From Islamism to Post-Islamism

Transformations within the Syrian Armed Islamist Movements (2011–2021): Ahrar al-Sham (The Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant), Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), and Failaq al-Sham (The Sham Legion)

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Abstract

This study examines the processes of collective transformations (radicalisation, de-radicalisation and moderation) within local armed Islamist movements in Syria, using a political process approach (PPA) as its analytical and theoretical framework. Using Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam), and Failaq al-Sham (the Sham Legion) as case studies, it investigates the dynamics and mechanisms by which armed Syrian Islamist movements have transformed their ideology, behaviours and organisational structures during the uprising.

The main objective of this study is to contribute to the theorisation of ongoing transformations within Islamist movements by focusing on the *roots* (root causes) of the transformation process as well as its *routes* (mechanisms). Within this framework, the study argues that organisational, behavioural and ideological transformations within the Syrian armed movements have been determined by the interaction between three essential dimensions: the external political environment, the movements' mobilisation structure, and the ideological frames they deploy.

The study also aims to produce a solid base of knowledge about local armed movements in Syria and their transformations. This, in turn, will fill a gap in the existing literature: most scholars have focused on radicalisation rather than de-radicalisation and moderation.

In order to achieve these aims, the study primarily employs a case-based qualitative-comparative approach. The data collected draws upon semi-structured interviews concentrating on three case studies focusing on three local armed movements, while analysing both the contents and discourse of the interview data, as well as the written and spoken data available on those movements.

Acknowledgement

Submitting this thesis was the culmination of a long, fascinating, and unusual journey. Many challenges have emerged along the way, including relocating to three different countries because of the pandemic. It is why I feel truly humbled and thankful to every single individual who has given me their time and support, throughout this journey.

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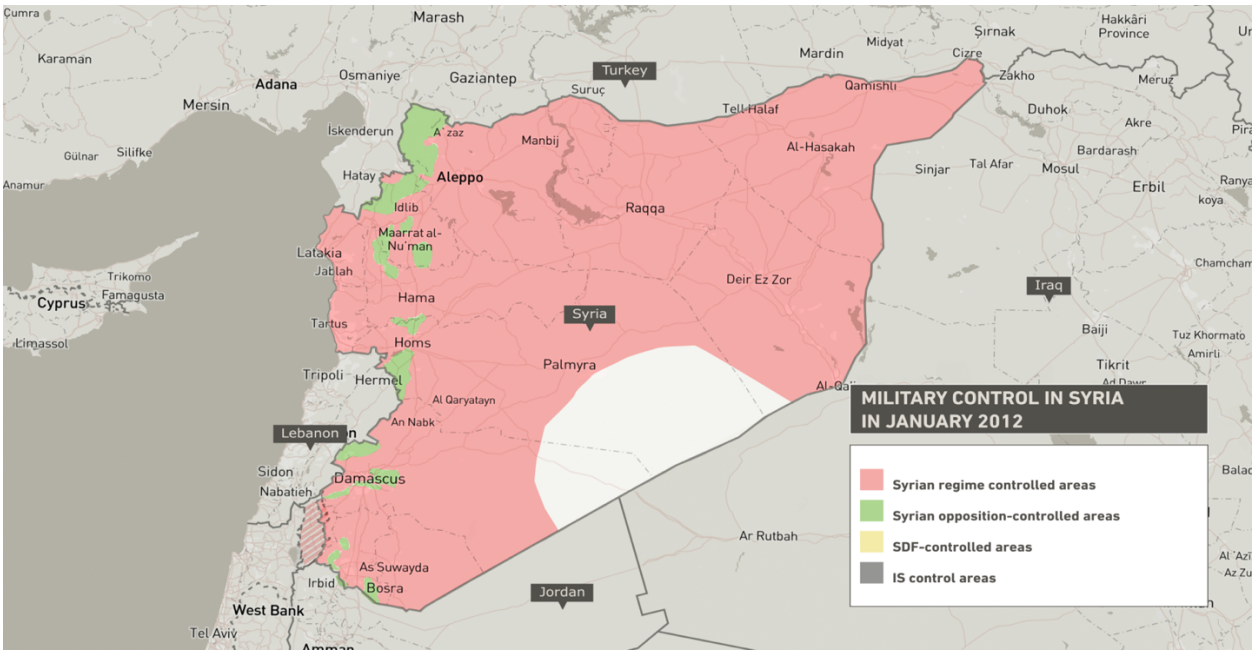
List of Abbreviations

ADF	The Authenticity and Development Front
ASH	Islamic Movement of the Free Men in the Levant (Ahrar al-Sham)
AKP	Justice and Development Party-Turkey
AoC	The 'Army of Conquest'
AoI	The Army of Islam (Jaysh al-Islam)
AoU	The Army of the Umma
CPC	Civilian Protection Committee
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FSH	The Sham Legion (Failaq al-Sham)
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Countries
HNC	High Negotiations Committee – Syria
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant
IF	The Islamic Front
IS	Islamic State, sometimes called Islamic State for Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh
KSA	The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MB	Muslim Brotherhood – Egypt
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOC	The Military Operation Center

NCS	The National Council of Syria
NF	Al-Nusra Front
NLF	The National Liberation Front
PPA	Political Process Approach
PYD	The Democratic Union Party
RMT	Resource Mobilization Theory
SDF	The Syrian Democratic Forces
SIF	The Syrian Islamic Front
SIG	The Syrian Interim Government
SILF	The Syrian Islamic Liberation front
SMB	Muslim Brotherhood of Syria
SMT	Social Movement Theory
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNC	Syrian National Coalition, also called National Collation of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces
SRC	Shields of the Revolution Council
SRF	Syrian Revolutionaries Front
STC	The Syrian Islamic Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
US	The United States
VG	Fighting Vanguard

Maps of Military Control in Syria Between 2012-2022

Since the peaceful uprising in Syria transformed into an armed conflict in late 2011, the map of military control has witnessed many changes. The maps below show the areas of military influence on the front lines between conflicting local forces on the ground between 2011-2022. They have been designed by the researcher based on data collected from several websites such as the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Jusoor Center for Studies, and GENE Platform for Data Analysis and Visualization in order to mitigate the complexity of the field scene.



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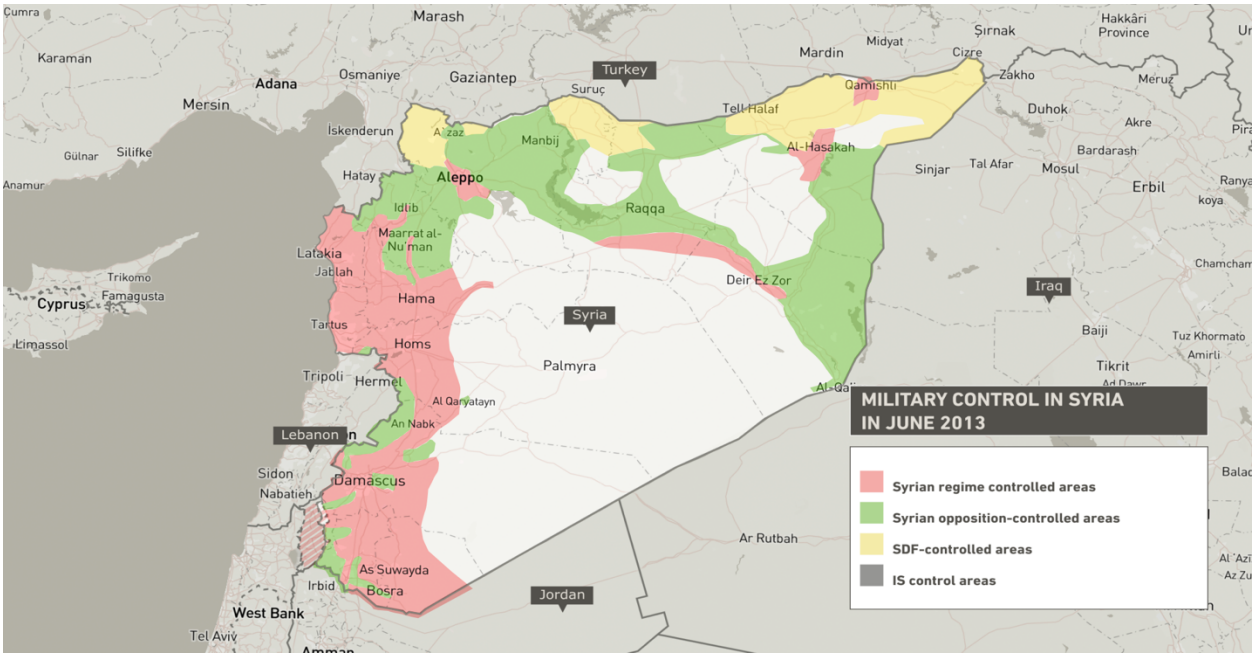

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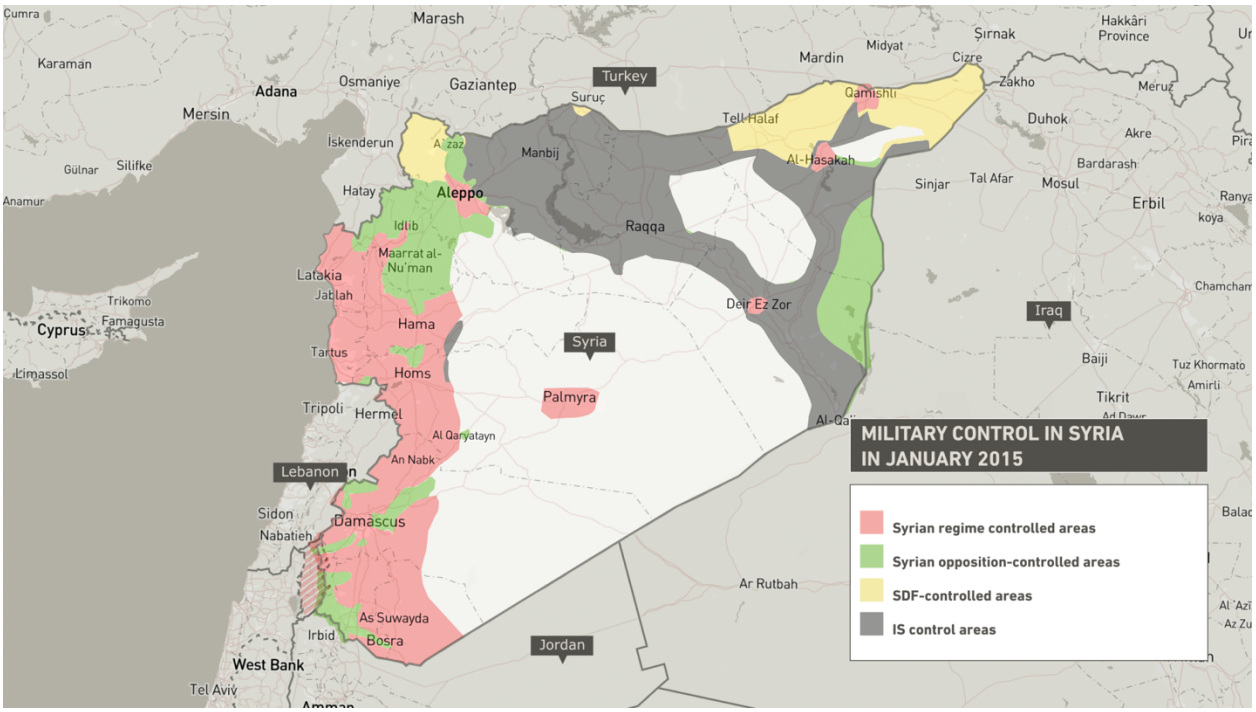

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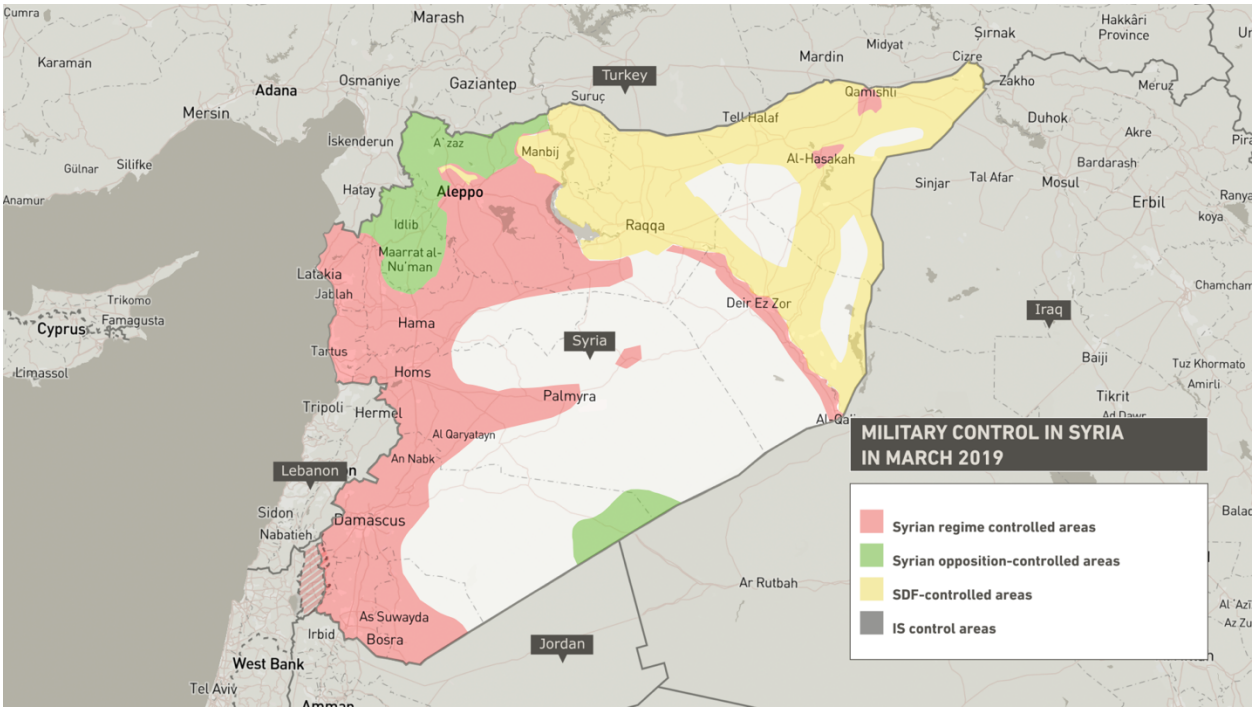

