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From Allies to Foes: The Relationship between the Islamic State Movement and other Sunni Islamist Insurgents

Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes

NADEEM ELIAS KHAN and DR. CRAIG WHITESIDE

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Introduction

The civil war in Syria started in 2011 as an uprising against Bashar al-Assad and saw the formation of over 1500 distinct operational groups according to Lister.[1] Instead of unifying to defeat the incumbent regime, the groups diverged into different political fronts with some fighting each other in a phenomenon Hafez calls "fratricidal rebels."[2] The rise of the Islamic State movement[3] in Syria from 2011 to 2014 ignited intra-Sunni and intra-Islamist clashes due to ideological differences between groups and the movement's quest for hegemony. While some Sunni Islamist factions slowly coalesced into distinct political fronts based on political and ideological goals, the Islamic State movement pursued a clearly defined goal, the creation of an expansive caliphate in the region. The group had a well-developed playbook, honed in the Iraq insurgency, which gave it a comparative advantage over its rivals. This playbook included the use of secret allegiances and infiltrations of rival groups, the use of overt and covert assassinations of rival leadership figures, and ultra-violence against individual or collective dissenters. Because of its advantages, the group was able to establish territorial control in large areas of Syria by summer 2014 and ruled as hegemon.

To explain the ideological divergence we saw in the Syrian Civil War, we adapted a previously developed typology of Sunni Islamism based on group attitudes towards the envisioned state using Jellinek's conception of statehood and its constituent parts: territory, people, and power.[4] Where groups fit in this typology correlates with their choice to cooperate, compete, or coerce each other. In our previous research on the Islamic State movement in Iraq, the group progressed through cooperative to competitive approaches to rival insurgents before adopting coercion. Hafez, Gabbay, and Gade defined these terms in their new research framework on rebel political consolidation: cooperative mode involves organizations growing consensually through alliance formation and mergers; competitive mode entails a process of increasing political and military power by outcompeting rival groups for fighters, popular support, and international sponsors; coercive mode occurs when militant organizations violently eliminate rivals.[5]

For legal prosecution, the understanding of intra-insurgent relations in Syria is of high importance. Firstly, members of groups allied to the Islamic State movement on the battlefield might fall under terrorism legislation for supporting a designated terrorist organization. A comparable, recent case affects former members of Liwa al-Tawhid who now reside in Germany.[6] Secondly, the Islamic State movement's partiality for front groups, secret allegiances, and infiltration of rival groups might hamper prosecution of individuals as long as

1 Charles Lister, The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic state and the evolution of an insurgency. Oxford University Press, 2016, 2.

2 Mohammed M. Hafez, "Fratricidal rebels: Ideological extremity and warring factionalism in civil wars." Terrorism and Political Violence 32, no. 3 (2020): 604-629.

3 This term we use includes the predecessor groups Tawhid and Jihad Group (TWJ) from 2003 to 2004, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from 2004 to 2006, Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC) in 2006, Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) from 2006 to 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) from 2011 to 2013, Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) from 2013 to 2014, and the contemporary Salafi-Jihadist group Islamic State (IS) since 2014.

4 Nadeem Elias Khan & Craig Whiteside, "State Accompli: The Political Consolidation of the Islamic State Prior to the Caliphate", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 47:9 (2021), 1045–1050; Georg Jellinek: Allgemeine Staatslehre, Springer-Verlag, Berlin, 1914, 394–434.

5 Mohammed Hafez, Michael Gabbay, Emily Kalah Gade, "Consolidation of Nonstate Armed Actors in Fragmented Conflicts: Introducing an Emerging Research Program", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 47:9 (2021), 963–983.

6 Generalbundesanwalt: "Anklage wegen mutmaßlicher Mitgliedschaft in der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung Liwa al-Tawhid", 23 January, 2024, https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2024/Pressemitteilung-vom-23-01-2024.html.

these complex connections remain unknown to the legal field.[7] Thirdly, aspects of the Islamic State movement's violence against other insurgents may constitute war crimes. Ultra-violence, aimed at annihilation, against specific tribal groups raises the spectre of genocide.[8]

In this paper, we trace the evolution of the Islamic State movement from its origins in 2003 to understand how it approached political consolidation with other groups (cooperation, competition, coercion) as part of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq (2003-2014), and how those lessons influenced its subsequent doctrine on relations with rivals. Finally, we apply both the typology and the group's playbook to the civil war in Syria to explain how and why different coalitions formed among insurgent groups, and how the Islamic State movement interacted with each. The research builds upon primary sources released by or leaked from both the Islamic State movement and its Sunni armed opponents as well as the existing literature describing the Syrian Civil War.

IRAQ

Sunni Islamisms in the Iraqi insurgency

The creation of 'Islamic State' in July 2014 is sometimes described as having started in Syria and then invading Iraq.[9] This is false. The origins of the self-described caliphate began in Iraq with the American-led invasion in 2003. Between the beginning of the conflict in 2003 and the start of open intra-Islamist conflict in 2007, we found that armed militant groups in the beginning consisted of ideologically diverse factions (we term such groups cross-trend) as its new members joined for multi-factor reasons, slowly forming larger, increasingly nation-wide groups. Cross-trend groups were unstable in the long run as they struggled to agree on strategic and political ends; our research indicates that many splintered as competition amongst rivals increased. The respective splinters formed larger, mono-ideological coalitions around major groups that dominated said coalition. Our previous study of the Iraq insurgency identified five distinct Islamist ideological and political groupings that we call trends. The five Islamist trends that developed are as follows:

- Salafi-Jihadism: a trend combining a no-borders pan-Islamism, extreme sectarianism against non-Salafist Muslims, and revolutionary opposition to Muslim majority nation state governments with the aim of establishing a shari'a-state; the dominant coalition in this trend was the "Mujahidin Shura Council" (led by al-Qaeda in Iraq) that would later form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).
- Political Salafism: a related but more moderate trend open to participation in democratic elections and accepting the nation-state concept; this became the "Reform and Jihad Front" dominated by the Islamic Army of Iraq.[10]

7 On aspects of membership in general cf. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Membership of the Islamic State and Other Forms of Involvement", CJA paper, forthcoming 2025.

8 International Criminal Court: "Element of Crimes", The Hague, 2011, 2; 31; 39.

9 A typical example is this from 2014: "In 2013, ISIS came into a conflict with fellow jihadists," says Bokhari. ISIS "hit a dead end in Syria, because it was fighting on two fronts – both the Assad regime and its allies as well as rival rebel groups that were relatively moderate," says Bokhari. As a result, "It decided it was in its interest to go back into Iraq." CBC News, "Five things to know about Iraqi jihadi group", 24 June, 2014, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/isis-5-things-to-know-about-the-iraqi-jihadist-group-1.2684540.

10 An Islamist group that focused on resistance to occupation. See Stanford's Mapping Militants Project, https://mappingmilitants.org/profiles/islamic-army-in-iraq.

- Clerical Islamism: a trend that emerged out of traditional clerical authority and Islamic scholarship, aiming for a greater role of shari'a in state law; this became the "Jihad and Change Front" led by the 1920 Revolution Brigades.[11]
- Muslim Brotherhood Islamism: the original Islamist trend that considers Islam as the pivotal political ideology and aims for a greater role of shari'a in state law. This category included members who were already part of the democratic process. Within the insurgency, the trend manifested as a formal alliance between the Islamic Front for Islamic Resistance (JAMI) and HAMAS al-Iraq.[12]
- National Conservatism: a trend expressing vague notions of a sometimes state-enforced role of local understandings of Islamic values in national society, often linked to traditional authority figures (e.g. Sufi orders); this formed into the "Jihad and National Salvation Front" around the Army of Muhammad.

11 A nationalist-leaning Islamist group focused on resistance to occupation, and its leadership was related to the leader of the Association of Muslim Scholars–Harith al-Dhari; see Stanford's Mapping Militant Project https://mappingmilitants.org/profiles/1920s-revolution-brigades.

12 HAMAS al-Iraq was a splinter group from the 1920 Revolution Brigades that openly fought ISI in 2007, https://mappingmilitants.org/profiles/hamas-iraq.

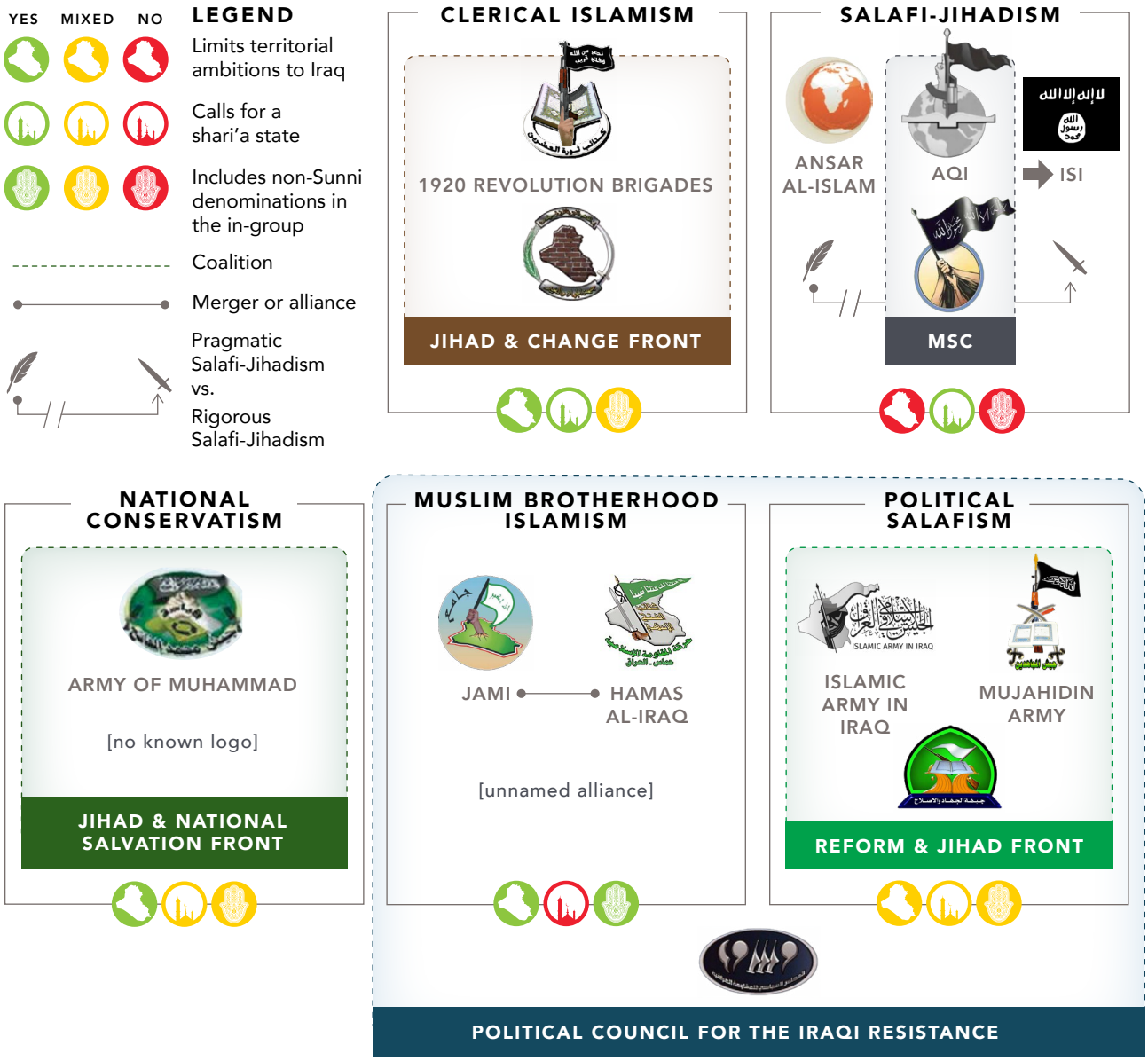

Figure 1 – Typology of Sunni Islamist actors in the Iraq War (2003-2011)[13]

