahhabism and its overlaps with the ideology of the Combatant Vanguard. Early on, he conducted several studies addressing the concept of disbelief (kufr) in Islam and the stance on "heretical Islamic sects" based on early fatwas and opinions from pre-Ghazali scholars to post-Ibn Taymiyyah thinkers.

In Afghanistan, he conducted multiple military training courses for both Afghans and Arabs arriving to fight the Soviet occupation. In 1983, he met Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden. Alongside Abu Ibrahim al-Iraqi, he established the **Military Oversight and Coordination Committee** with the leader of the Afghan Islamic Party, **Gulbuddin Hekmatyar**, aimed at controlling the Afghan capital, KAbul.

He was also involved in founding **Lashkar-e-Taiba**, a group trained under his supervision and funded by Osama bin Laden, led by Zaki-ur-Rehman. This group played a significant role in strengthening the

Salafi-jihadist movement within the Kashmiri resistance, overshadowing the **Popular Front for the Liberation of Jammu and Kashmir**, with strong backing from Pakistani intelligence and the government. The government implemented sharia law in Azad Kashmir under General Zia-ul-Haq's policies in a Kashmiri adaptation of Pakistan's legal reforms.

During the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Abu Firas played a role in securing the families of Arab Afghans, who were sometimes sold by tribes and brokers for as little as \$100 to U.S. forces, who would then detain them at Bagram and Guantanamo Bay.

He moved to Yemen in 2003 and followed the Syrian events from there. From March 2011 onward, he wrote under his real name for Islamic, including Brotherhood-affiliated, platforms and publications. His writings focused on discrediting civil leaders of the Syrian popular movement, accusing them of being agents for the Syrian regime or the West. Since I was among the first to write an article (1,200 words) on this issue, I am attaching his views to this research to avoid introducing any subjective bias into the analysis.

Abu Firas al-Suri remained in Yemen, as noted by Jabhat al-Nusra sources, until his return to the

Levant in early 2013, following the conflict between al-Nusra and ISIS. Together with Sheikh Abu Khalid al-Suri, he attempted to mediate and reconcile the factions, but their efforts were met with resistance and rejection by ISIS.

He officially joined **Al-Qaïda's Syrian branch**, represented by Jabhat al-Nusra, as part of the reorganization that followed the Shuhail battle against ISIS. This restructuring diminished the influence of individuals with Iraqi connections (such as Abu Maria al-Qahtani, Abu Hassan al-Kuwaiti/Yusuf al-Arjani, and Mazhar al-Wais) while bolstering the role of Syrian leaders, particularly those associated with Sednaya prison, like Abu Malik al-Talli, Abu Umar Saraqib, and others.

Abu Firas al-Suri entered the fields of writing and issuing religious verdicts (fatwas) based on his experience with the "Combatant Vanguard" group, which emphasized the necessity of focusing on the takfiri (excommunication) nature of the Alawite sect, considering confrontation with them as an integral part of the broader battle against the regime. The regime was deemed Nusayri (a derogatory term for Alawites), secular, and hostile to Islam. He authored dozens of texts illustrating the consensus among Sunni scholars regarding the excommunication of the Nusayris. Since joining the Arab Afghans, he

consistently paired Al-Qaïda's fight against "Crusaders and Jews" with a campaign against the Nusayris. This perspective can be traced through his personal website, <http://ardalrebat.blogspot.no>, where his writings and discussions are archived.

Abu Firas al-Suri defended **Jabhat al-Nusra** and Al-Qaïda within a broader defense of jihad in the Levant. His unwavering support for Al-Qaïda was evident in his articles, in which he attacked anyone who criticized or, as he frequently stated, "betrayed" it. One of his most illustrative articles is titled *"How Beautiful Their Impact on People, and How Ugly People's Impact on Them."*

Before returning to Syria, his first public stance as part of Jabhat al-Nusra was in his article *"The Remote's Devils."* In this piece, he attacked, with insults and accusations, all who criticized Abu Mohammad al-Joulani's allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaïda, including members of the National Council and the Syrian National Coalition. In this article, he wrote:

"A statement from the remote devils condemns the pledge of allegiance by Jabhat al-Nusra to the leader of Al-Qaïda, describing it as (religiously reprehensible, rationally unacceptable, an usurpation of the Syrian people's will, and a hijacking of their thoughts and destiny). What

religion are they talking about? The religion of Satan? Where is their evidence?"

France gathered its agents and appointed the secular communist apostate Burhan Ghalioun without consulting the mujahideen and those who are sacrificing their blood, nor the oppressed people on whose behalf the deceivers speak.

The "remote devils," whether turbaned or necktied, remained silent — like the monkeys of Luxor in Egypt: we did not hear, we did not see, we did not speak. They did not say that this was "something religiously denounced and rationally rejected, an encroachment upon all the people of al-Sham, and a confiscation of their thought and destiny."

Then they chose Abdul Basit Sida, the Swedish secular communist, while the "remote devils" remained silent — silent as the dead.

Then they brought the "Crusader Christian Frenchman" George Sabra, who swore allegiance to France when he was granted French citizenship. This happened with the blessing of the bankrupt Brotherhood, without consulting the mujahideen or the people. Meanwhile, the "remote devils" were either silent, approving, or justifying it as a sign of lofty secular national spirit. And the "remote devils" did not say that this was "something religiously

denounced and rationally rejected, an encroachment upon all the people of al-Sham, and a confiscation of their thought and destiny.”

Then America came and pulled from the garbage of the agents’ archives Moaz al-Khatib, appointing him as head of the coalition, assisted by the secularist Riad Seif and the Baathist Suheir al-Atassi.

The “remote devils” began cheering, chanting, supporting, and inventing heroics for al-Khatib, who had been an employee of Bashar’s propaganda apparatus. Al-Khatib joined in with them and declared “no” to dialogue with the client regime — one of four “no’s.”

Then America pressured the remote-control devils, and the “no’s” turned into “yeses.” He unilaterally announced dialogue with the heretical regime and accepted Iran and Russia to oversee the talks.

Then an American Sufi-like ecstasy overtook him, and he stood, proclaiming to his beloved America: yes, yes twice, yes many times! From that time on, he knew “no” only against the mujahideen — he declared “no” to the fighters.

Glory be to the One who made “no” into “yes” and “yes” into “no.”

And the “remote devils” continue to support, defend, justify, and polish the worn-out shoes that no amount of dye or polish can restore — and they still have not said that this was “something religiously denounced and rationally rejected, an encroachment upon all the people of al-Sham, and a confiscation of their thought and destiny.”⁸³.

Death of Abu Firas al-Suri Abu Firas al-Suri was killed in an airstrike conducted by the International Coalition in Idlib province on April 3, 2016. The attack claimed his life along with his son and at least 20 others, including members of Jabhat al-Nusra, Jund al-Aqsa, and Uzbek nationals.

Legacy and Connections to the Combatant Vanguard Within the broader context of figures originating from the "Combatant Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood," the name **Abu Basir al-Tartusi** stands out. Like others before him, Abu Basir carried the bitterness of youthful failure into the jihadist movement, leaving a notable imprint on his writings, opinions, and military positions.

Abu Basir al-Tartusi

Abdul Munim Mustafa Halima, known as Abu Basir al-Tartusi, was born in Tartus on October 3, 1959.

⁸³ <https://bahrainforums.com/vb/%c7%e1%da%d1%c8-%e6%c7%e1%e3/1064452.htm>

He was arrested in 1976, at the age of 17, for writing "jihadist" slogans on the walls of Tartus. Abu Basir participated in the armed activities of the Combatant Vanguard under the leadership of Adnan Aqla. By 1980, pressure on his group had intensified, leading him to seek refuge in Jordan.

Jordan served as a brief stopover before he moved to Iraq, then Pakistan, and later Afghanistan in 1981. In Peshawar, he met Abdullah Azzam and accompanied him on a "jihadist" journey to Afghanistan. During this time, jihadists would often leave Afghanistan for breaks and later return.

In the mid-1980s, Abu Basir returned to Jordan, and by 1987, he became a neighbor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the "Muasoom" neighborhood of Zarqa. In one of his books, Abu Basir recounts:

"Abu Musab's house was just tens of meters away from mine. During the early days of his commitment, he found solace in me and some of my books. He often consulted me on many issues."

In Jordan, he published several books, but the Jordanian intelligence services imposed restrictions, requiring him to pass his writings through the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and then the intelligence before publication. Defying these instructions, he

published the book *"Rules of Excommunication"* on July 13, 1994. This act led to his deportation.

Abu Basir then moved to Yemen, where he lived for about three years before being arrested and expelled. He briefly stayed in Malaysia and Thailand before eventually settling in Britain. He described Britain, a "land of unbelievers," as offering him the freedom to preach Islam—a liberty denied in "Muslim lands ruled by infidel leaders."

In April 2012, after 30 years of exile, Abu Basir returned to Syria but continued traveling between Britain and Turkey.

Ideological Stances

Over the 20 years leading up to March 18, 2011, Abu Basir issued numerous fatwas and opinions. He criticized the *Sururiyya* movement, Sheikh Safar al-Hawali, and the ideological revisions of Egyptian Islamist groups. He consistently argued that jihad was not limited to Islamic countries under occupation or facing aggression but was necessary in any country not ruled by Islamic law.

In 2007, he defended the method of using bombings, though he exhibited contradictions concerning the Syrian issue. While asserting that:

"The Syrian regime is eager to push the Syrian people into a violent and armed confrontation because violence is the only arena where the regime excels."

He simultaneously called for the establishment of jihadist security committees by the fifth month of the Syrian uprising. A recurring theme in his rhetoric was the conviction that the "evil of the sectarian regime can only be eradicated through force."

Position on Saudi Arabia

Abu Basir became known in the 1990s for issuing fatwas excommunicating the Saudi royal family. However, he also praised them at times, such as when Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal withdrew from the "Friends of Syria" conference in Tunisia. Yet, he later criticized them for their stance on Egypt after the ousting of Mohamed Morsi.

In interviews with *Al-Hiwar* TV, Abu Basir accused the Saudi regime of being insincere to the teachings of Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, saying:

"The Al Saud family has often deviated from Wahhabism for their political interests. If they adhered to the true Wahhabi methodology, it would benefit both them and the nation."

In a long article titled "Yes, I Am a Wahhabi," he proudly declared his Wahhabi identity, saying:

"Despite my aversion to modern labels that divide Muslims, I proudly announce that I am a Wahhabi and that I hold deep admiration for Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his call to Islam."

Views on the Syrian Revolution

From the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Abu Basir sought to revive the Combatant Vanguard's discourse, emphasizing the excommunication of the Alawite sect and its role, alongside the regime, in Syria's plight. In late March 2011, shortly after the uprising began, he wrote:

"What most threatens the existence of the Syrian sectarian Qarmatian regime and accelerates its downfall is a deep focus on its sectarian nature."

He argued that fighting the Alawite sect was as important as opposing the regime itself, saying:

"Fighting this ruling Alawite sect in Syria, under the guise of the infidel Baath Party, is an obligation supported by the Quran, Sunnah, and the consensus of Islamic scholars. This jihad, in my view, takes precedence over the jihad against Jews and Christians. Syria will not reclaim its promised

leading role or escape its current humiliation without jihad against this cursed infidel sect represented by the sectarian Baathist regime."

He further declared that the Syrian revolution aimed to topple three entities: the Syrian sectarian regime, the Iranian "Rafidite" regime and its influence in Syria and the region, and the Lebanese "Rafidite" Hezbollah. During this period, he propagated the claim that *"Hezbollah is aiding in the killing of Syrian protesters."*

When opposition figure Haytham Manna stated on March 23, 2011, that *"Syrian security forces, not Hezbollah or any other foreign party, fired on protesters in Daraa on March 18-19,"* Abu Basir responded with harsh rebukes.

On March 20, 2011, Abu Basir al-Tartusi created a Facebook page called **"Islamic Opposition to the Syrian Regime"**, which he personally managed. He issued a fatwa declaring it obligatory for Syrians to **"withhold taxes and utility payments until the regime falls"** and advocated for disrupting education with the slogan: **"No schooling or teaching until the president is overthrown."**

Abu Basir was among the first to call for the formation of **jihadist security committees** to protect protesters, seeking to take over the

coordinating committees across Syria. He was a staunch advocate for the establishment of a **"revolutionary military force"** on the ground, stating: **"They wanted it to be a Gandhian peaceful revolution, but God has willed for it to be jihad in His path."**

He heavily criticized Haytham Manna, referring to him in his writings (notably in *The Notebook of the Revolution and Revolutionaries*) as: **"The malicious, godless communist opportunist riding the wave of opposition."**

He directed similar criticism at Burhan Ghalioun in the same work, describing him as: **"A secularist, godless, eradicationist elitist whose greatest enemy is Islam and the Islamists. A French-made puppet lacking a history of real struggle."**

Abu Basir supported foreign military intervention in Syria, considering it beneficial, but stated: **"Before that happens, a military force must be formed on the ground."**

He also issued a fatwa permitting foreign intervention in Libya, contradicting an earlier fatwa in which he declared: **"Any Muslim who aligns themselves with unbelieving polytheists against Islam leaves the fold of Islam."**

Dual Role in the Revolution

Abu Basir pursued two main tracks during the Syrian revolution:

1. **Issuing Fatwas**
2. **Building support for jihad**—primarily reaching out to Salafists in Kuwait and other supporters to secure material and moral backing in preparation for the "jihadist phase" of the revolution.

In 2014, a jihadist source told the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar*: **"The role he played was crucial in securing support for the mujahideen."**

Entry into Syria and Military Involvement

In April 2012, Abu Basir decided it was time to **"embark on jihad"** and traveled to Turkey. There, he held several meetings with **"friends supporting jihad,"** according to sources, before crossing the border into Syria. Once inside, he founded the **"Islamic Dawn Movement"** in the Idlib countryside, which later expanded its operations to Aleppo.

He played a key role in establishing the **"Liwa al-Haqq" (Brigade of Truth)** in Homs. These two factions—Liwa al-Haqq and the Islamic Dawn Movement—eventually became central allies of the **Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement**.

Strategy of Islamizing Rebel Factions

Abu Basir focused on **"Islamizing" the fighting brigades of the Free Syrian Army**. To achieve this, he maintained a conciliatory stance toward the Muslim Brotherhood and used their platforms wherever possible. His goal was to expand an Islamic coalition among the fighters while progressively marginalizing non-Islamic factions.

He leveraged his **Afghan connections** to build a network that supported his strategy of aligning rebel groups under an Islamic framework.

Before 2011, Abu Basir al-Tartusi's **takfiri fatwas** (excommunication rulings) were broad in scope and numerous in victims. Among them were fatwas declaring the **apostasy of Yusuf al-Qaradawi**, criticisms of Kuwaiti Salafist Sheikh Hamid al-Ali, and attacks on Hamas, which he accused of **"opening the door to Shi'ism in Palestine."**

However, after March 18, 2011, he became more adept at crafting fatwas aligned with the prevailing political context. He frequently used his platforms to express gratitude to **"friends and supporters of jihad"**, including Erdogan's Turkey, **"the free and honorable people of Kuwait,"** and media outlets like Al-Jazeera and Wesal TV.

At the same time, he continued to attack various figures and entities, including:

- **Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb**, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, whom he called **"the misguided Sheikh."**
- **Sheikh Salah Abu Arafa**, Imam of Al-Aqsa Mosque.
- The residents of Aleppo, whom he criticized on multiple occasions.
- Anyone advocating for limiting the revolution to **peaceful options**, which he opposed vehemently.

In 2011 and 2012, he dedicated several of his posts to attacking secularism, reiterating his prohibition of democracy, stating: **"Any act that elevates a creature to the level of legislator (...) cannot be accepted or participated in under any circumstances, as it constitutes polytheism."**

A Stance Against "Martyrdom Operations"

Abu Basir held a unique and longstanding position on so-called **"martyrdom operations,"** often dismissing them as **"insignificant acts of suicide."**

Early Criticism of ISIS

He was among the earliest members of the **“Fighting Vanguard”** to warn against ISIS, describing them as **“extremist, coarse Khawarij (renegades)”** and stating in an interview on London’s Al-Hiwar channel: **“They are more dangerous to Islam and Muslims than the Khawarij of old, who excommunicated people for major sins. These people excommunicate for good deeds.”**

Divergence in Stance Toward the Free Syrian Army

Unlike Abu Faras al-Suri, Abu Basir maintained a **supportive stance toward Free Syrian Army fighters**, <http://www.Abubaseer.bizland.com/> while opposing their political representatives. He viewed fighters as **servants of jihad** who could potentially be won over to the project of establishing **God’s rule on earth**. Conversely, he saw political actors as **carriers of un-Islamic projects** that posed a threat to both jihad and the nation.

Criticism of Jabhat al-Nusra

Abu Basir’s position also diverged from other former members of the **Fighting Vanguard** due to his strong criticism of Jabhat al-Nusra. For instance, in

a tweet on April 12, 2015, he stated: **“The name of Al-Qaïda and the ‘Al-Qaïda-ization’ of the Syrian revolution strengthen the tyrant and the criminal of Syria by giving them additional power and life from global and regional powers.”**

He also criticized Al-Qaïda’s overall project as: **“A project of confrontation. It lacks the vision for a state, foundation, construction, and development.”**

Temporary Conclusions

An analysis of the various figures descending from the **“Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood”** and their positions on the Syrian situation reveals, first and foremost, that this organization—its structure, program, and membership—has devolved into nothing more than an early jihadist experiment. Its members take pride in being pioneers in the field. Their actions and writings broadly contribute to what they call **“global jihad.”**

There is no doubt that a strong **Shami (levant) fanaticism sentiment** is evident among all its key figures. This is reflected in their repeated assertions such as:

- **“If the people of Sham are corrupted, then there is no hope for you.”**

- “The good resides in Sham.”
- “The caliphate will return from the land of Sham.”
- “The children of Sham are more knowledgeable than ISIS.”
- “We in Sham had the honor of being the pioneers of jihad.”

While it is easy to find statements, fatwas, and strong criticisms in their writings targeting the Saudi government and religious figures in the kingdom—whether in support or opposition—as well as toward the governments of the UAE and Kuwait, there is a notable absence of any criticism of **Qatar** or its Salafi or jihadist figures, especially since the militarization of the popular uprising in Syria. On the contrary, connections were actively maintained, particularly through Syrian journalists with close ties to the Afghan jihad experience.

It is undeniable that the key figures of this group, each in their own way, have been highly successful in **strengthening and reinforcing sectarian rhetoric** within the global jihadist movement. They have also made significant efforts to establish an **extremist exclusionary, and sectarian approach** among Syria's armed Islamic factions. This was facilitated by several factors:

1. **The Wahhabi discourse** charged with hostility toward all dissenters.
2. **The direct intervention of Shiite armed factions** in support of the Syrian regime.
3. **Mutual media incitement campaigns** between Sunni and Shiite hate channels that proliferated like wildfire.

A review of the websites of groups such as “**Ahrar al-Sham**” and “**The Islamic Front**” (up until the Geneva III negotiations, which led to a shift toward a more regionalized and moderated media discourse for Ahrar al-Sham) demonstrates the depth of this sectarian entrenchment. This extends to factions outside these alliances—not just ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra on one side, but also Shiite sectarian groups like “**Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas**” and others on the opposing side. These platforms reveal the **degradation of consciousness** within all factions that perceive their 21st-century battles as extensions of ancient conflicts. These belated vendettas assault reason, life, the Quranic principle of human dignity, and the higher values of freedom and citizenship.

This **pathological sectarianism** has plunged nations and peoples into a new kind of violence—one that combines backwardness, insularity, and a

fixation on annihilation. It justifies death and killing as ends in themselves. Although it has exploded most visibly in the Eastern Mediterranean, this phenomenon is not regionally unique. As **Eric Hobsbawm** noted over a century ago:

“Another cause of unrestrained violence, which is even more dangerous, is the belief in the absolute justice of one’s own cause and the utter nonsense of others. Since 1914, this belief has dominated both international and domestic conflicts. It makes using every means to achieve victory or avoid defeat not just legitimate but necessary. This mindset provides both states and armed groups with a moral justification for barbarity.” (6)

Notes

1. For those who wish to delve deeper into this period, refer to the book: **Haytham Manna, *Salafism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Human Rights***, Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights and other editions, 2004.
2. **Ayman Al-Shurbaji, *Memoirs of the Fighting Vanguard in Syria***, p. 32, electronic edition. The series of assassinations included:
 - Colonel Ali Mahna, Deputy Chief of Military Intelligence in Aleppo, December 1976.
 - Brigadier General Abdul Karim Al-Razzouk, Commander of the Missile Corps in Damascus, June 1977.
 - Dr. Ali bin Abdul Ali, Professor of Agriculture at the University of Aleppo and Head of the Agricultural Research Center in Aleppo, November 1977.
 - Dr. Ibrahim Naamah, Head of the Syrian Dentists' Syndicate in Damascus, March 1978.
 - Colonel Ahmad Khalil, Director of Officer Affairs at the Ministry of Interior in Damascus, August 1978.

3. On **August 11, 2012**, a video was released announcing the rebirth of the "**Fighting Vanguard**" organization. It declared the group's return to Aleppo and its countryside, stating that the organization consisted of brigades named after leaders of the Vanguard from the 1970s and 1980s, including:
 - Marwan Hadid Brigade
 - Adnan Uqla Brigade
 - Ibrahim Mangani Brigade
 - Hosni Aabo Brigade
 - Ayman Barbari Brigade
4. **Adnan Uqla** was born on January 5, 1951, in the village of **Khisfin**, a village in the Golan. He grew up and completed his secondary and university studies in Aleppo. He was active in Islamic cells at Aleppo University, from which he graduated as an architect. After the initial leadership of the Fighting Vanguard was killed, he assumed leadership responsibilities. He was arrested in an ambush while attempting to return to Syria in 1983 and has been missing since then.
5. Reference link: [Bahrain Forums](#)

6. **Eric Hobsbawm**, *Globalization, Democracy, and Terrorism*, Arab Scientific Publishers, 2007, p. 108.