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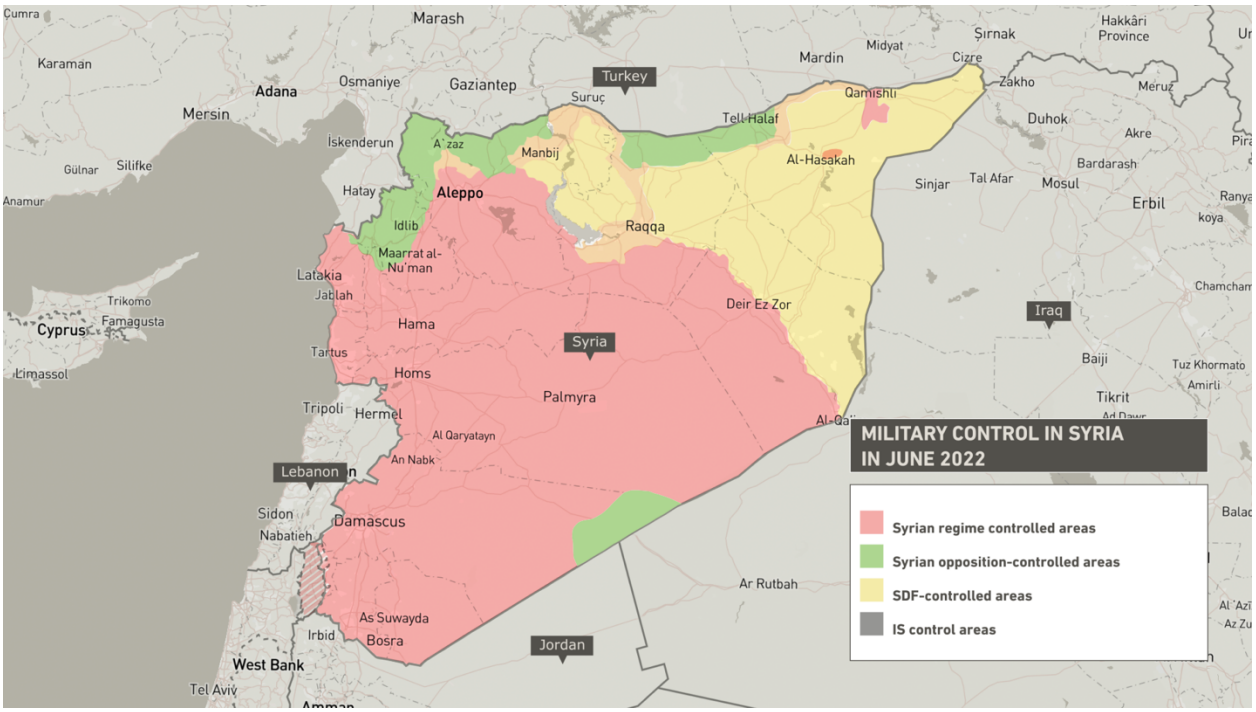


(Military Control in Syria in June 2022)

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction, Terminology and Typology, Theoretical Framework and Methodology 1

Introduction 1

Research Questions 9

Timeframe of Analysis 10

1.1. Terminology and Typology 12

1.1.1 Islamism and Islamists 12

1.1.2 Post-Islamism 15

1.1.3 Radicalism, Radicals, and Radicalisation 17

1.1.4. Individual and Collective De-radicalisation 19

1.1.5. Moderation 20

1.2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses 21

1.2.1. Revisiting Theoretical Approaches to Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, and Moderation 22

1.2.2 The Political Process Approach: An Alternative Explanatory Approach 31

A. Opportunities and Threats 32

B. Resources and Mobilising Structure 35

C. Ideological Frames and the Framing Process 41

1.3 Methodology and Data Collection 45

1.3.1 Choice of Discipline 45

1.3.2 Research Methodology and Methods 48

A. Qualitative Comparative Analysis 48

B. Selection of Cases 51

C. Semi-Structured Interviews 55

D. Content and Discourse Analysis 60

1.3.3 Positionality 62

1.4 Structure of the Thesis 63

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Understanding the Rise of Islamism in Syria . 67

2.1 The Sectarian Dimension 67

2.2 The Regime's Social Coalitions: Rural vs Urban 72
2.3 The 'Legacy' of Syrian Jihadists 75
2.4. Manipulation of Jihadists 78
2.5. The International Factor 80
2.6 Debates between Jihadists 83
2.7. Gap in the literature: What is new? 85
Chapter 3: From Reformists to Jihadists: The Development of 'Political Islamism' in Contemporary Syria 89
3.1. The Roots of the Islamic Movement in Syria 89
3.2 The Fighting Vanguard: The Seeds of Jihadist Salafism 94
3.3 The Deadlock of 'Exclusion': The Salafism of 'Nonviolence' vs Jihadist Salafism 103
3.4. The Attraction of al-Qaeda's Jihadists: Syria's Role in Iraq 110
3.5 Jihadist Revivalism: The Predicament of the Arab Revolutions 114
Chapter 4: Ahrar al-Sham: From Salafi-Jihadi brigades to Reformist Political Movement 120
4.1 The Evolutionary phase: From Uneven Structures to a Discernible Movement 121
4.1.1 The 'Revolution' Opportunity and Structural Threats 121
A. Foundation: Exclusive Combat Brigades 122
B. Re-invention: a Political Movement 126
4.1.2 Resource and Structure: Local and Interim Network 130
4.1.3 Beyond Salafi Jihadism: From Elitist 'Jihadism' to Popular 'Jihad' 138
4.2 Fragmentation phase: from unity to defections 145
4.2.1 A Transitional Phase: Strategic Shifts Towards 'Revolutionism' 146
4.2.2 The Fading of Local and Regional Networks 155
4.2.3 From 'an Ummah's Project' to 'a People's Revolution': 'Hardliners' versus 'Reformists' 163
4.3 The Military defeat: From Potential Revival to Rapid Fall 168
4.3.1 Structure or Agency: Schisms, Infightings, and Confrontations 168

4.3.2 Scrambling for Resources: One Entity for One Donor 175

4.3.3 No More Ambiguity: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back 178

Chapter 5: The Army of Islam: From Scholarly Salafism to the "Syrian National Army" 182

5.1. Foundation Phase: A Company, a Brigade and then an Army 182

5.1.1 Eastern Ghouta: An Oppressive Environment and Accumulated Social Grievances 183

5.1.2 Resources and organisation: the role of 'political entrepreneurs' 191

5.1.3 Armed Scholarly Salafism: "The Muslim People" at Odds with "Militant Elitism" 197

5.2 Expansion: Sub-Nationalism to Nationalism to Internationalism 201

5.2.1 Open Organisation: External Threats Offer New Opportunities 201

5.2.2 In Search of an International Patron: Replicating the Hezbollah Model 206

5.2.3 Reclaiming the Umayyad State: Fighting "Safavids", Takfiris, and "Corrupters" 212

A. The Safavid threat (Invention): 213

B. Takfiris (Borrowing): 216

C. Corruptors (Encounter): 217

5.3 The Beginning of the End: from an Army to a Company 220

5.3.1 Migrating North: A New Environment in Light of the Russian Intervention 220

5.3.2 Everyone for Themselves: A Struggle for Resources and Survival 227

5.3.3 Clashing Identities: Gradually Abandoning Scholarly Salafism 232

Chapter 6: The Sham Legion: Transformations in the Context of its Ambiguous Relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood 240

6.1 The Syrian Brotherhood after Hama: Political and Organisational Survival Attempts 241

6.1.1 An Opposition Political Movement in Exile 242

6.1.2 A Preaching Group: Painful Concessions Seeking Return ... 247

6.1.3 The Brotherhood after 2011: The Fight for Relevance 257

6.2 The Syrian Brotherhood's Back to Arms 265

6.2.1 The Shields of the Revolution Council: Establishing an Armed Wing 265

6.2.2 The Civilians Protection Committee: The Role of Informal Networks 273

6.3 Rebranding: from the Sham Legion to the 'National Front for Liberation' 278

6.3.1 On the Ruins of the Two groups: Turkey is Looking for a Field Partner 279

6.3.2 International Sponsors: a "Professional" Military Organisation 286

6.3.3 Compound Identity under the Umbrella of the Islamic Council 291

The Concluding Chapter: Determinants and Mechanisms of Transformations within Armed Islamist Movements in Syria: A Comparative Framework..... 297

7.1 How Can Transformations within Syrian Islamist Movements be Described? 299

7.2 Transformation Mechanisms: Testing Hypotheses 311

Bibliography 323

List of Charts, Maps and Tables

Charts

Chart 1: Organisational Structure of ASH 136

Chart 2: Organisational Structure of AoI 207

Chart 3: Organisational Structure of FSH..... 290

Maps

Map 1: Foreign Forces' Points in Syria, 2021..... 5

Map 2: Military Control of ASH between 2015 – 2018 149

Map 3: Military Control of ASH after 2018..... 174

Map 4: Military Control of AoI between 2014-2018 204

Map 5: Turkish Militarily Operations in Syria between 2016- 2022 226

Map 6: Military Control of AoI after 2018..... 232

Tables

Table 1: Status of the Syrian political System between 1947-1963 96

Table 2: The leaders of ASH between 2011-2021 146

I dedicate this humble work to all the Syrian heroes and heroines who sacrificed their lives for the dream of a free and democratic Syria

Chapter 1

Introduction, Terminology and Typology, Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Introduction

Under former president Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000) and subsequently under his son, President Bashar al-Assad (2000–present), Syria has experienced an authoritarianism that has changed its political landscape. Five decades of authoritarian rule have resulted in the disappearance of a diverse political life in Syria, 'killing politics' as Lisa Wedeen says in her book *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (1999, p. 32).

Bashar al-Assad's reign has seen a continued state of conflict between the regime and various Islamist movements, a conflict that can be traced to 1963. Following the 1963 military coup, the Ba'athist National Revolutionary Command Council (NRCC, the country's ruling elite) issued a series of laws and regulations in order to implement their vision of radical socialist reform. The Ba'ath party was given a unique status as the 'leader of state and society', ending the only period of political pluralism (1946–1963) in Syria's contemporary history (Conduit, 2019, pp. 27-29). During the pluralist period, most Syrian parties, including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), had considerable parliamentary influence; the first liberal constitution was written in the year 1950 (ibid).

Given the social background of the NRCC's officers, who were mostly leftist pan-Arab nationalists from peripheral areas and members of minorities, it was inevitable that they would clash with the SMB's grassroots and other Sunni conservatives in urban areas

(Devlin, 1991). Breaking with the movement's peaceful political activism which extended from its foundation in 1945 through to 1963, a considerable number of the SMB's members—albeit in the absence of a formal decision by Brotherhood leaders—turned to violence in an attempt to prevent what they saw as the forcible secularization of Syrian society, marginalization of the urban population within state institutions and the acquisition by rural people of the majority of senior state posts, especially in the army (Lia, 2016, p. 544; Batatu, 1999, pp. 155-160).

This socio-political incompatibility led to various armed confrontations, including the 1964 Hama Uprising and the Islamist uprising of 1976–1982, which ended with Brotherhood membership being declared subject to the death penalty (Law 49 of 1981) and the 1982 Hama massacre in which thousands of people were reportedly killed (Landis and Pace, 2007, p. 45). Moreover, several new intelligence agencies were established and given wide-ranging powers and legal immunity in order to suppress any opposition activity that might threaten the regime (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 97). This does not mean, however, that there has been no opposition to the regime whatsoever. Secular-liberal and leftist groupings as well as several Kurdish parties have worked within narrow confines through cultural forums and political salons, but lacking effective communication with the public or an ability to influence 'the street' (Bishara, 2013, p. 382). For the Islamist opposition, the picture has been more complex (See Chapter 3). Following its military defeat at the hands of the regime and the exile of its leadership after the 1982 Hama massacre, Islamist opposition, particularly the SMB, no longer enjoyed a physical presence or organisational structure within the country (Landis and Pace, 2007, pp. 45-48).