Of these Islamist factions, the Salafi-Jihadists of the Islamic State movement represent the most radical trend. As pan-Islamists, Salafi-Jihadists in general do not accept the borders of modern nation states but envision a caliphate that gathers Muslim majority countries as well as regions previously ruled by Muslims around the world in one polity. The constitutive people accordingly are Muslims, but due to the sectarian dimension of Salafi-Jihadism, the in-group is exclusive to Sunni Salafi Muslims.[14] Unlike minority Muslim denominations, non-Muslim adherents of monotheistic religions have the possibility to become second-class citizens by

13 Graphic by Nadeem Elias Khan with assistance from Paula Airth (design and layout). Icons in the legend are adaptions of graphics by Allexxandar (map), Harryarts (mosque), Freepik (hand) on freepik.com and Ramosh Artworks (feather) on stock.adobe.com.

14 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and the Sunni Community," forthcoming 2025.

paying a head tax and adhering to further regulations.[15] While the Salafi-Jihadist idea of a caliphate state resembles an elective monarchy, the trend rejects democracy as both heretical and impractical. Instead, the envisioned state is of authoritarian nature and meant to enforce a literalist understanding of shari'a on the population. Within Salafi-Jihadism, ISI belonged to the religiously rigid wing that is less compromising on any of the above-mentioned aspects than the politically pragmatic wing represented by Ansar al-Islam in Iraq.[16]

The other four coalitions that developed during the Iraq occupation recognized Iraq's borders but were less clear and unified on the role of Islam in governance. Regarding non-Sunni denominations, Political Salafists held strongly sectarian positions that privileged Sunni Muslims over out-groups, sometimes at the extreme level. Members of other trends at times also held discriminatory beliefs of Sunni supremacy, but sectarianism did not constitute a cornerstone of their respective group ideology. The only coalition that was able to overcome internal differences on a consistent basis was the Islamic State movement's Mujahidin Shura Council, which announced its proto-state in 2006 and remained resilient to challenges due to their clear, maximalist position as well as their evolving strategic playbook.[17]

By showing that the typology we developed for explaining coalition building during the Iraq war is applicable to the Syrian uprising, we hope to demonstrate this typology in principle is generalizable to many civil war contexts involving Sunni Islamists. The political rivalry among insurgent groups and the mechanisms of political consolidation or fragmentation over several years explain how Islamic State reached hegemonic status in the Iraqi and Syrian context in 2014.[18] Before we apply the typology to the Syrian case, it is important to review how the events in Iraq during the American occupation from 2003 to 2011 influenced the Islamic State movement's playbook that the group would use in Syria.

THE IRAQ EXPERIENCE

The evolution of the Islamic State movement is complex, with a series of mergers of like-minded groups, the serial poaching of smaller groups, and a series of name changes that confuse many observers. The movement was founded by the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq under the name Tawhid and Jihad Group sometime in 2003. Prior to this, adherents of Zarqawi's older Tawhid Group had conducted operations under the command of the Kurdish Salafi-Jihadists group Ansar al-Islam with whom they had sought shelter after having fled from Afghanistan.[19]

15 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and its Treatment of "Out Groups": A Comparative Analysis", in Sareta Ashraph, Carmen Cheung Ka-Man, and Joana Cook (eds.), Holding ISIL Accountable. Prosecuting Crimes in Iraq and Syria, The Hague, 2024, 6-30.

16 Nadeem Elias Khan and Craig Whiteside, "Emirate Astray: The Failed Political Consolidation of the Salafi-Jihadists in Occupied Iraq", working paper for a Political Consolidation workshop, 2023, Monterey, California. Ansar al-Islam (later Ansar al-Sunna, then again Ansar al-Islam) started as a largely Kurdish Salafi-Jihadist group that had a similar ideology as the Islamic State movement. Its Iraqi branch eventually disbanded, and its members joined Islamic State in 2014, while the Syrian branch still exists https://mappingmilitants.org/profiles/ansar-al-islam.

17 Khan and Whiteside: "State Accompli".

18 By hegemonic we mean the exclusive control of large population areas and contiguous territory for defense.

19 Brian Fishman, The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi strategy for final victory, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2016, 27-44. Khan and Whiteside, "Emirate Astray".

Generally, we divide the group's relations with its Sunni rivals in Iraq into three distinct periods. Firstly, a cooperative phase (2003-4) that saw the nascent group cooperate with other Sunni insurgent groups while attacking Shi'ite civilians as part of a sectarian terror wave.[20] Secondly, a competitive phase after Zarqawi's pledge to Usama Bin Laden that led to a name change to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in October 2004. This second phase lasted until October 2006 when AQI (without Zarqawi who had been killed in June of that year) merged with Salafi-Jihadist groups to declare ISI in select 'liberated' areas (e.g. Ramadi). This signified the beginning of a third and coercive phase of relations between the Islamic State movement and other insurgents, with the level of coercion depending on ideological distance from their perspective. The Islamic State movement's name changes and organizational shifts were more than propaganda moves; each transition served as policy declarations about how movement elites saw the possibilities of the establishment of a caliphate project in Sunni Iraq.[21]

PHASE	TIMEFRAME	NAME	MODE	OUTCOME
Cooperative consolidation	May 2003 to Oct 2004	Tawhid and Jihad Group (TWJ)	*Cooperation*: open to cross-trend cooperation *Competition*: Salafi-Jihadist groups, mostly Ansar al-Sunna [formerly known as Ansar al-Islam] *Coercion*: none	Recruitment from Iraqi Salafi-Jihadist networks
Competitive consolidation	Oct 2004 to Oct 2006	Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)	*Cooperation*: open to intra-trend cooperation *Competition*: Salafi-Jihadist and Political Salafist groups, mostly Ansar al-Sunna *Coercion*: collaborating tribal actors, local stakeholders	Consolidation of many Salafi-Jihadist groups in the MSC coalition
Coercive consolidation	Oct 2006 to April 2013	Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)	*Cooperation*: only mediation *Competition*: Salafi-Jihadist, Political Salafist, and Clerical Islamist groups *Coercion*: Brotherhood and Clerical Islamist groups as well as Political Salafist groups	Evolution from MSC coalition to a unified proto-state
Coercive consolidation	April 2013 to June 2014	Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS)	*Cooperation*: none *Competition*: none *Coercion*: groups from all trends including other Salafi-Jihadists	Becoming leading faction of renewed Sunni insurgency
Coercive consolidation	Since June 2014	Islamic State	*Cooperation*: none *Competition*: none *Coercion*: everyone	Achievement of hegemony

Table 1—Phases of Islamic State Movement Consolidation in Iraq

20 Craig Whiteside, "A case for terrorism as genocide in an era of weakened states", Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict, 8:3 (2015), 232–250.

21 Khan and Whiteside, "State Accompli".

Cooperative Consolidation: Tawhid and Jihad Group

During the first phase, the small but influential TWJ cooperated with several Islamist and non-Islamist insurgent groups, especially during the First Battle of Falluja in early 2004. After the success of armed resistance and battlefield coordination in that famous battle, TWJ took part in governing 'liberated' Falluja as part of the Mujahidin Shura Council of Falluja.[22]

Competitive Consolidation: al-Qaeda in Iraq

The Second Battle of Falluja in late 2004 was the impetus for the group to stress its globalist ambitions by joining al-Qaeda, a signal to future members that the group was attempting to 'outbid' the other Islamists.[23] The Mujahidin Shura Council of Falluja had too big a tent, and there are indicators that the group's leadership was uncomfortable working in a coalition with hated ideological rivals like Sufi Muslims and former Ba'athists.[24] By embracing the al-Qaeda label, the group now had access to additional political, financial, and technological capital. The new relationship attracted Iraq's Salafi-Jihadists to the group's banner. This included several notable defections from the other major Salafi-Jihadist group—Ansar al-Sunna (formerly Ansar al-Islam).[25] The outbidding signified AQI's competitive bid for leadership of the Sunni insurgency, to avoid becoming trapped into someone else's political vision of a post-occupation Iraq.

In a further step to unification of the trend, AQI later formed a coalition called the Mujahidin Shura Council with like-minded groups.[26] This event increased conflict with tribal, religious, and insurgent actors who took the opposite message from the defeat in Falluja and at the voting booth in 2005 as a sign to integrate in the national political system. The burgeoning split in the insurgency led to open battles between AQI and Sunni opponents in 2005. The group emerged victorious in conflicts against tribal fighters in Qa'im which secured vital control over the Syrian border, as well as insurgents led by the 1920 Revolution Brigade—at this time a Clerical and Brotherhood Islamist hybrid—in Ramadi.[27] AQI's primary reaction was to assassinate Sunni linchpins of these efforts, usually high-profile members of the community.

Highlighting how AQI understood this conflict, we turn to an internal report from a commander on his plan to destroy the Anbar People's Committee in Ramadi during January 2006: "From what we saw, the damage caused by those erratic infidels (Tribal Sheiks, The Islamic Party) is more dangerous than the Shiites and the peaceful police as people call them."[28] The author warned that the way to deal with the tribes was to find the main agitators and then kill them without attribution (or better, to use Iraqi National Guard uniforms to shift blame). One reason Anbar was contested in 2006, according to the author, was the success of the Islamic Party (Muslim Brotherhood) in the 2005 elections and their subsequent support for Sunnis joining the Iraqi Army and police.[29]

22 Truls Hallberg Tønnessen, "The Islamic Emirate of Fallujah," International Studies Association paper, Montreal, 2011.

23 Mia M. Bloom, "Palestinian suicide bombing: Public support, market share, and outbidding." Political Science Quarterly 119, no. 1 (2004): 61-88; Fishman, "The ISIS Masterplan", 45-58.

24 Tønnessen, "The Islamic Emirate of Fallujah".

25 Khan and Whiteside, "Emirate Astray".

26 Abu Ismail al-Muhajir, "Martyr Biographies 12: Umar Hadid," Mujahidin Shura Council, 2006.

27 William Knarr, The 2005 Iraqi Sunni Awakening: The Role of the Desert Protectors Program. JSOU Press, 2015.

28 MNF-W, "Anbar Insurgency Study," Chapter 6, US Army War College Iraq papers, 20; Anonymous, 'AQI Sitrep," Harmony Document IZ-060316-01, 2006, 1.