It is important to review prior articles on this subject, such as:

- **Abdul Rahman Al-Haj**, in *Al-Hayat* newspaper, Thursday, February 27, 2014.
- **Georges Malbrunot**, *Al-Qaïda in Syria Following the Killing of Abu Khaled Al-Suri*, Wednesday, April 23, 2014.
- **Sohaib Anjarini**, in *Al-Akhbar*, Tuesday, March 4, 2014.
- Two articles by **Tariq Aziza** on *Syrian Jihad* in *Al-Akhbar*, September 2 and September 12, 2013.

Jabhat Al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham?

Among the most secretive and enigmatic jihadist movements is **Ahrar al-Sham**. This institutional secrecy came at a great cost when a single operation wiped out many of its key founders and leaders, including its emir, Hassan Abboud (Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi).

Hassan Abboud, known for his organizational dedication and financial modesty, held a vision that distinguished him from his counterparts during their imprisonment in **Saidnaya Prison**. According to a fellow detainee who shared the prison and stayed in contact with him until just before the operation that claimed his life:

"Abu Abdullah combined Salafi-jihadist ideology with organizational intellect. This gave him a natural sense of superiority over his peers, enabling him to act as a guide for the movement, shaping its policies and organizing its military operations. And I can't forget his comments on the relationship between Ahrar, Al-Nusra, Al-Baghdadi, and the Free Syrian Army:

"We organized ourselves before what is called the Free Syrian Army even existed, and we fought before Al-Qaïda. The Free Syrian Army was under the command of international and regional operation rooms. Al-Nusra was established under orders from Al-Baghdadi, then split from him and pledged allegiance to al-Zawahiri. Our pledge, however, came from the people of al-Sham and their Muslim supporters worldwide. We don't need to be under anyone's umbrella."

This perspective—treating Ahrar as an equal to other groups—led Al-Qaïda to ensure early on that some of its operatives were embedded within Ahrar al-Sham, and they succeeded. Despite the catastrophic **September 9, 2014** attack that killed Hassan Abud along with Abu Yazan al-Shami, Abu Talha al-Makhzumi, Abu Abdul-Malik al-Shar'i, Abu Ayman Ram Hamdan (military commander), Muhi al-Din al-Shami (Abud's deputy), Abu Hamza, Abu Ayman al-Hamawi, Abu Sariyah al-Shami, Abu Yusuf Binnish, Talal al-Ahmad Tamam, and Abu al-Zubair al-Hamawi, the movement remained intact. The attack allowed factions affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey to enter the leadership structure more prominently, but it did not fundamentally alter Ahrar's relationships with non-Syrian operatives until much later. Internal

estimates suggest that at its peak, there were around **800 Saudi fighters** within the group, though this number declined sharply as Nusra and ISIS gained prominence, with many joining these two groups or dying in combat.

Ahrar al-Sham and Foreign Fighters

Ahrar al-Sham was one of the first factions to welcome foreign fighters during the early months of the Syrian conflict, even before the emergence of **Jabhat al-Nusra** and **ISIS**. The presence of Saudis and other foreign fighters within Ahrar al-Sham is shrouded in extreme secrecy. These fighters are subject to stringent measures to ensure their identities and nationalities remain hidden, and they are typically only identified after their deaths.

Contrary to popular belief, foreign fighters within Ahrar al-Sham are not limited to roles in training and advising; they often assume leadership positions within the movement, whether in its military, judicial, or religious branches. They are also frequently relied upon for conducting **infiltration operations** or **suicide attacks**.

Notable Saudi Figures in Ahrar al-Sham

1. **Sheikh Othman al-Nazih** – Initially a prominent member of Ahrar al-Sham, he defected to ISIS, where he became the head

of the Education Bureau before being killed in the Battle of Kobani.

2. **Abu Mahmoud al-Jazrawi** – Serves as the "religious emir" in the city of Azaz, north of Aleppo.
3. **Abu Mansour al-Jazrawi** – Holds a military leadership position in Handarat, north of Aleppo.
4. **Abdullah al-Najdi** – Occupies a key religious position.
5. **Al-Battar al-Najdi** – A prominent figure on social media and one of the group's well-known leaders on platforms like Twitter.
6. **Abu Ubaida al-Jazrawi** – A senior leader involved in various religious and media-related roles.
7. **Sheikh Musleh al-Alyani** – Although he presents himself as an independent cleric unaffiliated with any faction, he is closely linked to Ahrar al-Sham. He was seen in a video in rural Latakia, inciting Ahrar al-Sham fighters before they launched rocket attacks on civilians in the city of Latakia.

One of the most prominent training camps for Saudi fighters in Syria was the '**Aaqidi al-Azm**' camp in

northern rural Homs. This camp provided military training programs and religious indoctrination courses similar to those conducted by **Jabhat al-Nusra** and **ISIS** camps. Additionally, many foreign fighters trained at camps established by the Saudi cleric **Abdullah al-Muhaysini** were assigned to **Ahrar al-Sham**. The most notable of these camps include **al-Farouq**, **al-Battar**, and **al-Ghurabaa**.

Ahrar al-Sham adopted the tradition established by Al-Qaïda regarding the pseudonyms of Saudi fighters, using terms like “**al-Jazrawi**” or “**al-Najdi**” to indicate a Saudi fighter. This nomenclature reflects a rejection of the legitimacy of the Saudi ruling family and their use of the family name for the country.

Prominent Saudi Fighters Killed in Action

Dozens of Saudi fighters serving in Ahrar al-Sham were killed in the past year alone (2013 – 2014). Among the most notable were:

1. **Mohammed al-Tuwaijri** – Military sector commander in rural Idlib and a military leader in the "Liwa Ahfad Ali."
2. **Abdulrahman al-Khudair (Abu Badr al-Najdi)** – Killed in the battle of Al-Fu'ah.

3. **Ibrahim al-Yahya (Abu Saleh al-Najdi)** – A prominent religious leader in "Liwa Ahfad Ali," killed in southern Idlib.
4. **Abu Musab al-Jazrawi (Khalid al-Bargi)** – Killed in a suicide attack on a Sarmaniyah checkpoint.
5. **Abu Hamza al-Najdi (Hani Abdulkarim al-Lahham)** – A commander in the "Katibat al-Furqan."
6. **Abu Usayd al-Jazrawi** – Killed by Jabhat al-Nusra in rural Idlib due to a dispute over a checkpoint.

These are just a few examples, as the full list of Saudi fighters killed is extensive.

Ahrar al-Sham also facilitates suicide operations for Saudi fighters, even if they belong to other factions. For example, **Eid al-Otaibi (Abu Salem al-Ruqi)**, a member of Jabhat al-Nusra, carried out a suicide bombing in Sahl al-Ghab, rural Hama, in April 2015 using a car bomb prepared and funded by Ahrar al-Sham.

The importance of foreign fighters within Ahrar al-Sham cannot be overstated. Abu Azzam al-Ansari, a member of the group's Shura Council, emphasized the movement's intention to grant citizenship to

these fighters and ensure they are not prosecuted in any other country.

Notes on the Islamic Front in Syria

Former U.S. Ambassador to Damascus and Syrian affairs official at the State Department, **Robert Ford**, traveled from Istanbul to Antakya to meet with the **Islamic Front** just days after its formation. The meeting included leaders representing their respective factions as a prelude to an official meeting under the name "the Front," lasting several hours.

One of the key reasons for the political and media attention surrounding this nascent coalition, unprecedented for any group in Syria since the crisis began, was its emergence at a time when the **Free Syrian Army (FSA)** was losing its prominence and effectiveness. Significant regional and international efforts had been invested in the FSA to position it as the primary representative and leader of the armed opposition against the Syrian regime. However, the FSA's leadership, despite adopting rhetoric favorable to the "Friends of the Syrian People" coalition, had limited control over operations. Instead, it found itself following the lead of groups like **Jabhat al-Nusra** and **ISIS**, often conceding to joint operations and indirectly funneling arms to extremists via factions within its

leadership in areas such as Aleppo, Idlib, Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, northern Latakia, and the Qalamoun region.

FSA leadership was unable to maintain its dominance for long, in the face of the rise of various Islamist organizations, which—rooted in **Salafi** and **Muslim Brotherhood** ideologies—were integral to the FSA's composition. In response, Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish intelligence agencies organized the third major coordination effort among jihadist Salafi forces, following the failure of two prior attempts:

1. **The Syrian Islamic Front**, which included **Ahrar al-Sham**, **Liwa al-Haq**, and **Ansar al-Sham**.
2. **The Islamic Liberation Front of Syria**, which included **Liwa al-Tawhid**, **Jaish al-Islam**, and **Suqour al-Sham**.

Formation of the Islamic Front

The **Islamic Front** was officially established on **November 22, 2013**, as a coalition of factions with a predominantly Islamic identity, its key components included:

- **Ahrar al-Sham**
- **Jaish al-Islam**

- **Liwa al-Tawhid**
- **Suqour al-Sham**
- **Liwa al-Haq**
- **Ansar al-Sham**
- **The Kurdish Islamic Front**
- **Liwa al-Iman**
- **The Islamic Dawn Movement**

The merger of these factions highlighted the dominance of the **Syrian Islamic Front** over the **Islamic Liberation Front**, as the newly formed **Islamic Front** closely resembled the former in both form and substance.

Ahrar al-Sham played a central role as the backbone and primary architect of the **Syrian Islamic Front**, founded on **December 22, 2012**. Notably, the newly formed **Islamic Front** adopted the same name but omitted the term "Syrian," reflecting broader ambitions. This deliberate omission indicated aspirations for a **regional or even global reach**, aiming to establish an Islamic caliphate and combat tyrants worldwide.

The logo of the **Islamic Front** also mirrored that of the **Syrian Islamic Front**, which, in turn, was identical to the emblem of **Ahrar al-Sham**.

In terms of the substance, "Ahrar al-Sham" not only secured the position of the **head of the political bureau** within the Islamic Front, a role held by its leader **Hassan Abboud** (Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi), but also took the post of **Grand Mufti** of the Front. This role was occupied by **Abu al-Abbas al-Shami**, who had also been the Grand Mufti of both **Ahrar al-Sham** and the **Syrian Islamic Front** until September 2014.

"Ahrar al-Sham" openly aligned itself with the **Salafi Jihadist movement**, which advocates "jihad" as a method for change, the implementation of Islamic Sharia, and the rejection of all secular laws, including democracy, elections, and parliaments. Consequently, the Grand Mufti of the newly formed **Islamic Front** would frame its operations based on Salafi-Jihadist principles. This alignment is evident in the **Islamic Front's charter**, which explicitly rejected democracy, secularism, and civil governance, while declaring the establishment of an **Islamic state governed by Sharia** as the coalition's ultimate goal.

Other factions within the Islamic Front lacked the clear and consistent methodology of **Ahrar al-Sham**, often shifting their goals and approaches based on the surrounding circumstances. For example:

1. **Zahrar Alloush**, leader of **Jaish al-Islam**, had signed the charter of the **Ansar al-Islam Gathering** in August 2013, which aimed to establish a "rightly-guided Islamic Caliphate." However, following the creation of **Jaish al-Islam**, Alloush downplayed the demand for a caliphate, stating instead his desire to establish a "state of justice." At other times, he advocated for an Islamic state but distinguished it from the concept of a caliphate.
2. **Ahmad Abu Issa al-Sheikh**, leader of **Suqour al-Sham** and a former prisoner of Saydnaya prison, initially promoted the idea of a **civil state** based on democracy and equality. He even expressed no objection to a Syrian Christian assuming a ministerial position, as evidenced in a leaked video. However, after the formation of the Islamic Front, he fully retracted these statements, even justifying this shift by saying: *"Regarding the video circulated by troublemakers two years after its release, they should understand that times change. What we say today, we might retract tomorrow!"* Abu Issa's faction eventually joined **Ahrar al-Sham**, although he later split from them. Following an attempt by **Jabhat**

Fateh al-Sham to disband Suqour al-Sham, he labeled it "The Front for Criminal Conquest" and re-announced his faction's alliance with Ahrar al-Sham.

3. **Liwa al-Tawhid**, another faction within the **Islamic Liberation Front**, initially championed democracy and civil governance, with rhetoric that resonated with revolutionary ideals. Many perceived the group as the military arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. However, the lack of a specific ideological identity within the faction became evident over time. Despite containing both Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi members, Liwa al-Tawhid's ultimate goals remained ambiguous. Interestingly, **Abu Maria al-Qahtani**, the Sharia official of Jabhat al-Nusra, claimed on Twitter that **Abdul Qader Saleh**, leader of Liwa al-Tawhid, once told him their goal was to establish a "rightly-guided Prophetic Caliphate." This statement, however, had not been publicly expressed by Saleh before.

Controversial Actions

In November 2015, **Zahran Alloush** and **Jaish al-Islam** constructed nearly 100 iron cages, confining Syrian detainees accused of supporting the regime.

This was ostensibly done to deter aerial bombings in areas controlled by his forces. The detainees were grouped based on sectarian and religious affiliations, sparking outrage. Many opposition factions and political figures criticized this act, arguing that it only further tarnished the image of the revolution in the eyes of Arab, global, and even local public opinion. One critic, Raed al-Jundi, described the behavior as " *Alloush's Daesh-like cages*" (*Al-Araby* 21, November 14, 2015).

This incident also fueled suspicions regarding Jaish al-Islam's involvement in the kidnapping of human rights activists, including **Razan Zaitoun** and her colleagues. Critics described Alloush as a "**weak and fragmented leader**" with no vision beyond establishing his own version of oppressive security apparatuses, often compared to the Syrian regime's intelligence officers, as he had his own Islamist versions of 'Jamil Al Hasan' (Head of Air Force Intelligence) and 'Ali Mamlouk' (Head of General and Military Intelligence).

Subsequent developments, including Zahran Alloush's assassination, prompted significant changes within **Jaish al-Islam**, leading to the rise of a faction favoring negotiations and a political solution to the conflict.

The Charter of the Front: Sovereignty Belongs to God

The **Islamic Front's Charter**, in its first article, unequivocally affirms its allegiance to one of the central tenets of Salafi-Jihadist ideology: **the principle of "God's sovereignty"** (*Hakimiyyat Allah*). The charter declares that the front's goal is to: *"Establish an Islamic state where sovereignty belongs solely to the law of Almighty God, serving as the ultimate reference, ruler, guide, and regulator for the actions of the individual, society, and state."*

This ideological orientation is further reinforced by the adoption of the principle of **"Al-Wala wal-Bara"** (*loyalty and disavowal*), which dictates that the state be founded on an Islamic religious basis rather than a nationalist or populist one. Its loyalty is to Islam and Muslims while opposing polytheism and polytheists. The charter envisions a state that implements Islam in its internal policies, ensuring Muslims are empowered and in control of the state's essential structures.

In foreign policy, the front aims to **"raise the word of God and establish a strong global Islamic state,"** one that opposes "illegitimate regimes" (legitimacy, from the Salafi jurisprudential perspective, is limited to either Islamic states governed by Sharia, *dhimmi* states paying the jizya,

or treaty states). This is explicitly stated in **Article 5** of the charter:

"The members of the Front are Muslims whose loyalty is to the religion of God. They are united by jihad for the sake of God and the rejection of oppression and tyranny. Their goal is the implementation of God's law. They take pride in their affiliation with the Islamic Ummah and consider themselves an integral part of it."

Additionally, **Article 14** stipulates that: *"The Front maintains good international relations with all states that do not exhibit hostility toward it, provided that these relations serve its interests and adhere to Sharia principles."* The Sharia principles referenced here align with the previously mentioned concept of *Al-Wala wal-Bara*.

This point shows a convergence with **Al-Qaïda's strategy**, which acknowledges the importance of external factors. A research paper titled *"The Strategy of Regional War in the Land of al-Sham"*—which received considerable attention—states: *"Any local movement that does not take into account the broader sphere, understand how to align with it, and coordinate efforts accordingly will fail to effect change unless God wills otherwise."*

The detailed strategy outlined in the paper emphasizes flexibility, stating: *"Any jihadist force operating in the chaotic Syrian arena, which will witness greater violence and more players, must adopt a flexible strategy to respond to any activity on the ground or to situations imposed by major powers."*

Implicit Ambitions for a Global Caliphate

Though the Islamic Front's Charter does not explicitly declare an aim to establish a **global caliphate**, it may, by contrast, suggest its goal is to build an Islamic state within the recognized borders of Syria. However, several factors suggest that this may be an exercise in **taqiyya** (dissimulation) or camouflage to preserve cohesion among its components, given their diverse affiliations.

The first of these factors is that the charter labels itself as a "Project of an Ummah," a clear indication that the Islamic Front views itself as the legitimate bearer of the Islamic Ummah's project—a project with only one name: the **Islamic Caliphate**. However, the drafters of the charter may have chosen to unveil their broader goals gradually, in line with a phased strategy, as described by Ahmad Abu Issa al-Sheikh. This stepwise approach mirrors the policies embedded in the charter of **Ahrar al-Sham**.

Another factor is that Hassan Abboud, the emir of **Ahrar al-Sham**, stated in an interview with Al-Jazeera on June 13, 2013: *"We long for the day when we can, with our own hands, demolish the walls of Sykes-Picot that were imposed on us. These borders are a reality now, and we do not ignore the reality as it stands, but what we aspire to and hope for is to see this Ummah as a unified entity once again."*

The Islamic Front and Alliances

It is evident that the **Islamic Front's** loyalties were divided based on sources of funding, armament, and the necessities of jihad. Key factions within the front established close ties with the Western trio involved in the Syrian conflict (Britain, France, and the United States). Three of its components had longstanding relationships with former U.S. ambassador **Robert Ford**. Despite benefiting from Gulf-based Salafi financiers, some factions leaned more on **Qatari aid**, while others were the primary beneficiaries of **Saudi support**.

There are indicators of both direct and indirect connections between the newly formed **Islamic Front** and Al-Qaïda's two branches in Syria, reflecting a pattern seen in various other experiences. However, field alliances and

rivalries did not prevent internal disputes, which were expressed in different ways. For example, after the release of ISIS detainees from Iraqi prisons, **Abu al-Abbas al-Shami** tweeted on July 22, 2013: *"I don't know what makes my heart suspicious about the liberation of Iraqi prisons."* In response, pro-ISIS platforms stated: *"Abu al-Abbas should thank God for the humiliation of the Rawafid (Shiites) and the release of the prisoners... But what can we say about someone so fanatically loyal to his party that he's reached the point of extremism for it?"* (from the *Ana al-Muslim* website).

Disputes over funding were another point of contention. While **Abu al-Abbas al-Shami** praised Kuwaiti cleric **Shafi al-Ajmi** (describing him as a supporter of the Islamic project in Bilad al-Sham) for his financial aid to **Ahrar al-Sham**, ISIS supporters derisively referred to Shafi as *"the malicious, slanderous, gossiping Kuwaiti"* and cursed him. **Zahrán Alloush** also joined the conversation, stating: *"Dear brother, we have yet to receive anything from Sheikh Shafi's campaign. To clarify, Sheikh Shafi has not supported Liwa al-Islam with even a single dinar to date"* (June 25, 2013).

The Islamic Front's charter acknowledged the presence of **migrants** (*muhajirun*) fighting in Syria, stating: *"They are brothers who supported us in jihad, and their efforts are appreciated and valued... They share our rights and responsibilities."* However, day by day, it is becoming clear that the situation extends beyond the mere presence of supportive migrants content with appreciation and gratitude.

Evidence suggests that **Ahrar al-Sham**, the central faction within the Islamic Front, began its formation early in the Syrian crisis. This effort accelerated in **May 2011**, following the release of numerous detainees from Sednaya Prison under a general amnesty decree. Among them was the group's "emir," **Hassan Abboud**. At the time, the group operated clandestinely and with extreme secrecy.

Within two and a half years, it became clear that **Ahrar al-Sham** was the first Syrian faction to host **foreign jihadist migrants**. While there is no precise information about the number of migrants who joined, many of them began transferring to **Jabhat al-Nusra** after its establishment in late 2011. This shift created tensions between **Ahrar al-Sham** and **Al-Nusra**, sparking heated debates among jihadists about

the strained relationship between the two factions.

Notably, **Abu Basir al-Tartousi**, one of the most prominent jihadist theorists in the Levant, was an early skeptic of **Jabhat al-Nusra**. For several months, he accused Al-Nusra of dubious intentions, even suggesting it might be a creation of the regime. At that time, **al-Tartousi** was considered one of the primary religious authorities for the **Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement**.

As a result of these tensions between Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, Syria witnessed its first mentions of **"Sahwa" (Awakening) forces**. Ahrar al-Sham was the first group in Syria accused by Al-Nusra—particularly during the period of collaboration between **Baghdadi's ISIS** and Nusra—of being part of a **Sahwa project** aimed against the mujahideen.

Among the **"migrants"** who joined **Ahrar al-Sham**, there were both former and current "mujahideen" from **Al-Qaïda**, including some leaders. While the presence of non-Syrian Al-Qaïda leaders in Islamic Front factions has not been conclusively proven, the involvement of Syrian leaders is well-established. Among the

most notable and enigmatic of these leaders is **Abu Khalid al-Suri**.

Abu Khalid al-Suri, a founding member of **Ahrar al-Sham** who held a leadership position surrounded by secrecy, was also a senior figure in **Al-Qaïda** and a close associate of its late leader, **Osama bin Laden**. He coordinated with Al-Jazeera journalist **Taysir Allouni** and was described by **Ayman al-Zawahiri** as one of "the best we have known and worked with." Al-Zawahiri entrusted Abu Khalid with the task of mediating the dispute between **Abu Mohammad al-Joulani** and **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**. When Zawahiri sent a ruling on the matter, Abu Khalid was the third recipient of the letter, after Al-Joulani and Baghdadi.

In addition to Abu Khalid al-Suri and **Abu Basir al-Tartousi**, another prominent figure was **Abu Maria al-Filistini** (The Palestinian), who was arrested by Jordanian authorities and was revealed to have been a religious leader within **Ahrar al-Sham**. Another noteworthy name was **Abu Mohammad al-Faransi** (The Frenchman), whose prominence came after the incident in **Maskanah**, a town in rural Aleppo. He was found to hold the position of **Grand Mufti** of the **Musab ibn Umair Brigade**, founded by **Abu**

Jabir al-Sheikh. This brigade included non-Syrian fighters who later joined **Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah.**

However, the most significant example of **Ahrar al-Sham's** ties to global jihad—and by extension, the **Islamic Front's** ties—is the **Furqan Brigade**, composed entirely of "migrant jihadists" from various countries around the world.