In 2000, the current president, Bashar al-Assad, inherited his father's governance of Syria. Despite this being an extraordinary event in republican political terms, most of the Syrian opposition groups including the SMB were inclined to cooperate with the new president and give him an opportunity to implement his reformist programme and modernise the state's bureaucracy (Lesch, 2012, p. 9). There was much optimism for the young president with exposure to western learning, especially in the year 2001, when the 'Damascus spring' introduced political openness and unprecedented governmental tolerance to opposition activism (ibid). However, the democratic vows made by the new president were a temporal tactic to ensure his assumption of power. As result, repressive methods were reactivated once his authority consolidated (Bishara, 2013, p. 44). As can be inferred from Hinnebusch's words, Bashar al-Assad's reform programme was designed to be an 'authoritarian upgrading' rather than leading the country to democracy (2012, p. 95).

With regards to Islamist opposition and despite the regime's 'sympathy' for regional Islamist movements like Hamas and Hezbollah, repression was thus the security forces' main strategy in dealing with local Islamists (Lister, 2015, p. 31). Any attempts to establish Islamist organisations or associations inside the country, legally or illegally, were crushed, and prison was the inevitable fate of any Islamist activist who sought to challenge the regime's domination of the public. The Brotherhood, meanwhile, made several explicit and implicit attempts to reach a settlement with the regime, most notably in 2009 when the SMB officially suspended its opposition activism in and outside Syria and asked to be allowed to return as an advocacy group (See Chapter 6). The regime ignored this request (Ghadbian, 2015, pp. 96-97, 99). In short, and as Salwa Ismail coined in her seminal book

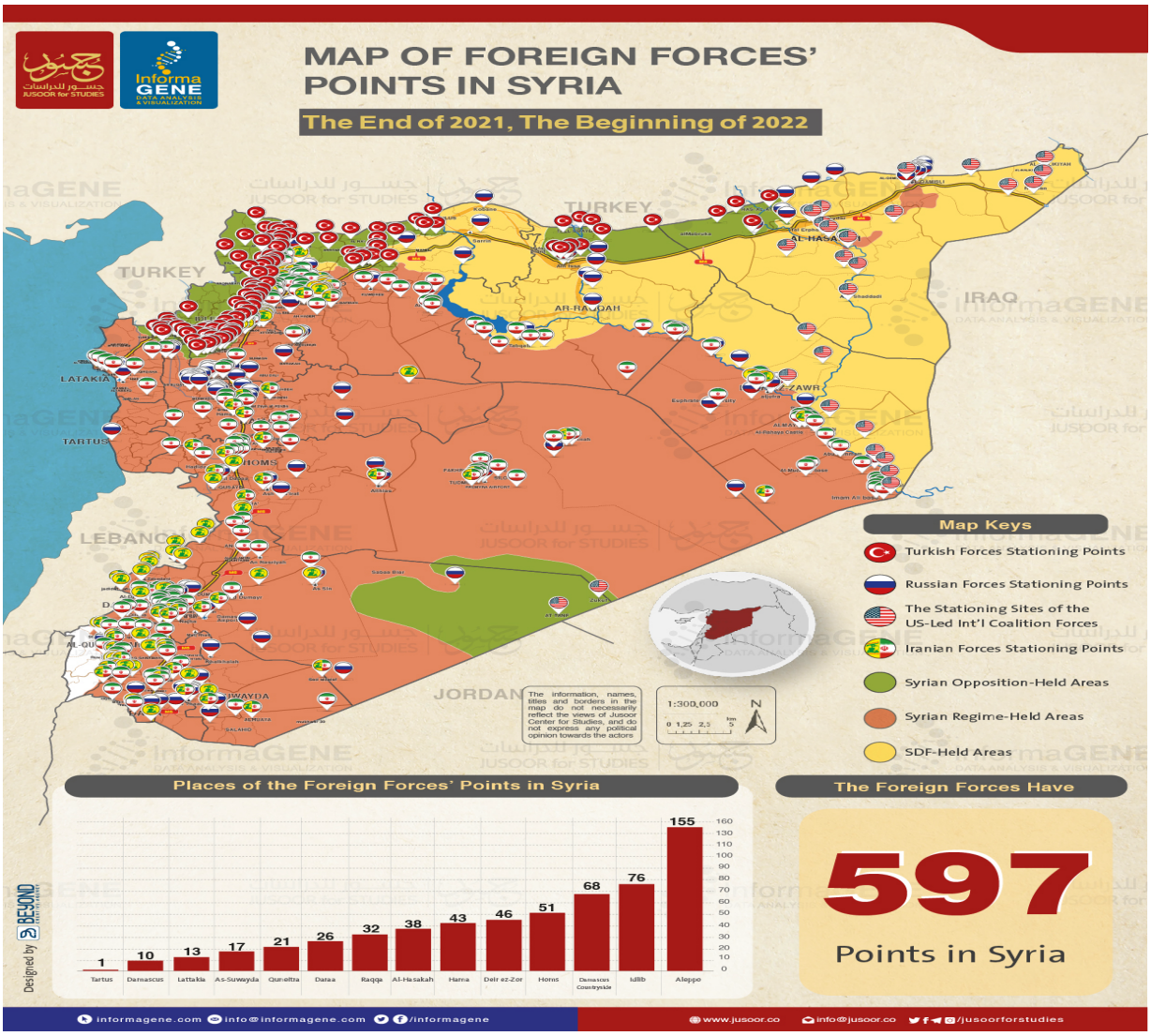
The rule of violence: subjectivity, memory and government in Syria, political violence became a 'modality of government', ordering and structuring regime–citizen relations (2018, pp. 1-3). This approach works 'not only to contain and neutralise opponents and dissidents, but also to establish conditions of rule and to order citizens' interpretative horizons and understandings of state/regime power' (ibid, p.3).

Given this background, it is unsurprising that many analysts predicted that the so-called 'Arab spring', which resulted in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and spread to various other Arab countries in early 2011, would not extend to Syria. This extrapolation was based on what is known in Syrian studies as 'Hama rules', a term coined by Thomas Friedman—that is, any rebellion would face the same brutal fate of the Islamist insurgency of the 1980s (Friedman, 1989, p. 76; Lefevre, 2013a, p. 1-2). As anticipated, 'Hama rules' did indeed prevail nationwide, with intense violence deployed to suppress the unprecedented large-scale protests of 2011 and the armed rebellion that followed in 2012 (Lefevre, 2013).

But despite its resilience, there is a near consensus that since 2011, the Syrian regime has lost the capacity to enjoy exclusive control of the political process in the country. Concerning the field scene and the map of military control, it can be said that, since the ceasefire agreement signed between Turkey and Russia in Moscow in March 2020, Syria is now divided into three main areas. Data analysis and visualization conducted by the Jusoor Center for Studies by the end of 2021 have shown that the opposition factions have control over (10.98 per cent) of the Syrian geography. While (25.64 per cent) of Syrian territory is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces 'SDF', the Syrian regime has control over re-captured areas that amount to (63.38 per

cent). Moreover, the data show that the number of foreign security and military sites, bases and posts, reached nearly 600 including the US-led International Coalition, Turkey, Russia and Iran (whether the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or the Lebanese Hezbollah (see map below).

Map 1: Foreign Forces' Points in Syria, 2021



(Source: Jusoor Center for Studies in cooperation with the InformaGENE Platform for Data Analysis and Visualization, 2022)

In other words, the Syrian uprising has paved the way for opponents of the regime in general, and Islamists in particular, to make a dramatic return to the political scene after decades of exclusion and ostracisation. To borrow a term from Jürgen Habermas's seminal work *The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article* (1964), the uprising appears to have created a new 'public sphere' that has freed the opposition from regime oppression in such a way that it has allowed both political and social actors to present their ideas, visions, and political platforms. Islamist activists, including Jihadists, initially participated in the peaceful demonstrations without promoting their own slogans. Their aim was to find a foothold in the popular uprising and find a common ground with protesters to overthrow 'the corrupt regime' which since 1963 had destroyed the political process and misgoverned the state (Pierret, 2020, pp. 6-5). But at the same time, Islamists sought to gradually and covertly gather resources and recruit members based on a 'victimisation' narrative, all the while waiting for an opportune moment to wage war against the regime (Pierret, 2017, pp. 144-45).

Between 2011 and 2013, as the peaceful uprising deteriorated into an armed conflict, Syria saw for the first time in its modern history the development of numerous armed Islamist groups. As the government lost control of large swathes of the country, Islamists found themselves in a situation where they needed to either lead or assist the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in governing local communities and participating in military operations. Since early 2013**,** they have been at the centre of armed action against both the Syrian regime and foreign-backed factions such as Hezbollah and Iraqi and Iranian forces (Achcar, 2016, p. 15). This development is just one of many internal and external factors that have shaped the Syrian conflict: fighting now takes place almost exclusively

between the regime and its allies on the one hand, and armed Islamist movements on the other. Like their counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia who assumed power through elections after decades of opposition activism, Islamists in Syria have sought to seize the political opportunity provided by the Syrian uprising to expand their constituency and assume a key role in shaping the dynamics of the political landscape (Schwedler, 2013, p. 2).

In attempting to understand the conflict in Syria, many researchers have focused on the rise of 'Islamism' and the development of 'Syrian Jihadism'. Most of these studies, however, have concentrated on al-Qaeda and Islamic State 'IS' (hereafter 'global Jihadist groups') at the expense of local Islamist movements. This fixation can be attributed to the extraordinary threat that global Jihadist groups pose to regional and international security. Despite their crucial role in shaping the conflict and determining its current outcomes, home-grown or local Islamist movements have not been given due attention in the literature.

Moreover, the literature that has addressed local Islamist groups has focused exclusively on the establishment of these groups despite subsequent transformations in their ideologies, behaviours and organisational structures during the uprising (Mullins, 2015, pp. 88-90). Regardless of their refusal to recognizes the basic principles of a peaceful uprising and its aspirations for freedom and democracy, for example, most of the local Islamist movements have attempted to claim ownership of 'the Syrian revolution' and implement significant changes to present themselves as a part of the Syrian opposition and the future of Syria.

Accordingly, this study aims to bridge this gap in the literature and contend the behavioural, organisational and ideological transformations of local armed Islamist

movements in Syria during the uprising. In order to do so, I have selected three cases as the subject of comparative analysis. These are Ahrar al-Sham (ASH), Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam) or (AoI), and Failaq al-Sham (the Sham Legion) or (FSH). These were the most prominent and powerful local armed movements in Syria. By entering their 'black box' through conducting in-depth interviews with their political and military leaders, grassroots supporters and competitors, this study investigates the mechanisms and dynamics of the transformation process within these movements.

The Political Process Approach (PPA) adopted as a theoretical framework is intended to enrich theoretical discussion on whether armed Islamist movements in Syria contribute to the theorisation of transformation within Islamist movements, in particular radicalisation, de-radicalisation and moderation. There are two main reasons to adopt PPA as an analytical and theoretical framework in this study. Firstly, social movement theories (SMTs) approach armed Islamist movements as political and social actors looking to seize structural opportunities, expand their constituency through interaction with external environments, and engage in the production of meanings and symbols in daily life in order to achieve political and societal change. They thus make it possible to analyse transformations in a way that goes beyond religious or cultural factors (Hutter, 2014, pp. 31-2; Al-Anani, 2016, pp. 6-10). Thus, besides the fact that the movements selected for this study are considered, in some regards, as non-state armed groups (NSAG), it also classifies them as political and social movements because they have sought to portray themselves as an essential part of 'the Syrian revolution' despite the inconsistency between their initial aim of establishing an Islamic state and the goals of the 2011 peaceful uprising.

Secondly, PPA pays more attention to the dynamics of transformation than its political end point—that is, whether the Islamist movements would ultimately become moderate or radical. In Hafez's words, 'rather than being an outcome of fixed circumstances, the political process approach treats social and political struggle as a dynamic of interaction, adaptation, and intendent and unintended consequences that are likely to shape the strategies of the movements over time' (2003, p. 21).

Given that the outcomes of the transformation process within the three movements studied here have not been fully established, investigating how they have responded to changes in the wider political context, constructed organisational structures, mobilised resources, recruited members and built their networks as well as framing and reframing their ideologies might help predict the future military and political strategies of Syrian Islamist movements.

Research Questions

Using the case studies of Ahrar al-Sham (ASH), Jaysh al-Islam (AoI), and Failaq al-Sham (FSH), this study aims to answer the principal question outlined below:

'What are the formative factors and dynamics that led the Syrian armed Islamist movements to transform their ideology, behaviours, and organisational structure during the Syrian uprising?'

During the analysis, a **sub-set of research-questions** for further investigation emerged, most notably:

- What are the mechanisms of change that have driven the transformation process in the Syrian armed Islamist movements?
- How do these movements respond to the external political environment? Do they respond in the same manner or do their responses vary from one movement to another?
- How do these movements mobilise their resources, construct their organisations and frame their ideology?
- What is the nature of the transformations within the movements selected, after 10 years of the armed uprising (radicalisation, de-radicalisation, moderation)?
- How do these transformations impact on their future strategies?