29 AQI Sitrep, 2.

According to local AQI leaders:

> *we found that the main thinker behind the Party's ideas is Sheik Abd al-Ghafur al-Kubaysi the Imam and speaker of al-Shafi'i mosque in Ramadi, and [he] made his mosque the center of all the Party's meetings, with all that, he didn't stop fighting the brothers with his speeches at the mosque, so the brothers assassinated him near his house, after he left the mosque going home, and there was no reaction by the Islamic Party or people, except that they raised signs condemning the killing.*[30]

The author finished the document with a request to lift the heavy restrictions on killing the group's enemies – a wish granted as subsequent assassinations led to the council's dissolution.[31] A strategy document describes the group's understanding of the situation in ideological terms and sees "two political paths for Iraq's future": those that followed "the nationalist path" which embraced a pluralist society—including "Christians and 'Devil Worshippers' [Yazidis] and Shi'ite rafidites [rejectionists]."[32] "This government would abide by international laws, United Nations resolutions, and Arab League laws." The nationalist path— "even if they try to ally themselves with Islamism and Salafism [...] is based on the gradual implementation of sharia to preserve their interests, which is the excuse for losers."[33] Special ire was reserved for the Muslim Brotherhood, as represented in Iraq by the Iraqi Islamic Party. "They [MB] will prohibit sharia law as their brothers in different places did [...] removing sharia law and replacing it with democratic laws and evil systems is fitna [referring to polytheism here] and is the worst possible outcome."[34] Here, we see the theological justification for assassinating these opponents: their rival's stance fundamentally contradicted AQI's understanding of tawhid al-hakimiyya (monotheism in judgment) and therefore warranted takfir (excommunication).[35]

The fight for Ramadi, and other varied experiences fighting Americans, Iraqi government, Shi'ite militias, and its Sunni rivals in this period gave AQI valuable experience that became doctrine for them, a type of playbook for an irregular style of warfare against its enemies and their Sunni supporters. It kept rival groups in line with the threat of leadership targeting, as described above. The phrase one commander used was "to cut the heads of the Sheikhs of infidelity," a phrase that is figurative (like leadership decapitation) but had in some cases, like the head shaykh of the Albu Fahd tribe in Ramadi in 2006, a literal meaning as well.[36]

From the beginning in 2003, all incarnations of the movement allowed its local leaders to run front groups outside of the group's imprimatur for intelligence and recruitment value. These groups could collect information, share resources, and recruit without suffering from the negative image as foreign extremists that AQI had acquired. They could also claim attacks that the group for political or security reasons did not want to associate with. Apart from setting up pure front groups, AQI infiltrated other groups and hostile tribes to subvert them.[37]

30 AQI Sitrep, 3.

31 Anbar Insurgency Study, Chapter 6, 90.

32 Hararo J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement. Oxford University Press, 2020, 115.

33 Ingram et al, "The ISIS Reader", 116.

34 Ingram et al, "The ISIS Reader", 119.

35 The most comprehensive work establishing the beliefs of Islamic State movement is Abu Suhayb al-Iraqi, "Polytheism in Obedience", Ninawa Province, Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, 2012. A contemporary work expressing the same beliefs in passing is Abu Hamza al-Baghdadi, "Why do we fight, and whom do we fight?", Shari'a Council of al-Qaeda in Iraq, 2005.

36 AQI Sitrep, 1.

37 "Zobai AQI leadership was able to establish cells among the Albu Fuhaylat and exploit existing tensions within the Albu Issa to create a significant level of influence over Amariyah and Ferris Town." Anbar Insurgency Study, Ch 6, 129.

Individuals, factions, or entire groups who pledged allegiance kept their oaths secret and could thereby achieve similar results. Additionally, these secret adherents bolstered the image of the newly announced Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006 by making it appear larger and more widely accepted than it was through publicly pledging their support to the new entity.[38]

Coercive Consolidation: Islamic State of Iraq

The ascendency of AQI in 2006 was in large parts due to its provocation strategy that succeeded in fomenting sectarian civil war as Shi'ite reprisals radicalized the Sunni community.[39] With the declaration of a proto-caliphate called the Islamic State of Iraq, the group transitioned to a naked drive for hegemony over all Sunni insurgent groups, and the implementation of the plan to create a future caliphate.[40] Like-minded Salafi-Jihadist groups and ideologically adjacent factions from the Political Salafist and Clerical Islamist trends willingly joined the new project that offered them both the exclusively Sunni entity and the shari'a government they also sought.[41] Others who were unwilling but outgunned had no option but to join or relinquish their weapons.[42] The movement of more radical factions from the mainstream of the insurgency to ISI shifted the equilibrium within these groups, as moderate voices no longer had to contend with meaningful internal resistance. Accordingly, integration into the Iraqi nation state once more became a hot topic. ISI's heavy-handed efforts to achieve hegemony inspired a backlash that first saw the foundation of 'Awakening Councils' – militias that fought ISI side-by-side with US forces and the Iraqi government. In 2007, ISI overreached with its assassination practice when it killed the well-connected 1920 Revolution Brigades' commander Harith Dhahir al-Dari. Fed up with constant intimidation and outright murder, Political Salafists, Clerical, and Brotherhood Islamists formed their own respective coalitions, some of whom began fighting ISI only days after announcing themselves and later sought support by United States and government forces.[43] These coalitions against ISI largely faltered due to a lack of consensus on the political endgame and continuously hemorrhaged fighters who did not consider fighting other Sunni insurgents religiously permissible. The Islamic State movement, however, has always distinguished itself from its peers by its adoption of a narrow in-group definition that in practice sanctioned the killing of Sunni Muslims that actively oppose its views.

Their erstwhile allies joining the Awakening crippled ISI. While in the aftermath ISI was able to stage a comeback through steady assassination of Awakening leaders and continuing provocation attacks against Shi'ites, the group ever since has been deeply paranoid of in-group

38 Mujahidin Shura Council, "Statement on Establishing Mujahidin Shura Council in Iraq," 15 January, 2006.

39 Sam Knight, "Bombing of Shia shrine sparks wave of retaliation," The Times, 22 February, 2006, https://www.thetimes.com/article/bombing-of-shia-shrine-sparks-wave-of-retaliation-klzqj6dsbp6; Ingram et al., "The ISIS Reader", 37–54.

40 Nibras Kazemi, "The Caliphate Attempted: Zarqawi's Ideological Heirs, Their Choice for a Caliph, and the Collapse of Their Self-Styled Islamic State of Iraq", Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, 1 July, 2008, https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-caliphate-attempted-zarqawi-s-ideological-heirs-their-choice-for-a-caliph-and-the-collapse-of-their-self-styled-islamic-state-of-iraq.

41 Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, "Truth Has Come and Falsehood Has Vanished," al-Furqan Media, 22 December, 2006.

42 Legal and Judiciary Office of Ansar al-Sunna: "Letter to the Esteemed Leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq", 22 January, 2007, CTC Westpoint, https://web.archive.org/web/20070709230751if_/http:/ctc.usma.edu:80/AAS_letter_to_AQ_original.pdf.

43 Lydia Khalil, "Leader of 1920 Revolution Brigades Killed by al-Qaeda", Terrorism Focus, 4:9, Jamestown Foundation, 10 April, 2007, https://jamestown.org/program/leader-of-1920-revolution-brigades-killed-by-al-qaeda/; 1920 Revolution Brigades, "Obituary Statement for one of the Leaders of the Brigades,"27 March, 2007. Islamic State of Iraq, "The Clear Word on the Reality of the 1920 Revolution Brigades," 22 September, 2007.

defection to opponents.[44] During its recovery from significant setbacks in 2010 (including the loss of its top leaders, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir), the beginning of the Syrian Civil War offered new leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi a golden chance for growth and expansion by fulfilling the long-held ambition to carry the fight to Syria.[45]

SYRIA

APPLICATION OF TYPOLOGY AND PLAYBOOK TO SYRIA

The universe of rebel groups in Syria is quite complicated and in this section, we will not trace the ever-changing alliances of Islamist Free Syrian Army factions. Instead, we focus on the 'big four' native Islamist groups of the Syrian Civil War and their respective coalitions, adding additional information on other insurgents where necessary. Our understanding of the Syrian scene owes much to the work of Pierret, Lund, and Lefevre. The four major Syrian Islamist groups that had risen to prominence since 2012 were:

- Kataib Ahrar al-Sham – a hybrid Salafi-Jihadist/Political Salafist group under the leadership of Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi. The strong Salafi-Jihadist current within included Abu Khalid al-Suri– al-Qaeda's delegate for Syria – in its senior-most leadership. In December 2012, Ahrar al-Sham together with other hardline Political Salafist groups founded the Syrian Islamic Front. Most of these groups eventually came together under the new name Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya.[46]
- Alwiya Suqur al-Sham – a Political Salafist group under the leadership of Abu Isa al-Shaykh, primarily based in Idlib. The group included a Salafi-Jihadist faction – Liwa Dawud – that gained prominence for its military prowess. In September 2012, it co-founded the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front.[47]
- Liwa al-Islam – a Political Salafist group with close links to the Quietist Salafist milieu both in Syria and Saudi-Arabia that was led by Zahran Alloush, primarily based in Damascus. In September 2012, it co-founded the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front. One year later after collecting pledges from scores of smaller groups, Liwa al-Islam became Jaysh al-Islam.[48]
- Liwa al-Tawhid – a National Conservative Islamist group under the leadership of Abdul Qadir Salih, primarily based in Aleppo. In September 2012, it co-founded the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front.[49]

44 Craig Whiteside, "The Islamic state and the return of revolutionary warfare," in: Jihadist Insurgent Movements, Routledge, 2017, 15-48; Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006–2017)," ICCT-The Hague, 2018.

45 Fishman, "The ISIS Master Plan", 17-36.

46 Thomas Pierret, "Salafis at War in Syria. Logics of Fragmentation and Realignment", in Francesco Cavatorta, and Fabio Merone (eds.), Salafism After the Arab Awakening. Contending with People's Power, Hurst Publishers, London, 2017, 142-145.

47 Aron Lund, "Islamist Mergers in Syria: Ahrar al-Sham Swallows Suqour al-Sham", Diwan, 23 March, 2015, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2015/03/islamist-mergers-in-syria-ahrar-al-sham-swallows-suqour-al-sham?lang=en.

48 Joshua Landis, "Zahran Alloush. His ideology and beliefs", Syria Comment, 15 December, 2013, https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/zahran-alloush/; Laila Rifai, "The Sunni Religious Establishment of Damascus. When Unification Creates Division", Series on Political Islam, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/06/the-sunni-religious-establishment-of-damascus-when-unification-creates-division?lang=en&center=middle-east.