It is well established that **Ahrar al-Sham** includes a significant faction aligned with **Al-Qaïda**, some members organizationally and others ideologically. This faction has recently managed to dominate decision-making within the group and, consequently, within the **Islamic Front**, sharing influence and leadership within **Jaish al-Fatah** independently of other Islamic Front factions. The close alliance between the Islamic Front and **Jabhat al-Nusra** is evidence of this. Initially, Ahrar al-Sham, like most armed factions, criticized Al-Joulani's pledged allegiance to Zawahiri, viewing it as a service to the Syrian regime. However, following the split between Al-Nusra and ISIS, they had no qualms about allying with Al-Nusra, which they had previously accused of aiding the regime. Ahrar al-Sham justified this by distinguishing between

the extremism of ISIS and Al-Nusra's perceived understanding of Syrian realities.

While **Ahrar al-Sham** presented itself as an "inclusive Islamic movement working to liberate the land, elevate humanity, and build a righteous Islamic society in Syria," its rhetoric and official website used sectarian language. It referred to the Syrian army and its allies as **Shiite militias** and called the **Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)** "gangs" or "militias." Its operations films frequently expressed hostility toward Shiites, Alawites, and Iranians. For example, in a video, Zahran Alloush of the **Islamic Brigade** declared: "Umayyad glory will return to Damascus and the Levant despite you, and the mujahideen of the Levant will cleanse the filth of the Rafidites and Rafidism from the Levant forever, God willing, until they purify the lands of the Levant from the impurity of the Magians." He continued: "The Magians from the Rafidites and Alawites are besieging Ghouta. I give you glad tidings, O filthy Rafidites, that just as the Umayyads crushed your heads in the past, the people of Ghouta and the Levant will crush your heads in the future. They will inflict upon you severe torment in this world before God inflicts it upon you in the afterlife. O filthy Rafidites, you will face what you do not expect."

Regarding ties to **Al-Qaïda**, Alloush, head of the Islamic Front's military council and leader of **Jaish al-Islam**, told *Al-Hayat* newspaper on November 21, 2013: "Jabhat al-Nusra is an Islamic fighting faction operating in Syria. They are brothers, fierce in battle and effective against the enemies. We have fought many battles alongside them and have seen their dedication and good jihad. I personally met with Abu Maria al-Qahtani (Jabhat al-Nusra's Sharia official), and I found no difference between Nusra's Sharia officials and those of Jaish al-Islam. I even said that if we were one faction, Abu Maria would be Jaish al-Islam's Sharia official." He added that he praised Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, whom he described as "concerned for the future of the Ummah."

The joint military operations and shared leadership on the ground—such as in Qalamoun, Arsal, Idlib, the joint operation to seize Aleppo Central Prison, and Quneitra operations—highlight the collaboration, overlap, and even competition for organizing and recruiting "migrant" or foreign fighters. Leaders from Al-Nusra have headed numerous Islamic Front brigades in areas of joint coordination, and there has been significant overlap in methods,

rhetoric, kidnappings, and sectarian killings. Human rights organizations have noted that there is little theoretical or practical difference between Jabhat al-Nusra and **Ahrar al-Sham** in the first four years of their existence. Coordination was widespread, with joint operations comprising over 80% of both groups' activities. Ahrar al-Sham had fewer foreign fighters than Al-Qaïda, but it maintained good relations with the **Northern Operations Room**, which included British, French, American, Qatari, and Turkish officers.

Ahrar al-Sham never severed ties with the Americans, attempting to curry favor through articles by **Labib Nahhas** and communication with U.S. ambassadors Robert Ford and Michael Ratney. These relations were stronger with the pragmatic and Brotherhood-aligned faction but were carried out under the watch of the hardline faction. Ahrar al-Sham sought to build ties with Saudi Arabia after King Abdullah's death, gaining protection and participation in the **Riyadh Conference** in December 2015. This enabled the group and other Islamic Front components to secure substantial Gulf and Western aid while avoiding designation as a terrorist organization by Europe, the U.S., or international bodies.

Finally, there is ambiguity surrounding the involvement of "Syrian Afghans" in Ahrar al-Sham, such as **Abu al-Hasan al-Tabuki**, who previously worked within Al-Qaïda.

Abu al-Hasan al-Tabuki (Iyad al-Shaar):

Ahrar al-Sham leader in Syria's coastal region and Jisr al-Shughur: Brother of the Moscow Theater Siege leader!

More details have emerged about the operation carried out by extremist factions in northern Latakia countryside, particularly in **Kassab** and its surroundings, as well as later in Idlib and specifically **Jisr al-Shughur**.

Lebanese newspaper *Al-Safir* was the first to reveal that the "general emir" of this operation was **Abu Musa al-Shishani**, the military commander of the **Ansar al-Sham Brigades**. Later, it became clear that Chechen elements formed the backbone of the attack, especially with the involvement of prominent figures like **Muslim al-Shishani (Abu Walid)**, the "emir" of the **Junud al-Sham group** in the Latakia countryside, and his deputy **Abu Turab al-Shishani**, both of whom oversaw the assault on **Observatory Point 45**.

One of the striking commonalities in the 2014 Latakia countryside offensive was that all military leaders were either Chechen or staunchly anti-Russian. This connection provides additional evidence that the leaders of the Kassab offensive had strong links to **Turkish intelligence**, which has longstanding interests and cooperation with Islamist movements in Chechnya. Notably, both **Muslim al-Shishani** and **Abu Musa al-Shishani** participated in several terrorist operations against Russian forces in the 1990s, most prominently the **Khairallah operation**.

The military commander of **Ahrar al-Sham** in the Latakia countryside, **Abu al-Hasan al-Tabuki**, although Syrian (not Saudi), harbored hostility toward Russia comparable to that of the Chechens. He was a key field commander in the 2014 Kassab attack and the 2015 offensive on **Jisr al-Shughur**. Who is he?

- Iyad al-Shaar, later known as Abu al-Hasan al-TAbuki, left his hometown of Jisr al-Shughur in 1978 at the age of 11. His family moved to **Tabuk, Saudi Arabia**, where his father worked. There, he was influenced by **Salafi-Wahhabi ideology** early on in his life.

- He was known for his history of fighting in **Afghanistan** as part of the “Arab Afghans” aligned with Al-Qaïda, alongside his brother Yasser.
- In 2015, after 37 years away, he returned to Jisr al-Shughur with the **Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fath)** under the **Ahrar al-Sham** banner, despite being injured. Rumors about his health surfaced on social media during this time.

The Moscow Theater Connection

Abu al-Hasan al-Tabuki is the brother of **Yasser al-Shaar (Yasser al-Suri)**, the only Arab involved in the **Moscow Theater Siege** 12 years earlier. Reports confirm that Yasser was one of the leaders who planned and executed the operation, not merely a participant.

At the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Abu al-Hasan returned to Syria and joined **Ahrar al-Sham** at the behest of his Al-Qaïda-linked network. The group’s ideology, behavior, and leadership structure closely mirrored that of Al-Qaïda. Prominent Ahrar al-Sham figures like **Abu Khaled al-Suri, Abu Mariam al-Filastini,** and **Abu Mohammedal-Faransi** all had

organizational ties to Al-Qaïda or jihadist efforts in Afghanistan.

Numerous reports have documented the strong relationship between **Ahrar al-Sham** and **Turkish intelligence**, particularly through leaders like **Abu al-Hasan al-Tabuki**. He, along with his brother Yasser al-Suri, maintained close ties to Turkish intelligence, as did figures like **Ayman Abu al-Tut** (aka **Abu Abbas al-Shami**), who was the "Grand Mufti" of the **Islamic Front** before his death.

- **Ayman Abu al-Tut's**, a long-time Turkish resident, had well-known connections to terrorist organizations under the watchful eye of Turkish security. He was later arrested by Syrian authorities and imprisoned in **Saydnaya Prison**, only to be released under a presidential pardon in May 2011.

The **Moscow Theater Siege** occurred on October 23, 2002. A group of about 50 Chechen extremists, including Yasser al-Suri, carried out the siege on a Moscow theater under the leadership of **Movsar Barayev**. The attackers took hundreds of hostages, demanding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya and an end to the Second Chechen War. After a 2.5-day standoff, Russian special forces pumped

chemical gas into the ventilation system before storming the theater. The operation resulted in the deaths of 39 attackers (including Yasser al-Suri) and at least 129 hostages.

Connection and Separation

The first serious confrontation between **Jabhat al-Nusra** and **Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement** occurred following the issuance of the “**Revolutionary Honor Charter**”, which was crafted and engineered by the founder of Ahrar al-Sham and political leader of the **Islamic Front**, Hassan Abboud.

The charter was the first Syrian Salafi-jihadist document to propose a vision distinct from the legacy of Al-Qaïda, directly challenging its principles. This was perhaps the first and most significant review by the components of the **Islamic Front**, addressing issues of ideological affiliation, authority, and objectives. The religious authorities within Al-Nusra were visibly upset, with many reactions abandoning even superficial respect in discussing the disagreements.

At the time, **Sami al-Aridi**, a Jordanian, had not yet replaced **Abu Maria al-Qahtani** as Al-Nusra’s leading religious authority and was referred to as the “Mufti of Nusra in Daraa.”

Nevertheless, he described the charter as a document of **"cowardice and surrender"**, asserting that "jihad is currently undergoing a phase of trial and testing." He declared his disavowal of "any call, charter, or group that does not openly and unequivocally proclaim the rule of Sharia." Al-Aridi went on to describe Al-Nusra's bearers of the jihad banner as "the people of truth, strangers among those who surrender and compromise, as well as those who are extremist and excessive."

A non-direct argument unfolded on Twitter between the political head of the Islamic Front, **Hassan Abboud**, and Al-Aridi. Abboud defended the charter, stating:

"We will continue on our path, paying no heed to those who wish to end us in the peaks of mountains, forests, and barren deserts to engage in elite jihad."

In response, Al-Aridi countered:

"Living in mountains and caves under the rule of Sharia is better than living in palaces under any other rule. We take the Taliban as an example."

Four days later, Nusra issued a detailed response to the charter, ultimately demanding

that its signatories withdraw it from circulation (in the annex).

The **Revolutionary Honor Charter** caused an internal split within Ahrar al-Sham. On one side, Al-Qaïda-aligned elements began to coalesce into factions, while on the other side, the "Syrian nationalist" wing gained strength, consolidating its arguments and building relations with various other Syrian fighting factions. The nationalist camp, led by **Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi**, enjoyed a strong social base due to his charisma and well-known ethical behavior.

In contrast, Al-Nusra experienced internal tremors over its perceived "isolationist and extremist" stance, as described by defectors from that period. However, this dynamic was short-lived. Many regional actors—not just Al-Nusra—began to sense the threat posed by the charter's radical proposals, especially regarding foreign fighters. Hassan Abboud boldly addressed this on **Al Jazeera**, saying:

"We don't need non-Syrian fighters. We have enough Syrian fighters, many of whom were misled, and their initial support turned into a curse."

Regarding Syrian independence, he asserted:

“Decisions must be entirely Syrian.”

He also publicly criticized those who prioritize the group’s interests over the nation’s, describing pseudo-clerics who have assumed leadership as:

“Young and foolish, without knowledge of religion or an understanding of legitimate politics.”

These revolutionary critiques placed Ahrar al-Sham and its founder in the crosshairs of various parties. Al-Qaïda’s media machine began accusing him of **leniency, negligence, and failure**, which ironically increased the popularity of the factions that signed the charter, contrary to Al-Qaïda’s intentions. This included factions like Nusra, **Khorasan Group**, and clerics advocating for jihadist extremism.

Amid these shifting alliances and rivalries, a massive assassination took place in September 2014, killing 45 leaders of Ahrar al-Sham. This ushered in a new leadership, with **Abu Jaber al-Sheikh** assuming the position of General Commander.

Under circumstances like these, one question remained: who stood to benefit from this mass assassination operation? The answer is simple, and does not require conspiratorial thinking.

Five key parties benefited from the assassination, including:

- 1. The Khorasan Group and non-Syrian clerics**
- 2. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS**
- 3. Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and the anti-Syrianization wing of Al-Nusra**
- 4. Turkish military intelligence MIT.**

As the late George Hawi once said:

“When the protective cover is lifted from a person or organization, liquidation becomes merely a technical matter.”

Abu Jaber al-Sheikh sought to strengthen relations with Al-Nusra and reinforce the Al-Qaïda-aligned faction within Ahrar al-Sham without severing ties with the **Muslim Brotherhood** and reformist currents. Confident in the absence of significant figures in this direction who could challenge him, Abu Jaber pursued this strategy.

However, his calculations did not align with unfolding events. He was ousted after a year, and **Mohannad al-Masri**—a leader better equipped to deal with what Al-Aridi and others

described as "soft elements"—took his place. Political and military developments brought the nationalist wing to the forefront, triggering an open confrontation between the two wings of Ahrar al-Sham, with external actors intervening to support one side or the other.

The journalist Abdallah Suleiman Ali attempts to summarize the current state of affairs as of the eve of this research being sent to the press, stating:

*"After the Astana conference, Ahrar al-Sham found itself in an unenviable position, especially after it became clear that Jabhat al-Nusra (Fateh al-Sham) was prepared to react to the conference, which directly targeted it, with swift and premeditated action. Indeed, within mere hours, Al-Nusra managed to upend the situation in northern Syria, proving it remained a force to be reckoned with, not easily bypassed or sidelined.

Al-Nusra's response had two components: militarily, it attacked factions that had participated in the Astana conference, and organizationally, it succeeded in absorbing key armed groups, including Al-Zenki, Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna, merging them into a new entity called 'Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham' (HTS). Ironically, this name was the same one that

factions had intended to use if their unification negotiations during Russia's late 2015 'Sukhoi storm' operation had succeeded.

Although Ahrar al-Sham neither participated in the Astana conference nor agreed to its resolutions—and thus, Nusra's actions weren't directly aimed at it—the unfolding events thrust the movement into the center of the turmoil. Unexpectedly, Ahrar al-Sham embraced the factions attacked by Al-Nusra due to their involvement in Astana, while simultaneously rejecting the proposal to merge into HTS. This, despite the fact that Ahrar's leader, Abu Ammar al-'Umar, had signed a merger agreement with the same factions just weeks earlier, only to withdraw his signature under pressure from the movement's political wing, led by the al-Nahhas brothers, Labib (head of external relations) and Kinan (a Shura Council and political bureau member).

It seems Ahrar al-Sham's leadership misjudged the significance and implications of the Astana conference for its rival ally, Al-Nusra. They assumed the fallout could be managed through the same containment policies used in response to previous political developments. Consequently, Ahrar issued an internal

memorandum justifying its non-participation in Astana, citing as a primary reason its opposition to isolating Al-Nusra. However, this justification soon appeared as an attempt to achieve two goals: to placate Nusra and prevent it from taking severe measures, and to maintain internal unity by appealing to Jaysh al-Ahrar, which was on the verge of splitting under the leadership of Abu Jaber al-Sheikh.

Ahrar al-Sham stopped short of further concessions, as evidenced by its decision to shelter factions that supported Al-Nusra's isolation in Astana while rejecting HTS's merger to protect itself from impending international targeting. This contradiction in Ahrar's positions exposed the internal power struggle it had long denied. The Al-Qaïda-aligned wing within Ahrar could no longer align with its general leadership, whose policies seemed increasingly aligned with Turkish objectives, especially as Ankara's agenda converged with Russia's regarding separating 'moderates' from 'extremists.' This led key Qaïda-aligned leaders, including Abu Jaber al-Sheikh, Abu Saleh al-Tahhan, Abu al-Fath al-Farghali, Abu Hamza al-Masri, and Abu Mohammed al-Sadiq—all senior figures in Ahrar—to defect and join HTS.

The wave of defections also extended to numerous brigades and battalions, notably large parts of Liwa al-Tamkeen, the Armored Brigade, and dozens of smaller units. While it's too early to quantify the full extent of these defections or their military and symbolic weight, it's evident they will significantly reshape Ahrar al-Sham.

Nevertheless, it's unlikely the entire Qaïda-aligned wing within Ahrar will join HTS. Nusra seeks to retain its influence within Ahrar and access to its internal workings. Additionally, some Al-Qaïda-aligned individuals or groups may lack the conditions needed for an open defection and might delay their decision.

Conversely, Ahrar al-Sham has absorbed several large factions, such as Jaysh al-Mujahideen, Fastaqim Union, segments of the Sham Front, and Jaysh al-Islam, all of which participated in the Astana conference, along with dozens of smaller battalions. Notably, Faylaq al-Sham did not join Ahrar, despite its name being included in the 'Salvation Initiative,' which urged factions threatened by Nusra to align with Ahrar.

The number of new members joining Ahrar significantly outnumbers those who defected. However, the impact of the defections is expected to outweigh that of the accessions.

This discrepancy in influence is not due to the symbolic weight of the defectors or the defected brigades' military strength but rather because some accessions to Ahrar are superficial, aimed merely at self-preservation. Therefore, it's only a matter of time before these groups separate again. *

(‘Ahrar al-Sham in the Grip of Nusra, Turkey, and Astana,’ February 7, 2017, Al-Mayadeen website).

Were We Not Alone?

The Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights' reports on the rise and branches of the "Salafi Jihadi movement" in Syria since the second half of 2011 did not reveal the unseen. Many researchers documented the process of this movement's birth and spread in earlier studies. It is worth revisiting one of these early reports, which was suppressed at the time, as were our own reports, deliberately and knowingly ignored.

In a study published by the Carnegie Center by researcher Mona Alami in early 2013⁸⁴, we find:

⁸⁴ [Syria's Foreign Legions Who are the jihadis in Syria—and where are they coming from?](#)

"A few months after the uprising began, bloggers on Salafi websites began asking jihadist scholars to issue fatwas permitting them to join the protest movement. Sheikh Abu al-Munther al-Shanqeeti advised bloggers to join the protests on the condition that they avoid calling for democracy or raising any secular slogans. At the end of 2011, Osama al-Shihabi, the leader of Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon, called for armed struggle in Syria through the online forum 'Shumukh al-Islam.' Subsequently, Sheikh al-Shinqiti issued a fatwa on the 'Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad' forum, permitting the use of violence against the Assad regime."

"In February 2012, Al-Qaïda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on fighters in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to act in support of what he referred to as their 'brothers in Syria.' Around the same time, Salafi Sheikh Abu Mohammed al-Tahawi issued a fatwa calling for jihad in Syria, stating in an interview, 'I called on all capable men to go to jihad in Syria; it is the duty of every committed Muslim to work to stop the bloodshed caused by the Nusayri regime.' The Jordanian intelligence services arrested al-Tahawi a few months later."

Alami provides numerous insights into the infiltration of the Salafi Jihadi current and its impact on the future of events in Syria:

"It appears that most of the jihadists fighting in Syria are from neighboring countries such as Jordan, Iraq, and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon. According to Lebanese Salafi preacher Omar Bakri, there are also small groups from Libya, Tunisia, Belgium, France, and Sweden, most of whom hail from North Africa. Estimates based on interviews with Lebanese, Palestinian, and Jordanian sources suggest that around 100 Lebanese fighters are involved in the Syrian conflict, alongside 40 to 80 Palestinians from refugee camps in Lebanon. Not all of them are jihadists; some went to Syria due to familial ties with Syrian families or out of hatred for the Assad regime, which occupied Lebanon for over 19 years.

Tamer al-Samadi noted that about 300 Jordanians are currently engaged in jihad in Syria, though there is no data indicating their percentage among foreign fighters.

The Lebanese jihadists belong to a new generation. Sheikh Nabil Rahim from Tripoli stated, 'Most of them are young men aged 17 to their late 20s, with very limited Islamic and military knowledge.' The fighters themselves recruit new members, as happened with Malik and Abdel Hakim Haj Dib, who were recruited by Hassan Sarour, a fighter with the Farouq Brigade. According to family members,

Syrian imams in Tripoli—a stronghold for one of Lebanon's largest Salafi groups—also encourage local youth to join the conflict.

This trend is also observed within Palestinian camps in Lebanon, particularly Ain al-Hilweh, Burj al-Barajneh, and Shatila. Reports indicate that former members of 'Abdullah Azzam Brigades,' 'Fatah al-Islam,' and 'Jund al-Sham,' as well as elements previously associated with 'Asbat al-Ansar' and the 'Islamic Jihad Movement,' have split into five factions of approximately 25 members each. These groups are currently training in the Bustan area using light to medium weapons. Many of these fighters defected from 'Asbat al-Ansar' and the 'Islamic Jihad Movement' recently, objecting to the groups' newfound 'moderation' and cooperation with the 'infidels,' a reference to the Lebanese army and intelligence agencies.

The Syrian conflict's attraction of more fighters from across the region could help propagate Al-Qaïda's regional plan, whose goal remains unchanged by the Arab Spring: to wage jihad in all 'infidel states.' Whether or not Al-Qaïda has the actual means or sufficient followers to achieve this goal, the increasing globalization of jihad could destabilize fragile countries, raising concerns throughout the region."

How Much Pain, O Freedom

This study, among others, makes it difficult for many figures of the democratic opposition and the countries that considered themselves friends of the Syrian people to claim today: *We didn't know*. Everyone we met—Arabs and non-Arabs alike—was informed of what was happening. Truthfully... because, as I often repeat, we believe that truth is the pursuit of the believer and that truth is always revolutionary. Sectarian and extremist media, too, spoke of these issues daily. How can we forget the *Safaa* channel symposium under the slogan "*Sunni Blood is One*," where Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Haytham al-Maleh discussed calling the Mujahideen to fight in the land of the Levant? Or the stadium conference where Mohamed Morsi gathered all the banners of jihad and extremism, both Salafi and Brotherhood, in the heart of Cairo?