Timeframe of Analysis

This study focuses on the period from the first protests in Syria in mid-March 2011 until the end of 2021. This period is subdivided into three phases, based on how the case studies themselves developed within the context of the Syrian conflict: foundation, evolution, and military defeat. In the first phase, which extends from late 2011 until April 2013, the three movements formally announced their establishment for the purpose of fighting the Syrian regime and started to mobilise resources. They also framed their ideology in such a way as to recruit more members and cultivate a loyal base within the local communities in which they operate (Abazeid, 2015a, pp. 40-2). In a context where the imminent collapse of the regime seemed very likely, their first manifestos explicitly stated their aim of establishing an Islamist state/community in Syria (ibid).

The second phase spans from the declaration of the IS on 9 April 2013 until the start of the Russian military intervention on 30 September 2015. Alongside the threat posed

by the Syrian regime, local armed Islamist movements faced a double existential threat throughout this period. The first threat came from obvious enemies such as Hezbollah and Iraqi and Iranian forces and proxies, who steadily intensified their military involvement in Syria on the pretext of protecting Shi'is from the Jihadi threat (Hage Ali, 2019, pp. 8-9). The second was IS, which launched a multi-front war against the Syrian armed opposition in general, and Islamist movements in particular, in order to seize the territory under their control. After many military defeats at the hands of both enemies, the Syrian armed Islamist movements succeeded in overcoming these intimidations by driving IS fighters out of opposition strongholds in north-western Syria and the Damascus countryside in early 2014 (Lister, 22015a, pp. 194-5).

Likewise, two of the movements selected for study (ASH and FSH) managed to expel government troops and allies from Idlib province and the Hama countryside in early 2015, in collaboration with al-Nusra Front (NF) (Steinberg, 2016, p. 4). At the same time AoI seized several neighborhoods in southern Damascus, creating for the first time a real threat to the regime within the capital. During this period all three movements, by now in charge of a considerable part of the country, began to revise their position in order to adapt to changes in the external political environment, particularly when the US and many western countries sought to open indirect and direct lines of communication with them (Lund, 2016a).

The third phase began in late 2015 with Russian military intervention to 'protect the regime from inevitable collapse', as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it on 18 January 2017 (Aljazeera, 2017). Over the last five years, Russian military materiel and political support has allowed the Syrian regime to recapture most of its territorial losses.

This has been accompanied by a series of agreements brokered by international players—particularly Russia and Turkey—with the intention of bringing an end to the armed conflict. In response, the three movements have begun a comprehensive review of their position, in order to adapt once more to the new reality.

1.1. Terminology and Typology

This section explains the terms used in this study to define 'actors' or transformation processes within Islamist movements. It also provides a typology of Islamist movements.

1.1.1 Islamism and Islamists

The term 'Islamism' is generally associated with the politicisation of Islam to establish an Islamic order, government, or state that derives its legitimacy not from the principle of 'popular sovereignty' but from the will of God (Grinin et al., 2019, pp. 2-3; Tibi, 2012, pp. 1-2). However, we cannot understand Islamism as a political movement without an appreciation of the historical context provided by the ongoing debate over the compatibility of Islam and modernity on the one hand, and Islam and the nation-state on the other.

This debate can be traced back to the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms, which took place between 1839 and 1876 (Kawtharani, 2018, p. 54-5).[1] These reforms, which reduced the role of religious authorities and replaced many *sharia* provisions with civil laws,[2] allowed

[1] During this period, the Ottoman sultans Mahmud II and his successor Abdulmecid I issued a series of legislative, administrative and constitutional reforms (*Tanzimat*) modernising the army and the state bureaucracy.
[2] Most notably the Ottoman Nationality Act of 1869, under which Muslims outside the Empire's borders became 'foreigners' and its Christian and Jewish minorities 'citizens' for the first time.

the Ottoman Empire to modernise its army and institutions and to promulgate its first constitution. As Wajih Kawtharani puts it, the *Tanzimat* raised a number of difficult and complex questions—which it failed to fully address— about the validity of the Islamic caliphate as a system of government in the era of European 'modernity' (2018, pp. 51-2). However, the clergy's demand that *sharia* be reinstated as the primary authority governing law and politics meant that most of these reforms were reversed in the late nineteenth century (Ibid; Yilmaz, 2011, pp. 253-4). 'Islamism' as an ideological movement thus appeared in the context of the conflict between tradition and modernity, especially after the Ottoman caliphate (the world's last widely recognised caliphate) was abolished in 1924. The demise of the caliphate coincided with the beginning of western colonialism in the Arab and Islamic world (Mozaffari, 2007, pp. 18-20)

According to Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society* (1933), the clash between traditional values and modernisation can generate conflicts and violent mass movements. It was in this context that 'Islamist' movements like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) first emerged in Egypt in 1928, calling for the 'revival of Islam' and the restoration of the caliphate and seeking to confront what they perceived as the 'political and cultural colonialism' of the Islamic *Ummah* by the 'nation-state' model (Al-Azmeh, 1993). The nation-state, of course, became a reality in Arab and Islamic cultures in the post-independence era of the 1950s and 1960s, while the objectives of many 'Islamist' movements are yet to be achieved (Al-Moustafa, 2016, p. 150).

This ushered in a new phase in Islamist thought, with what we might call 'Islamisation of the nation-state' rooted in the idea of *Hakimiyyat Allah* (the sovereignty of

God), developed by Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi[3], replacing the dream of a reinstated caliphate (Giunchi, 1994, p. 351). Mawdudi's ideas emerged against the background of, and for the purposes of, the Pakistani War of Independence. They were rearticulated by Sayyid Qutb[4] as a globalist ideology, a sort of 'world revolution of Jihad', which aimed to establish Islamic political systems throughout the Islamic world as a first step towards constructing a 'new world order' (Tibi, 2012, p. 37).

Alongside this concept of *Hakimiyya*, which has influenced the vast majority of local and global Jihadist groups, the foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has played a vital role in the development of contemporary Islamism. The founders of KSA adopted *sharia* as their main source of law and Wahhabism or scholarly Salafism[5] as a comprehensive ideology, providing a practical example of how a nation-state could be Islamised (Mozaffari, p.25). The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which culminated with the declaration of the Islamic Republic, likewise offered a successful model of an Islamised nation-state in which Islamic clerics have the authority to guide the *Ummah* (Al-Moustafa, 2016, pp. 151-2, 155).

Given all this, it is arguable that Islamism as a political movement is directly linked to the development of the nation-state as a system of government in the Arab and Islamic context. While it has divided itself into many new factions (Ikhwanism, Salafism, Jihadism)

[3] Aiming to establish an Islamic government 'by systematic endeavor (jihad) and, if the necessity should befall, by war and bloodshed'.
[4] Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) was an influential Islamist ideologue whose later publications inspired radical Islamists worldwide. Influenced by Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi, he became convinced that Egypt was in a state of *Jahiliya*—pre-Islamic ignorance—and would only recover with the establishment of a fully Islamic government.
[5] This movement takes its name from its founder, Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–1787), an Islamic preacher in the Arabian Peninsula, who was a strict follower of the teachings and Salafi doctrine of the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya. He claimed that he was appointed by God to restore Islam to its original purity and draw Muslims back to *tawhid*, the worship of God and God alone. Despite its reformist tendencies, Wahhabism or Salafism adopted a strict interpretation of Islam, giving primacy of 'obligations' over 'rights' (Valentine, 2015, pp. 14-15).

with different forms, ideologies, and tools, the various forms of 'Islamism' have, to some extent, one common ambition: 'Islamising' or embedding Islamic commandments in the model of the 'nation state'.

Asef Bayat distinguishes between two essential Islamist tendencies.[6] The first is the reformists, 'party-political' Islamists who consider the establishment of the Islamic state a 'strategic goal' to be achieved through gradual peaceful activism and who operate within existing constitutional frameworks using social mobilisation. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait and many other groups associated with Brotherhood ideology could be categorised as reformist. The second is the revolutionary or militant tendency, which emphasises violence (*jihad*) as its preferred strategy. By enacting a Leninist-type vanguardist insurrection, these grouping hopes to seize power and thereby facilitate the enforced Islamisation of state and society from above. This tendency is typically further divided into two categories: local or 'national' Islamist movements whose ambitions are limited to a given state entity (all the cases discussed in this study fall under this category), and globalist movements like al-Qaeda and its regional offshoots, which seek to target what they consider the 'far enemy', the 'infidel West' or 'societies of nonbelievers' all over the world (2013, p. 5-6). This study adopts Bayat's typology as one of its basic analytical tools.

1.1.2 Post-Islamism

The term 'post-Islamism' was first used by Asef Bayat in 1996 in his article "The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society", where he describes the political perceptions of Iranian

[6] A detailed typology of different currents and schools of thought within Islamism will be provided in the historical overview of the development of the Islamic Movement in Syria.

Islamism in the post-Khomeini period (Bayat, 1996, pp. 44-7). He states that 'by post-Islamism I mean a condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters. As such, post-Islamism is not anti-Islamic, but rather reflects a tendency to re-secularize religion. Predominantly, it is marked by a call to limit the political role of religion' (ibid. p. 45).

The term has since been used to characterise the transformation of Islamist movements in various countries (including Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Tunisia, and Lebanon) where Islamists are able to participate in elections and governmental bodies (Yilmaz, 2011; Cavatorta and Merone, 2015; Shahibzadeh, 2016). Bayat argues that after a phase of experimentation, Islamism has been forced to reinvent itself as its attraction and legitimacy has dwindled, hence post-Islamism is 'a condition and project that seeks to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains' (Bayat, 2013, p. 8). Unlike Islamism, which conflates religiosity and religious obligations in its pursuit of the doctrinal principle of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong', post-Islamism emphasises rights rather than responsibilities, identifying Islam with liberty.

In this sense, post-Islamism represents an intellectual phenomenon that aims to transcend the ideological constraints of Islamism and its rigidity, and seeks instead to arrive at an 'alternative modernity' whose essential characteristics are derived by identifying Islam with democracy and modernity and recognising the role of secularism in the public sphere (ibid, p. 9). It appears, as Yilmaz argues, that 'post-Islamism' is a play on Habermas's term 'post-secular', which acknowledges the influence of religion in

secularised environments. Like post-Islamism in religious communities, 'post-secular' goes beyond the rigid boundaries of secularism in secularised environments. This may help us to understand religion's importance as a 'cultural resource' in many democratic societies (2014, pp. 93-4).

By applying 'post-Islamism' to the armed Islamist movement in Syria, Jerome Drevon has recently coined the term 'politicalistion' that means armed movements do not renounce violence or engage with democratic processes but adopt more pragmatic stands during an armed uprising by '(1) developing more realistic tactical and strategic objectives, (2) fostering external alliances with other actors including foreign states and other insurgents, and (3) normalising their interactions with the population by avoiding the imposition of harsh governance and looking for local acquiescence instead' (2021, pp. 2-3). This term will be essential in exploring the nature of transformations within the movements selected for this study.

1.1.3 Radicalism, Radicals, and Radicalisation

The meaning of the term 'radicalism' differs depending on the user's perspective. Etymologically, it is derived from the Latin word *radix*, 'root', rearticulated by Marx (following Hegel) in philosophical terms as someone who seeks to address the roots of an issue (Bishara, 2015, p. 7). Politically, the term was commonly used in the late eighteenth century to describe 'radical reformers' in the British parliament who called for universal male suffrage (Goodwin, 2016, pp. 171-5). Within this context, the OED defines radicalism as 'the beliefs or actions of people who advocate thorough or complete political or social reform.'

In the twentieth century ‘radicalism’ was used to describe various ideologies, political groups and parties opposed to the state—that is, the state became the only body with the authority to determine who was a ‘radical’, depending on their response to the political process rather than the basis of their ideology (Koopsmans, 1993, p. 645). For example, after the Second World War, ‘radicalism’ referred to all ideological parties (communist, leftist, capitalist, right-wing) bound together by strong individual ties that sought a comprehensive change in state and society, whether their methods were peaceful or violent, gradual or revolutionary (Snow and Cross, 2011, pp. 116-17).

The meaning of ‘radicalism’ in Islamic studies likewise varies depending on the approach of the writer. Some scholars consider all Islamists radicals because of their belief that ‘there is no sovereignty outside of the sovereignty of God’, their rejection of ‘the separation of religious authority from the power of the state’, and their aspiration to achieve ‘a fundamental alteration of existing political, economic, and social relations’ (Driessen, 2012, p. 172; Rabasa et al. 2010, pp. 13-20; Schwedler, 2011, p. 350). Other scholars classify Islamists according to their tactics or political activism. In this schema, Islamists who use violent means to achieve their goals are categorised as ‘radicals’, whilst those who are willing to participate in elections within the existing political system might be labelled as ‘moderate’ (Bötticher, 2017, p. 75).

This study defines ‘radicalism’ as an ideology and praxis, whether individual or collective, that ultimately leads to the rejection of existing political systems; the rejection of social or political compromise, especially in a pluralist context; and the adoption of violence as the only strategy by which comprehensive social and political change might

be affected. Following this definition, radicalisation is the process by which an individual or organisation arrives at these conclusions.