49 Pierret, "Salafis at War", 145f.

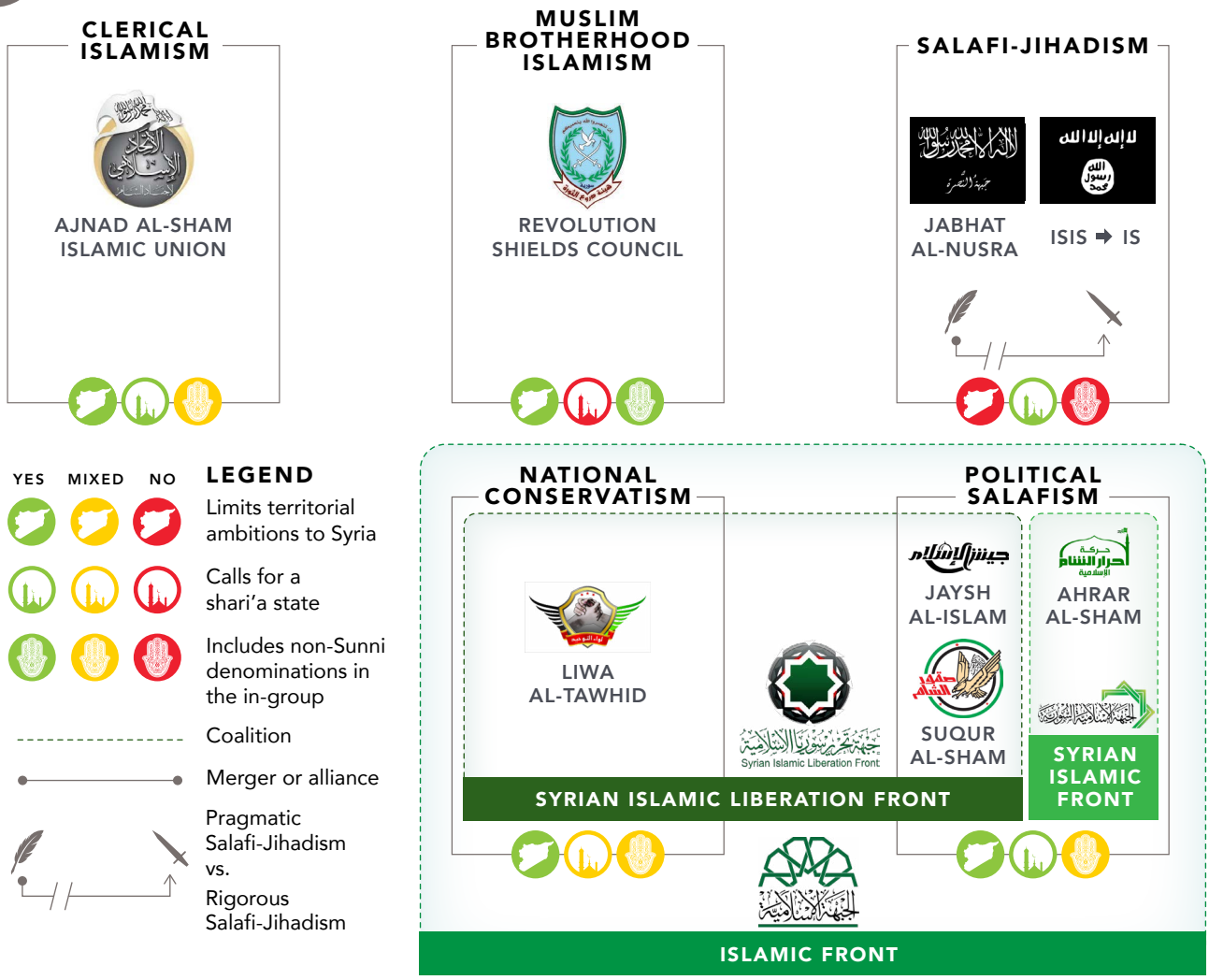

Figure 2: Typology of Sunni Islamist actors in the Syrian Civil War (2011-2014)[50]

The absence of Brotherhood and Clerical groups from this roster is best explained by the expulsion of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and critical clerics from the country following the Islamist uprising in the early 1980s. Without a presence on the ground, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood concentrated on political work, dominating the Syrian National Council and taking part in the Syrian National Congress in exile while supporting different actors on the ground financially, amongst them all the 'big four'. The Brotherhood's attempt to gather like-minded groups in its own coalition – the Revolution Shields Committee – never gained real traction.[51]

As for Clerical Islamism, the clerical establishment mostly stayed loyal to the regime. Those clerics who joined the opposition could not mobilize their followers to form armed groups

50 Graphic by Nadeem Elias Khan with assistance from Paula Airth (design and layout). Icons shown in legend are adaptions of graphics by Allexxandar (map), Harryarts (mosque), Freepik (hand) on freepik.com and Ramosh Artworks (feather) on stock.adobe.com.

51 Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt. The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria", Middle East, 7 May, 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2013/05/struggling-to-adapt-the-muslim-brotherhood-in-a-new-syria?lang=en; Raphaël Lefevre, "Islamism within a civil war. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's struggle for survival, Rethinking Political Islam Series", Brookings, August 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Syria_Lefevre-FINALE.pdf.

during the early days of the revolution.[52] A broad pro-revolution clerical body – the Syrian Islamic Council – emerged in exile during April 2014, after the intra-Islamist conflict had begun in earnest.[53] Arguably, one of the major groups who expressed support for this new body – Ajnad al-Sham – was the most important Clerical Islamist group in Syria. Founded in December 2013 and based in Damascus, the group had links to the few pro-revolution clerics in the capital. Interestingly, above-mentioned Salafist groups rejected the Syrian Islamic Council for its stand on Alawites that they considered too soft.[54]

The ideological difference between the above-mentioned 'big four' relates to questions of state power and state people as we see when comparing the two most important Islamist insurgent coalitions that formed in 2012. The Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) espoused a markedly moderate vision for a future state: "The Front aims to topple the Assad regime, protect all Syrians, seize weapons, and maintain security after the fall of the Assad regime, and uphold Syria's sovereignty, unity and independence, using shari'a as its source."[55] Democratic elections were not a point of contention as Suqur al-Sham's Abu Isa al-Shaykh stated publicly.[56] This was similar to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's moderate approach as part of the Syrian National Congress. It is therefore unsurprising that all SILF groups joined the Syrian Military Council – an attempt by the Syrian National Congress to unite the 'Free Syrian Army' – after its announcement in December 2012.[57]

In contrast, the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) demanded a shari'a state and emphasized its Salafist credentials: "This group operates according to the laws of Islam, based on the understanding of the pious Muslim predecessors. Its objective is to topple the Assad regime and construct a society based on the laws of God, providing a just society for Muslims and non-Muslims."[58] Ahrar al-Sham with its deep connections in the Syrian Salafi-Jihadist scene and pro-Islamic State movement networks in Syria was a natural ally to the Salafi-Jihadists of ISI who arrived in Syria in 2011 under the banner of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). Like we saw in the Iraq case, we observed three distinct phases of Islamic State movement's consolidation: a cooperative phase as Jabhat al-Nusra (2011-2013),[59] a competitive phase as Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (2013-2014), and a coercive phase that culminated in the declaration of the Islamic State caliphate (2014-2019). Zelin called this multi-stage development the group's "territorial methodology", while we focus on interaction with other groups to explain group behavior, territorial control being the outcome of geographically limited intra-insurgency hegemony.[60]

52 Thomas Pierret, Religion and State in Syria. The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 216-234.

53 Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Islamic Council", Diwan, 13 May, 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2014/05/the-syrian-islamic-council?lang=en&center=middle-east.

54 Aron Lund, "The Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union", Diwan, 4 March, 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2014/03/the-ajnad-al-sham-islamic-union?lang=en&center=middle-east;
Aron Lund, "Damascus Preachers and the Armed Rebellion", Diwan, 5 March, 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2014/03/damascus-preachers-and-the-armed-rebellion?lang=en;
Thomas Pierret, "The Struggle for Religious Authority in Syria", Diwan, 14 May, 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2014/05/the-struggle-for-religious-authority-in-syria?lang=en&center=middle-east.

55 Syrian Islamic Liberation Front,"Who are we?", 2013.

56 Aron Lund, "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 2. An Umbrella Organization", Diwan, 15 January, 2014, Lund, "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 2. An Umbrella Organization", Diwan, 15 January, 2014.

57 Pierret, "Salafis at War", 145f.

58 Syrian Islamic Front: "New Comprehensive Front Committed to Following Islam", 21 December, 2012.

59 The part of JN that split from Islamic State movement and kept the name continued with its cooperative phase for some time.

60 Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Research Notes 29, 2016, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ResearchNote29-Zelin.pdf.

PHASE	TIMEFRAME	NAME	MODE	OUTCOME
Cooperative consolidation	Announced Jan 2012 to April 2013	Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)	*Cooperation:* open to cross-trend cooperation *Competition:* Political Salafist groups, primarily Ahrar al-Sham *Coercion:* none	Recruitment from Syrian Islamist networks
Competitive consolidation	April 2013 to Jan 2014	Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS)	*Cooperation:* open to cross-trend cooperation, excluding governance *Competition:* Salafi-Jihadist and Political Salafist groups, mostly Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham *Coercion:* individual Free Syrian Army factions, local stakeholders	Consolidation of many Salafi-Jihadist groups under the ISIS banner
Coercive consolidation	Jan 2014 to June 2014	Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS)	*Cooperation:* only intra-trend military cooperation with selected Salafi-Jihadist groups *Competition:* Salafi-Jihadist groups *Coercion:* Salafi-Jihadist, Political Salafist groups, and other Islamist as well as non-Islamist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham	Conquering territory from rival insurgents in Eastern Syria
Coercive consolidation	Since June 2014	Islamic State	*Cooperation:* none *Competition:* none *Coercion:* everyone	Achievement of hegemony in its territory

Table 2—Phases of Islamic State Movement Consolidation in Syria

Cooperative Cooperation: Jabhat al-Nusra as an Islamic State of Iraq front group

In 2011, when the Syrian Civil War broke out, ISI reacted quickly to this opportunity. Seeking to camouflage its intervention from Iraq with its tested concept of front groups, ISI sent a small number of operatives under command of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani to Syria to form JN. This group introduced itself in January 2012.[61] ISI lavishly furnished this front group with half of its overall budget.[62] By concealing its allegiance, JN limited foreign interest and the complications of ISI's terrorist designation, at least until December 2012 when the United States designated the group as ISI affiliate.[63] Within Syria, the hidden allegiance spared JN the extremist label that tarnished the Islamic State movement's image. Jawlani soon built a clandestine group out of the decade-old Islamic State movement support networks in Syria and engaged in high-profile terrorist attacks on regime targets. Subsequently, he established JN as

61 Al-Manara al-Baydha: Good Tidings to the People of Sham, 24 January, 2012.

62 Lister, "Syrian Jihad", 56-59.

63 United States Department of State, "Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq", 11 December, 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20170203085135/https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266590.htm.