I was in a position to speak, logically, without the bias or compromises of those who had only recently left the seats of power. Before I wrote About ISIS and al-Nusra, I had authored three books and 19 reports in multiple languages on the nature of the Syrian regime and its crimes. Three years of persecution, 25 years in forced exile, and denial of citizenship. The intelligence services assassinated my brother, engineer Ma'an Aloudat, in August

2011, and kidnapped our most prominent activists—Abdul Aziz al-Khair, Iyass Ayash, Maher Tahan, and Raja al-Nasser.

Nonetheless, fatwas declaring me an infidel or a traitor were issued against me. The cadres of al-Nusra and its affiliates, along with their accomplices, dedicated articles and petitions to attack us, such as Abu Firas al-Suri's article in the supplements. Documents and facts were falsified left and right, including one document allegedly signed by the director of the presidential palace permitting Aref Dalila (who spent ten years in Bashar al-Assad's prisons) and Haytham Manna to enter the palace at any time. Mercenaries even appeared on channels like *Al-Arabiya*, *Al-Jazeera*, and *Wesa!* to explain our supposed dubious ties to the regime and its allies.

Silencing the voices of independent Syrian democrats was a necessary condition for the success of the operation to destroy Syria—not just to overthrow the regime.

U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford once explained to me in a Parisian café, during the last August of his mission, his theory of the "Sunni majority" versus the Shiite and Alawite "minorities." He clarified that the number of Sunnis in the world far exceeds that of other sects, and thus, in the end, the majority

would prevail over the minority. I responded, saying, "I've never heard of this 'billion-member Sunni Party.' Do you consider Sisi, Bashir, or Essebsi members of this party? Even if you do, the migrant groups coming here to fight declare them infidels, and they declare me and you infidels as well."

It cannot be said that the American ambassador, who began his diplomatic career supporting the Contras in Nicaragua, who witnessed the destruction and dissolution of the Iraqi army, was naïve to such an extent. Just as the United States had used its Arab allies to provide money and "jihadist" fighters during the Cold War in Afghanistan, the Western hand was not far from stoking a sectarian conflict designed to destroy an entire generation of Islamists—both Sunni and Shia. Both, after all, are classified by the U.S. as terrorist organizations. It was also advantageous to destroy the capabilities of any Arab army that, by its mere existence, could pose a threat to a functional entity that the U.S. considers part of its national security interests.

One day, the Saudi Press Agency reported this announcement: *"Royal approval has been issued for the establishment of a committee headed by His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz, Emir of the Riyadh region, to receive donations for*

Muslim Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Subcommittees will be established throughout the Kingdom to collect donations and arrange their delivery to those entitled to receive them."

Government intervention in Afghanistan was part of the official policy and declared doctrine of more than one Gulf state. However, by 2011, these countries could only act similarly in Libya, where Qatar's direct intervention manifested religiously (through Qaradawi's fatwas justifying NATO's involvement and the execution of Muammar Gaddafi), through media channels like *Al Jazeera* and a private Libyan channel in Doha, and financially and militarily, as widely known. Hamad bin Jassim summed up the Libyan tragedy five years later by saying, *"Too many hands interfered, and we reached where we are now."*

In Syria, things were different. Publicly, humanitarian, media, and financial aid to the "moderate opposition" was announced. However, what occurred behind the scenes was a different matter. The enormity of exploitation, intervention, and complicity raises a legitimate question: How could more than 30,000 "migrants" cross into Syria through Turkish territory to join ISIS and al-Nusra without the knowledge, facilitation, and willful

negligence of the Turkish government and the tacit approval of their respective governments?

Our warnings to Yusuf al-Qaradawi not to fall into the sectarian trap during his statements on Syria, during a visit to Doha two weeks after the popular uprising in Daraa began, were futile. This role was precisely what was assigned to him. When Samir Aita and I spoke at a seminar broadcast by *Al Jazeera Live*, stating that the Arab dream was for the spring to encompass republics, monarchies, and emirates alike, a Qatari employee from *Al Jazeera* approached me later at the hotel and said, *"When our people in the Gulf see what will happen to your spring, they will kiss their rulers' shoes."* I jokingly replied, *"For God's sake, calm down."* He said, *"I didn't come to discuss the spring or the four seasons. I came to advise you to cancel your trip to Manama tomorrow. Serious issues will occur; the timing is not right."* Knowing the man's honesty and integrity since I first met him, I canceled my travel plans. Indeed, the following day, Saudi forces entered Bahrain.

A presidential pardon in Damascus released all "jihadists" detained in Sednaya Prison between May and December 2011. Suddenly, there was a group of over 1,400 detainees with combat experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Six of them had

previously been executed due to the Sednaya prison rebellion, convicted of murder and sabotage charges. Everyone else was released.

It became clear that the militarized security solution and armed confrontation with civilians would inevitably undermine the combat doctrine of the military institution. Security apparatuses could no longer control the situation. Thus, the doors were flung wide open for proponents of militarized jihadism, while key figures of peaceful civil activism were arrested or assassinated. Security agencies believed that armed confrontations would inevitably suppress the peaceful movement, making it easier for the regime to eliminate armed groups later. As a defected security officer told me during his testimony about that period: *“The moderate, middle-ground Islam of the Levant will reject these extremists.”*

Mohammed Alloush, a leader of Jaysh al-Islam and the head of the opposition’s armed factions at the Astana talks, admitted this after five years in a conversation with Giselle Khoury on BBC: *“Yes, we fell into the militarization trap.”*

From the early weeks of the civil movement, I launched the "Three No's": *“No to sectarianism, no to violence, and no to foreign intervention.”* In August 2011, I warned that if the movement became

armed, it would radicalize, sectarianize, and lose its way. The Halbon Conference in 2011 adopted these three principles as the National Coordination Committee's slogan. They also became part of the *Covenant of Dignity and Rights*, which was prepared by Abdul Aziz al-Khair, Samir Aita, Boutros Hallaq, and me. However, the so-called "opposition of mercenaries" criminalized us, accusing us of wanting the regime to stay. The pseudo-opposition figures in Doha, at the request of their patrons—as narrated by one of the coalition's founders—insisted on rejecting negotiation and dialogue, advocating for fighting until the last Syrian citizen.

In an interview with Taysir Allouni on *Al Jazeera*, Hassan Abboud stated: *"The formation of jihadist factions preceded the announcement of the Free Syrian Army."* Before Haytham al-Maleh allegedly purchased 3,000 uniforms and boots for the Free Syrian Army, funds from "benefactors and Salafi businessmen" in the Gulf, supported by their governments, flooded every faction bearing a jihadist or sectarian name. The jihadi tide began under the pretext of fighting the *"Nusayri regime that kills children and rapes women."* Bloodshed fatwas brought fighters from across the globe. As is the case with all clandestine armed organizations, no intelligence agency in the region or the West failed to get involved or achieve some level of infiltration.

Targeting infrastructure, bombing thermal and electrical plants and surface dams, looting and smuggling factories and artifacts, trafficking oil, crops, and people's property, tearing apart Syria's social fabric, terrorizing minorities, and labeling anyone advocating democracy as an infidel—all of this became commonplace. Except for primitive Captagon factories—deemed “useful” for the needed euphoria in suicide operations—not a single medical factory was spared from attacks by all warring factions. It's hard to count the hospitals bombed by barrel bombs or "Hell Cannons." Half the Syrian population became refugees or internally displaced. The destruction cost surpassed \$300 billion, with more than half a million fatalities and over two million Syrians permanently disabled or suffering occupational impairments.

Regional and international intelligence agencies facilitated the cancerous growth of these groups, which played a pivotal role in tearing apart the social fabric of at least four countries: Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

The rest of the tragedy is well-known...

Despite the profound pain and bitterness, we wish, as we witness the devastation of both human and physical structures in Syria and in other beloved sister nations, that those who have not yet fallen

into the quagmire of extremist violence and senseless sectarian wars will open their eyes before it's too late.

*) **Mazmijar al-Sham** comments on this issue: *"I do not know of any faction in Syria that did not receive external support. However, those who take their support under the table are accustomed to posturing against those who take it openly."* He adds: *"Didn't al-Joulani once reproach Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi for receiving support from a questionable external source, as he described it? Al-Hamawi responded that their representative had also received his share!"* (Mazmijar's Twitter, 31/01/2017).

In a study published by the **Carnegie Center** titled *"Qatar and the Recalibration of Power in the Gulf"*⁸⁵ Lina Khatib, director of the center for the Middle East, states: *"Every Gulf state sponsored its own network of jihadist clients in Syria, attempting to apply military pressure on the Assad regime. Saudi Prince Bandar, in particular, spearheaded funding efforts for several groups, such as Jaysh al-Islam, many of*

⁸⁵ [Qatar and the Recalibration of Power in the Gulf](#)

which later coalesced under the umbrella of the Islamic Front. Meanwhile, Qatar-backed groups affiliated with Al-Qaïda, like Jabhat al-Nusra, found refuge in Syria. However, the use of jihadists began to backfire. Instead of focusing their efforts on the Syrian regime, the Qatar- and Saudi-backed jihadist groups became embroiled in two additional fronts: fighting the Islamic State and fighting each other." (Carnegie publications, September 11, 2014).

Wikileaks documents revealed numerous correspondences discussing government-backed support for jihadist groups—not just indirect or “humanitarian” aid through “*philanthropic and noble businessmen with Salafi tendencies.*” Regarding the financial sources of Jabhat al-Nusra, there are numerous references addressing this topic, including:

Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, Al Nusra

Front, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>.

Annex

Letter and Request

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most
Merciful

Dr. Haytham Manna,

Peace and blessings be upon you.

I have read your manuscript "*Fiqh al-Dam*" (Jurisprudence of Blood) more than once, and I had previously studied your valuable book "*The Caliphate of ISIS*" with great attention.

I commend your commitment to scholarly integrity, thoughtful analysis, and persistent research, as well as your dedication to distinguishing between Islam and the exploitation of the popular religiosity phenomenon by the extremists of our time.

Your approach of defending human rights and promoting nonviolence in critiquing takfiri groups is unsurprising and not something that we, as scholars who believe that Islam is a religion of peace and

human dignity, would reject or criticize. However, this approach alone is not sufficient. I remind you of what you wrote in your book *"Islam and Europe"* regarding the efforts of Islam's enemies to *"reduce the Islamic religion to political Islam and to reduce political Islam to the most extreme and fanatical groups, thereby fueling Islamophobia and distorting the image of true Islam."*

The absence of Qur'anic foundations that refute takfiri ideologies in your analysis may give the impression to readers unfamiliar with our culture and religion that these misleading groups base their methods and practices on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. The truth is that these groups are far removed from the Qur'anic methodology and the life of the Seal of Prophets, peace and blessings be upon him.

My dear brother,

The Qur'an is based on two fundamental concepts in defining humanity's nature and position on Earth and in the universe:

1. **The Concept of Dignity:** "We have certainly honored the children of Adam" (Surah Al-Isra, 17:70). This dignity is granted unconditionally, without regard to religion, gender, or race.

2. **Faith in God and the Last Day:** This central concept transcends religion and all worldly matters, including laws, peace, war, the so-called “Abode of Islam,” “Abode of Disbelief,” and other claims made by groups obsessed with governance, loyalty, and disavowal. Since Allah created humankind and knows their nature better than anyone, He described the human soul as *“prone to evil”* and did not leave the matter of faith to human judgment. Instead, He revealed in the Qur’an a clear and eternal verse that removes from humans the right to judge or force faith upon others: *“If your Lord had willed, all those on Earth would have believed—all of them entirely. Then, will you compel people until they become believers? It is not for a soul to believe except by Allah’s permission, and He will place defilement upon those who will not use reason”* (Surah Yunus, 10:99–100).

Faith is higher and purer than merely declaring Islam. Allah says: “The Bedouins say, ‘We have believed.’ Say, ‘You have not [yet] believed; but say [instead], ‘We have submitted,’ for faith has not yet entered your hearts” (Surah Al-Hujurat, 49:14).

Allah has promised the best reward to those who believe in Him and the Last Day:

- “Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and do righteous—on them shall be no fear” (Surah Al-Ma'idah, 5:69).
- “Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does righteousness—they will have their reward” (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:62).
- “Whoever believes and reforms—there will be no fear concerning them” (Surah Al-An'am, 6:48).

This promise is not exclusive to Muslims, a “saved sect,” or a “victorious group” but extends to all who believe in Allah and the Last Day. Who among humans has the right to nullify Allah’s promise, which is undeniably true?

How can a Qur’anic verse that calls on believers to *“make things easy and not difficult”* be abrogated by the claims of pseudo-scholars and extremists ignorant of both religion and worldly matters? I wept when I heard them incite a child to sing: *“We’ve come to slaughter you, no agreements... Our terror is praised, a divine call... My greetings to al-Nusra, triumphant over disbelief...”*

By Allah, if the enemies of Islam had conspired to create forms of defamation against our religion and people, they would not have matched the crimes committed by these individuals against Allah, His Messenger, believers, and humanity.

Islam is innocent of such acts, and these people have no connection to the Qur'an. If this truth is not included in your book, it will confuse many who do not know Islam.

We have always prayed for your well-being and that your defense of Muslims in Europe, their personal and religious rights, and your advocacy for non-Muslim oppressed people will weigh heavily in the scales of your good deeds. Today, I ask you to give this aspect its due attention in your book.

Nazism was born in Germany and committed horrific crimes against humanity, but no one has the right to label the German people as Nazis or Christianity as an enabler of its evils. Every soul is accountable for its deeds.

These takfiri factions admit, through their leaders, that they could not attract more than one in a million Muslims to their so-called emirate in Taliban. How, then, can they claim to represent our culture and religion with their distorted words and criminal actions?

To Allah belongs the matter before and after.

Your loving brother,

Abu Khalid

(Azhar-educated Imam and researcher living in
Europe since June 2014)

Abu Firas Al-Suri (Ridwan Mahmoud Nammous)⁸⁶:

On Haytham Manna

His original name is Haytham Aloudat, born in Daraa (May 16, 1951). He adopted the surname "Manna" in memory of his first wife, whom he lost in a social attack just five days after their marriage. This tragic event, often referred to as an "honor crime," occurred because his wife, Mouna, came from a different religious background (Christianity).

He studied medicine at Damascus University and holds a doctorate in anthropology, specializing in psychosomatic therapy and sleep-wake disorders. Haytham Manna was a member of the Syrian Workers League, later known as the "Communist Action Party." He called for unifying all communist parties and opposition organizations under the framework of the Syrian Communist Party's "Political Bureau," also known as the "Riad Al-Turk Group." He was elected to the first Political Bureau of the Workers League during its founding conference in August 1976.

Manna left Syria for France, where he stayed for 25 years, and is currently the spokesperson for the Arab Committee for Human Rights. He rejected the Antalya, Brussels, and Istanbul opposition

⁸⁶ Al-Qaïda veteran and Al-Nusra senior militant

conferences. At the start of the Syrian revolution, Manna revealed he had been offered deals to smuggle weapons into Syria, sparking significant controversy. Critics demanded that he disclose the details and those behind these offers, but according to observers, Manna has not provided a satisfactory answer to date.

Manna faced intense criticism from opposition figures within Syria for claiming that some protesters had received foreign support to topple the regime and that armed groups infiltrated peaceful protests to fight security forces. Many within the opposition view him as a "mine" from the regime among the opposition.

He is a vocal critic of religious discourse, particularly Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood ideologies, which he sees as fundamentalist and regressive. On the other hand, he is a staunch supporter of Iran, Hezbollah, and Shiites in general, often defending them vigorously. In the latest opposition conference held in Qatar, Manna openly criticized accusations against Iran and Hezbollah of supporting the Syrian regime's militias, dismissing these claims as fabricated.

Opponents, especially from Daraa, argue that Manna's statements reveal his true allegiance, accusing him of colluding with the Syrian regime in

exchange for financial support from Iran. Some even assert that his rhetoric aligns closely with that of the Syrian ambassador in Beirut, calling Manna's allegations laughable and more suited for the Syrian Ministry of Interior's statements.

Manna has gained recognition for his work in human rights. In 1992, he was honored by *Human Rights Watch* and received the Human Rights Medal from the National Academy of Sciences in Washington.

Significant controversy surrounds Manna's statements on BBC, where he claimed he was offered weapons deals for Syria but declined, advocating instead for a peaceful approach to the revolution.

In an interview with the Al-Manar News website on Sunday, May 15, 2011, Dr. Haytham Manna, spokesperson for the Arab Commission for Human Rights based in Paris, stated that the number of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia far exceeds those in Syria. He said, "There are approximately 5,000 prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia. Steps must be taken to end religious-based discrimination against Shia in employment. The government's employment policies should better reflect the religious composition of the state's regions and encourage qualified Shia individuals to

assume leadership positions in local governments, especially in areas where Shia constitute significant minorities or majorities (e.g., Qatif, Ahsa, Najran, and Medina). Particular attention should be given to eliminating discrimination in education-related employment, allowing Shia to enroll in military colleges and serve in the military. Consideration should also be given to appointing prominent Shia figures to key central government positions, such as ministries.

B. Steps must be taken to end religious-based discrimination in the judiciary. Shia should be allowed to qualify for positions as regular judges, in addition to the four Shia judges currently serving in Qatif and Ahsa courts (whose jurisdiction is limited to civil matters). No Shia individual should be excluded from accessing justice.

C. Steps must be taken to combat religious discrimination, allowing Shia to teach religion in schools. There should be no discrimination in granting permits for planning and constructing Shia mosques, husseiniyas, and spaces for religious or cultural purposes. Shia imams and mosques should receive the same level of support from the government as Sunni imams and mosques. There should be no interference in Shia worship practices,

whether public or private, and their right to worship should be protected without outside interference. Shia imams should not be arrested for performing their religious rituals. Additionally, followers of other religions, such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, should be allowed to practice their religious rites without state interference."

Manna also stated in a special comment to Al-Alam News on Wednesday, *"The Saudi army is ideologically driven, with a hostile mindset that does not respect human life or dignity. Saudi soldiers view Bahraini protesters as 'rawafid'⁸⁷ (a derogatory term for Shia), making it easy for them to act against them without restraint. Their intervention cannot provide a solution to the crisis."*

He argued that a state of emergency has effectively existed in Bahrain for years, as evidenced by arrests and trials where detainees were tortured to instill fear and assert state authority. Manna described the actions of the authorities and foreign forces as a suicidal, futile project that could only succeed by exterminating more than half the population. He considered the Saudi military intervention in Bahrain to be paving the way for a massacre, noting that ten people had been killed

⁸⁷ *rejectionists*

since that morning, with the toll expected to rise. He described the situation as catastrophic and reiterated that the Saudi forces must leave, emphasizing that there was no justification for their presence in Bahrain.

Manna warned that these crimes would not go unpunished and that any Bahraini official or member of the Peninsula Shield Forces brought to Europe would face prosecution for crimes against humanity.

On July 20, 2011, speaking to Al-Alam News from The Hague, Manna confirmed that the Arab Commission for Human Rights was working on filing a lawsuit against human rights violations in Bahrain. The lawsuit was organized through a report prepared by nine European and Arab lawyers, bypassing the need for the United Nations Security Council to address the Bahraini case judicially. He explained that a brief, urgent meeting was held with the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Luis Moreno Ocampo, to establish the foundation for the lawsuit and document the massacres in Bahrain as a prelude to further legal action.

Manna stated that the International Criminal Court now faces two options: the first is for the Prosecutor to declare the evidence submitted sufficient for the court to proceed, and the second is to appoint a preliminary committee to study the submitted report

and case, which would take at least two months to determine the sufficiency of the evidence.

Quoting a website called "Bahrain Coup/Bahrain Revolution," an Iranian organization advocating for the protection of the oppressed and wounded Bahraini people, the article attributed criminal responsibility to Saudi Arabia for its intervention in Bahrain.

Manna, speaking as a representative of the Arab Commission for Human Rights, deemed the proposal to establish a revolutionary council in Syria extremely dangerous. In a call with "Russia Today" from Paris, Manna noted what he believed to be an external push, particularly from Gulf countries, to hastily create structures for the Syrian opposition.

It is evident from Manna's activities that he is a communist Shia activist interested in absolving Iran and Hezbollah of their crimes, supporting the Syrian Alawite regime in its acts of genocide.

(September 2011) (Eleven months later the same Abu Firas pronounced a Blaspheme Fatwa against Hayham Manna and his friend Abdel Aziz Al-Khayer).

Commentary Manna added upon learning about this article:

The article was written at the beginning of September 2011, specifically a month after the martyrdom of my brother, engineer Ma'an Aloudat, whom Abu Firas Al-Suri avoids discussing. My stance on the revolutionary movement in the Arab region, not just in Syria, is well known. I oppose transforming the popular movement in Syria from a peaceful, civil struggle for dignity, freedom, and democracy into a hollow sectarian conflict that tears apart Syria's social fabric and destroys everything in its path.

I am proud of my defense of minorities rights since my teenage years, but sectarian minds cannot grasp this as a defense of full and equal citizenship for all people. Hence, we find an article titled "Haytham Manna is an Alawite," with Ridwan Nammous claiming I am "a communist and Shia." A Salafi confronted me in Brussels two years ago, saying, "You are Christian, and your family only recently converted to Islam," and so on.

To all those who make such baseless claims, I say: I take pride in being deeply immersed in the rich Arab-Islamic culture, discovering the gems of Eastern Christianity, and exploring the richness of various Islamic schools. I followed the concept of

the "Perfect Human" with Ibn Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi. This enlightened and inclusive culture—not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—opened the widest doors for me to the world of human rights.

The Announcement of Jabhat al-Nusra

Abu Mohammedal-Joulani

1433 AH | January 2012

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of all worlds, and peace and blessings be upon His trustworthy Messenger, and upon his family and companions.

To proceed:

Allah Almighty says:

"[Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory.]"
[Surah Al-Hajj: 22:39]

After the long and arduous months in the land of al-Sham (Syria) and the fierce and brutal onslaught it has faced—of children being killed, the elderly beaten, men imprisoned, and women's honor violated—the massive bloodshed has awakened in the hearts of the sincere the meanings of sacrifice, heroism, dignity, and defiance. It has stirred in them

a love for martyrdom and striving for the sake of Allah, raising the banner of truth and the pinnacle of Islam.