1.1.4. Individual and Collective De-radicalisation

As with 'radicalisation', there is no single agreed definition of 'de-radicalisation'. At the individual level of analysis, de-radicalisation is usually defined as a social and psychological process that leads to an individual renouncing their commitment to violent activity and a parallel change in views towards mainstream principles (Islam, 2019, p. 6). At the organisational level, meanwhile, 'collective de-radicalisation' is a process that occurs when a radical group: 1. has both the resolve and ability to adapt its tactics and strategies according to changing circumstances; 2. abandons violent means of effecting political change; 3. reviews its programme and method, removing or amending anything that might justify the use of violence, thereby taking a first step towards accepting peaceful and gradual societal, economic and political change in a pluralist environment (Ashour, 2009, pp. 5-6; Horgan et al., 2017, pp. 62-6).

Ashour further distinguishes the dimensions of collective de-radicalisation reflecting three sub-processes: ideological, behavioural, and/or organisational. Ideological de-radicalisation is the restructuring and redirecting of the radical group's ideology, delegitimising the use of violent means to achieve political ends. While this process also involves moving towards an acceptance of gradual socio-political change within a pluralist context, it does not require the adoption of liberal or democratic principles. Behavioural de-radicalisation, meanwhile, is a process leading to the abandonment of armed methods as a tactic for attaining revolutionary political goals,

without a concurrent process involving the ideological delegitimisation of violence. Finally, organisational de-radicalisation refers to the process leading to the dismantlement of an armed group (2011, p. 379-80).

1.1.5. Moderation

In Islamic studies, the term ‘moderation’ is usually associated with the acceptance of democratic practices and liberal values (Wegner and Pellicer, 2009, p. 157; Al-Anani, 2010, p. 1). This raises the question of what exactly liberal values are and how they can be identified. In answering this question, some scholars offer extensive definitions covering a broad range of constituent elements: agreeing to peaceful political participation and recognising human rights, tolerance, and gender equality. For some the definition of ‘Islamist moderation’ should extend to an agreement with the USA’s policies and recognition of Israel (Al-Anani, 2010, pp. 1-2; Brown, 2012, p. 4).

Based on an extensive review of the literature on moderation, Schwedler asserts that the vast majority of scholars have used the term ‘moderation’ without clarifying the mechanisms at work in this process (2011, p. 351). She therefore distinguishes between three kinds of moderation: first, the behavioural moderation of groups, which is regularly determined by electoral participation and does not rely on militias; second, the ideological moderation of groups, which reflects a relative adaptation to open and tolerant worldviews instead of an rigid and closed perspective; third, the ideological moderation of individuals, which accounts for the gradual development of the thought and activism of Islamist groups and sub-groups through ‘democratic habituation’—Dankwart Rustow’s central

argument—or political learning that encourages individuals or entire groups to seize political opportunities (ibid., pp. 353-61).

While these academic forays have had some success in clarifying certain aspects of 'moderation', none provides precise answers to what exactly it is that moderating actors are adapting 'to' or compromising 'with'. Some scholars seek to address this problem by defining moderation as 'an adjustment to at least some attributes of the center in a particular country at a certain time' (Somer 2014, pp. 1-2). By this definition, moderation advances democratisation only if there is a democratic centre to which it is adapting.

This study defines 'moderation' as a form of social and political interaction between political actors and a democratic centre in a particular country leading to a bilateral compromise to prevent armed conflicts, help resolve social and political disputes peacefully, and maintain democratic practices and values.

1.2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The theorisation of behavioral, organisational, and ideological transformations within Islamist movements has enjoyed scholarly attention from various perspectives, including terrorism and conflict studies, democratisation, civil resistance and social movement studies, and psychology. While the radicalisation process has been investigated in depth since 1970, interest in studying the de-radicalisation and moderation process has only become prominent in the last two decades— particularly since the 'Arab Spring', which has produced a series of multidirectional transformations in Islamist movements across the MENA region (Schwedler, 2011).

This section reviews the main approaches to analysing these three processes. It shows how the vast majority of these approaches, despite their importance, have several methodological and explanatory limitations. In light of the complexity of the Syrian uprising and the specificity of the selected cases, whose transformations are still ongoing, I argue that the Political Process Approach (PPA) provides a holistic framework appropriate for studying the mechanisms of change within armed Islamist movements.

1.2.1. Revisiting Theoretical Approaches to Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, and Moderation

On radicalisation, it can be said that scholars first became interested in studying armed Islamist movements in order to identify the root causes driving 'radicalisation' of Islamists at the individual and organisational levels (Cook, 2015, pp. 107-19). At the micro level, scholars have largely used a structural-psychological approach, as it depicts the structural context within which Islamist movements arise. This approach is primarily based on Ted Gurr's theory of 'relative deprivation' as set forth in his seminal *Why Men Rebel* (1970), which emphasises the importance of socio-structural strains (Hafez, 2003, pp. 6-7; Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 6; Ashour, 2009, p. 18). There are three main frameworks adopted by those who pursue this approach, whose accounts of radicalisation rest on socio-economic, political, and cultural factors respectively (Sarfati, 2013, p. 16).

The socio-economic framework imbeds the adoption of radical attitudes behaviourally or ideationally by both groups and individuals in the effects of economic deprivation, poverty, unemployment, marginalisation, and corruption in the Middle East region (Moghaddam, 2005, pp. 163-64; Hegghammer, 2016, pp. 3-4; Süß and

Aakhunzzada, 2019, p. 4). Gottlieb, for example, argues that 'those who have opportunities to sustain and better themselves will likely accept the system in which they live and behave peacefully. By contrast, individuals who are confronting socioeconomic deprivation are more likely to be drawn to radical and possibly violent movements, including terrorist movements' (2010, p. 34).

While socio-economic dynamics are of great importance, since they allow us to move past essentialist or cultural accounts of the tendency towards radicalisation, this framework has failed to answer many questions concerning incentives; in particular why people living in good economic conditions or in developed countries (e.g., upper-middle-class Jihadists or European and Western Jihadists) have joined Jihadist groups[7]. Bayat notes that although some Islamist leaders hail from poor urban or rural areas, the majority come from the urban upper and middle classes and are well-educated (2013, pp. 7-8).

To avoid the explanatory gaps in the socio-economic framework mentioned above, many studies have adopted the frustration-aggression theory, which emphasises the importance of the political factor. This theory deals with 'radicalisation' as a direct consequence of individual frustration[8], which may interact with a general feeling of political and social alienation at the national level (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p. 43).[9]

[7] A comparison of economic indicators in MENA countries, where the level of radicalism is high, and the equivalent figures in developing countries outside the MENA region clearly shows that the correlation between radicalisation and economic suffering is not statistically significant. For example, the World Bank database demonstrates that 11 percent of the MENA population is multi-dimensionally poor. This is considerably lower than the proportion of poor people in other developing countries, where they comprise some 33 percent of the population. Moreover, UNDP data reveals that 65 percent of countries in the MENA region have achieved high levels of human development compared to an average of 44 percent in non-MENA developing countries (Farasin et al., 2017, pp. 4-5). Accordingly, it is hard to prove an inevitable causal connection between socio-economic dislocation and the rise of Islamism and jihadism in the Middle Eastern countries.

[8] According to this theory, individuals tend to adopt radical positions and embrace political violence as part of a process of 'soul-searching' or a 'struggle for recognition', which the prominent philosopher Axel Honneth considers an essential motivation for social conflict and a cause of war (1996, pp,.4-5)

[9] For example, Pew Global Attitudes surveys conducted in France, Spain, Germany, the UK, and the US after suicide attacks in those regions show that a significant proportion of Muslim adults who had experienced discrimination in those countries were inclined to justify or support suicide bombings and violence against the West. To reduce the risk of

Delving into the literature, however, brings to light two main criticisms of this theory. Firstly, it is individual-centric: it concentrates on personal impulses rather than the collective drivers of radicalisation. Secondly, the psychological explanation considers tendencies toward radicalisation as a reaction, ignoring the fact that radicalisation might be an intentional act and a result of rational, strategic and conscious calculations to maximise individual and collective gains. People often become radicals on purpose, and an individual psychological explanation cannot account for this process of commitment (Gupta, 2008, pp. 17-19; Fillieule, 2015, p. 5).

Despite their limitations, the last two explanations will help, to some extent, in understanding the motivations for the Syrian uprising breaking out mainly in rural areas such as Idlib and the Hama countryside where ASH and FSH were operating, as well as Eastern Ghouta, the main incubator of AoI. These areas have experienced, as will be shown in Chapters 4 and 5, a long period of political and economic marginalisation.

Repression-aggression is another structural-psychological framework in common use within radicalisation studies. This explanation emphasises state exclusion as the cause and source of political violence and radicalisation (Burgat and Delvoie, 2003, p. 77; Hafez, 2003, pp. 18-19; Githens-Mazer, 2009, pp. 15- 16; and al-Anani, 2016, pp. 10-12). Most advocates of this theory emanate from Francois Burgat's argument that 'any Western political party could be turned into the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA) if it was subjected to repression' (1997, 1945).

extremism and tendency towards radicalisation, this study called on Western governments to intensify their efforts to counter discrimination as a major driver of radicalisation (Victoroff et al., 2012, p. 791).

This framework is empirically supported by different Islamist movements in the Middle East as Ashour has shown (2009, p. 22)[10]. Thus, it will help, mainly in Chapter 3, in explaining the process of radicalisation within the Fighting Vanguard (FV) and the SMB in Syria (1980s) when the Syrian regime issued Law 49, which made all of its members subject to the death penalty (Barout, 2000, p.290-91). The counterargument, however, states that in other countries—such as Turkey and Tunisia—repression has led to moderation, as Cavatorta and Merone argue (2013, pp. 859-61).

The last, structural-psychological framework, focuses on cultural factors as a trigger for radicalisation, attributing a significant role to Islamic textual sources in interpreting this phenomenon at both the micro and macro levels (Richards, 2017, p. 29). Substantial ideological aspirations such as establishing an Islamic state, restoration of the caliphate, obeying God, fulfilling their prophecies, or 'getting into heaven', provide an appropriate epistemological framework for understanding Islamic extremism (Anderson, 1997, p. 24-5; Hudson, 1999, p. 31-2; Hamid, 2016)[11]. In this sense, cultural factors confine us to a simplistic and narrow religious account of radicalisation. Furthermore, this school of thought imagines that a strong religious identity is widespread not just among those who uphold radical Islamic beliefs, but also among all Muslims (Ashour, 2009, p. 21; Sarfati, 2013, p. 16).

In contrast to radicalisation which is generally perceived as 'an escalation process leading to violence', de-radicalisation indicates 'the reversal of escalation dynamics' (Della Porta, 2012, pp.7-8). Based on this broad general definition, the literature typically

[10] Including the armed wing of the MB in Egypt (1954–1969), the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and GIA in Algeria (1992–1997) or the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) during the Tajik Civil War (1992–1997).
[11] According to Shadi Hamid, the motivation for carrying out a suicide bombing or joining IS may well be the result of a dire economic situation, individual psychological frustration, domestic repression, politics of humiliation, or foreign occupation, but none of these can account for the whole story (2016, p. 9)

distinguishes two main models of the de-radicalisation process: individual-focused and group-focused. The first model takes its theoretical structure from classical security studies, especially its observations regarding the dismantling of gangs and right-wing organisations (Horgan et al., 2017, pp. 2-4). At the individual level of analysis, we can further distinguish two kinds of process: disengagement and de-radicalisation. The former comprises behavioural changes that mean an individual stops using violence and exits a radical group[12]. The latter refers to an individual revising their radical beliefs, perspectives and ideology (Bjorgo and Horgan, 2008, pp.18-9; Rabasa et al., 2010, pp.13-20; Horgan and Taylor, 2011, pp. 174-75; Islam, 2019, pp. 6-7).

One of the key references in understanding 'collective de-radicalisation' is Omar Ashour's *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, which studies several armed Islamist movements in Algeria and Egypt. Ashour makes an important theoretical contribution, bridging the gap between classical security studies and democratisation literature as well as combining structural and process-oriented processes. This contribution is based on the combination of four variables: historical and charismatic leaderships, state repression, selective inducements, and social interaction within and outside the organisation (Ashour, 2009, pp: 136-40). In a sense, this approach to the de-radicalisation process entails procedural application of the rational choice theory. De-radicalisation thus mostly occurs after a military defeat when the anticipated

[12] According to Rabasa et al., the path to individual de-radicalisation thus tends to happen in several stages. 1) A trigger, which could be the result of a painful event or emotional crisis, usually opens doors for cognitive questioning and doubts about staying in the group. 2) Push and pull factors – personal analysis of the costs and benefits involved in exiting the radical group and the main obstacles or difficulties facing those who decide to leave. 3) A turning point that may be reached when the expected benefits of leaving the radical group exceed the predictable benefits of remaining. 4) Disengagement: the decision to depart the group. 5) De-radicalisation: typically the reintegration of defectors or detainees into society with a new identity that might help them to avoid re-joining a radical group

cost of not renouncing violence surpasses the limited benefits of continuing the armed struggle (Abrahms, 2008, p. 78).