a vital part of the Syrian insurgency by implementing TWJ's cooperation phase. JN was open to military cooperation with practically every force hostile to the regime. Much of the battlefield coordination happened in locally constituted joint operations rooms.[64] There is even evidence of joint checkpoints with the Kurdish YPG.[65] Like Islamic State's predecessor group (Tawhid and Jihad Group) in Falluja (2004), JN participated in governing the liberated areas in concert with other groups, (e.g. joining SIF and SILF in the Shari'a Committee of Aleppo).[66]

Jawlani displayed an independent streak from the beginning of ISI's intervention in Syria, refusing to carry out orders of his superiors in Iraq. Settling scores from the Iraq war, Baghdadi tasked JN with assassinating a number of former Iraqi insurgent leaders, chief amongst them the founding leader of Mujahidin Army – Abu Sa'id Hirdan – who had fought against ISI as part of the Reform and Jihad Front.[67] It is unclear whether ISI also directed assassinations of Syrian insurgents at this point. In Iraq, the group had first used assassinations against other Sunni insurgents when it moved into its competitive mode. By late 2012, ISI leadership grew suspicious of Jawlani and dispatched Abu Ali al-Anbari to Syria to review the situation of the undercover branch. Anbari, an AQI veteran, reportedly went to Syria with high hopes but was thoroughly unimpressed by the conduct of JN's leader. His after-action report to Baghdadi accused Jawlani of insubordination.[68] According to his biography, Anbari was the key actor in the Islamic State movement's overt expansion to Syria by warning Baghdadi about the situation with the "two-faced" Jawlani, bringing Baghdadi to Syria, and convincing him to act before JN and its fighters deviated further from ISI's guidelines. To snatch back the initiative, ISI went on the offensive. Anbari toured Syria to convince JN commanders as well as rank and file to stay true to their oath to Baghdadi. In early April 2013, Baghdadi announced the expansion to Syria under the new name Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and officially abolished JN. Jawlani rejected this move and split from ISI by declaring himself the representative of al-Qaeda in Syria, a claim that al-Qaeda's overall leader Ayman al-Zawahiri soon bolstered by ordering Baghdadi back to Iraq. The latter rejected this command out of hand.[69] While claims about the percentage of fighters going either way in this split differ, the Islamic State movement had made provisions by turning to its method of using front groups and secret oaths to build momentum toward political consolidation. In mid-April, Baghdadi convened a meeting with independent Salafi-Jihadist groups to convince them to join ISIS. Attendees included the notorious Chechen Umar al-Shishani, leader of Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa-l-Ansar, and representatives of the Libyan group Katibat al-Battar. The man who orchestrated the meeting, Abu al-Athir al-Absi, was the leader of the Mujahidin Shura Council. He had personally convinced Shishani, who had been leaning toward joining JN before the split, to postpone his decision. At the meeting, the men all pledged allegiance to Baghdadi but kept their oath secret. Suqur al-Sham's sub-unit Liwa Dawud, led by Abu Muhannad al-Shami, also secretly pledged allegiance to Baghdadi. Shami had previously fought for AQI during the Iraq

64 Pierret, "Salafis at War", 140f.

65 Charles Lister, Tweet on 6 June, 2019, https://x.com/Charles_Lister/status/1136712171914743808.

66 Pierret, "Salafis at War", 141.

67 Fishman, "The ISIS Master Plan", 169f.

68 Abu Abdullah al-Anbari, The Informed Study on Shaykh al-Anbari's Biography, al-Turath al-Ilmi, 2018, 72f.; Anonymous, "The Worshipping Scholar and Warrior Preacher Shaykh Abu Ali al-Anbari", al-Naba 43, 18 August, 2016, 8f.

69 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "And give Good Tidings to the Believers", al-Furqan, 9 April, 2013; Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, "Speech on the Situation of Sham", al-Manara al-Bayda, 10 April, 2013; Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Untitled Letter to Baghdadi and Jawlani", June 2013, leaked by al-Jazeera on 09 June, 2013 https://www.aljazeera.net/news/9/6/2013/%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8B%8D%88%9D%8A%7D%87%9D%8B%1D8%9A-%D8%9A%D%84%9D%8BA%D8%9A-%D%8AF%D%85%9D%8AC-%D%8AC%D%87%9D%8A7%D%8AF%D8%9A%D8%9A-%D%8B%3D%88%9D%8B%1D8%9A%D%8A7; Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Remaining in Iraq and Sham", al-Furqan, 14 June, 2013.

war but had acted independently in Syria to date. This political consolidation was driven by ideological affinity, with the Islamic State movement's maximalist sectarian shari'a state bringing groups with distinct histories and needs together.[70]

Raineri argued the role of Abu al-Athir al-Absi in the coalescing was not happenstance, but a fallback option that had been carefully nurtured by ISI leadership.[71] When Abu al-Athir's elder brother Abu Muhammad al-Absi formed Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin in the Aleppo region during late 2011, the former was busy in Homs founding a small Salafi-Jihadist group – Katibat Usud al-Sunna – that posed as Free Syrian Army faction. There is evidence that at least one Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin fighter, who joined in April 2012, appears in IS membership rosters as having joined the group at that time.[72] It seems likely that both Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin and Katibat Usud al-Sunna were front groups for ISI, following examples from the Iraqi playbook.[73] In the pledge meeting with Baghdadi, we see the benefit of front groups in action – as the younger Absi could appear as an impartial matchmaker, convincing the influential commander Shishani to throw his lot with ISIS instead of its former subordinate and now rival JN.

Competitive Consolidation: The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham

When ISIS announced its presence in Syria, it shifted from silent partner to competing with JN in winning over the Sunni population. It set up da'wa tents where it intermingled with society, especially children, and other insurgents to propagate its ideology. Reflecting on its troubles with Iraqi fighters during the Awakening, ISIS outreach to Syrian tribes also featured heavily in their plans.[74] With regard to battlefield cooperation, ISIS followed the Falluja model, fighting the vastly stronger Assad regime side by side with other insurgents in localized operation rooms in liberated areas. Joint operations were not exclusively defensive though. In December 2013, a joint attack by ISIS, JN, and Ahrar al-Sham targeted the Shi'ite Lebanese pro-regime group Hezbollah in Damascus.[75] The increasingly sectarian character of the Syrian Civil War allowed ISIS to cooperate with other insurgents on their sectarian agenda beyond military targets to include non-Sunni civilians as part of the movement's programmatic ideas on ethnic cleansing and genocide against Alawites and Shi'ites. This cooperation was not limited to fellow Salafists who were inherently sectarian.

One example that Amnesty International identified as a possible war crime is the August 2013 offensive in Latakia, which saw around 200 Alawite civilians killed. While evidence points to Salafi-Jihadist groups as well as Ahrar al-Sham (Political Salafists) as culprits, the

70 Harald Doornbos and Jenan Mousa, "Present at the Creation", Foreign Policy, 16 August, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/16/present-at-the-creation/; Anonymous: "A Mountain from the Mountains of the Caucasus who towered on the Land of the Caliphate. Shaykh Umar al-Sishani", al-Naba 39, 21 July, 2016, pp. 8f.

71 Danele Raineri, "The al-Absi Brothers. ISIS precursor in Aleppo", Storify, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20171012024210/https:/storify.com/AdamBrodie1/the-al-absi-brothers-isis-precursor-in-aleppo; Id., "The Belgian Brigade. Belgian Brigade, ISIS & Hostages Executions", Storify, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20171012063350/https:/storify.com/flr666/t.

72 Id., Tweet 1 on 24 March, 2016, https://x.com/DanieleRaineri/status/712972584443383808; Id. Tweet 2 on, 24 March, 2016, https://x.com/DanieleRaineri/status/712973641210789893.

73 Later Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani by case of example led the Secret Islamic Army while being a subcommander of al-Qaeda in Iraq. MNF-I, "Insurgent Groups of Anbar Province," 10.

74 Al-Furqan, "Messages from the Land of Epic Battles 9", 11 October, 2013; Al-Itisam, "Windows upon the Land of Epic Battles", 10 November, 2013; Craig Whiteside and Anas Elallame, "Accidental ethnographers: the Islamic State's tribal engagement experiment," in Considering Anthropology and Small Wars ed. Montgomery McFate (Routledge, 2020), 191-212.

75 Bill Roggio, "Islamic Front joins al Qaeda suicide assault to take Syrian hospital", The Long War Journal, 23 December, 2013, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/islamic_front_joins.php.

Syrian Military Council participated in the offensive as well.[76] Other instances of arguably offensive cooperation occurred in the country's north, where ISIS fought against the Marxist-influenced YPG alongside other Islamists and Free Syrian Army factions, the former due their ideological rejection of the YPG, the latter due to political considerations.[77] ISIS also used its newly acquired front group Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa-l-Ansar to cooperate with the Syrian Military Council. Especially noteworthy is the capture of Menagh Airport. Free Syrian Army representatives lauded the crucial role Shishani played in this battle, even though his affiliation with ISIS was an open secret by now.[78]

Members and supporters of the three largest ideologically similar groups – ISIS, JN, and Ahrar al-Sham – even coined a term for the mutual battlefield cooperation of the triad: brothers in methodology and creed.[79] The unity message of this slogan was a farce; despite deep interpersonal connections, the groups had already drifted apart ideologically. This was especially true for Ahrar al-Sham and its senior leadership, like Abu Yazan al-Shami and Abu Abdul Malik al-Shar'i – IF's most senior religious officer. The former had spent time in Syria's jails for his participation in "Islamic work related to Iraq" — a reference to his affiliation with ISI — and the latter had two brothers killed while fighting in Iraq in 2003, presumably in the ranks of ISI predecessor group TWJ.[80] Now, both distanced themselves from their Salafi-Jihadist past. Abu Yazan described his new outlook as follows:

> *[Y]es, I was Salafi-jihadist, and I was imprisoned in the regime's jails for it. Today, I ask for God's forgiveness and repent to Him, and I apologize to our people for involving them in Quixotic battles of which they have no need. I apologize for being apart from you for even a day [...]*[81]

Heller describes Ahrar al-Sham's visibly more inclusive ideological turn as revisionist jihadism; we believe that Salafi-Jihadists within the group adopted the consensus ideology of the group – Political Salafism.[82] JN remained in the Salafi-Jihadist camp but adopted a more pragmatic approach to participation in the Syrian resistance that split the difference between ISIS and Ahrar al-Sham. The exclusivism of ISIS, based on a strong embrace of takfirism, distanced the group from its wary allies. Within the ultra-conservative Sunni constituency of the opposition to Assad in Syria and beyond, the three groups competed in recruitment, acquisition of weapons, and financial resources.

Having to cooperate in military matters against the regime did not hinder ISIS in its competitive drive to govern Syrian populations. Unlike JN, ISIS was neither ready for power-sharing agreements in 'liberated' areas nor for submission under independent shari'a courts

76 Human Rights Watch, "You Can Still See Their Blood. Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside", October 2013, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1013_ForUpload.pdf

77 Reuters, "Arabs battle Syrian Kurds as Assad's foes fragment", 26 September, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-kurds-idINL5N0HM3M220130926/.