The calls for jihad have risen, and we had no choice but to answer the call and return to our people and our land in the early months of the revolution. Perhaps Bashar and Maher (al-Assad) have failed to realize that the era of Muslims being oppressed has ended and disappeared. The Islamic nation has reclaimed its sharp sword that stands between them and the tyrants and oppressors, defending their honor, preserving their blood, and protecting their wealth.

Therefore, we bring good news to the Islamic nation of this long-awaited historic event: the formation of a front to support the people of al-Sham, composed of the mujahideen of al-Sham on the battlefields of jihad. This is our effort to reestablish the authority of Allah on His earth, to avenge the violated honor and the spilled blood, to restore smiles to the faces of infants and widowed women. We ask Allah for success and guidance.

We call on the people of al-Sham to rally around the banner of "*La ilaha illallah*" (There is no god but Allah), for it is only through this banner that humiliation and disgrace are lifted, justice prevails, and oppression is crushed.

So come, if you have resolve, for the
caller of longing

Beckons you to traverse the path
ahead, hasten and move along.

Do not wait for the company of one
who lingers,

Leave him, for longing is sufficient to
drive you forward.

Take a spark from their light and walk
with it,

For their light will guide you, not the
torches.

Say: Endure, O self, with patience for
but an hour,

For in meeting (Allah) the burden of
hardship will vanish.

It is but an hour that will soon pass,

And the sorrowful will become joyful
and jubilant.

**What the People of al-Sham must realize is that
this regime will not fall except by the power of
Allah, followed by the power of arms.** For taking
up arms in defense of al-Sham is not a disgrace or

something to be ashamed of; rather, the true disgrace is to allow the law of the jungle to govern us instead of the law of Allah while we stand by and watch. The disgrace lies in the violation of the honor of free women while we watch. The disgrace lies in the spilling of innocent blood while we watch. The disgrace lies in seeing men dragged in chains behind bars of humiliation while we do nothing but watch.

Every free and noble person must take up a weapon to defend themselves and their honor from danger, even if it means selling the furniture in their homes. Religion and blood are far more precious and deserving of sacrifice, O people of dignity and chivalry.

Patience, patience, O people of al-Sham,

for indeed, the hardship has now intensified.

If you endure the strain of a calamity,

It will be as though no hardship ever touched you.

It is worth noting that in this arena, many calls and movements have arisen, which is not surprising, as

the land of al-Sham has always been a historical battleground for old and new struggles.

Among these calls is the appeal to seek help from the Western enemy to rid ourselves of the Ba'athist enemy. Such a call is deviant, misguided, and a great crime. It is an unforgivable disaster of immense magnitude. History will never show mercy to those behind it.

Can it be rational to think that the very criminals who have killed Muslims and aided in their killing across the East and West will now become the noble knights who save the nation from the tyranny of the regime and its cronies?!

Have these people forgotten that the West and America are partners with the regime in its crimes?!

All praise is due to Allah, for even the common people in the land of al-Sham have grasped what the advocates of these calls fail to understand.

Undoubtedly, I include in this crime the Turkish regime, which is America's new tool in its attempt to divert minds and sound paths. It flatters the Muslims to gain their favor only to poison them with deadly venom. The so-called "Islam" of the Turkish regime is superficial and lacks substance. It is an image without meaning, a body without a soul.

The greatest failure of the Turkish regime's project lies in the fact that America is pleased with it, as Allah says: "And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion." [Surah Al-Baqarah: 2:120]

Among the projects doomed to failure is also the Arab League initiative and the issue of the observers. This was orchestrated by America in its effort to give the regime a chance to eliminate the people of al-Sham.

It is also clear to any reasonable person the relentless Iranian efforts with this regime over the years to implant *Safavidism* in this blessed land, aiming to restore the Persian Empire. For Iran, al-Sham is the lungs through which its decaying project breathes.

So, in the face of these intertwined equations and agendas, the nation must return to placing its trust in its own people. It must abandon the pursuit of help from oppressors. The sons of this nation have proven that they are capable of breaking the dominance and arrogance of tyrants who are far superior to this regime in terms of material, human, and technological resources.

No one, friend or foe, can deny or dismiss the victories that Allah, the Almighty, has granted to the

sons of this nation—victories that have been achieved despite the envy of those who steal history and the false claimants of victory. These people are like vultures preying on a corpse after it has been hunted by lions.

Returning to the people of this nation is the rightful path that will save the ship from being lost and preserve it from ruin, chaos, and destruction. The sons of this nation, especially those engaged in *jihad*, are the only ones capable of bringing about true change. There is no value in a change that moves from one form of oppression to another or from one type of corruption to another. That is nothing but pure corruption in different shades. True change must be from oppression to justice and from falsehood to truth.

Beware, beware of the nation being deceived for another fifty years. Salvation from all these turmoils lies in the nation returning to its essence and placing its trust in those who are worthy of that trust.

Jabhat al-Nusra bears the responsibility of being the weapon of this nation in this land, sparing the people, after Allah, the need to seek the help of foreign murderers.

I do not forget to pray for mercy for every martyr who has fallen on this land, relief for every prisoner

detained for a just cause, and patience for every afflicted and grieving person, for every widow, bereaved mother, and for everyone who has lost a father, mother, brother, or sister.

We, the sons of Jabhat al-Nusra, pledge to all of you that our blood is a shield for yours.

Allah is the One who grants success,
and upon Him, we rely.

And peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be upon you.

Announcement of Allegiance to Al-Qaïda and Separation from ISIS

Abu Mohammed al-Joulani

1434 AH | 2013 CE

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

All praise is due to Allah, and may peace and blessings be upon the Messenger of Allah, his family, companions, and those who follow his path.

To Muslims everywhere, the leaders of jihadist movements, the leaders of armed factions, the people of al-Sham, and the members of Jabhat al-Nusra:

Peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be upon you.

Allah, the Truth, Most High, says: *"Alif. Lam. Mim. (1) Do people think that they will be let go merely by saying: "We believe," and that they will not be tested, for We indeed tested those who went before them? (2) Allah will most certainly ascertain those who spoke the truth and those who lied." (3) [Surah Al-Ankabut, 29:1-3]*

A discussion has arisen regarding a speech attributed to Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (may

Allah preserve him). The speech claims that Jabhat al-Nusra is subordinate to the Islamic State of Iraq. Furthermore, the speech announces the dissolution of the names “The Islamic State of Iraq” and “Jabhat al-Nusra,” replacing them with a single name: **“The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).”**

Therefore, we inform everyone that the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra, its Shura Council, and this humble servant (the General Commander of Jabhat al-Nusra) were not aware of this announcement except through what we heard in the media!

If the attributed speech is indeed genuine, we were neither consulted nor commanded regarding this decision.

I say, seeking Allah’s help:

After certain matters have come to light, I wish to state that we have accompanied the jihad in Iraq from its beginnings until our return following the Syrian revolution. Despite a divinely ordained separation that occurred for some time, we were still privy to most of the major events that shaped the jihadist movement in Iraq. From this experience, we drew lessons that brought joy to the hearts of the believers in al-Sham under the banner of Jabhat al-Nusra.

Allah, the Most High, knows that we have seen only immense goodness from our brothers in Iraq: generosity, hospitality, and care. Their kindness is beyond measure, a debt we carry on our shoulders as long as we live. I had not wanted to leave Iraq before seeing the banners of Islam raised high and fluttering proudly over the land of the two rivers. However, the rapid developments in al-Sham stood between us and our aspirations.

I was honored to accompany many righteous individuals in Iraq—whom we consider to be so, and Allah is their ultimate judge—and we parted from many of them. Whenever someone is mentioned before me, I cannot help but say, “May Allah accept him.”

Not to mention the dozens, rather hundreds, of martyrs—both Syrians and others—who sacrificed their lives to raise the word of Allah under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq.

Then Allah Almighty honored me by introducing me to Sheikh al-Baghdadi, that noble sheikh who fulfilled the rights of the people of al-Sham and repaid the debt in double measure. He agreed to a project we proposed to him to support our oppressed people in the land of al-Sham. He supplemented us with part of the state’s wealth despite the difficult times they

were experiencing. He placed his full trust in this humble servant, entrusted me with setting the policy and plan, and provided us with some brothers, though few in number, yet Allah Almighty blessed them and their gathering.

The Front began to navigate the difficulties little by little, until Allah Almighty blessed us, and the banner of the Front fluttered high and proud, lifting with it the hearts of Muslims and the oppressed. It became the pivotal force balancing the nation's battle on this land today and the hope of Muslims worldwide.

We announced from the beginning that we aspired to restore Allah's sovereignty on His land, then to elevate the nation by implementing His Shariah and spreading His guidance. We did not seek to rush into announcing matters that required deliberation. The tasks of the state, such as enforcing Shariah law, resolving disputes, striving to establish security among Muslims, and providing for their needs, have been ongoing in the liberated areas—despite some shortcomings.

Thus, the issue of publicizing the declaration was not a priority in the presence of the essence (of the cause). Moreover, the Islamic State in al-Sham is being built with the efforts of everyone, without excluding any essential party who has joined us in

jihad and fighting in al-Sham, whether from jihadist factions, esteemed scholars from Ahl al-Sunnah, or our migrant brothers. Exclusion of the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra and its Shura Council was also out of the question.

Delaying the announcement of allegiance was not due to a weakness in religion or a lack of resolve among the men of the Front. Instead, it was guided by wisdom grounded in Shariah principles, long experience, and diligent effort to understand the Shariah-based politics suited to the reality of al-Sham. This wisdom was agreed upon by those qualified to make decisions (Ahl al-Hall wal-Aqd) in the lands of al-Sham, including the leaders and scholars of the Front, the leaders and scholars of other factions, and the honorable sheikhs and advisors who support us from outside the country.

Now, I respond to the call of Sheikh al-Baghdadi (may Allah preserve him) to ascend from the lesser to the greater. I declare: This is a pledge of allegiance from the members of Jabhat al-Nusra and their general leader. We renew it to the Sheikh of Jihad, Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri (may Allah preserve him). We pledge to hear and obey, in ease and hardship, in migration and jihad, and to not

dispute authority with its people unless we see clear disbelief for which we have proof from Allah.

The banner of the Front will remain as it is, unchanged, though we take pride in the banner of the State (ISIS), those who carry it, and those among our brothers who have sacrificed their lives under it.

We reassure our people in al-Sham that what you have seen from the Front—its defense of your religion, honor, and blood, and its good conduct with you and with the fighting groups—will remain as you have known it. **The declaration of allegiance will not change anything in its policies.**

O Allah, unite our ranks upon truth and guidance.
Ameen, Ameen.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.

Servant of the Muslims, the General Leader of
Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Mohammed al-Joulani.

**Decision to dismiss Saleh al-Hamawi from
Jabhat al-Nusra**

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم



بيان صادر عن: "لجنة المتابعة والإشراف العليا"

الحمد لله رب العالمين، والصلاة والسلام على إمام المرسلين، وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين، أما بعد؛

استناداً إلى البيان الإعلامي رقم (١١) الصادر عن مؤسسة المنارة البيضاء بتاريخ ٢٩ ربيع الأول ١٤٣٦ للهجرة، الموافق ٢٠ - ١ - ٢٠١٥، والذي جاء فيه:

"قد أصدرت جبهة النصرة من قبل عدة بيانات تعلن فيها الحسابات الرسمية المعتمدة لديها في مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي والتي تعبر عن منهج الجماعة وسياساتها، وتدعو جميع أفرادها إلى الالتزام بسياسة الجماعة وقنواتها الرسمية وعدم التحدث باسم الجماعة، والالتزام بالضوابط التنظيمية للعمل الجماعي. وقد كنا أعلننا من قبل أن كل من يلتزم بالسياسة الإعلامية للجماعة وضوابطها فسبحان المحكمة شرعية وقد يصل الأمر إلى طرده من الجماعة إن لزم الأمر. وقد تم فصل عدة أفراد من الجماعة جراء ذلك في الفترة الأخيرة. ونهيب بجميع جنودنا الانضباط والالتزام بالسياسة المتبعة من قبل الجماعة."

وعليه؛ يتم فصل الأخ/ صالح حمزة (أبو محمد) من جبهة النصرة، لعدم التزامه بسياسة الجماعة وضوابطها.

وننوه أن قرار الفصل أصدر منذ قرابة ستة أشهر إلا أن قيادة جبهة النصرة ومجلس شوراها أثرت الصبر والتريث لعل الأخ يعود للسمع والطاعة ويلتزم بضوابط العمل الجماعي، لكن دون جدوى. ويبقى للأخ حفظ فضله وسابقته وتبقى أخوة الدين قائمة بيننا.

ونهبب بإخواننا الكرام -جنوداً وأمرأء- ضرورة الانضباط بمنهج وسياسة الجماعة المتبعة داخلها، فلا جماعة بغير سمع وطاعة، ونؤكد أن أي مخالفة لتلك السياسة تستوجب المعاقبة والمحاسبة والتي قد تصل إلى الفصل.

والحمد لله رب العالمين

(جَنَتهُ النَّصْرَة)

|| المنارة البيضاء للإعلام الإسلامي ||

تاريخ نشر البيان: الأربعاء ٢٨ رمضان ١٤٣٦هـ، الموافق ١٥ / ٧ / ٢٠١٥

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

"Statement Issued by the Supreme Follow-Up and Oversight Committee"

All praise is due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon the leader of the messengers, his family, and all his companions. To proceed:

Based on Media Statement No. (11) issued by Al-Manara Al-Bayda Foundation on 29 Rabi' al-Awwal 1436 AH, corresponding to January 20, 2015, which stated:

"Jabhat al-Nusra has previously issued several statements announcing its official accounts on social media platforms that represent the group's methodology and policies. It calls upon all its members to adhere to the group's policies and its official channels, refrain from speaking on behalf of the group, and comply with the organizational regulations governing collective work.

We had announced earlier that anyone failing to comply with the group's media policies and regulations would be referred to a Sharia court, and, if necessary, could be expelled from the group. Recently, several individuals were dismissed from the group for such violations. We urge all our

members to maintain discipline and adhere to the group's policies and strategies."

Accordingly, Brother **Saleh Hama (Abu Muhammad)** is hereby dismissed from Jabhat al-Nusra for failing to adhere to the group's policies and regulations.

We would like to note that this dismissal decision was made approximately six months ago; however, the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra and its Shura Council exercised patience and deliberation, hoping that the brother would return to compliance, listen, and obey the rules of collective work, but to no avail.

We acknowledge the brother's past contributions and virtues, and the bonds of religious brotherhood between us remain intact.

We urge our honorable brothers—both soldiers and commanders—to uphold strict adherence to the methodology and policies of the group. There is no group without listening and obedience. We reaffirm that any violation of these policies will lead to accountability and punishment, which may include expulsion if necessary.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.

(Jabhat al-Nusra)

|| Al-Manara Al-Bayda for Islamic Media ||

**Date of statement publication: Wednesday, 28
Ramadan 1436 AH, corresponding to 15 July
2015**

Thank You, Jabhat al-Nusra

(Saleh al-Hamawi's Response to Jabhat al-Nusra's Latest Statement, Statement 11 Repeated)

First: I would like to thank the brothers in Jabhat al-Nusra for their calm and clear statement. I wasn't surprised by the decision to dismiss me as much as I was by the method, mechanism, and references upon which they based their decision.

Second: I have never heard of this committee, I do not know its members, when it was formed, its responsibilities, or its authority—neither I nor anyone else knows this. They did not contact me to inquire about the matter, neither before nor after the decision.

Third: This decision is political, not organizational. The Statement No. 11 they referenced in their dismissal decision is vague and broad—perhaps deliberately so—to later be interpreted as needed to target dissenters. They stated in their announcement that I violated their policies six months ago, so why didn't they dismiss me at the time? Instead, they left the matter unresolved until a moment that suited them.

By the norms of organizations and groups, a dismissal statement typically cites a specific clause or article in the internal bylaws (e.g., "Based on Clause X of Article Y of the internal regulations"). Here, however, they referenced Media Statement No. 11, showing that they lack any legal framework since the group does not have internal bylaws.

They claimed the decision was issued by the Shura Council, but I doubt that. Every soldier and commander in Jabhat al-Nusra, and even other factions, knows that the Shura Council is symbolic and has no real influence on decisions. In fact, no one even knows how many members it has or who its permanent members are, as the members change from session to session. I am almost certain that some Shura members learned about my dismissal through the media.

Fourth: The last message I received from Sheikh al-Joulani was eight months ago. Since then, communication between us ceased on their end for reasons I do not know. I was never warned that I would be dismissed if I didn't comply with the group's media policies. Typically, disciplined organizations follow a process of warnings and escalating measures before resorting to dismissal. This never happened, despite my presence in areas where senior, officially recognized scholars of Jabhat al-Nusra were present.

They stated in Statement No. 11 that anyone violating the group's policies would first be tried in a Sharia court and that dismissal would only be a last resort. I was never summoned to any Sharia court by Jabhat al-Nusra.

Fifth: What they call a violation of the group's policies is, in reality, my critique of what I and others see as serious religious violations that harm the group, the broader jihadist arena, and the people of al-Sham. Chief among these concerns is what I perceive as the group's

tendency toward extremism. When Statement No. 11 was issued, one of the senior, officially recognized scholars was asked, "Does the group have a general policy?" He replied: "No. As scholars, we don't even know what the group's policy is to begin with, so how can we judge someone for violating it?" This explains why the decision didn't come from the group's judicial or religious bodies but rather from this so-called "Follow-Up Committee," which, as I mentioned, no one had heard of before this statement. If the decision had been issued by a judicial or Sharia body that listened to both sides, I wouldn't have written this statement or defended myself at all. For the record, I have documented all the religious violations committed by the group and sent them to several scholars within the jihadist movement, as well as to some of the group's branches.

Sixth: By Allah, I always wished we had internal regulations that clearly defined the circumstances under which a member could be dismissed and the violations that would result in punishment. I repeatedly and strongly urged the establishment of an internal system to clarify the responsibilities of each division and to create a disciplinary system. Unfortunately, all decisions are unilaterally political, dictated by a single individual. Praise be to Allah, I was among the first to advocate for the creation of an accountability and oversight committee, but Sheikh al-Joulani rejected the idea at the time, saying, "I believe our fraternal relationships are greater than the need for us to hold each other accountable."

Seventh: I had already resolved to leave the group after Sheikh al-Joulani's speech announcing the emirate was leaked. A week before the leak, he informed me that there was going to be a major announcement that would resolve all issues in the arena. Despite being a member of the group's Shura Council at the time, neither I nor any other council members in the north or south were informed of what this major announcement was. Everyone was surprised by his statement.

After the speech was leaked, I openly criticized the announcement. This marked the first real conflict between me and al-Joulani. He reproached me, saying, "You should have waited before commenting!" I replied, "Your words were clear—it was an announcement of an emirate without consultation and made publicly, so it must be addressed publicly." From that day, I firmly resolved to leave the group. However, I was persuaded to stay by many beloved brothers, including Dr. Abu al-Baraa al-Shami, Abu Qasim (one of the leaders of the Daraa front), Sheikh Abu Maria, prominent scholars from the jihadist movement outside Syria, and others outside the group, such as Brother Yamen al-Nasser (Abu Bakr al-Deiri).

Dr. Abu al-Baraa and Sheikh Abu Maria said, "We do not want to give al-Adnani a reason to gloat and say, 'This is one of the effects of the mubahala [prayer duel].'" One of them even joked, "If you issue a statement announcing your departure from the group, I will shoot you in the leg." Ultimately, I acquiesced to their wishes and exercised patience, despite enduring much harm. For

months, there were rumors on Twitter that I had been dismissed, but they came from anonymous accounts and similar sources. At the time, I paid no attention to these rumors, as I had received no official indication of my dismissal, as I have explained above.

Eighth: Praise be to Allah, the statement was issued openly by them and not by me. This is something I had repeatedly tried to avoid. On several occasions, prominent scholars of the jihadist movement (whose names I won't mention for security reasons, as they are outside Syria) attempted to mediate between me and Sheikh al-Joulani, but they were unable to reach him. I wouldn't be surprised if external pressures played a role in issuing this politically motivated decision rather than an organizational one.

Some scholars with whom I have engaged in intellectual debates, particularly concerning matters of Islamic politics, may have influenced this decision because I disagreed with them. These scholars even discussed my comments in online forums, labeling me and others like me as "Islamist Syrians who resent Al-muhajirun." They pressured the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra to take decisive action against me for my public critiques.

Ninth: All the issues in which I disagreed with the group stemmed from principles I derived from the writings of Sheikh Atiyah Allah al-Libi, Sheikh Abu Yahya al-Libi, the Abbottabad documents, and the central guidance of Al-Qaïda. My entire goal was to steer Jabhat al-Nusra back toward the policies of the central Al-Qaïda organization

and away from the influence of the Islamic State group, which had heavily impacted it. For the record, in my very first meeting with al-Joulani on Ramadan 23, 2011, before pledging allegiance to him, I requested that we, in al-Sham, be directly affiliated with Khorasan rather than the Islamic State of Iraq. He refused at the time. For a full year, in every meeting with him, I would remind him of this matter until he eventually told me, "Joining Khorasan, according to the brothers in the State [of Iraq], is considered a crime. I ask you not to repeat this request ever again."

Ninth: There's a repeated claim that I began publicly criticizing the group after being removed from my position. This is utterly false and baseless. I have official messages and communications to prove otherwise, which I am willing to reveal publicly if necessary. In fact, I criticized the group and Sheikh al-Joulani himself while I was still in my role as the commander of the Badia (Desert) region and a member of the General Shura Council. I made it clear that I would criticize any public mistake openly, especially after losing hope in the repeated private advice I had given. I submitted more than ten detailed proposals and reform documents addressing every issue, big and small. All of these are archived with me and may one day be made public. However, none of them yielded results, which compelled me to resort to public criticism.

As for my position, my last assignment was given to me by Sheikh al-Joulani himself, despite my repeated requests to be relieved of it. Thus, the claim that I began

my criticism only after being removed from my position is nothing but a lie and slander. I criticized everyone, including Sheikh al-Joulani, while I was still a member of the General Shura Council and while holding the position of Emir of the Badia.