Despite being criticised as his theoretical framework is inherited from classical moderation hypotheses (Schwedler, 2011, pp. 356-57), Ashour's variables—or as Schwedler calls them, 'mechanisms'—will be retained in exploring the organisational transformations within the selected cases following their military defeat in 2018. That is because Ashour's argument reflects in many regards components of PPA such as political opportunity/threat and resource mobilisation.

Last but not least, and since 2005—especially after MB participation in the 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt and Hamas' subsequent unprecedented victory in the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC) elections in 2006—the 'inclusion-moderation' and 'exclusion-moderation' theses have come into common use in the study of Islamist movements in the MENA region.

The theoretical structure of the 'moderation through inclusion' thesis is based on the idea of a 'trade-off' between moderation and participation, as theorised by Samuel Huntington in his seminal book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century.* According to Huntington, this 'trade-off' occurs when parties that reject the political rules put in place by the government renounce some ideological profits in return for being part of the political process within a democratic context (1993, pp. 165-66)[13].

[13] Empirically, the inclusion-moderation thesis draws on the experiences of Western Christian, socialist and communist parties and applies its conclusions to Islamist movements in the MENA region. It assumes that similar to radical leftist parties in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s that aimed to overthrow the bourgeoisie in all its forms, Islamist movements are the most popular and effective groups in their societies (Wickham, 2004, pp. 212-17). Therefore, as with the Christian parties in Latin America, the Hindu-Nationalist parties in South Asia and Jewish parties in Israel, encouraging Islamist movements to run in elections and participate in the political process may result in behavioural moderation, perhaps in turn leading to ideological moderation (Brocker and Künkler, 2012, p. 172).

This takes place where there is an awareness of potential opportunities to gain support through the ballot box instead of using other risky tools such as violence (Tezcür, 2010, pp. 71-73; Buehler, 2013, p. 216). In other words, the inclusion-moderation thesis suggests that 'inclusion in electoral politics tends to democratize religious actors in their doctrines and practices, and that electoral inclusion is therefore one way to appease the more radical ideological tenets of religious movements' (Brocker and Künkler, 2012, p. 72).

The key questions this model poses, however, are: what are the appropriate conditions under which religious movements are bound to become more moderate? What variables—such as the nature of the political regime, the state institutions or the electoral system, the structure of the state, or the degree of economic liberalisation—might influence the dynamics of moderation?

The 'moderation through exclusion' thesis, which attempts to address these shortcomings, claims that state repression and socio-political constraints imposed on radical Islamists at the individual and organisational levels may encourage them to critically rethink their activism and reformulate their ideological views. This thesis is theoretically grounded in a set of cultural and socio-political assumptions (Hamid, 2014, pp. 47-54).

The cultural side of the thesis is inspired by the orientalist presumption of incompatibility between Islam and democracy, known in democratisation studies as 'Islamic exceptionalism' (Kalyvas, 2000, pp. 380-84)[14]. The socio-political part of the

[14] An example of this is Stathis Kalyvas's critique of the equivalence drawn between Western Christian and Islamist movements. Kalyvas compared Christian parties in Belgium and the FIS in Algeria to examine whether or not they could take the same path towards moderation, concluding that the latter could not become 'moderate' because unlike Christianity, Islam lacks a central power structure that might allow Islamists to illustrate their obligations to accept moderation and to avoid radicalism (Kalyvas, 2000, pp. 380-84).

theory is based on various critiques of the 'inclusion–moderation' thesis. Advocates of the exclusion thesis claim that ideological or comprehensive moderation, as opposed to behavioural and tactical moderation, cannot be brought about through inclusion. Indeed, they argue that inclusion may afford Islamist movements an opportunity to spread their 'destructive' ideas and promote their interests in society (ibid). Exclusion, on the other hand, may convince both leaders and members that their radical ideology has failed to attain any concrete results, and that survival in such an exploitive environment requires not only behavioural compromise, but substantive ideological alterations. The main criticism of this thesis is that it promotes and encourages repression, which may prove counterproductive for moderation or democratisation. As well as its promotion of repression, this thesis has also been criticised for its inability to determine exactly how much and what kind of violence will cause Islamist movements to reconsider their fundamental choices (al-Anani, 2010, pp. 7-9).

The experience of the SMB during the first decade of President Bashar al-Assad's rule (2000–2010) will direct the empirical examination of the moderation thesis in this study. The movement, driven by its ideological flexibility, sought to exploit political opportunity after promises of political reform were given by the new president, and the start of what was called 'Damascus Spring', to return from exile and reach a peaceful settlement with the Syrian regime, as will further discussed in Chapter 6 (Mandaville, 2014, pp. 121-202).

After reviewing the commonly used approaches that have theoretically addressed transformations within the Islamist movement, it can be argued that these approaches have indeed improved our understanding of Islamist movements and their strategic

changes beyond essentialist and Orientalist narratives. Despite their importance, however, the vast majority of these approaches still contain several methodological and explanatory limitations.

First, most of these approaches proceed from the normative assumption that Islamists are either naturally extremist or always carry the seeds of extremism. For instance, many questions arise concerning the usefulness of comparison between Islamist Movements and Western Christian or communist parties due to the different nature and structure of political systems in democratic countries (Schweder, 2011, p. 350; Bosi, della Porta and Malthaner, 2019, pp. 133-35). Second, many approaches are more interested in asking *why* in order to explore the root causes of transformations than they are in interactions within the movement itself and interactions between the movement and its context. Scholars tend to focus either on the *micro* or *macro* level of analysis rather than looking at the *meso* or trying to link them together, despite the fact that radicalisation, de-radicalisation and moderation are interactive processes (Hafez, 2003, p. 21; Fillieule, 2015, p. 4; Schock and Demetriou, 2018, p. 349). Third, many approaches seem somewhat teleological in their emphasis on the 'inevitable outcomes' of transformations within Islamist movements over the dynamics and mechanisms of change (Al-Anani, 2016, pp. 10-11). Fourth, some approaches are specific to particular types of Islamist movements. While moderation approaches can examine movements in the electoral political arena, radicalisation and de-radicalisation approaches are more usefully applied in the protest or violent political arena. Thus, the crucial question here is: how can multi-faceted and hybrid Islamist movements be examined, and by using which theoretical approach can their complex transformation be measured? (Schock and Demetriou, 2019,

p. 338). Fifth, the general assumption of these approaches is that Islamist movements take a linear, unidirectional and irreversible trajectory which delivers them straight to the ultimate outcome (radicalisation, de-radicalisation, moderation). Contrary to this view, the processes of transformation within most contemporary Islamist movements in countries like Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey have been multifaceted, multidirectional and erratic, as Kirdis notes (2019, pp. 468-72).

In order to avoid these limitations and achieve a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of Islamist movements' transformations, particularly in the selected case studies, this study sought a different explanatory approach. I argue below that the Political Process Approach (PPA) provides an ideal alternative

1.2.2 The Political Process Approach: An Alternative Explanatory Approach

The theories of social and political movements have been increasingly used in the last two decades to study the process of transformation within armed Islamist movements. Hafez's seminal 2003 work *Why Muslims Rebel* was one of the first academic contributions to shed light on the interaction between the external political environment and radicalisation in the Arab and Islamic world. Schwedler (2013) and Conduit (2019) have used the 'political opportunity' approach focussing on the dynamics between the Syrian regime and the SMB. More specifically, Reinoud Leenders adopts a relational approach to address how and why popular mobilisation in Syria took off in the 'peripheral' Dar'a region by focusing on 'the province's dense social networks involving clans, labor migration, cross-border movements, and crime' (2012, p. 419). Furthermore, Kevin Mazur (2020), in two separate studies, draws on SMTs to examine local networks, hybrid

identities, and armed mobilisation in Deir ez-Zur and Homs, respectively. Accordingly, it can be argued that SMTs including PPA in many regards is applicable in explaining the Islamist collective action in the Syrian context and transformation of the cases selected in this thesis. This approach first appeared in response to socioeconomic and psychological theories of social movements which propose that prospects for political mobilisation are context-dependent (McAdam et al., 1996, pp. 2-3; Hafez, 2003, p. 19; Ashour, 2009, p. 25; Sarfati, 2013, p. 19). It comprises three explanatory factors: external political environment; the mobilisation structure from which the movement draws its resources; and the ideological frames justifying collective action. These three elements (political opportunities/threats, mobilising structure, and framing process) are the principal concepts in analysing movement and revolutions, as Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow argue (1996, pp. 4-6). Thus, the Syrian uprising and the armed Islamist mobilisation are no exception from this theoretical generalisation, as discussed below.

A. Opportunities and Threats

PPA emphasises the inevitable correlation between the nature of the external political environment and the emergence and development of a social movement (Tilly, 1978; Ibrahim 2002; Goldstone 2003; Koopmans 2004; Hafez and Wiktorowicz, 2004; Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Brown and Hamzawy, 2010, pp. 13-14 Tarrow, 2011). The notion of 'political environment' is generally used in social movement studies to indicate a threat/opportunity mechanism that shapes the mass mobilisation and attitudes of the movement within its socio-political context, whether it operates in the electoral or protest arena (McAdam et al., 1996, pp. 6-9). Tarrow's theoretical approach emphasises that the

social movement mobilisation starts when political opportunities are opening up. Accordingly, ‘changes in political opportunity structures provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure’ (1996, p. 85). To the contrary, as Leenders argues, ‘when actors are confronted by a threat, for example due to a sharp increase in state repression, collective action and mobilization may follow as the costs of inaction outweigh the risks of mobilization’ (2012, p. 423).

As outlined earlier, the opportunity/threat theory has become dominant in the study of Islamist movements in order to explain the revolutions and the rise of Islamist activism in the MENA region after 2011 (ibid). Given the relative structural similarities between the political systems in the Arab world, this mechanism might explain the establishment/re-establishment of the armed Islamist movements in Syria three decades after the 1982 Hama massacre. For example, the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 was the moment that the SMB had long awaited and prepared for, financially, organisationally, and politically, for three decades, especially since the Arab uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt showed an early rise of Islamic movements (Lefèvre, 2013b). Likewise, the uprising offered an ‘opportunity’ for ASH when the Syrian regime lifted its emergency law and issued two pardons that included Saydnaya’s Salafi prisoners. Many ASH leaders were released as a result of the pardon and soon succeeded in reactivating their Salafist Networks to wage an armed rebellion against the Syrian regime (The Syrian Parliament, 2011; al-Weiss, 2015). In the AoI case, the uprising presented intellectual, methodological and practical challenges to scholarly Salafism. These challenges, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5, prompted a political shift that was embodied in scholarly Salafism’s

assertion that it was entirely permissible to revolt against the Syrian regime (Arab Center, 2015, p. 2).

PPA stresses that opportunities offered and constraints put in place by the political system form part of the calculations of the movements' actors and create a debate about strategies as well as the ideological frame that they should adopt in order to adapt and determine the nature and degree of political participation (Brown and Hamzawy, 2010, pp. 13-14; Hutter, 2014, p. 28; Bamyeh, 2019, pp. 11-12). We can thus distinguish between two types of political environment, 'opening' and 'closing', that play a vital role in motivating the collective action of a social movement.

In an oppressive political context, a social movement faces many obstacles and threats which, in turn, affect its structure and strategies. When it comes to Islamist movements, Hafez argues that an exclusionary and repressive environment forces Islamists to undergo a near universal process of radicalization. This process involves the rise of an exclusive mobilisation structure to ensure against defections and external repression and the diffusion of an antisystem ideological frame to justify radical and motivate collective violence (2003, p. 22). This argument has an explanatory power in addressing the initial Islamist mobilisation in Syria. Islamist movements were thus very cautious about making their activism public during the initial stages of the uprising and worked to establish an exclusive movement that limited organisational belonging and recruitment to a narrow framework of trustworthy activists (See Chapters 4 and 5). To avoid a decisive blow, armed Islamic activism confined itself to the peripheries while the regime's security forces and military were preoccupied with the urban protest movement.

For example, ASH was positioned in northern Syria, away from the Syrian regime's control and established as isolated brigades originating from different social networks that eventually aligned over their similar ideals and goals under the name 'ASH Brigades'. Likewise, AoI's first cell that formed in Douma on 14 September 2011 was an extremely selective, ideologically strict and organised group that the security services could not penetrate. Its members included Sheikh Samir Ka'ka, the current head of AoI's religious committee and Essam al-Buwaydhani, a current commander (Haj Saleh, 2017).

In sum, changes in both opportunity structures and threat levels have some explanatory value in analysing why most of the armed Islamist movements in Syria established an exclusive organisation in the foundation phase and sought to build an inclusive organisation when the external political environment became less hostile. However, I suggest that opportunities and threats would not have encouraged Islamists to mobilise and transform their organisation, behaviour and ideology without their pre-war network and external support.