78 Lister, "Syrian Jihad", 159.

79 Arabia Posts; "Brothers in Methodology. Truth or Exageration?" [no date given], https://arabia-posts.com/%d8%a3%d8%ae%d9%88%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d9%86%d9%87%d8%ac-%d8%ad%d9%82%d9%8a%d9%82%d8%a9-%d8%a3%d9%85-%d9%85%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ba%d8%a9/.

80 Anonymous, "Biographies of the Leaders of Ahrar al-Sham", 2014; Abu al-Walid al-Hanafi, "Biographies of the Eminent Martyrs of the Syrian Revolution. Shaykh Muhammad al-Tayba known as Abu Abdul Malik al-Shar'I", 2023, 2.

81 Sam Heller, Ahrar al-Sham's Abu Yazan: "It's our country and our revolution.", Abu Jamajem, 5 September, 2014, https://abujama-jem.wordpress.com/2014/09/05/ahrar-al-shams-abu-yazan-its-our-country-and-our-revolution/. Translation of the Arabic original by Sam Heller.

82 Sam Heller, "Ahrar al-Sham's Revisionist Jihadism", War on the Rocks, 30 September, 2015, https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/ahrar-al-shams-revisionist-jihadism/.

to solve intra-insurgent problems. To do so would have run counter to its claim to statehood.[83] Unsurprisingly, other rebel actors did not acknowledge this claim. ISIS accordingly turned to its second, most trusted tactic to shape the Syrian arena to its liking – it began coercing other actors through assassinations. Assassination campaigns started before the announcement of ISIS, probably in 2012 or early 2013. The biography of one fighter responsible for such campaigns in Hasaka – Abu al-Muthana al-Husayni – notes:

> *With the arrival of some security agents from Iraq, the security work in all of eastern Syria began. Abu Anas al-Iraqi and Abu Ahmad al-Iraqi – may God accept them both – started a sequence of security operations against the Nusayri regime and its agents in the city of Raqqa before the conquest [March 2013]. They completed the work on the heads of apostasy among the secularists and the Awakening leaders under the command of Shaykh Abu Luqman al-Raqqi. At the same time, Abu Umar Qardash – may God accept him – was working hard against the agents of the regime and the leaders of the Free Army of Apostates in al-Khayr province [Deir ez-Zor]. He and a group of his mujahidin were able to behead some of them and forced others to flee from the area. These operations were carried out in secret and were not claimed, and all this happened before the betrayal of Jawlani and those with him. Abu al-Muthanna – may God accept him – and his brothers with him – carried out a number of operations against the agents of the Crusaders and the regime in Shadadi and its environments. During this time, the security detachment of the Islamic State [of Iraq] prepared itself for the emergence of the Awakenings that the leaders of Islamic State expected soon. This because of the gathering of information on the leaders of the groups, their movements, plans, and meetings, especially their meetings in Turkey. By the grace of God, the brothers were able to catch many of them during their return from Turkey, carrying orders, money and weapons.*[84]

To the Islamic State movement, the Free Syrian Army had apostatized in their allegiance to Syrian National Council that had not called for shari'a. Its obsession with the Awakening experience in Iraq led the group to preemptively target rivals.[85] Refraining from claiming the assassinations likely prevented outright conflict at this time. One less discrete ISIS commander was Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, who repeatedly clashed with moderate rebels and gained a reputation for brutality.[86] Soon, ISIS began a slow campaign against Free Syrian Army groups with a reputation for criminality, disguising their power grabs as law and order policy, often claiming that opponents had been in possession of alcohol. This way, ISIS was able to gain control of the vital border cities of Jarablus and Azaz.[87]

During the second half of 2013, ISIS fighters were increasingly caught assassinating members of rival groups, including Ahrar al-Sham. In one case, ISIS members beheaded Muhammad Faris of Ahrar al-Sham in mid-November only to claim that they had mistaken him for a Shi'ite. When the torso was found still wearing an Ahrar al-Sham t-shirt, relations between the two groups understandably soured.[88] Days later, the SILF and the SIF de-facto merged as Islamic Front (IF), uniting the big four: Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, and Liwa

83 Pierret, "Salafis at War", 151f.

84 Anonymous, "Abu al-Muthanna al-Husayni", al-Naba 193, 29 August, 2019.

85 Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy Behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2022.

86 Mike Giglio, "A Late-Night Phone Call Between One Of Syria's Top Extremists And His Sworn Enemy, BuzzFeed News", 4 April, 2014, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/a-late-night-phone-call-between-one-of-syrias-top-extremists#.hcE0nyLPRW; Anonymous, "Abu Ayman al-Iraqi. A Man like a Nation of Men", al-Naba 90, 20 July, 2017.

87 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Analyzing Events in Azaz. A Detailed Look At ISIS' Takeover", Brown Moses Blog, 9 October, 2013, http:\brown-moses.blogspot.com\2013\10\analyzing-events-in-azaz-detailed-look.html; Al-Itisam, "Windows upon the Land of Epic Battles 17", 16 October, 2013.

88 Aks Alser, New details in the case Muhammad Faris, 17 November, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20131206213955/https://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=1895980af59268d759a8bc54ee791a5b&ar=160270050.

al-Tawhid as well as smaller groups.[89] Most former members of the SILF were now ready to support a more radical project that exposed a radicalization of the insurgency against Assad. The new coalition stated that it "aims to topple the Assad regime in Syria completely and to build an Islamic state whose sovereignty belongs to God's shari'a alone as reference, rule, lead, and system for the conduct of the individual, the society, and the state."[90]

The new coalition was obviously a force to reckon with. The murder of Muhammad Faris was a precursor of the coming battle between IF and ISIS. Alert to the threat of rival insurgent coalitions from its Iraqi experience—where the Political Salafist insurgent coalition Reform and Jihad Front attacked ISI immediately after constituting—the group tried to deter others from joining using coercion. To demonstrate their own growing strength, ISIS publicized the allegiance of Shishani, Shami, and their respective loyalists who numbered in the thousands.[91]

The race to build strength saw additional insurgent mergers, including:

- the Clerical Islamist group Ajnad al-Sham (2 December 2013)
- the Syrian Revolutionaries Front that united a number of Free Syrian Army factions (9 December 2013)
- Mujahidin Army that was formed by a number of Aleppine groups from different Islamist trends (3 January 2014)

Some of these new groups and coalitions were obviously coming together to fight ISIS. On the last day of 2013, some ISIS fighters handed the mutilated body of Dr. Abu Rayyan Sulayman to his comrades in Ahrar al-Sham, instigating a war between the factions. Once more, the assassination of a well-connected insurgent leader served as the final cause for other insurgents to attack the Islamic State movement. From 3 January 2014, ISIS suffered widespread attacks in the provinces Idlib and Aleppo that cost it hundreds of men – some of them summarily executed.[92] The group's largest fear – a large-scale attack by other armed Sunnis akin to the Awakening in Iraq – had become reality. In the Iraq war, ISI had signaled its coercive mode before other insurgents began to fight back; in Syria, ISIS was still in its competitive mode when this happened, reserving coercive tactics for clandestine assassinations and avoiding direct conflict. The January 2014 outbreak of warfare among rebel groups forced the group's leaders to transition to the coercive phase of consolidation.

Coercive Consolidation: Fighting the 'Syrian Awakening' and announcing the Caliphate

ISIS leadership viewed its struggle for hegemony in Syria through the lens of its experience in Iraq. Official spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who had come out of prison in 2009 at the height of the counter-Awakening battle against Iraqi Sunni tribes and rival insurgent groups that had rallied to the government,[93] said this early in this new phase of the rebellion:

> *By God, it is [like] the Iraqi conspiracy. In completely the same manner. By God, it is the civil state, and the national project, and it is the Awakenings. We know it already, and we know its custom. Yesterday in Iraq,*

89 "Statement on the unification of the largest Syrian fighting groups under the name Islamic Front", 22 November, 2013.

90 Islamic Front, "Charter of the Islamic Front", 22 November, 2013.

91 Anonymous, "Abu Muhannad al-Shami. The Man who destroyed the Groups with Iron Feet", al-Naba 25, 07 June 2016, 8f; Thomas Joscelyn, "Chechen-led group swears allegiance to head of Islamic State of Iraq and Sham", The Long War Journal, 27 November, 2013, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/11/muhajireen_army_swea.php.

92 Lister, "Syrian Jihad", 187-197.

93 Craig Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise." International Centre for Counterterrorism, The Hague (2016).

> *it was a coalition, a national council, blocks, and political parties. An Islamic Army [Islamic Army in Iraq] and a Mujahidin Army and squadrons and groups – and now they return in Sham... with the same sponsors, supporters, and financier, nay – even with the same names.*[94]

The SRF and other FSA factions involved in the fight had never been part of the Sunni Islamist in-group, and Adnani quickly focused on their apostasy for insufficient intent to rule by Islamic law and their alliance to non-Muslims: "Oh, people of Sham! Verily, anyone who calls for a civil state is an agent and a partner of the Jews and the Crusaders, and a new false deity [...]."[95] Announcing the excommunication of all moderate elements of the Syrian opposition, Adnani declared open season on their members and supporters.[96]

Applying coercive tactics to Islamist fellow travelers was more complex. Adnani's reference to the Islamic Army [in Iraq] and the Mujahidin Army as a metaphor explaining its Syrian challenges with Islamist groups serves as a clear hint in this regard. These two Political Salafist groups had been erstwhile allies in the insurgency in Iraq before having large elements of its membership turn against ISI during the Awakening in 2007. Apart from playing on the names of newcomer Mujahidin Army from Aleppo and the mostly Damascus-based Jaysh al-Islam (literally Army of Islam), he was identifying the ideological camp that he both considered the largest threat and the greatest opportunity, namely the Political Salafists united under the banner of IF.

While IF claimed it was only defending itself against ISIS aggression, the reality was different and public statements to the contrary served to appease the incensed supporting milieu. ISIS blamed Ahrar al-Sham as the main instigator of the attacks on its members.[97] Conflict between groups with strong permeability of membership meant high stakes in the rivalry between the Political Salafists of IF and the Salafi-Jihadists of ISIS, as they mostly adhered to the same religious creed and had shared underground networks for both the Iraq and Syrian wars.

To prevent IF from capitalizing on these potential inroads, ISIS once more turned to its Iraqi playbook of hidden allegiances, assassinations, and ultra-violence. In Idlib, where the group was hard pressed, Shami – leader of former Suqur al-Sham sub-group Liwa Dawud – publicly renounced his allegiance to ISIS and stayed clear of the infighting.[98] This was a ruse, a return to the secret pledge strategy to preserve his forces in the province. The strong positions that Shami held in his native town of Sarmin allowed him to protect other ISIS forces under threat by hostile insurgents.[99] At the same time, this role secretly allowed him to target insurgent leaders opposed to ISIS.[100] Furthermore, his influence on some of his former comrades in Suqur al-Sham led to a cease-fire between the groups in February, blunting the opposition in Homs.[101] A similar attempt for a cease-fire had previously occurred in Aleppo, where the highly respected Shishani and Ahrar al-Sham's Suri signed a local understanding including an exchange of prisoners.[102] Early on, Jawlani declared JN's intent to defend itself against

94 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "The Pionier does not lie to his People", al-Furqan, 7 January, 2014.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Lister, "Syrian Jihad" 190f; Al-Itisam, "Windows upon the Land of Epic Battles 42", 12 January, 2014.