Tenth: The path of jihad continues and is not tied to any specific group or organization. We will continue on this path until victory or martyrdom, by Allah's will. If Jabhat al-Nusra had not been a natural extension of a long history of jihad, I would not have joined it in the first place. Unfortunately, we now see some groups turning into private corporations, despite this being an era of consultation (shura) and institutions.

In conclusion, I spent beautiful days with brothers I loved in Jabhat al-Nusra. I pray to Allah for guidance for myself, for Jabhat al-Nusra, its soldiers, and its leaders. I ask Allah to direct their efforts and decisions and to replace me with someone better for them. Certainly, the bonds of faith and friendship will remain, by Allah's will.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.

Saleh al-Hamawi

Written on Ramadan 29, 1436H

July 16, 2015

Formation of Jaish al-Ahrar Under the Leadership of Abu Jaber al-Sheikh



الجيش الإسلامي

أحرار الشام

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قال تعالى

وَاعْتَصِفُوا بِحُجُلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفْرَقُوا ۚ وَادْكُرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَيْهِمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءُ فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ
(بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ مِنْهَا ۚ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ) (103)

حرماً على وحدة الصف في حركة أحرار الشام الإسلامية، وزيادة الفاعلية العسكرية
في الساحة، لردّ العدو الصائل، تعلن الألوية والكتائب التالية :

لواء التمكين

لواء عمر الفاروق

لواء أحرار الجبل الوسيطاني

لواء أجناد الشريعة

لواء أنصار الساحل

لواء أنصار حمص

كتيبة أبو طلحة الأنصاري

الجناح الكردي

كتائب حمزة بن عبد المطلب في الشمال

كتيبة قوافل الشهداء

كتيبة أحرار حارم

كتيبة شيخ الإسلام

كتيبة الطواقم

لواء المدفعية والصواريخ

لواء المدفعية الرديف

لواء المدرعات

العاملة في الحركة، اندماجها تحت مسمى (جيش الأحرار)

بقيادة المهندس هاشم الشيخ (أبو جابر)

سانلين المولى تعالى التوفيق والسداد

حركة أحرار الشام الإسلامية

قيادة جيش الأحرار

هــ 11/3/1438

م 10/12/2016

Ahrar al-Sham

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

Allah Almighty said: *"And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you - when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make clear to you His verses that you may be guided."* (Ali 'Imran 3:103)

To ensure unity within the ranks of the Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham and to enhance military effectiveness on the battlefield in the face of the aggressing enemy, the following brigades and battalions announce their merger under the name **"Jaish al-Ahrar" (The Army of the Free)**:

- **Liwa al-Tamkeen**
- **Liwa Omar al-Farouq**
- **Liwa Ahrar al-Jabal al-Wustani**
- **Liwa Ajnad al-Shari'ah**
- **Liwa Ansar al-Sahel**
- **Liwa Ansar Homs**
- **Katibat Abu Talha al-Ansari**
- **The Kurdish Wing**

- **Kata'ib Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttalib in the North**
- **Katibat Qawafil al-Shuhada'**
- **Katibat Ahrar Harim**
- **Katibat Sheikh al-Islam**
- **Katibat al-Tawaqim**
- **Liwa al-Madfa'iyya wa al-Sawarikh (Artillery and Rockets Brigade)**
- **Liwa al-Madfa'iyya al-Radif (Backup Artillery Brigade)**
- **Liwa al-Mudara'at (Armored Brigade)**

These units, operating under the Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham, have united under this banner and are now led by **Engineer Hashem al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber)**.

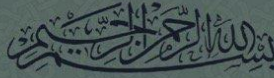
We pray to Allah Almighty for success and guidance.

Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham

Leadership of Jaish al-Ahrar

11/3/1438 AH 10/12/2016 AD

Fatwa Prohibiting the Aggression of Jabhat al-Nusra



الحمد لله القائل: (ومن يقتل مؤمناً متعمداً فجزاؤه جهنم خالداً فيها) والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله القائل: (لا يزال المؤمن في فسحة من دينه ما لم يصب دماً حراماً) وبعد ..

فلا يخفى ما تمر به الساحة الشامية اليوم من حالة خطيرة من تداعٍ للأعداء وتقهر في الجبهات .

ولقد وردنا نشوب قتال بين فتح الشام وجيش المجاهدين ، وإننا نفتي مجاهدي جبهة فتح الشام قيادة وجنوداً بوجوب الكف عن إخوانهم جيش المجاهدين وسحب الأرتال والنزول العاجل لمحكمة شرعية تعرض فيه فتح الشام أدلتها التي أدت بها لمهاجمة إخوانها ، وعلى القضاة سواء كانت مظلمة جنائية أو سياسية أو اتهام بالعمالة، والقضاة يعلنون ذلك على الملأ فإن كان القتال حقاً طلب من جيش المجاهدين التوبة والعودة للحق وأصدر الحكم القضائي فيه ، وإن كانت اتهامات ظالمة حجت الجبهة عن ظلمها.

وإننا نؤكد على الشباب المسلم حرمة هذا الإعتداء ، ونحذرهم من مغبة لقاء الله بدماء تفسد عليه جهاده وتوبقه في أخراه ونذكرهم أن المشاركة بهذا القتال ستحمل المقاتل تبعة ما ينتج عن ذلك من دماء في الساحة وربما سقوط الجبهات واندلاع القتال في كل مكان .

والله الموفق والهادي لسواء السبيل.

الموقعون

١. الشيخ /عبدالرزاق المهدي.
٢. الشيخ / أبوالحارث المصري.
٣. الشيخ / مصلح العلياني.
٤. الشيخ / عبدالله المحبسيني.

Praise be to Allah, who says: "And whoever kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, wherein he will abide eternally..." (Surah Nisa, 4:93), and peace and blessings be upon the Messenger of Allah, who said: "A believer remains within the bounds of his religion unless he sheds unlawful blood."

After that...

It is no secret the dire situation facing the Syrian front today, with enemies advancing and setbacks occurring on various battlefields.

We have received reports of fighting between Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and Jaysh al-Mujahideen. In light of this, we issue the following **fatwa**:

- It is obligatory upon the leadership and fighters of Jabhat Fath al-Sham to **cease fighting their brothers in Jaysh al-Mujahideen**, withdraw their forces immediately, and promptly refer the matter to an Islamic court.
- Jabhat Fath al-Sham must present its evidence justifying its aggression against their brothers. The judges must announce their findings publicly.

- If the fighting is deemed justifiable, Jaysh al-Mujahideen should be advised to repent and return to what is right, and the judicial ruling will be issued accordingly.
- If the accusations are found to be false, Jabhat Fath al-Sham must be restrained from committing further injustice.

We emphasize to all Muslim youth the **prohibition of this aggression** and warn them of the grave consequences of meeting Allah with the burden of unlawful bloodshed that could nullify their jihad and lead to their downfall in the Hereafter.

We remind them that participation in this conflict will make each fighter responsible for the blood spilled, the potential collapse of the battlefronts, and the spread of fighting throughout the region.

May Allah guide us to the straight path.

Signed:

- Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi
- Sheikh Abu al-Harith al-Masri
- Sheikh Muslih al-Alyani
- Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini

Statement on the Formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



بيان تشكيل هيئة تحرير الشام

الحمد لله القائل: {إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِهِ صَفًا كَانَتْهُمْ بُنْيَانُ مَرُصُوصٍ}
والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله وبعد؛

فنظرًا لما تمر به الثورة السورية اليوم من مؤامرات تعصف بها واحتراب داخلي يهدد وجودها، وحرصًا منا على جمع الكلمة ورض الصف، فنحن الفصائل الموقعة أدناه، نعلن عن حل كل من الفصائل التالية واندماجها اندماجًا كاملاً ضمن كيان جديد تحت مسمى "هيئة تحرير الشام" بقيادة المهندس أبو جابر هاشم الشيخ.

وإننا ندعو جميع الفصائل العاملة في الساحة لإتمام هذا العقد والالتحاق بهذا الكيان جمعًا للكلمة وحفظًا لمكتسبات الثورة والجهاد، ليكون هذا المشروع نواة تجمع مقدرات الثورة، وتحفظ خط سيرها، وتحقق أهدافها المنشودة بإسقاط النظام المجرم، وليعيش أهل الشام بعزة وكرامة في ظل شريعة الرحمن. سائلين المولى أن يمن علينا بالنصر والفتح المبين.

الفصائل الموقعة:



لواء الحق



حركة نور الدين الزنكي



جبهة فتح الشام



جيش السنة



جبهة أنصار الدين

30 ربيع الآخر 1438 هـ | 28 كانون الثاني 2017

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Statement on the Formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Praise be to Allah, who said: "Indeed, Allah loves those who fight in His cause in a row as though they are a [single] structure joined firmly." (Surah As-Saff: 61:4). And may peace and blessings be upon the Messenger of Allah.

Given the conspiracies threatening the Syrian revolution today, along with internal strife that endangers its very existence, and out of our concern for uniting ranks and consolidating efforts, we—the undersigned factions—hereby announce the dissolution of the following factions and their full merger under a new entity called **"Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" (HTS)** under the leadership of Engineer **Abu Jaber Hashem al-Sheikh**.

We invite all active factions in the field to join this initiative and unite under this entity to consolidate efforts, protect the gains of the revolution and jihad, and create a nucleus that will unite the revolution's resources, preserve its direction, and achieve its ultimate goals: the overthrow of the criminal regime and enabling the people of al-Sham to live with honor and dignity under the rule of Allah's Shari'ah.

We ask Allah to bless us with victory and a clear conquest.

The undersigned factions:

- Jabhat Fath al-Sham
- Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki
- Liwa al-Haq
- Jabhat Ansar al-Din
- Jaysh al-Sunnah

30 Rabi' al-Thani 1438 AH | January 28, 2017

Statement on the Joining of Scholars to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



بيان انضمام المشايخ لهيئة تحرير الشام

الحمد لله القائل : (وإن هذه أمتكم أمة واحدة وأنا ربكم فاتقون)
والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله القائل : (يد الله مع الجماعة) وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين .
أما بعد :

فلقد تابعنا عن كثب مجريات الأحداث في الساحة منذ سقوط حلب إلى يومنا هذا ،
واستشعرا منا بالخطر، قمنا بالدور الذي افترضه الله علينا كطلاب علم من السعي لجمع
الكلمة وتوحيد الصف ، فاستفرغنا الوسع في إنجاح جولة الاندماج الأخيرة ، وأصدرنا فتوانا
فيها بوجوب الاندماج ، وخطورة ما يترتب على النكول عنه ، وعدم المضي فيه ، ولما لم
يتبع ذلك عاودنا السعي ثانية لمحاولة رفع الاحتقان والتوتر ، ودفعنا لبوادر الفساد ، فقدر الله
أن وصلت الساحة إلى ما وصلت إليه مؤخراً من اقتتال أدمى قلوبنا ، فبحثنا عن حل للساحة
يضمن إيقاف الدم والوصول إلى صيغة تكفل عدم تكرار مثل هذه الحوادث ، مع ضبط للوضو
العامة ، التي تعيشها الساحة فلم نجد حلاً واقعياً للساحة ، سوى أن يلتزم الجميع بوقف
الاقتتال والعودة للاندماج بمن مضى فيه .
فرأينا :

أن تشكيل هيئة تحرير الشام بقيادة المهندس * أبو جابر الشيخ * هي قصار ما أمكن الوصول
إليه ، باعتبار هذا الاندماج متمثل بكيان حاضر قادر على مواجهة المائل من المخاطر .
وإننا استجابة لأمر الله الصريح بوجوب جمع الكلمة وحرصاً منا على حقن الدماء وعلى أن
تكون صفاء أمان ضد أي اقتتال داخلي .

لذا قررنا الانضمام لهذا الجسم المبارك ، كما ندعو جميع الفصائل في هذه الثورة المباركة إلى
المبادرة بالالتحاق بهذه الهيئة

لنبدأ مرحلة جديدة من مراحل هذه الثورة المباركة ، تطوى فيها صفحة الخلافات ، وتعود فيها
- بإذن الله - الانتصارات .

سائلين المولى عز وجل أن يبارك بهذا الجمع المبارك .

الموقعون :

- 1- الشيخ : عبد الرزاق المهدي .
- 2- الشيخ : أبو الحارث المصري .
- 3- الشيخ : أبو يوسف الحموي .
- 4- الشيخ : عبد الله المحيسيني .
- 5- الشيخ : أبو الطاهر الحموي .
- 6- الشيخ : مصالح الملياني .

30 ربيع الآخر 1438 هـ | 28 كانون الثاني 2017

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Statement on the Joining of Scholars to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Praise be to Allah, who said: *"Indeed this, your religion, is one religion, and I am your Lord, so fear Me."* (Surah Al-Mu'minun: 52). And peace and blessings be upon the Messenger of Allah, who said: *"Allah's hand is with the group,"* and upon his family and companions.

We have closely followed the developments in the field since the fall of Aleppo until today. Feeling the gravity of the situation, we have carried out the role Allah has assigned us as students of knowledge: striving to unite ranks and consolidate efforts. We exerted all efforts to make the recent merger attempt successful and issued a fatwa requiring the merger while emphasizing the severe consequences of failing to proceed with it.

When this merger did not materialize, we resumed efforts to ease tensions, reduce conflict, and prevent corruption. However, Allah decreed that the situation in the field would deteriorate into internal fighting, which broke our hearts. We sought a solution to the chaos that would stop the bloodshed and ensure such incidents would not repeat themselves. After careful consideration, we found no realistic solution other than for everyone to cease fighting and return to the path of unity through a merger.

In light of this:

We see that the formation of **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham**, under the leadership of Engineer Abu Jaber al-Sheikh, is the best possible solution at this critical time. This merger represents a viable entity capable of confronting the challenges and dangers ahead. In obedience to Allah's command to unite and in our commitment to preventing bloodshed, we have decided to join this blessed entity.

We also call upon all factions in this blessed revolution to join this entity so that we may begin a new phase in this revolution: one where disputes are put to rest and, by Allah's will, victories are restored.

We ask Allah Almighty to bless this noble effort.

Signatories:

1. Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi
2. Sheikh Abu Harith al-Masri
3. Sheikh Abu Yusuf al-Hamawi
4. Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini
5. Sheikh Abu Taher al-Hamawi
6. Sheikh Muslih al-Alyani

30 Rabi' al-Thani 1438 AH | January 28, 2017

Statement on the Obligation to Repel the Aggressor

بيان وجوب رد الباغي الصائل

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على خير الأنبياء والمرسلين وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين، ولا عدوان إلا على الظالمين، وبعد: فإن عدوان جهة فتح الشام وتصعيدها ضد المجاهدين لأزال مستمراً منذ أيام، وفتاوى شرعيهم مستمرة في التحريض على البغي واستنصال الفصائل وتجريدها من سلاحها رغم بيانات وفتاوى أهل العلم في الشام، ومبادرات البيئات والمجالس والشخصيات العلمية والشرعية والثورية، مما يستدعي وقفة حازمة صفاً واحداً في وجه هذه الفنة حتى تعود إلى رشدها.

وإننا نحن الموقعين على هذه الوثيقة، كنا قد أعلننا مبادرة لإنقاذ الشمال السوري بطلب ضم كبرى فصائل الشمال لحركة أحرار الشام وفق شروط وضوابط، فكان أن التزمت الفصائل المشار إليها بهذه المبادرة، كما استجابت لها حركة أحرار الشام، جزمهم الله خيراً جميعاً، إلا أن مجريات الأحداث على الأرض أسرع من مبادرة حركة أحرار الشام، ولا زال المطلوب أن يكون تجاوب الحركة وقطاعاتها عسكرياً وإعلامياً وشرعياً بالقوة والسرعة على مستوى الحدث، وأن يكون شاملاً وبكل قوة وحزم، والفصل بين مسارات التصدي للبغاة، وانتظار نزولهم لحكم الشرع، وإجراء الإصلاحات في جسم الحركة.

كما نؤكد في بياننا هذا على بقية الفصائل أن تؤدي حق الأمانة التي تحملوها في الدفاع عن الثورة والشعب، وعدم الاكتفاء بالحياد أو الفصل بين الطرفين، وبخاص في ذلك الإخوة في فيلق الشام وحركة الزنكي وبقية فصائل الجيش الحر.

كما أننا نحث المتأزمين من جنود الفصائل على الالتحاق بالمجاهدين والوقوف إلى جانب المعتد عليهم؛ فإن الدفاع عن المظلومين وصد الباغيين هو من الجهاد في سبيل الله، وليس من قتال الفتنة المشي عنها. قال تعالى: ﴿لَوْ أَن تَحَنَّنْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ عَلَى الْآخَرِينَ لَقَاتَلُوا أَنْتَ بَعْدَ مَا نَبِغِي حَتَّى تَقِيءَ إِلَى أَمْرِ اللَّهِ﴾، قال الطبري رحمه الله: "في هذه الآية دليل على وجوب قتال الفتنة الباغية المعلوم بغتها على الإجماع، أو على أحد من المسلمين".

وقال صلى الله عليه وسلم: (مَنْ قُتِلَ دُونَ مَالِهِ فَبِهِ شَهِيدٌ، وَمَنْ قُتِلَ دُونَ دِمِهِ فَبِهِ شَهِيدٌ).

فالترفع عن قتال الفتنة الباغية هنا معصية ومخالفة للشرع، لا طاعة فيه.

وإلى عموم شعبنا الأبي المجاهد: ها أنتم تشاهدون بغي وعدوان جهة فتح الشام، وفتاوى مشايخ الضلال في استباحة قتال المجاهدين، وعدم قبولهم بوقف القتال والتحاكم للشرع، والاستعانة بخوارج جند الأقصى رأس حربة في قتال المجاهدين بدلاً من الوفاء بتعهدهم السابق بتقديمهم للمحكمة، مع رفض بيعات الفصائل لأحرار الشام كما صرحوا بذلك مراراً، فكما نرتزم على استبعاد نظام الأسد وظلمه وطمعانه فقد ابتلاك الله تعالى بالتصني لبيذة الفتنة الباغية، فأروا الله من أنفسكم خيراً بنصرة المظلوم والتصدي للظالم كل بما يستطيع ويحسن مالم تصدر جهة فتح الشام بياناً فوراً بإيقاف القتال والتحاكم للشرع.

نسأل الله تعالى أن يرم ثلوثنا من أمرها رشداً، وأن يوفق من أراد بها خيراً، وأن يقصم من أراد بها شراً، وأن يجعل بفضلحه في الدنيا والآخرة، والحمد لله رب العالمين

الموقعون:

الشيخ أسامة الرفاعي	د. محمد دراش	الشيخ أحمد محمد نجيب
د. عبد المنعم زين الدين	الشيخ أبو العباس الشامي	د. عماد الدين خيتي
د. أيمن هاروش	الشيخ غازي التوبة	د. معاذ مصطفى الخن
الشيخ ماهر علوش	الشيخ أحمد العلوان	الشيخ صالح الحموي
الشيخ أبو بصير الطرطوسي	الشيخ عبد الله رحال	الشيخ فايز الصلاح
الشيخ عبد العليم عبد الله	د. أحمد حوى	الشيخ عبد الجليل زين الدين
الشيخ حسام سلامة	الشيخ عمر حذيفة	أ.د. أحمد بن عبد الكريم نجيب
د. حسان الحاجية		

٣٠ ربيع الآخر ١٤٣٨ هـ - ٢٨ يناير / كانون الثاني ٢٠١٧ م

In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and blessings and peace upon the best of the prophets and messengers, and upon his family and companions. There is no aggression except against the wrongdoers.

The aggression of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and their escalation against the Mujahideen has persisted for days. The fatwas of their scholars continue to incite transgression, aiming to eliminate factions, strip them of their weapons, and undermine their efforts, despite the clear fatwas from the scholars of the Levant and initiatives by religious, revolutionary, and academic entities to address these issues. This necessitates a firm and united stance against this group until they return to reason.

We, the undersigned, had previously announced an initiative to save northern Syria by calling for the largest factions in the region to merge with Harakat Ahrar al-Sham under specific conditions and guidelines. These factions committed to the initiative, as did Harakat Ahrar al-Sham—may Allah reward them all. However, developments on the ground have outpaced the response of Ahrar al-Sham. It remains essential that the group's response, in military, media, and legal aspects, matches the gravity of the situation with strength and speed, addressing the aggressors decisively while maintaining separate tracks for dealing with the

transgressors and for pursuing internal reforms within Ahrar al-Sham.

We also urge other factions to fulfill their duty in defending the revolution and the people. Neutrality or attempting to mediate between the two parties is not sufficient. Specifically, we call on the brothers in Faylaq al-Sham, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, and other Free Syrian Army factions to step forward.

We further encourage hesitant fighters from all factions to join the Mujahideen in defending those under attack. Defending the oppressed and repelling transgressors is a form of Jihad in the path of Allah, and it is not part of the prohibited "fitna" fighting. Allah said:

" But if one of them oppresses the other, then fight against the one that oppresses until it returns to the ordinance of Allah." (Surah Al-Hujurat: 9). Imam Al-Tabari, may Allah have mercy on him, said: "This verse is evidence of the obligation to fight the transgressing group when their aggression against the Imam or any Muslim is known."

The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: *"Whoever is killed defending his wealth is a martyr, whoever is killed defending his blood is a martyr."*

Refraining from fighting against the transgressing group in this situation is disobedience and a violation of Islamic law.

To the noble, striving people of our nation: You are witnessing firsthand the aggression of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and the misleading fatwas of their scholars, permitting the bloodshed of Mujahideen, refusing to cease fighting, and rejecting calls to arbitration through Islamic law. Furthermore, they have sought assistance from the Khawarij group, Jund al-Aqsa—a hotbed of extremism—against the Mujahideen, instead of fulfilling their previous commitment to bring them to justice. They have also rejected pledges of allegiance to Ahrar al-Sham, as they have repeatedly stated. Just as you rose against the tyranny and oppression of the Assad regime, Allah has now tested you with confronting these oppressors. Strive against them in any way you can, unless Jabhat Fatah al-Sham issues an immediate statement ceasing their aggression and agreeing to arbitration under Islamic law.