B. Resources and Mobilising Structure

Notwithstanding the critical role of the external political environment in understanding a social movement's strategies and transformation, it cannot on its own explain, as PPA argues, the existence of diverse patterns of collective action or mobilisation in the same political context. For instance, while a repressive environment can contribute to accumulating socio-political grievances, it cannot account for the various formal and informal patterns of mobilisation of the social movements and the degree of political participation (McAdam, 2010, p. 22-5). In other words, there is a need to dig much deeper

in order to answer detailed questions about the dynamics of contention that prioritise mechanisms of collective action. What explains intra-group tactical variances in a shared context like this? Why do some movements adopt violence while others choose non-violent methods such as marches and demonstrations even when they share the same ideology? And what are the shared repertoires that show consistency and continuity across time and space? (Wiktorowicz, 2004, pp. 8-9; McAdam, 2010, pp. 11-13).

A branch of SMT, Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) responds to these queries: it treats the organisers of collective action as rational actors and emphasises the significance of political learning from prior experiences when organising collective action (McAdam et al., 1996, pp. 2-5; Mullins, 2015, pp. 5-6). In Wiktorowicz's words, 'Movements are not seen as irrational outbursts intended to alleviate psychological distress, but rather as organized contention structured through mechanisms of mobilization that provide strategic resources for sustained collective action' (2004, p. 10).

RMT is utilised in liberal and democratic contexts to describe the formal mobilisation of social movements where contention is usually organised and coordinated through formal institutional structures, state bureaucracy, or authorised associations, political parties and trade unions, etc. Nevertheless, from the late 1980s, RMT advocates began to emphasise the major role of informal networks in resource and mobilising structures in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, especially in Arab and Islamic countries. As a result, Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and mosques came under intense research scrutiny, as Islamist movements used these meso-level organisations to build their grassroots movements within local communities (ibid., pp. 10-11; Pierret, 2012). Furthermore, RMT and insurgency theories emphasise the 'pre-war

network' as a fundamental element of mobilisation and collective action in the armed conflict. According to Mullins, 'pre-war networks are not only essential to acquire manpower, leadership and resources, but contribute to social learning, adaptation, and form repertoires of contention' (2015, pp. 58-9).

The resources that make it possible for an armed movement to conduct a rebellion or effect social and political change are typically divided into three categories: material and organisational, legitimacy and identity, and institutional resources (Tilly, 1987, p. 69). The first provides the movement with the manpower and financial and military wherewithal to launch and sustain collective action, whether by peaceful means like demonstrations, banners, and strikes or through armed rebellion. The second gives the leadership of the movement the moral power to recruit new members and encourage the target audience to embrace or at least sympathise with the group's ideology within society. The third concerns the channels by which the group can publicise its goals via the political and social elites. According to Hafez, 'Islamists who command some or all these resources have many strategic options and are capable of collective action. Those who lack these resources will encounter difficulties and are likely to mobilize few people' (2003, pp. 19-20).

During their foundation phase, armed movements generally do not need much in the way of material, organisational or institutional resources, although they do need legitimacy and identity. During this phase, a movement's membership is typically limited to a small set of loyal activists to prevent penetration by the security forces. In Kevin Mazur's words, 'mobilization within an excluded ethnic group is most likely among local

communities where members are densely linked to one another and lack network access to state-controlled resources' (2020, p.481)

However, there is near consensus within social movement and conflict studies that an insurgency cannot be maintained, expanded and sustained by mobilising resources based on local networks and private donors alone while adopting guerrilla tactics (Leenders and Giustozzi, 2020). Various studies have therefore emphasised the influence of external backers on the sustainability of collective action and the movement. Besides state support, common in contemporary international relations, there are additional forms of external support that have proved effective in many internal conflicts. These include diaspora, refugee and religious organisations and wealthy individuals (Byman et al., 2001, pp.71-80; Hinnebusch, 2017).

Resource mobilisation is suitable for theoretical application in this study. Many academic studies, for example, analysed the role played by regional and international powers such as Russia, Iran, the KSA, Qatar, Turkey, Russia and Iran that have 'meddled in Syria's sectarian-tinted conflict, financed and armed combatants, pushed military developments to their advantage, and in the process sustained and intensified the violence at the behest of their wider struggles regionally and globally' (Van Dam, 2017; Phillips and Valbjørn, 2018; Leenders and Giustozzi, 2020, p.3).

Competition over resources has been an essential factor in the trajectory of the Syrian conflict and had a profound impact on armed Islamist movements, particularly when analysing transformations within the three cases examined in this study. Most Syrian Islamists seem to have depended on pre-war informal networks built up over the last three decades, especially following the 2003 Iraq War, in order to secure the

resources needed to resume Islamic activism against the Syrian regime at the beginning of the peaceful uprising in 2011. While equipment and weapons seized from the Syrian army were the main sources of materiel during the initial guerrilla insurgency and the subsequent armed struggle that began in 2012, the Syrian diaspora and wealthy expatriates provided the necessary financial support to recruit and arm more fighters (Lund, 2016c).

From mid-2012, however, many regional actors—most notably Qatar and KSA–decided to take part directly in the Syrian conflict by supporting the political and armed opposition against the regime. Nevertheless, at first most materiel and financial support was directed to nationalist forces under FSA command rather than Islamist groups (Lister, 2015; Pierret, 2016a). The latter were initially reluctant to receive any state support, preferring to rely on Salafi preachers, Muslim clerics and Islamist private donors in the Gulf countries in particular, as this helped to promote their ideology and alleviate international pressure. Since 2013, this reluctance has melted away, contributing to many behavioural, organisational, and ideational transformations that have ultimately ensured the support of larger state actors, particularly after the Iranian and Russian military intervention (Phillips, 2016).

During its foundation, ASH relied for funding on local networks, predominantly construction suppliers, and Gulf networks that were built by some of its founders, as well as donations from Syrians in the diaspora. ASH then went through an institutionalisation phase, giving birth to the ASH Movement that had a structure and a bylaw. At that stage, ASH relied for funding on external investments in Turkey and the Gulf countries. Notably, ASH never struggled with funds until the later part of its second stage and final stage,

when it was incorporated into the Syrian National Army (SNA), which reported to Turkey in a financial and administrative sense. ASH's financial troubles stemmed from its failings with its supporters, particularly the Qataris (Drevon 2021, pp. 9-11). Its ambivalent position was a manifestation of the ideological conflict that ruled its deliberations over whether or not it was permissible to engage in politics. The unclarity of ASH alienated its supporters, not to mention other circumstantial reasons at regional and international levels, such as the push towards a political resolution, as well as the pressure the US applied, particularly on Kuwait, to end funding to the opposition, (ibid.) (See Chapter 4).

Likewise, in its foundation phase, AoI relied on pre-war scholarly Salafism networks to expand and find funding, and later turned to Gulf donors and international funding before undertaking necessary behavioural and intellectual 'reforms'. The struggle for resources and the Ghouta infighting also deeply impacted on its structure (Lund, 2016a; Pierret, 2018). The AoI invested in scholarly Salafism as an ideological frame, and repurposed its literature so it appeared to be entering the political sphere to fight the infidel ruler. It also tried to attract regional donors and state funding after the Iranian intervention. But the rise of IS and the subsequent Russian involvement, coupled with a reserved regional investment in political Islam and changes in the KSA position, stripped scholarly Salafism of its momentum and led to a gradual abandonment that accelerated in northern Syria (see Chapter 5).

In the case of FSH, the founder's networking effort in Europe before the war played an important role during the first phase of its establishment. Haitham Rahma presents himself and his pre-revolutionary activity in this role, where he was active in several Islamic associations in Europe that were interested in humanitarian charity and Islamic

advocacy. After 2014, Turkey backed FSH and became its preferred 'proxy' in the Syrian armed opposition (see Chapter 6)

C. Ideological Frames and the Framing Process

The growing interest in examining armed Islamic activism through SMT has highlighted the crucial role of Islamic symbols and identities in the mobilisation of contention and Islamic collective action. Moreover, constructing an Islamic state/government is among the top priorities of most Islamist movements; *Sharia* rules are thus adopted as a doctrine, source of authority and comprehensive ideology in their activism. Consequently, relational framing process theory has been commonly employed to enrich our knowledge on the developments and ideational transformations within Islamic social movements (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 2; Westphal, 2018, p. 20; Bamyeh, 2019, p. 12).

This emphasis on the connection between the production of meaning and mobilisation and the role of the framing process in justifying and legitimising collective action within social movements– particularly protests and political violence—arguably goes back as far as the 1970s. However, the traditional view that perceives social movements as actors with beliefs and values rather than signifying their involvement in the construction of meaning was dominant until the late 1980s (Snow, 2004, pp. 383-84). Snow and Benford's seminal 1998 work, which treated social movements as 'signifying agents who assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions' through 'collective action frames', was a turning point in this regard (1988, p. 198).

Working from this premise, SMT studies often differentiate between *frames*, which reflect the 'noun of idea', and *framing*, which represents 'the verb of process'. The

collective action *frame* refers to 'action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of social movement organization' (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 614). More specifically, frame denotes the 'collective patterns of interpretation with which certain definitions of problems, causal attributions, demands, justifications and value-orientations are brought together in a more or less consistent framework for the purpose of explaining facts, substantiating criticism and legitimating claims' (Rucht and Neidhardt 2002, p. 11). In the context in which social movements operate, the effective frame comprises three elements: an emotively described socio-political grievance and inequality; an investigation of agency; and an identity factor outlining both the 'we' of the targeted audience, and a 'they' who hold opposing beliefs (Gamson, 1992, p. 85; Gillian, 2008, p. 249).

This perspective is applicable to the Syrian context as armed Islamist movements have consciously and strategically built a collective action frame by identifying the causes of the oppression of Syrian Sunnis since 1963. Building on this point, Heiko Wimmen argues that although 'sectarianism' both in the past and in the current rebellion is a product of the regime's political behaviour,[15] it has served as a mobilisation tool for both sides and as the fuel for violent conflict (2017, p .64). In his opinion, the sectarian narrative became a crucial tool of the Islamist opposition a month after the advent of the peaceful uprising, reshaping both sides' positions and equipping them with moral justifications to legitimise violence (ibid., pp. 62-63).

[15] From his perspective, sectarianism has been long rooted in Syrian society, since before the current war. Its origins were due to the 'legacy of violence' in Syria's contemporary history especially after the military confrontation in the 1980s. As a result, the sectarian polarisation between Sunnis and Alawites in mixed cities such as Homs and Baniyas was more visible and therefore violence erupted earlier than in other locations (Wimmen, 2017, p. 67).

The *framing process*, meanwhile, denotes 'conscious strategic efforts to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action' and delegitimise opponents (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 6). In other words, framing is a subjective and ideological process[16] encompassing a sharp cognitive and emotional dividing line between two antithetical opposites: us versus them, just versus unjust, faithful versus impious.[17] With respect to social movements, the main objective of the framing process is to transform social grievances into actions by endorsing 'a specific version of reality and [making] this version resonate with the worldview of potential recruits' as Dalgaard-Nielsen states (2010, pp. 801-02).

This symbolism will be applied to the Syrian Islamist movements as they have sought to create a collective identity emphasising their heritage, memory, and experience. This identity was used to seize the opportunity to violently bring about comprehensive social change and establish the Islamic state in the early years of the Syrian uprising. In other words, while the revolutionary frame of most protesters and Syrian opposition bodies was based on a dichotomy of 'democratic' and 'authoritarian', most Islamists tended to frame their collective action within different polar narratives (Sunni/Alawite), which justified using violent means and waging war against the 'infidel' and corrupt regime. Although this narrative was initially put forward as 'sacred' or 'Quranic' and taken

[16] Some scholars deem 'ideology' as a crucial mechanism or sub-process of the faming process in 'justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community' within social movements as Freeden argues (2003, p. 32).

[17] It seems that there is no obvious distinction between 'frame' and 'ideology' or at least the boundaries separating them are unclear. Therefore, many social movement theorists, most notably Gillan, raised questions in relation to this epistemological confusion as 'ideology' is 'broader in scope and potentially longer in duration than the frames created by activists' (Gillan, 2008, pp. 265-268). Nevertheless, this tendency to opt for a rigid distinction in most social movements studies has also been criticised, as frames articulation requires an interdependence between events and experiences with ideological factors 'in a relatively integrated and meaningful fashion' (Snow, 2004, p.400; Westphal, 2018, p. 2).

to reflect irreversible distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, many event- and agent-initiated frame transformations have since occurred, making the previous frame irrelevant to changing political circumstances.

Drawing upon the three aforementioned explanatory factors, this study argues that organisational, behavioural and ideational transformations within ASH, AoI and FSH during the Syrian uprising were determined by the interaction between three dimensions: the external political environment, mobilisation structure, and ideological frames. The following hypotheses can be derived from this argument:

Hypothesis 1A: As the external political environment in Syria was extremely repressive, the movements mentioned here were established as small and exclusive organisations during the first three years of the armed conflict and have embraced only violent methods and radical worldviews.

Hypothesis 1B: As the external political environment became less hostile with the diminution of the regime and the IS threat from early 2014 onwards, these movements sought to construct an inclusive organisation and revise their radical ideology.

Hypothesis 2A: As pre-war networks and private Islamic fundraising were the only resources available to Islamists who wanted to re-engage with activism in late 2011, Syrian Islamist movements operated within a limited geographical area and pragmatically adopted more radical goals.