98 Charles Lister, Tweet on 5 January, 2014, https://x.com/Charles_Lister/status/419737189128237056.

99 Anonymous, "Abu Muhannad al-Shami".

100 Christopher J. Chivers, "Behind the Black Flag: The Recruitment of an ISIS Killer", The New York Times, 20 December, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/21/world/middleeast/isis-recruitment-killer-hassan-aboud.html.

101 Charles Lister, Tweet on 5 February, 2014, https://x.com/Charles_Lister/status/430970425204412416.

102 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Syria: Truce Between ISIS's Abu Umar al-Shishani & Ahrar ash-Sham On Eastern Front in Aleppo Province", EA Worldview, 8 January, 2014, https://eaworldview.com/2014/01/syria-claimed-truce-abu-umar-al-shishani-ahrar-ash-sham-eastern-front/.

aggression from any side while granting asylum to foreign members of ISIS, likely an attempt to poach members of the rival group.[103]

Other Salafi-Jihadist groups stayed on the fence during this early stage of the conflict, but continued cooperation with ISIS forces on the frontlines fighting the Assad regime, most prominently as part of the siege of Kweiris Military Airport near Aleppo.[104] As these uncertain allies fought regime forces, ISIS fighters began a counter-offensive against hostile insurgent rivals. During this time, relations with JN began to sour in earnest as ISIS consistently rejected mediation as directed by al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan.[105] As a result, on 3 February 2014, al-Qaeda publicly severed all relations to ISIS.[106] Likely warned by supporters of the coming move, ISIS opted for a preemptive strike on JN in the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor. The proximity to Iraq, the oil-wealth of the province, and the particularly bad relationship with local JN leader Abu Mariya al-Qahtani likely influenced this decision.[107] The strategic importance of Eastern Syria to its cross-border project motivated ISIS to withdraw its remaining military forces from Idlib, Southern Aleppo, and Homs where the group was weak, a calculated move and acknowledgment they could not be strong in all areas.[108] The infighting was not universal; cooperation continued between JN and ISIS in the Qalamun region bordering Lebanon. Here, the pressure from Assad-allied Hezbollah was immense, and forced the Salafi-Jihadist rivals to work together. Additionally, the local leader of JN was the renowned hard-liner Abu Malik al-Tali who in turn was friendly with the corresponding ISIS commander – Abu Usama al-Banyasi. This personal relationship prevented full-blown infighting, displaying the importance of individual commanders and their connections.[109]

To deprive its enemies of well-connected, capable commanders, ISIS had upped its targeted assassinations campaign in response to the January 2014 clashes, occasionally claiming these attacks for the first time in a sign of growing confidence. The most consequential assassination occurred in mid-February 2014, when ISIS killed Zawahiri emissary and Ahrar al-Sham commander Abu Khalid al-Suri. [110] By killing Suri, ISIS severed the direct connection between Ahrar al-Sham and al-Qaeda, prevented a closer alliance between JN and Ahrar al-Sham, and deprived Zawahiri of his primary contact in Syria. To mitigate repercussions in its support base, ISIS did not claim the attack. This did not fool its opponents, who were familiar with the ISIS playbook. In another public example, JN accused its rival of assassinating Abu Muhammad al-Fatih – one of its commanders – and his family.[111]

Emboldened by its successful campaign in Iraq, ISIS soon began a general offensive in Syria. In April 2014, the group's shari'a council released a statement written by Anbari – now ISIS

103 Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, "Fear God with regard to the Arena of Sham", al-Manara al-Baydha, 7 January, 2014. ISIS confirmed such occasions but ascribed them to the "sincerity of some youth" in its propaganda: Al-Itisam, "Windows upon the Land of Epic Battles 47", 25 February, 2014.

104 Basel Dayoub, "Kweiris Airport", al-Akhbar, 28 February, 2014, https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/27724.

105 Jerome Drevon, From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 93.

106 The General Leadership/ al-Qaeda, "Statement regarding the Relationship between the Qaedat al-Jihad Group and the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham Group", 2 February, 2014.

107 Lister, "Syrian Jihad", 201.

108 Al-Hayat, "Flames of War I", 19 September, 2014.

109 Johannes Saal, "The Rise and Fall of Majd – Part V: Caught in Syria's Intra-Jihadi Crossfire", The German Jihad, 3 Augsut, 2018, https://germanjihad.wordpress.com/2018/08/03/the-rise-and-fall-of-majd-part-v-caught-in-syrias-intra-jihadi-crossfire/.

110 Lister, "Syrian Jihad", 204-206.

111 Al-Basira, "But this is their Methodology", 18 April, 2014.

governor for Syria – that excommunicated the leadership of IF, some due to their former membership in the Syrian Military Council. The argument for their apostasy derives from the council's embrace of a civil state instead of a shari'a state and therefore an affront against the group's creed regarding tawhid al-hakimiyya (monotheism in judgment). As IF's leadership had never distanced itself from this thought nor announced the disbelief inherent to a civilian state, they themselves fell into apostasy, according to Anbari.[112] The obvious audience of the 32-page treatise were IF fighters who in the eyes of ISIS remained Muslims:

> *[...] verily the judgement of apostasy in our view does not extend to members and followers of the so-called Islamic Front until they have gained knowledge of the condition of their banner represented by their leaders. Individuals of this group are not guilty of apostasy until they know the condition of their leaders and their apostasy would lie in following the apostates in the leadership of the so-called Islamic Front [knowingly].*[113]

To preserve this status, the ensuing reasoning goes, IF members only possibility was defection – the statement being the final call. [114] Attempts to poach hardline IF members seem to have been rather successful in Eastern Syria, where many Ahrar al-Sham members defected due to ideological overlap.[115] Having made its case against IF, ISIS turned to its most dangerous remaining opponent in Eastern Syria – JN in Deir-ez-Zor.[116] Renewing its military efforts in the province in April 2014, spokesman Adnani attacked JN's legitimacy by explaining why ISIS had rejected Zawahiri's order to leave Syria. As per Adnani, the allegiance to al-Qaeda had been canceled by al-Qaeda in Iraq's subsumption under ISI in 2006.[117] Attacking Zawahiri personally, Adnani articulated the hegemonic aspiration of the Islamic State movement in May 2014, pointing to the Qurashite lineage of its leader Baghdadi that is a prerequisite for a caliph.[118] The generated legitimacy of rule in the group's doctrine is far superior to Zawahiri's leadership claim.[119] It is unclear whether these statements had any real impact on JN's rank and file. Public claims of defections in either direction were rampant, with the scale likely tilting in the favor of ISIS.[120]

On the military side, JN in Deir-ez-Zor became so hard-pressed that it had to join forces with other remaining insurgent groups in the province under the name Mujahidin Shura Council in the Eastern Region.[121] JN's tactical alliance with 'apostate' forces led members of ISIS to excommunicate their opponents in Deir-ez-Zor.[122] ISIS' spectacular takeover of Iraq's metropolis Mosul in early June 2014 gave ISIS an immeasurable morale and material boost that had a knock on effect in Deir-ez-Zor, resulting in JN's retreat from the province shortly thereafter.[123]

112 Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, "Statement by the Shari'a Council regarding the Islamic Front and its Leaders", 16 April, 2014.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 Al-Furqan, "Messages from the Land of Epic Battles 17", 31 January, 2014; Al-Itisam, "Windows upon the Land of Epic Battles 45", 10 February, 2014; Al-Itisam, "Windows upon the Land of Epic Battles 46", 13 February, 2014.

116 Lister, "Syrian Jihad", 215

117 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is not our Methodology, nor will it ever be", 17 April, 2014.

118 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Apologies, oh amir of al-Qaeda", 11 May, 2014.

119 Ingram et al, "The ISIS Reader", 64-70.

120 Abwa Lasiqa, "Testimony by Abu Umar al-Ansari – One of the Soldiers of the Jawlani Front who defected from it", 3 April, 2014; Id., "The Truth about the Testimonies of the Jawlani Front", 6 June, 2014. In the propaganda war that used testimonies by defectors from the rival group, ISIS prevailed by providing proof of forced witness statements on the side of JN.

121 Syrian Memory, "Deir-ez-Zor: The largest Factions form the Mujahidin Shura Council in the Eastern Regions", 25 May, 2014, https://syrianmemory.org/daily-events/event/5eb99009b27e7f00011f2caa.

122 Lister, "Syrian Jihad", 202.

123 Theo Padnos, "My Captivity", The New York Times, 29 October, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/28/magazine/theo-padnos-american-journalist-on-being-kidnapped-tortured-and-released-in-syria.html.

During its conquest of large parts of Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, ISIS began enforcing its hegemonic demands on other armed groups in the regions it controlled. Fellow Salafi-Jihadists either joined willingly or were strong-armed to announce their allegiance publicly. In Iraq, members of the Salafi-Jihadist rival Ansar al-Islam that had clashed with ISIS on numerous occasions pledged allegiance to Baghdadi.[124] In Syria, the JN garrison of the border city Albu Kamal under the command of Abu Yusuf al-Masri pledged allegiance to ISIS in front of Shishani.[125] The motive for this public obeisance was to buttress the legitimacy of ISIS. While members of less radical Islamist groups and opportunist insurgents also joined during this period, the group mostly refrained from highlighting this development, as it served no inherent propagandistic value. Armed actors whom the group considered apostates could repent and were spared by the group if they disarmed.[126] ISIS' claim to statehood was now substantiated by territorial control and its authority established through oaths – freely given or coerced – from former Salafi-Jihadist rivals. Accordingly, the Islamic State movement felt secure enough to proceed to its ultimate objective: establishing a caliphate.

On 29 June 2014, official spokesman Adnani proclaimed the group's leader Baghdadi as caliph and commander of all Muslims, changing the name of the group to Islamic State (IS). The group now formulated its claim to total dominance in the territory it ruled and hinted at global expansion – a shift from local to global hegemony within Sunni Islamism. Adnani singled out members of other armed groups and called upon them to join the caliphate:

> *We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilāfah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalīfah Ibrāhīm [al-Badri – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilāfah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas. [...] As for you, O soldiers of the platoons and organizations, know that after this consolidation and the establishment of the khilāfah, the legality of your groups and organizations has become invalid. It is not permissible for a single person of you who believes in Allah to sleep without having walā' (loyalty) to the khalīfah.*[127]

In response, fighters secretly pledged to the group now moved to the territorial caliphate from insurgent-held areas under the command of Shami.[128] IS soon enforced its hegemony on other armed Sunni actors after a short grace period. In Syria, the Sha'ytat tribe's uprising against the group led to a genocidal counter-campaign in early August 2014 that ended with tribal leaders repenting and showing public obeisance by handing in their arms.[129] In Iraq, IS crushed the Political Salafists of Mujahidin Army in their stronghold al-Karma in mid-August.[130] Likely to circumvent such a fate, Ansar al-Islam formally pledged allegiance on 25 August 2014 thereby legitimizing IS as sole Salafi-Jihadist actor in Iraq.[131] It had taken the group only two months to enforce its hegemony within its territory decisively. This status would prevail for roughly five years until the demise of the territorial caliphate at the hands of a global coalition in March 2019.