We ask Allah Almighty to guide our revolution to wisdom, to support those who intend good for it, to destroy those who seek to harm it, and to expose their disgrace in this world and the Hereafter. All praise is due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds.

Signatories:

Sheikh Osama Al-Rifai, Dr. Muhammad Darwish, Sheikh Ahmad Muhammad Najib, Dr. Abdul Mun'im Zainuddin, Sheikh Abu Al-Abbas Al-Shami, Dr. Imad Al-Din Kheiti, Dr. Ayman Haroush, Sheikh Ghazi Al-Touba, Dr. Muadh Mustafa Al-Khann, Sheikh Maher Aloush, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Alwan, Sheikh Saleh Al-

Hamawi, Sheikh Abu Baseer Al-Tartousi, Sheikh Abdullah Rahal, Sheikh Fayez Al-Salah, Sheikh Abdul Alim Abdullah, Dr. Ahmad Hawa, Sheikh Abdul Jalil Zainuddin, Sheikh Hussam Salama, Sheikh Omar Hudhayfa, Prof. Dr. Ahmad Bin Abdul Karim Najib, Dr. Hassan Al-Jajeh.

30 Rabi' al-Thani 1438 AH – January 28, 2017 CE

Internal Estimates of Those from Ahrar al-Sham Who Joined Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham



- 955 - Final total number of individuals who left Ahrar al-Sham for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham:
- 3 members of the Shura Council
- 156 from the military wing
- 639 from northern Idlib
- 87 from southern Idlib
- 63 from Aleppo
- 7 from Hama

The Revolutionary Honor Charter

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Recognizing the critical phase that our blessed revolution is going through, and striving to unify efforts under a common framework that serves the Syrian revolution, the revolutionary forces affirm their commitment to the following:

1. The principles and guidelines of revolutionary work are derived from the rulings of our noble religion, far from extremism and fanaticism.
2. The Syrian armed revolution has a political goal: the overthrow of the regime with all its symbols and pillars, and bringing it to fair trial, without vengeance or retaliation.
3. The revolution militarily targets the Syrian regime, which has practiced terrorism against our people with its official and unofficial forces, as well as its supporters, such as Iranian mercenaries, Hezbollah, the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, and anyone who attacks our people and declares them apostates, such as ISIS. Military operations are restricted to Syrian territory.
4. Overthrowing the regime is a collaborative effort among various revolutionary forces. Aware of the regional and international dimensions of the

Syrian crisis, we welcome engagement and cooperation with regional and international parties sympathetic to the plight of the Syrian people, as long as it serves the interests of the revolution.

5. Preserving the unity of Syrian territory and preventing any divisive projects by all available means is a revolutionary principle that is non-negotiable.
6. Our revolutionary forces rely on Syrian personnel in their military operations and believe that political and military decision-making in the revolution must remain purely Syrian, rejecting any external dependency.
7. The Syrian people aim to establish a state of justice, law, and freedoms, free from external pressures and dictates.
8. The Syrian revolution is a revolution of ethics and values, seeking to achieve freedom, justice, and security for the Syrian society in its diverse social fabric, encompassing all ethnic and sectarian groups.
9. The Syrian revolution is committed to respecting human rights as encouraged by our noble religion.
10. We reject the regime's policy of targeting civilians with various weapons, including chemical

weapons, and affirm our commitment to keeping civilians out of the conflict. We do not possess or use weapons of mass destruction.

11. All resources recovered from the regime are the property of the Syrian people and are used by revolutionary forces to achieve the people's demands of overthrowing the regime.

We invite all other forces operating on Syrian soil to sign this statement so that we may stand united in our pursuit of overthrowing the regime.

Signatories to the Statement:

- The Islamic Union of Ajnad al-Sham
- Faylaq al-Sham
- Jaysh al-Mujahideen
- Alwiya al-Furqan
- The Islamic Front

17/05/2014

**Statement Issued by Jabhat al-Nusra Regarding
the "Revolutionary Honor Charter"**

Media Statement No. 9

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. All praise is due to Allah, who has promised the Mujahideen in His cause the best reward and more and has made encouraging the believers an act of worship. May peace and blessings be upon the one who was sent with the sword before the Hour, and upon his family and companions, who possess wisdom and leadership. To proceed:

The media has circulated what has been called the "Revolutionary Honor Charter," signed by some fighting factions in Syria. We have received this charter as other Muslims and Mujahideen have, and we wish that our signing brothers had consulted us on this matter. It is well-known that one of the prominent issues in the jihad fronts, which scholars have frequently highlighted, is the absence of consultation and unilateral decision-making. The Syrian jihad is a trust upon the shoulders of Muslims in general and the Mujahideen in particular, especially as it enters these days of trials and tribulations.

Since this charter addresses general matters concerning the Syrian jihad and, in some aspects, the jihad of the ummah as a whole, we find it necessary to clarify the observations we have regarding it, as we understand from our religion, and to present aspects of our methodology. It is important to emphasize that our criticisms of the factions for certain errors do not negate their virtues and contributions to jihad. Every individual's statements are subject to acceptance or rejection, depending on their alignment with the Shari'ah. This is a matter of faith, and jihad must be cleared of any mistakes or violations. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: *"O Allah, I disassociate myself from what Khalid has done."*

After this introduction, we summarize our key observations as follows:

1. First: Lack of clarity, discipline, and specificity in the charter's principles.

While the first point mentions the "principles and guidelines of revolutionary work," we found no clarity or specificity within it. Instead, it consists of vague and ambiguous phrases that can be interpreted differently by different parties. How can it be a charter that defines and regulates revolutionary work when it lacks discipline and definition?

2. **Second: One-sided focus on combating extremism and neglecting laxity and appeasement.** While extremism and fanaticism indeed harm and distort jihad, so too does laxity, compromise, and surrender. The religion of Allah lies between these extremes, as Allah says: *“And thus we have made you a just community that you will be witnesses over the people”* (Surah Baqarah, 2:143).
3. **Third: Mere claims of adhering to the rulings of our religion are insufficient.** Many claim to refer to the principles of our noble religion, but words and actions must align with the Qur'an and Sunnah. This charter, however, contains elements that contradict them, as we will clarify in this statement. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “I have left you upon a clear path, its night is like its day; no one deviates from it after me but he is destroyed.”
4. **Fourth: Limiting jihad to one form of confronting the aggressor: the military overthrow of the regime.** This regime has attacked not only our lives, honor, wealth, and lineage but, more importantly, our religion. Therefore, confronting it must

prioritize the preservation of religion above all else. It is an established principle in Islam that safeguarding religion takes precedence over other necessities. Allah says: *“And fight them until there is no fitnah and [until] the religion, all of it, is for Allah. And if they cease - then indeed, Allah is Seeing of what they do.”* (Surah Anfal, 8:39). And in another verse: *“And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children?”* (Surah Nisa, 4:75).

5. **Fifth:** The statement specifies that the factions signing the charter intend to bring the symbols and criminals of the regime to fair trials, far from vengeance or retaliation. However, this contradicts what Islamic law has decreed: those who have committed severe apostasy (***ridda mughalladha***) have no right to anything but the sword in Islam. The tyrants of the regime, along with its symbols and pillars, are among those guilty of severe apostasy, and Shari'ah mandates their execution if they are captured.

This is supported by the narration found in *Sunan al-Nasa'i* and authenticated by al-

Albani regarding four individuals who were ordered to be executed even if they sought refuge by clinging to the coverings of the Kaaba. It was narrated by Mus'ab ibn Sa'd on the authority of his father, who said:

"On the day of the conquest of Mecca, the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) granted safety to the people except for four men and two women. He said: 'Kill them even if you find them clinging to the coverings of the Kaaba.' They were: Ikrimah ibn Abi Jahl, Abdullah ibn Khatal, Miqyas ibn Subabah, and Abdullah ibn Sa'd ibn Abi Sarh. As for Abdullah ibn Khatal, he was found clinging to the coverings of the Kaaba. Sa'id ibn Hurayth and Ammar ibn Yasir both rushed to him, but Sa'id, being the younger and more agile of the two, killed him. Miqyas ibn Subabah was caught in the marketplace and killed there."

Furthermore, it is within our sacred law to seek rightful vengeance against this criminal regime. Did not Qa'qa' ibn Amr cry out during the early stages of the Battle of Qadisiyyah when he saw Bahman Jadhuyah, "For the revenge of Abu Ubayd, for the revenge of Sulayt ibn Amr, for the revenge of the companions of the bridge"? Did not the

Prophet (peace be upon him) dispatch his companions in the blessed Battle of Mu'tah to avenge the killing of his emissaries? Similarly, the Battle of TABuk was also waged in retribution. Thus, there exists legitimate and Shari'ah-approved vengeance, and failure to avenge the people of Syria is nothing but a betrayal of their trust.

6. **Sixth:** The charter states that it welcomes engagement and cooperation with regional and international parties that stand in solidarity with the plight of the Syrian people, as long as it serves the interests of the revolution. However, this statement is too broad and lacks specificity regarding the identities of these parties, their stances toward Islam and Muslims in various regions, their roles, and their objectives regarding the blessed Syrian Islamic revolution and its outcomes. Furthermore, the charter does not clarify the forms of cooperation, the nature of the meetings, or the discussions taking place within them.

It is well-known that these regional parties primarily aim to combat Islam and its adherents while preventing the return of the rightly-guided Caliphate. This is evident in

point four of the charter. Meanwhile, point six mentions the rejection of any form of subordination to foreign entities, but it does not clarify the term "foreign entities." Does it refer to Islamic groups—which seems more apparent—or to regional parties? If it refers to the latter, then the statement is contradictory.

Allah has repeatedly warned us of the schemes of the polytheists throughout the ages. He says:

“And judge between them ‘O Prophet’ by what Allah has revealed, and do not follow their desires. And beware, so they do not lure you away from some of what Allah has revealed to you. If they turn away ‘from Allah’s judgment’, then know that it is Allah’s Will to repay them for some of their sins, and that many people are indeed rebellious.”
(Surah Al-Ma'idah 48:58).

And He also says:

“And thus do We detail the verses, and [thus] the way of the criminals will become evident”
(Surah Al-An'am, 6:55).

And:

“Indeed, those who have turned back after guidance has become clear to them - Satan enticed them and prolonged hope for them. That is because they said to those who disliked what Allah revealed, ‘We will obey you in part of the matter.’ And Allah knows what they conceal” (Surah Muhammad, 47:25–26).

7. **Seventh:** The principle of faith-based brotherhood is absent, while the spirit of national and territorial brotherhood dominates all the provisions of the charter. This is evident in points three, five, six, and eight, all of which emphasize citizenship and allegiance to land and nation. This contradicts the teachings of divine revelation, which emphasize the brotherhood of faith, regardless of homeland, ethnicity, or color. Allah the Exalted said:

“The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy” (Ayah al-Hujurat, 49:10). And He said: “The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong” (Surah Tawbah, 9:71). Furthermore, in describing the People of the

Book, Allah said: "And [recall] when We took your covenant, [saying], 'Do not shed each other's blood or evict one another from your homes.' Then you acknowledged [this] while you were witnessing" (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:84).

We in Jabhat al-Nusra openly and categorically reject any undermining or concealment of the role of our immigrant brothers in this blessed jihad. They have played a monumental role in supporting the people of Sham, in accordance with Allah's command:

"And if they seek help of you for the religion, then you must help" (Surah Al-Anfal, 8:72).

We will only repay them with kindness and gratitude, as Allah the Merciful said:

"Is the reward for good [anything] but good?" (Surah Rahman, 55:60).

What unites us with the Muslim community is the brotherhood of faith, which transcends all ties of land or nation. Our support for Muslims is based on religion and loyalty to it, not to a homeland or land. Allah said:

"And what is [the matter] with you that you do not fight in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children?" (Surah Nisa, 4:75).

The Prophet (peace be upon him) also said:

"A Muslim is the brother of another Muslim; he does not wrong him nor does he forsake him."

Let it be known to all that the Islamic state we seek is one founded on the basis of religion, faith, and Shari'ah above all else, and that loyalty and disavowal are based on this foundation. For us, a Muslim and a disbeliever are not equal, as Allah said:

"Then should We treat the Muslims like the criminals?" (Surah Al-Qalam, 68:35).

The Prophet (peace be upon him) also said:

"The strongest bond of faith is to love for Allah and to hate for Allah."

What harms our immigrant brothers harms us, and what affects them affects us. Whoever mocks or belittles them has mocked or belittled us. So, O immigrants, this is the land of Sham; traverse it freely. The gates of Sham will remain wide open for anyone who

wishes to support it and do good for its people.

8. **Eighth:** The charter states that the Syrian people aim to establish a state of justice, law, and freedom without external pressure or dictates. However, we clearly see the pressures and dictates in the wording of this clause. We, as sons of Sham, have, by Allah's grace, a significant presence across all regions of Sham. We desire only a state governed by Shari'ah, without concealment or compromise.

We openly declare that we will not accept any civil or democratic state or any state that does not operate under the sovereignty of Shari'ah. This is also the stance of many of the fighting factions with whom we interact and live, and they represent the majority of the people of Sham. The people of Sham have realized that Shari'ah is what will bring them justice and security. There is no justice, freedom, security, or safety in societies that do not adhere to Shari'ah. Allah the Exalted said:

"Then is it the judgment of [the time of] ignorance they desire? But who is better than Allah in judgment for a people who are

certain [in faith]?" (Surah Maidah, 5:50). And He said: "They who believe and do not mix their belief with injustice - those will have security, and they are [rightly] guided" (Surah Anam 6:82).

The concept of a state of justice, law, and freedom is one sought by Muslims, Jews, Christians, secularists, Hindus, Magians, and others. Everyone claims they want a state of justice, law, and freedom. Thus, generalization and lack of clarity in this matter are unacceptable. In this regard, we refer to the statement of our leader, the conqueror Abu Mohammedal-Joulani (may Allah preserve him): *"The days to come are better than the past."*

9. **Ninth:** The charter states that: *"The Syrian revolution is a revolution of morals and values aimed at achieving freedom, justice, and security for Syrian society in its diverse social fabric, encompassing all its ethnic and sectarian components."*

We say that the treatment of sects, religions, and groups in the religion of Allah varies from one group to another, as established by scholars. It is not permissible to equate them all. A charter such as this should have stated

that dealing with each group is governed by Shari'ah texts and its rules, ensuring no injustice is done and none is suffered.

In conclusion, we remind you that this statement was written purely as advice, for Allah, His Messenger, and the mujahideen. We call upon the signatories to retract, amend, and align the charter with clear and explicit Islamic terms and projects.

Allah knows best and is the most wise.

May Allah's blessings and peace be upon our master Muhammad, his family, and his companions.

"And Allah is predominant over His affair, but most of the people do not know" (Surah Yusuf, 12:21).

Jabhat al-Nusra

Date of publication: Tuesday, 21st of Rajab, 1435 AH (May 20, 2014).

French Foreign Minister Fabius and Jabhat al-Nusra



Proche-Orient

INTERNATIONAL PROCHE-ORIENT Arabie saoudite Bahreïn Irak Iran Israël

EDITION ABONNÉS

Pression militaire et succès diplomatique pour les rebelles syriens

LE MONDE | 13.12.2012 à 12h51 • Mis à jour le 13.12.2012 à 13h18 |

En revanche, la décision des Etats-Unis de placer Jabhat Al-Nosra, un groupe djihadiste combattant aux côtés des rebelles, sur leur liste des organisations terroristes, a été vivement critiquée par des soutiens de l'opposition. M. Fabius a ainsi estimé, mercredi, que "tous les Arabes étaient vent debout" contre la position américaine, "parce que, **sur le terrain, ils font un bon boulot**". "C'était très net, et le président de la Coalition était aussi sur cette ligne", a ajouté le ministre.

Source de l'image:
<https://www.les-crises.fr/fabius-et-les-islamistes-d-al-qaida-qui-font-du-bon-boulot/>

Le Monde Newspaper, 13/12/2012:

In contrast, the decision by the United States to classify Jabhat al-Nusra, the jihadist group fighting alongside the rebels, as a terrorist organization was strongly criticized by supporters of the opposition.

Mr. Laurent Fabius said on Wednesday: "All the Arabs are against this American stance because, on the ground, the group is doing a good job, and this is very clear. The President of the Syrian Coalition also shares this position," the minister added.

Syria under the Rule of Jihadi Fascism

Haytham Manna

Less than a month before Bashar al-Assad fled Damascus, an Arab cartoonist called me on the day Assad arrived in Riyadh to attend an Arab-Islamic summit. He asked: “How can I sum up the Syrian president’s presence at the summit in a single image?” I replied: “Take a skeleton from a medical illustration and place Assad’s head on it.” Of course, my friend didn’t take my suggestion.

Meanwhile, in Geneva, an HD (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue) employee organized a meeting between visitors from northwestern Syria and the American and British embassies and intelligence services. Preparations were underway in Hakan Fidan’s office for a military operation whose minimum objective was the entry into Aleppo and the rest of Idlib province along strategic roads, and whose maximum objective was a move toward Damascus. Hillary Clinton’s 2012 remark on the Syrian National Council echoed in my mind: “Expired.”

Throughout more than half a century of my life, I've always refused to be part of the "Let the Devil Come"⁸⁸ party. Having followed Jabhat al-Nusra and its offshoots since the Qazzaz bombings and a funeral in Jaramana, I and several Syrian democrats saw "Salafi jihadism" as a counter-revolutionary force against the peaceful civil uprising. For example, Assad issued presidential pardons for al-Qaïda members while Syria's best youth fell to the bullets of his criminal regime.

Our suspicions were later confirmed when Jabhat al-Nusra issued a takfiri fatwa against me and Abdelaziz al-Khayyer in summer 2012—labeling me a "Shiite communist" and him a "Nusayri Alawite."

In my final meeting with Ambassador Robert Ford, he suggested I meet with the "Ahrar al-Sham" movement. I declined. In spring 2014, a former Sidnaya prisoner who had shared a cell with Hassan Aboud called me. He told me that Aboud and a clever young man (Mohammad al-Shami) were working on a "Revolutionary Honor Charter." It was, in reality, a last cry before collapse. Syrians had lost control of their fate; foreigners were now making the decisions.

⁸⁸ It is a statement commonly used among those who could bear no more—the severe deterioration of all aspects of personal, civil, and political life—and welcome any change—regardless whether it deepens the suffering—even if the devil brings it.

Since then, I focused my research on the Islamic State in Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra: their formation, functions, financial and military support, the cross-border fighter networks, and the contradictions between their field religious practices and their subordination to the geopolitical strategies of Erdoğan and Fidan.

On July 12, 2014, in Paris, we organized a joint seminar with Turkish and Syrian opposition figures⁸⁹. We had verified information that the relationship between Turkey's MIT and Jabhat al-Nusra had progressed from "tense tolerance" to active cooperation—both security and military—through SADAT (a defense consultancy) and the quasi-governmental IHH relief agency. This relationship was first exposed publicly on January 9, 2014, when Turkish gendarmerie stopped weapon shipments bound for Jabhat al-Nusra.

Despite Turkey's declared commitment to UN Resolution 2254 and later the Sochi Agreement (2018) to clear Idlib of terrorist groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Turkish cooperation with them only deepened—economically through border

⁸⁹ The Consequences of War in Syria on the relations between the Peoples of Turkey and Syria
. SIHR/FHM & ACHR, Malakoff 12/07/2014.

crossing revenues and Turkish investments in areas under HTS's "Salvation Government."

On November 8, 2018, I gave a lecture in Geneva about "Turkish-Qatari support for Islamic movements in Syria" and MIT's ties to HTS and its government. No Western diplomat present took my remarks seriously⁹⁰.

After the defeat of ISIS and the intervention of the international coalition, Jabhat al-Nusra—then HTS—focused on imposing a strict socio-religious order in its territories: monopolizing civil and humanitarian activities, enforcing "hisbah" (moral policing) in the Wahhabi-Talibani sense. Turkish intelligence oversaw alliances, enmities, and funding. HTS propaganda became increasingly anti-Syrian and sectarian, leading to mass displacement and full prisons for those guilty of "sins."

Idlib became a strict camp of daily control. "Jihad of the Sunnis" became the rallying cry across speeches and school curricula. HTS institutionalized sectarianism and integrated foreign fighters as a core military base. Authority structures followed the

⁹⁰ Hakan Fidan, the current Turkish Foreign Minister, acknowledged the longstanding relationship and coordination with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, but did not disclose this until 2024 due to its designation as a terrorist organization. See Glossary

logic of “loyalty and disavowal,” while the war economy mirrored the regime’s corruption.

I often corrected my friends who referred to HTS-held areas as “liberated” by saying: “To be accurate, call them ‘repeated’ areas.”

HTS’s ideologically closed, sectarian model was chosen (by Fidan) to be expanded across Syria. Meanwhile, the “Coalition” and “Interim Government” were sidelined and cut off from aid. Other factions, like the “National Army,” were left waiting for their turn at plunder, participating in joint raids, expulsions of Alawites, property confiscations, and looting under the official label of so-called *Fulul* “remnants of the former regime.”

It’s worth recalling that Bashar al-Assad was the only political figure in the region who said nothing all year about the genocide in Gaza—even the Comoros presidency condemned Israeli massacres. But that didn’t endear him to British, Turkish, or Qatari intelligence.

Even if the proposed alternative regime inspired little trust, replacing a collapsed, bloody dictatorship with a weaker, authoritarian one seemed acceptable to many countries involved in the Syrian war. The military-security front had exhausted itself. Civilians in rebel-held areas were simply struggling to

survive. Ukraine's war, Gaza's extermination, and Hezbollah's battering had eroded the "wings of defense" that delayed Damascus' fall by ten years.

The "Military Operations Room" inherited a collapsed state and bankrupt economy. Borrowing from satirist Khateeb Badleh, it was a "shattered, torn-apart, punctured" country, with over 80% of people below the poverty line and under the heaviest sanctions in the developing world. The "new administration," whose top figures had Syrian blood on their hands and were listed by the UN as terrorists, was incapable of transitioning from sectarian militancy to national reconstruction.

Thus, dissolving the army and police were among their first moves, followed by firing over a quarter of public sector workers (mostly Alawites and other non-Sunni groups). Within 100 days, sectarian cleansing massacres occurred on the Syrian coast.