124 Khan and Whiteside, "Emirate Astray".

125 Bill Roggio and Oren Adaki, "Egyptian Al Nusrah Front commander on Syrian border defects to ISIS", The Long War Journal, 25 June, 2014, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/egyptian_al_nusrah_f.php.

126 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and the Sunni Community," forthcoming 2025.

127 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is God's Promise", 29 June, 2014. Translation from Islamic State's al-Hayat media.

128 Anonymous, "Abu Muhannad al-Shami"; Chivers, "Behind the Black Flag".

129 Haian Dukhan, "The ISIS Massacre of the Sheitat Tribe in Der Ez-Zor, August 2014", Journal of Genocide Research, 25:1 (2021), 113-121; Al-Khayr Province, "Except those who repent and believe, 11 January, 2015.

130 Mujahidin Army, "Statement on the Withdrawal from al-Karma", 23 August, 2014; Falluja Province, "War has its Ups and Downs", 19 April, 2017.

131 Shura Council of Ansar al-Islam/ Iraq, "Pledge of Ansar al-Islam Group in Iraq to the Islamic State", 25 August, 2014.

Conclusion

Our comparison of the Islamic State movement's approach to other Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq and Syria reveals a pattern of behavior. The movement cooperated with other groups on the battlefield and in governance when weak. To advance its political agenda, the group sought opportunities by turning to competition, a more zero-sum game than its cooperative phase. In the competitive phase, the group withdrew from shared governance and began covertly assassinating rival Sunni insurgent and societal leaders they saw as obstacles to their political fortunes. Success in this stage saw them advance to a fully coercive mode of political consolidation, where they used assassinations and ultra-violence against Sunni rivals, underlining the self-perception as a state through building institutions and hegemonic domination of rivals. Programmatic name changes often signaled a new stage of behavior towards other insurgents. During all stages, the movement practiced a gradual implementation of its policies, coercing ideologically distant insurgents first, then using similar tactics on ideologically closer Political Salafists and eventually even on other Salafi-Jihadists. A key difference between the Iraqi and the Syrian cases is the defection of large parts of the original front group JN. The ensuing comparative weakness of ISIS in its competitive phase might have influenced decisions like the early use of covert assassination. ISIS' rather diverse set of cooperative partners in the early stage of its competitive phase might also result in the rivalry with the JN splinter.

Sectarian hatred for Shi'ites and Alawites as well as the perceived religious duty to bring forth a shari'a state formed formidable ideological overlaps with rival Salafi-Jihadists like the splinter faction JN and Political Salafist like Ahrar al-Sham. This furthered battlefield cooperation against common others and enhanced permeability between groups. The maximalist and exclusivist ideological approach by the Islamic State movement soured relations and created the same backlash it had seen in Iraq. ISIS delegitimized political and military counter-movements by comparing them to the Awakening in Iraq, and countered them with alacrity and severity. Still, the Islamic State movement showed itself to be pragmatic when it had to be, despite its reputation, even after the establishment of its caliphate. While the territorial core area of IS remained uncompromisingly committed to dominating the Sunni insurgency in Syria to the point of rejecting a ceasefire with other insurgents in May 2015, this was not true for other regions where the group was weaker.[132] IS continued to adjust policies in line with its tested playbook despite its claim to predominance. In the Qalamun area, coordination with JN carried on into 2015 when it faltered due to the demise of Banyasi.[133]

In Southern Syria's Dar'a Province, the group continued its practice of secret oaths by acquiring the covert allegiance of the Yarmuk Martyrs Brigade and Muthana Islamic Movement or at least its leading members, presumably during 2014. These groups followed the trajectory of ISIS by continuing battlefield cooperation with other insurgents while rejecting insurgent judiciary outside of their own Islamic courts. At the same time, covert assassinations of rival insurgents were regular occurrences. After merging these organisations that by then had become mere front groups under the name Jaysh Khalid bin al-Walid in May 2016, the affiliation to IS became public, eventually leading to the official recognition of the group as

132 Bill Roggio, "Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar leader accuses Islamic State of creating 'fitna' between jihadist groups", The Long War Journal, 28 May, 2015, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/jaish-al-muhajireen-wal-ansar-leader-accuses-islamic-state-of-creating-fitna-between-jihadist-groups.php.

133 Saal, "The Rise and Fall of Majd V".

Islamic State's Hawran Province in July 2018.[134] The difficulty of identifying the Islamic State movement's influence on groups or their status as fronts – even for governments and experts – becomes evident in the case of Yarmuk Martyrs Brigade. In February 2015, renowned expert Aymenn al-Tamimi remained unconvinced of links between the group and IS:

> *The other claim of an ISIS presence in the south is the supposed allegiance to ISIS of the Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk (Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade), which is one of the more well known [sic] Free Syrian Army (FSA) branches in Deraa. This "allegiance" has been a central talking point circulated by Syria's al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) to justify taking on the group militarily, but nothing substantial corroborates JN's claims. It should thus be seen as mere pretext.* [135]

By September 2015, Tamimi had revised his opinion due to new information and developments, correctly predicting the eventual status change to official province that would occur in 2018.[136] The United States designated the group in June 2016 without any mention of its allegiance, ironically after the group had ceased to exist and had become a semi-official affiliate to IS.[137] After the demise of the territorial caliphate, IS seems to have once more engaged in cooperation with like-minded groups in Syria – a sign of rebuilding strength at the lower competitive state. Small Salafi-Jihadists groups like the Ansar Abi Bakr al-Siddiq Squadrons in Idlib – where the rebranded and moderated JN has been ruling as Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – at least negotiated with IS regarding cooperation against both HTS and Turkish troops in the area.[138]

The gradual change in relations with other Sunni Islamist actors and the core tactics used to further hegemonic ambition are observable outside of Iraq and Syria as well. Internationally, the so-called 'distant provinces' have adapted parts of this playbook to local circumstances. Prominent cases include:

- the secret allegiance of Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam in Libya's Derna that became public in October 2014 and furthered IS propaganda when it officially accepted oaths from outside Iraq and Syria in November 2014 in its first global expansion[139],
- the battle coordination with al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel that persisted until 2020[140],
- the relentless campaign of assassination targeting rival Islamist leadership figures in Afghanistan and Pakistan[141],

134 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi and Charlie Winter, "The Islamic State in Dera'a: History and Present Situation", Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, 24 April, 2023, https://www.hudson.org/islamic-state-deraa-history-present-situation.

135 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "ISIS and Syria's Southern Front", Middle East Institute, 6 February, 2015, https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-and-syrias-southern-front.

136 Id., "Liwa Shuhada' al-Yarmouk: History and Analysis", Syria Comment, 18 September, 2015, https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/liwa-shuhada-al-yarmouk-history-and-analysis/.

137 United States State Department, "In the Matter of the Designation of Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade", 10 June, 2016, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/06/10/2016-13676/in-the-matter-of-the-designation-of-yarmouk-martyrs-brigade-aka-katibah-shuhada-al-yarmouk-aka-liwa.

138 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Jihadi 'Counterterrorism:' Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State", CTC Sentinel 16:2 (2023), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/jihadi-counterterrorism-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-versus-the-islamic-state/.

139 Id., "The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2325, 10 October, 2014, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-first-colony-libya; Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Although the Disbelievers hate it", al-Furqan, 13 November, 2014

140 Wassim Nasr, "ISIS in Africa: The End of the Sahel Exception", Newlines Institute, 2 June, 2020, https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/.

141 Andrew Mines and Amira Jaadon, "A string of assassinations in Afghanistan point to ISIS-K resurgence – and US officials warn of possible attacks on American interests in next 6 months", The Conversation, 21 March, 2023, https://theconversation.com/a-string-of-assassinations-in-afghanistan-point-to-isis-k-resurgence-and-us-officials-warn-of-possible-attacks-on-american-interests-in-next-6-months-201852; Osama Ahmad, "ISKP Attacks Pakistan's Religious Political Parties for Participating in Elections", Terrorism Monitor 21:19, Jamestown Foundation, 15 September, 2023, https://jamestown.org/program/iskp-attacks-pakistans-religious-political-parties-for-participating-in-elections/.

- and the ultra-violence targeting communities that cooperate with Nigerian security forces.[142]

Prosecution for group membership and for core international crimes should therefore not limit themselves to Iraq and Syria but take all IS provinces into consideration. Remaining problems for prosecutors are the approach to ideological opponents within the insurgency who were at a time part of battlefield alliances with the Islamic State movement and the murkiness of group membership in cases of front groups. Trying members of insurgent groups who cooperated with the Islamic State movement in defensive environments – like the Siege of Aleppo – seems excessive to the authors as few if any insurgents would be safe from prosecution, simply due to their participation in a revolution against a genocidal regime and the ensuing military necessities on the ground. A preferable approach could distinguish between defensive and offensive environments. Here, ideological affinity is important, as members of JN and Ahrar al-Sham are more likely to have participated in offensive activities. Additionally, prosecution should focus on insurgents known to have consciously cooperated with the Islamic State movement in individual capacity. Given the fragmented nature of Syrian insurgent groups, members in one corner of the country might have had nothing to do with members in the other corner of Syria cooperating with the Islamic State movement.

In addition, prosecution of cooperation with front groups has to take into account the individual's knowledge about the partner's allegiance. The same holds true for individual members of an infiltrated or – even more relevant – a front group. Whether they knew about their superiors' pledge to the Islamic State movement warrants investigation in the individual case. For example, a large part of the obvious ISIS front-group Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa-l-Ansar refused to follow its leader Shishani when he publicly pledged to Baghdadi and would later become ardent opponents of IS.[143] Counting them as ISIS members during the months that he kept his pledge secret is rather counterintuitive. Their rejection of Shishani's public pledge might form an argument for their ignorance of their superior's allegiance, namely that they would have deserted him (as they eventually did) if they had known of his secret oath. That not all members of front groups were informed of their superiors' current allegiance is evident from the example of Shami who only announced his oath to Baghdadi when his convoy towards IS territory had already crossed the frontlines. Notably, he even gave dissenting fighters who like most others seem to have been unaware of this plan the choice to retreat.[144] To do the incredibly complicated Syrian context justice, prosecution needs detailed background information on a case-by-case basis.

142 Habibu Gimba, "ISWAP Claims responsibility for Yobe mass killing, gives reason", The Daily Trust, 3 September, 2024, https://daily-trust.com/breaking-iswap-claims-responsibility-for-yobe-mass-killing-gives-reason/.

143 Caleb Weiss, "Chechen commander killed in northern Syria", Long War Journal, 17 December, 2017, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/12/chechen-commander-killed-in-northern-syria.php.

144 Chivers, "Behind the Black Flag".

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