Gulf and Western media downplayed the events and adopted the new regime's official narrative: that this was a "foiled coup attempt by regime remnants." Despite extreme danger, Syrian human rights defenders documented the genocide-in-progress by jihadi groups—most now integrated into the new army and security forces—in one of the most important human rights reports in modern Syrian history.

Although over a million people read the “Human Rights and Humanitarian follow-up Committee” (Syria) report⁹¹, neither the UN Security Council nor the UNHCR, nor intergovernmental bodies like the EU or Arab League responded proportionately to the atrocities.

As the saying goes: “Easy money teaches theft; unpunished crimes teach murder.” The takfiri slogan expanded southward. We now hear the ragged, masked militia shouting: “Put the weapons back on the shelves—there’s nothing worse than Alawites except the Druze!”

The “*original sin*” of Jabhat al-Nusra still activates mobs and the ignorant whenever the new sectarian regime needs them. Our fear is that the crimes in Jaramana, Sahnaya, al-Saoura al-Kubra, and elsewhere may go unnoticed due to local and international complicity—just like what happened earlier in Pakistan. Now, the desperate masses cry out:

“We don’t want electricity, we don’t want water... At your service, O Messenger of Allah... We want the infidels executed!”

⁹¹ <https://sihr.fr/eng/sectarian-cleansing-as-a-policy-of-governance/>

The new regime has shattered Syrians' last civic immune defenses. It redirected people's attention away from rebuilding, national unity, equal citizenship, and productive work—toward killing, displacement, and robbing fellow Syrians with the help of foreign fighters.

Defining loyalty through Sunni sectarian identity and casting all others as enemies has already brought us to disaster in the coast, Jaramana, Sahnaya, Soura, Homs, and Suwayda. This path promises the worst scenarios for Syria's future.

We will not delve here into determining responsibilities for future possibilities, which include division, partition, and civil war. The model presented to us by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham does not resemble the overwhelming majority of Syrians. No matter how much some newspapers try to report opinion polls they call "scientific and accurate" about the popularity of the group holding power in Damascus, or how some focus on the new outfits of the Takfiri jihadists, their sectarian beliefs and daily practices confirm, day after day, the necessity of exploring other scenarios before destroying what remains of this torn country.

Sectarian mobilization and incitement is a weapon of mass destruction. I've said it dozens of times and will keep saying it:

We have no future with those who made it a strategy for domination and rule.

Washington, 12 May 2025. Syrian Conference for Democracy.

Glossary

Youssef al-Qardawi: Born September 9, 1926 in Egypt and died September 26, 2022 in Doha, a student at Al-Azhar, and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, he left Egypt in 1961 to live in Doha. He quickly became the Mufti of the State of Qatar. When Hamad bin Khalifa took power in 1995, he sought to form a parallel body to Al-Azhar and tasked Qardawi with this task. The latter oversaw the religious agenda of Al Jazeera and several Islamic institutions. His role became evident in 2011 when he issued a fatwa supporting NATO's military intervention in Libya, and then gathered 500 Salafi clerics and members of the Muslim Brotherhood to declare jihad in Syria. This undermined the image he tried to present as a moderate Islamist. Just before his death, al-Qardawi considered President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the hope of Muslims for the reconstruction of the Islamic caliphate.

Ahmad al-Sharaa: Hussein al-Sharaa, father of Ahmad al-Sharaa, was displaced from the village of Jableen (Golan Heights occupied after 1967). He was close to the national leadership of the Baath Party, then studied economics and worked in the Ministry of Economy when Assad took power, before leaving for Saudi Arabia to continue his studies. Hussein's sons became interested in business and opened a mini-market in Mazzeh Jabal, and one of his brothers studied medicine. Abu Mohammed al-Joulani is one of Hussein's sons. He failed to graduate from high school for two years, then

left school to join the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (Zarqawi's group). He was first influenced by Sheikh Saad's religious circles in Mezzeh, then joined a charlatan sheikh from the north named Abu al-Qaqa (Mahmoud Qol Agha), who submitted reports on his students to security and was one of his disciples. After his sheikh was assassinated, Ahmed left with several of his companions to "resistance" in Iraq. After Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took command of the Islamic State in Iraq, he entrusted him, along with two former officers of Saddam's army (Colonel Samir Abdul Muhammad al-Ubaidi al-Dailami, whose nom de guerre was Haji Bakr, and Maysar bin Ali al-Jubouri, whose nom de guerre was Abu Maria al-Qahtani, and a number of Iraqis), with the mission of establishing an al-Qaïda branch in Syria. Regarding this mission, al-Joulani said: "Almighty God honored me by allowing me to meet Sheikh al-Baghdadi, this venerable sheikh who respected the rights of the people of the Levant, doubled the debt, and approved a project we proposed to him to support our oppressed people in the Levant. He then granted us a portion of the state's wealth despite the difficulties they were going through. He then placed his complete trust in this poor servant, giving him the power to develop policies and plans, and granted him a few brothers. Despite their small number, Almighty God blessed them and their assembly." Iraqi officer Haji Bakr was accidentally killed. In Aleppo, al-Joulani took command, assisted by Iraqi Abu Maria al-Qahtani. They were joined by three Syrian veterans of the Fighting Vanguard who had fled to Afghanistan. According to the HTS lists of "martyrs," all

of these fighters died as martyrs, with the exception of al-Joulani, who always surrounded himself with a group of foreign fighters of various nationalities. Al-Joulani's stance toward Turkey was extremely hostile and did not differ from that of former Iraqi army officers who converted to Islam. Therefore, in his first audio message announcing the birth of the Al-Nusra Front, he stated: "There is no doubt that I include in this crime the Turkish regime, which is America's new stick to fight the distortion of minds and rational approaches. It flatters Muslims to gain their favor in order to feed them with this bitter poison. The Islam of the Turkish regime is devoid of substance; it is a meaningless image and a body without a soul." The greatest failure of the Turkish regime's project is that America is content with it: {And neither the Jews nor the Christians will be pleased with you until you follow their religion.}" As the conflict escalated and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) split, it began to establish security relations with Turkey. The only outlet for arms and trade was a Turkish port. For years, some joined HTS with Turkish approval, others at the behest of Turkish military intelligence. Miraculously, the common ground of contact with ISIS was its support for the authenticity of the hadith fabricated by Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, al-Baghdadi's deputy: "On the authority of Abu Hurairah, he said: I heard the Messenger of God deliver a sermon to us and say: 'Leave the Turks alone as long as they leave you alone.'" This was to prevent any operations by its foreign supporters in Turkey. It signed contracts with various factions, including the People's Protection Units, Hazm,

Ahrar al-Sham, Ahrar Syria, etc., and honored none of them. There are strong indications that it was involved in the assassination of all the leaders of the Ahrar al-Sham movement, in a gas explosion that killed Hassan Abboud and all 24 members of its leadership. In a recorded speech, Aljolani criticized Al-Nusra's waste of resources, which he said amount to a billion dollars, commenting: "We must save as much money as possible, because having money makes it easier to attract and recruit men."

Takfir: According to the majority of Islamic schools, declaring a person an infidel (takfir) is a very serious matter, as it authorizes the shedding of their blood after they have previously been protected. The Prophet Muhammad said: "Whoever says, 'There is no god but God,' their blood and property are protected." This view has not prevented the emergence of the idea that Islamic societies are considered "twentieth-century jahiliyyah" and that most Muslims who do not engage in jihad to establish the reign of "God" on earth are infidels. This minority movement successfully mobilized for jihad against communism in Afghanistan after the Soviet Union's intervention in the Afghan conflict in the twentieth century and Western support for the mujahideen against communism. The rest is history.

Tafjir: Literally, to explode, is a term used by Islamic reformer Laith Shubaylat to describe the random use of violence by Salafi jihadist groups.

Shabiha: "specters, ghostly apparitions," originally paramilitary gangs, were groups of armed men in civilian

clothes who acted for the government of Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian opposition and human rights groups all claimed that the Shabiha were a tool of the regime to repress and terrorize the population and the popular protest movement. Tahrim: Al Tahrim, or prohibition, is the historical religious expression of "censorship and prohibitions." There is no more effective way to prevent dissenting opinions or customs that are not in harmony with a religious group than to clothe the forbidden in a sacred garment. Although the Quran's prohibitions are limited to basic social relations, the prohibitions within religious groups extend to various aspects of life. We find

this phenomenon among Jewish and Islamic extremist groups, among others.

Sednaya: A prison under the Ministry of Defense and managed by the military police under the direct supervision of the military intelligence division, built by Hafez al-Assad in 1987. Between 1987 and 2000, the prison housed mainly left-wing prisoners: from the Communist Action Party, the Communist Party-BP, Kurdish parties, the Democratic Baath Party, trade unionists, human rights activists (notably the CDF), Islamist prisoners, and military personnel critical of the regime, including Lebanese and Palestinians. However, since the beginning of the "War on Terror," the political complexion of the prisoners has completely changed: Salafists, Syrians, and Arabs have become the group most frequently visiting the prison. The number of imprisoned Salafist jihadists reached nearly 2,000 in

2011. Since the 2011 uprising, Sednaya has become the primary detention center and a symbol of torture and arbitrary detention. Tens of thousands of prisoners have been held there. The surviving detainees were released by Syrian rebels on the night of December 7-8, 2024. Among the released detainees were "Syrians, but also Lebanese, Palestinians, Iraqis... Democrats, communists, Christians, Druze, Shiites, Muslim Brotherhood members, journalists, lawyers, and students." A significant number of women and children were also discovered.

Sabaya: captives of war, sex slaves. In 2014, ISIS has released a booklet containing the group's answers to 32 questions prepared by the group's Research and Fatwa Bureau regarding captivity and how to treat female captives. The booklet begins with a definition of captivity and concludes with fatwas on the methods of marrying female captives. The booklet explains in detail what this relationship entails, including permission to take non-Muslim captives, referring to Christians and Jews. It also advises treating non-Muslim women as slaves. The booklet includes several other fatwas, such as marrying apostate women who were born Muslim and then converted. The ISIS booklet defines captivity as "what Muslims take from the women of the people of war," and states that "the reason for captivity is disbelief. Therefore, disbelieving women are permitted to us by the imam dividing them after seizing them and bringing them to the abode of Islam." These characteristics are fulfilled, as ISIS imams see it, in the Yazidi and other women they

have captured. The basic of this booklet was admitted by members of HTS in the attacks against the Alawites and others no-Sunnis women in 2025.

Ibn Taymiyyah: It is difficult to discuss Ibn Taymiyyah because myth and fact are mixed when examining his career and writings. The basis for Ibn Taymiyyah's opinions is found entirely in the "Qadirite Doctrine" (1018 AD - 409 AD), the first decree of the Abbasid Caliph (Al-Qadir Billah 381 - 442 AD - 991 - 1031 AD), which stipulated the definition of the Muslim faith and the obligation to act in accordance with its chapters, which begin with the statement: "This is the faith of the Muslims, and whoever contradicts it commits an act of immorality and disbelief." In matters of faith, we find nothing new in Hanbali Sunni jurisprudence, and we only find his personal opinions on marginal issues (such as the confirmation of a man's right to divorce his wife), while in matters of the caliphate, we find him supporting legitimacy based on alshaouka: force, violence and weapons. He focuses on the prohibition of alcohol, music, philosophy and literature, and considers excommunication and the fight against all Islamic sects (Mu'tazila, Jahmiyya, various Shiite schools, Batiniyya, Sufis, Ismailis, Alawites, etc.) as a religious duty, and he personally participated in campaigns of persecution against them in the Bekaa and Mount Lebanon. Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwas would have disappeared with their time, if Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1793) had not found in them something suitable for the nomadic nature and cultural poverty of the Arabian Peninsula, and

he relied on them to propagate Wahhabism in present-day Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This doctrine achieved military victories that brought it to power thanks to an alliance between the Al ash-Sheikh (the clan of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab) and the Al Saud, who have ruled Saudi Arabia for nearly a century. Oil and gas have completed the ahistorical role of this extremist school of Islam.

Hour Al-Aïn: Virgins of Paradise. Hour Al-Aïn has been used since ancient times as a means of mobilizing young men and preparing them to die for the sake of Allah. Salafi books are replete with the story of Abu Hurairah calling on fighters, saying: “Hurry to meet the houris in the company of the Lord of the Worlds.” Al-Muhaysini and other Wahhabis used them to mobilize teenagers to carry out suicide operations. He even went so far as to say in one of his sermons about teenage fighters: Abdullah al-Muhaysini, in a video in which he says: “In minutes and hours, the greatest battle in the history of the Levant jihad will begin... Where are those who want seventy-two beautiful wives from the houris? Martyr, if one of those wives spits in the sea, Her spit becomes sweet. If she kisses your mouth, she fills it with honey and nectar. If you sweat, you fill paradise with fragrance. So, imagine her hug? Imagine her singing!”

Hakan Fidan: Born in 1968 in Ankara, the Turkish capital, Hakan Fidan is from the Kurdish Seytitki clan. He graduated from the Turkish military academy and the military school for linguistic studies. He then served in the NATO Response Force in Germany. He earned a

bachelor's degree in political and administrative studies from the University of Maryland in the USA. Upon returning to Turkey, he earned a doctorate in international relations from Bilkent University. Between 2003 and 2007, he was successively assigned to the IAEA in Vienna, then to the United Nations Institute for Research and Development in Geneva, before joining the Centre for Information Technology and Verification Research in London. Finally, he worked in the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TİKA), a government organization dedicated to increasing Turkish influence over developing countries, particularly Turkic countries. In November 2007, he joined Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's cabinet as Deputy Undersecretary of State. On May 25, 2010, he was appointed Undersecretary, i.e., head, of the Milli Istihbarat Teskilati, the Turkish secret service (MIT). In 2012, Erdoğan declared that Fidan was "a very efficient civil servant," "he is the keeper of my secrets, the keeper of state secrets." Fidan is considered "one of the most powerful men in Turkey." The only official in Turkey authorized to negotiate with terrorists by parliamentary and government decision, Fidan built a regional and international network that allowed him to control and manage the entry of more than 120,000 jihadists from nearly 60 countries into Syria and Iraq. He manages to control an unmanageable situation and overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime following a deal that brings Syria into a very certain future. A bet on his personal future as Erdogan's pre-designated successor.

Islamic Front: Faced with the dominant influence of non-Syrians in ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, which gave foreign fighters a leading role in the fighting in Syria, Syrian leaders from several Salafi-jihadist factions met and decided to create a common front based on Syrian fighters and proposing a program that would be compatible with Syrian society, with its various groups, sects, and ethnicities. Several factions, including Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, agreed to declare this front. The Front met with several Western officials, including US Ambassador Robert Ford, to explain its plan. Hassan Abboud, the leader of Ahrar al-Sham, prepared a “revolutionary code of honor.” Al-Qaïda, Turkish, and Qatari intelligence services opposed this plan, and Hassan Abboud was subjected to takfir (excommunication) campaigns by Salafi jihadists. The incident culminated in a major bombing that killed Ahrar al-Sham leaders, weakening the Islamic Front.

Anas Khattab: The official UN website states: "Anas Hasan Khattab was listed on the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaïda Sanctions List on 23 September 2014 pursuant to paragraphs 2 and 4 of Security Council resolution 2161 (2014) as being associated with Al-Qaïda for having participated in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of Al-Nusra Front, and for having otherwise supported acts or activities of the Front. As of early 2014, Anas Hasan Khattab was a senior administrative official of Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant. As of late

2013, he was a senior member of the leadership of Al-Nusra Front, was a senior administrative official. In mid-2013, Khattab was also a member of the Shura Council of the Nusra Front. Responsible for infiltrating and eliminating competing elements in the jihadist movement and the Free Army, he is credited with eliminating numerous rival officials. Appointed after the HTC/SHS came to power as head of general intelligence in Syria, he oversees sectarian cleansing operations against Alawites in the Sahel. He is currently Interior Minister in the interim government in Damascus.

Alawites: A Shiite branch of Islam, mainly present in Syria, also called Alawites or Nusayris. Their name comes from their veneration of Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, considered the first imam of this branch of Shiism. They represent nearly 12% of the Syrian population. Like other non-Sunni minorities, their participation in the construction of post-Ottoman Syria is marked by the role of their intellectuals and cadres in the life and construction of Syria in the 20th century. After the 1963 coup d'état, the influence of Alawite officers in the army began to grow. Hafez al-Assad, following a military coup, was able to seize power and establish several special units on which he relied to build his authoritarian regime. To do this, he relied on two major Alawite clans: his own Qarahleh clan and the Matawwara clan. From them, he built what Max Weber called his military interest group, which ruled Syria even after his death. Although he relied on various sects to administer the government, the presence of a clear

majority in his security apparatus drawn from these two clans created a link between his regime and the sect. The Muslim Brotherhood has always equated Assad's power with all Alawites (it should be noted that most of the opposition figures to his regime were left-wing Alawites).

Abu Musab al-Suri: nom-guerre of Mustafa Bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar. He was around 24 years old when he took part in the uprising in the large Syrian city of Hama in February 1982. Mustafa reached France, then went to Spain where he married a Spanish woman, which allowed him to obtain the passport essential for his future travels. In 1995, he joined Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. Returning to Spain in 1992, al-Suri supported the Algerian Armed Islamic Group. He is wanted in Spain for an attack committed in 1985 as well as as a witness in the Madrid attacks of March 11, 2004. Many consider him "the most eloquent representative of modern jihad and its most sophisticated strategies." In 2005, along with his companion, Abu Khaled al-Suri, Abu Musab Al-Suri was arrested by Pakistani intelligence and handed over to the CIA, where he was imprisoned for several months. Having no evidence against him, they sent him to Damascus. Sentenced to seven years in prison with Abu Khaled al-Suri, Abu Musab was tortured almost daily by Syrian intelligence until he disappeared from view. Abu Khaled al-Suri was released along with several hundred Islamists at the start of the uprising in

2011, while Abu Musab was not so lucky. Abu Khaled al-Suri was assassinated in Aleppo on February 23, 2014.

Abderrahim Atoun: Born in Idlib Governorate in 1956, he developed his Salafist culture with several sheikhs and joined the jihadist movement shortly before 2011. He joined Jabhat al-Nusra in 2014 and considered the "Revolutionary Charter of Honor" a blasphemous document. Atoun attacked anyone who used the terms patriotism, homeland, Syria, and democracy. He strongly criticized the Ahrar al-Sham movement and the Free Syrian Army factions, calling for them to be fought, and participated in the 2017 battle to get rid of them. His first public appearance took place in a recording broadcast alongside Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and Abu al-Faraj al-Masri announcing the severance of al-Nusra Front's ties with al-Qaïda on July 28, 2016. Several sources indicated that Atoun was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of these changes within al-Nusra Front. He supported openness and cooperation with Western countries, while calling for an alliance with the Taliban. Atoun viewed foreign alliances as a means of empowerment, and his stance toward Turkey and the West was therefore subject to the question of self-interest. This is why he aligned himself with the transformations that have taken place within Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in recent years. Atoun announced his resignation from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham on January 27, 2018, and the suspension of his work in all positions within the organization, without providing any reason for his resignation. He nevertheless remained close to

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and its Salvation Government, having been invited to participate in several seminars and video interviews. His most recent appearance at a symposium organized by the Directorate of Culture of the Salvation Government in Idlib on September 15, 2021, titled "Jihad and Resistance in the Islamic World – The Taliban as a Model," sparked widespread controversy. He appeared in a new outfit, bareheaded and abandoning his dark-colored Arab robe. This was seen as a continuation of the transformations undergone by Atoun himself and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as a whole. He was appointed to the Syrian Fatwa Council after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham seized power.

Methodological Note

This book is part of a series of studies conducted by the author for the Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights/Haytham Manna Foundation- Geneva. The series began with the book *"Salafism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Human Rights"* and proceeded to examine professional armed groups, their growth, and transformations during the shift of the civilian popular movement, which began in Daraa on March 18, 2011, into a dirty civil war and a war on terror.

As part of this series, we published the first book on the Islamic State (*The Caliphate of ISIS*, Bisan Publishing) and the first Arabic research on *"The Öcalan Movement: Ideological Structure and Practice"* (Dar Al-Farabi). This book represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first comprehensive and documented research in Arabic on Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates.

The Caliphate of ISIS has been published in multiple editions and languages, and *The Öcalan Movement* has been released in English. This book will later be published in French.

Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights/ Haytham Manna Foundation

Haytham Manna

Born in Daraa, southern Syria, Haytham Manna studied general medicine at the University of Damascus (1976) and Pierre and Marie Curie University in France. He earned a diploma in psychosomatic therapy from the University of Paris 13 and a diploma in sleep and wakefulness disorders from the University of Montpellier (1989). He later taught the subject of sleep at the University of Paris Nord in 1990.

He also pursued studies in social sciences, earning a PhD in anthropology from the Advanced School for Social Sciences EHESS in Paris (1983). He was one of the founders of the French intellectual journal *SOUAL/Question* in 1980 and served as editor-in-chief of *Approaches* magazine. He also edited the *Short Universal Encyclopedia on Human Rights*:

- Part I: Al-Ahali (2000), 2nd edition 2018
- Part II: Al-Ahali and Europe (2002)
- Part III (2011)

Manna has held several prominent positions in Arab and international advocacy:

- Vice President of the International Federation for Human Rights until November 1997.
- Elected President of the International Office of Humanitarian and Charitable Associations in 2004.
- Co-founder and spokesperson of the Arab Commission for Human Rights until September 2011.

- Coordinator of the International Alliance for the Prosecution of War Criminals.
- President of the Scandinavian Institute for Human Rights.
- Honorable President of the 'Movement of Human and Peoples Rights'

He was elected Deputy Coordinator-General of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria and headed its diaspora branch for four years before resigning. He then founded the *Kamh Movement* (Values, Citizenship, and Rights).

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He has contributed to several collective works on women in the Arab world, human rights, the Arab Development Report, and ESCWA's *"Injustice in the Arab World and the Path to Justice"*. He has also published works in French or translated ones, as well as over 4,000 articles and lectures in Arabic, French, and English.

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Haytham Manna

Jabhat al-Nusra

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