Hypothesis 2B: As state support was indispensable for survival and mobilisation, these movements were obliged to expand their military activities, restructure their organisations, realign, and become more willing to renounce some ideas and beliefs previously considered ‘non-negotiable’.

Hypothesis 3A: As demonstrations and armed action began and became established in cities with majority Sunni populations, Islamist movements threw their weight behind a discourse of Sunni oppression and 'us and them' sectarian framing to produce meaning within the opposition.

Hypothesis 3B: As the sectarian narrative failed to justify armed 'collective action' after the emergence of IS, from mid-2014 these movements began to rearticulate their ideology *vis-à-vis* the 'other', which had been based on a distinction between 'national Islamists' and 'national secularists'.

1.3 Methodology and Data Collection

The three main methodological components of this study are explained in this section: 1) the choice of academic discipline, 2) the methodological approach to data collection and analysis as well as case selection, and 3) positionality.

1.3.1 Choice of Discipline

Social movement studies are generally considered a subfield of political sociology, as the problem of mobilisation is fundamental to the study of contentious politics (Walder, 2009, p. 412). By using a PPA that is derived from SMTs as an analytical and theoretical framework, this study situates itself firmly within the discipline of political sociology.

There are several definitions of this discipline. According to Giovanni Sartori 'political sociology' is a hybrid discipline with two central elements, political science and sociology, aiming to explain the socio-political reality (Sartori, 1969, p. 195). Notwithstanding Sartori's insistence on the scientific interdependence of this discipline, it can be said that

‘in much of the literature, political sociology is most often treated as a sub-discipline of general sociology, that is as the sociology of political structures and processes’ (Mitra et al., 2009, p. 14). Many political scientists, consider political sociology a subfield of political science. According to Christopher Barrie ‘two of the central tenets of Social Movement Theory – political opportunity and resource mobilization – can be traced to contributions from political science’ (2021, p. 922). This study does not intend to add to this continuing debate about the identity of political sociology—it focuses on the interaction between political phenomena and social structure, which is a subject of interest to political sociology irrespective of whether it constitutes an independent discipline or a subfield of sociology or political science or sits at the interface of both.

In other words, as far as this study is concerned, political sociology is an interdisciplinary approach that bridges political science, which focuses on state practices, and sociology, which is the study of patterns of social interaction as well as social structures (Sartori 1969, p. 200). By this definition, intermediary actors like political parties and organisations, semi-political organisations and social movements and their relationship with one another and with the state are all within the remit of political sociology. In this vein, political behaviour, the concentration of power and decision-making, the ideologies of social movements and interest groups, political parties and associations, the bureaucratisation of politics and consensus and conflict are all at the core of political sociology according to Seymour Martin Lipset (1967, pp. 437-440; 1985, pp. 6-8).

As common grievances and generalised beliefs are significant preconditions for the development of social movements (Barrie, 2021, p. 923), this discipline will help us to

better understand the socio-political underpinnings and social structures (economic organisation, class and status, community organisation and social ties, formal organisation and bureaucracy) that paved the way for violent Islamist behaviour towards the Syrian regime before the 2011 uprising. Additionally, the interaction between agency and structure emphasised by political sociology will be considered in a broader political context to explore the conditions under which the Syrian Islamists mobilised grievances and how these motives were translated into collective action.

Considering that the peaceful and armed uprisings have changed Syria's political context by creating different sets of dynamics within the country, the process of mobilisation which is at the core of this discipline will be also investigated to explain how changes in the political structure, from stability to armed conflict, have led to Islamists changing their political identity to achieve their goals. Moreover, this discipline will help us understand how changes as a result of regional and international involvement have created political opportunities/threats that have likewise led to changes in Islamists' behaviour and ideology. Unlike classical approaches to security and counter-terrorism studies, which disregard differences in social issues, a political sociology approach allows this study to avoid that pitfall and to provide a wider interpretation of 'Islamism' in Syria as a political phenomenon and of the movements under study as social actors.

As political sociology reflects a disciplinary alignment between sociology and political science, this examination of the emergence and transformation of Islamist movements in Syria will not rely on a single theoretical approach. Although the two aspects of this discipline have their own areas of analysis, their explanatory frameworks and methodologies are often interlinked with other disciplines such as history,

psychology, economics, geography, theology, and religious studies. Accordingly, the primary research question and sub-questions of this study will be investigated not through a specific disciplinary focus but using a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach. Wiktorowicz notes that exclusive emphasis on the societal motivations of Islamic activism or the ideas that inspire it cannot effectively answer many central questions; rather there is a need to develop a comprehensive and interconnected approach to better understand the patterns of Islamist contention and complex case studies such as armed Islamist movements which operate in multifaceted political systems (2004, pp. 3-4). This complexity might justify why an interdisciplinary methodical approach is essential in social sciences and vice versa where 'the nature of complex systems provide a rationale for interdisciplinary study' as William Newell puts it (2001, p. 1).

1.3.2 Research Methodology and Methods

To analyse the dynamics and mechanisms of transformations within the armed Islamist movements in Syria, this study mainly employs a qualitative comparative approach based on case strategy. It will be based on interviews concentrating on the three case studies of local armed movements in Syria, with both content and discourse analysis of the interview data and written and spoken records of these movements.

A. Qualitative Comparative Analysis

This study is designed to be qualitative. By definition, this method aims to explore the motivations that lie behind human behaviour and seeks to 'understand more about human interactions and discovering the meanings human beings attribute to their behaviour and the external world' (Lichtman, 2013, p. 2; Della Porta and Keating, 2008, p. 26). In contrast

to quantitative research, which uses numbers, statistics, regression analysis and related techniques to measure causal relationships between dependent and independent variables, qualitative research implies an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world: it comprises a range of interpretive practices that endeavour to make sense of the world or to interpret it and make it more observable (ibid., pp. 27-28). These practices convert the world and social phenomena into a set of 'representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 3)[18].

The qualitative method has several merits which justify using it to explore transformations within armed Islamist movements in Syria. Firstly, it offers a detailed explanation of the experiences of the movements chosen as case studies and provides interpretations of their activism. Secondly, it provides an interdisciplinary understanding of their transformations throughout the conflict. Thirdly, data-gathering methods in qualitative approaches such as semi-structured interviews facilitate direct/indirect interaction between research participants and researchers. Despite their many shortcomings—subjectivity in analysis and data collection, difficulty in drawing generalisations, lack of transparency and ambiguity in conclusions—qualitative methods are still the most commonly used in social science, either independently or as part of 'mixed-method' studies combining qualitative with quantitative research (Bryman, 2016, pp. 284-85).

[18] Within this context, Uwe Flick stated that qualitative research interested in analysing subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events, or practices by collecting non-standardised data and analysing texts and images rather than number and statistics' (2014, p. 542).

Several methodological frameworks have been adopted in this research to avoid the shortcomings mentioned above. To mitigate subjectivity, I have followed two main methods. First, with regard to data collection, I have chosen semi-structured interviews in order to limit the open-ended nature of the questions posed by the author and the participant's answers. Analytically, I have formulated the research question by contextualising it within existing and relevant literature. Data gathered in interviews, as well as other empirical data, have been subject to content and discourse analysis. Secondly, with regard to generalisation, I have employed comparative analysis in order to make the study's theoretical inferences and procedural conclusions generalisable and replicable even beyond their Syrian context. This is important because of the similarities as well as intersections between armed Islamist movements in Syria and their counterparts in Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Chechnya in Russia, and Afghanistan.

There are two qualitative comparative analysis approaches: variable-oriented and case-oriented. While many sociologists contend that comparison should be variable-oriented, the latter approach—which seeks to enrich the explanation of a few cases of a certain phenomenon—has been very common, especially in political science and political sociology (Della Porta and Keating, 2008, pp. 198-200). This study adopts a case-oriented comparison to provide a rich description of the selected cases, uncover the roles they have played, and examine the mechanisms and modifying factors that have prompted their transformations during the Syrian conflict as well as similarities and differences in the outcomes of these transformations. As outlined above, the transformation process itself will be analysed based on three main dimensions, political environment, resources and ideology. The comparative analysis will then serve to

demonstrate similarities and differences in the case studies' responses to these three factors. In short, I will bridge the gap between these two approaches, or at least attempt to mitigate the strict distinction between them in order to control the research hypotheses and examine the macro-dimensional, inter-dimensional and institutional processes that social movements operate within.

B. Selection of Cases

As already mentioned, this study focuses on three armed Islamist movements operating in Syria.

Ahrar al-Sham (Islamic Movement of the Free Men in the Levant): ASH originated in northwest Syria in late 2011 as a coalition of different brigades with the stated aim of 'overthrowing the Syrian regime and instituting an Islamic state inside Syria.' In December 2012, their leader Hasan Aboud announced the formation of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), an alliance of many local armed Salafi-Jihadi groups across the country. On 31 January 2013, these groups merged into a new 'Islamic movement', *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya*, under Aboud's leadership. (Pierret, 2017, p. 143).

From the 2013 merger until 2018, ASH was classified as the largest and most powerful armed movement in Syria, fielding an estimated 15-20,000 fighters (Steinberg, 2016, p. 2). Despite its strict ideology, which was key to ASH's development, the movement has undergone a string of behavioural and organisational changes, especially since the death of its founding leaders on 9 September 2014 (Lister, 2015, pp. 371-73; Pierret, 2017, pp. 143-45). These changes have left their mark on its ideology and its future role in Syria. In short, ASH has abandoned its Salafi-Jihadi ideology, helped to

defeat IS in northern Syria, and since 2019 has been part of the 'Syrian National Army' (SNA), the armed wing of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). Moreover, despite years of field-level bilateral cooperation and combat alignment, ASH has also clashed militarily with the al-Qaeda-affiliated NF on numerous occasions.

The Army of Islam (Jaysh al-Islam): AoI was established in its earliest form (the Islam Company- *Sariyat al-Islam*) in the city of Douma (10 km northeast of the centre of Damascus) in September 2011. As it expanded its armed operations against the Syrian regime, in June 2012 the 'Company' became a 'Brigade'. In September 2013, after a merger of some 30 groups operating in the area around Damascus, it declared itself to be an 'Army' and political organisation (ACRPS, 2016, pp. 3-4). The AoI once had an estimated 10,000 fighters deployed throughout the country, but since April 2018 this number has been halved, following military defeat by Russian and Syrian regime troops.

As result, AoI has withdrawn from its popular stronghold in Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, to the north of Syria joining the Turkey-backed SNA. Although its ideological identity was never particularly clear, most of its leadership—especially former leader Zahran Alloush— appeared to espouse a scholarly Salafi ideology, allowing them to receive financial support from private Islamic networks in KSA (ibid.). While constructing an Islamic government along the lines of that in KSA was originally AoI's main priority, many dramatic alterations have occurred since 2018, and according to its current leader Essam al-Buwaydhani it is now ready to be part of an elected and democratic government in Syria (2021)[19].

[19] A written interview with the head of AoI, Essam al-Buwaydhan,i on 21 October 2021.

The Sham Legion (Failaq al-Sham): FSH was officially established on 10 March 2014, but the emergence of its core forces can be traced back to 2012, when Haitham Mahmoud Rahma founded the Civilian Protection Committee (CPC) to serve as an organisational umbrella for armed action in Syria (Lefèvre and Yassir, 2014). The CPC, which was ideologically close to the SMB, failed to achieve its aims due to a lack of resources; many private donors and state actors such as the US and KSA categorised it as 'the official armed wing' of the SMB and refused to give it funding. To secure military and financial support, the new version thus sought to dissociate itself from the SMB, and many scholars accordingly tend to classify FSH as a 'pragmatic' rather than an ideological group (ibid.).

During its foundational period, the group defined itself as a national 'revolutionary' movement. In 2015, however, it abandoned its 'national identity' and adopted Islamic symbols and an Islamist flag in order to join the 'Army of Conquest' (AoC), a coalition of Salafist movements such as NF and ASH. But once AoC had accomplished its mission and successfully expelled government troops from Idlib province in northern Syria, FSH's leaders withdrew from the alliance and dropped the Islamic symbology by readopting its 'moderate ideology' as described by its founder (Rahma, 2021)[20]. This parametric behaviour has made FSH the armed movement closest to Turkey in particular, and it has fought alongside Turkish troops in several military operations.

While random selection is the norm in statistical quantitative studies, a qualitative study is primarily based on an intentional selection (Della Porta and Keating, 2008). Corporativists contend that the selection of cases is one of the most important issues in comparative analysis as it directly affects the results obtained. Smegler has suggested

[20] Skype interview with Haitham Rahma, the Secretary General of SNC, on 24 July 2021.

that in order to justify our choice of the unit of analysis, we should follow certain standards: it should be suitable to the theoretical problem raised by the researcher, related to the phenomenon under investigation, empirically invariant with respect to its classificatory criterion, should reflect the degree of availability of data, and should be based on standardised and repeatable procedures (2013, p. 174).

The choice of these three movements has several explanations. Firstly, they were the most prominent, most powerful and best-organised armed Syrian opposition movements. Secondly, they have enjoyed support in the areas hosting them, where they set up autonomous administrations. Thirdly, as armed movements their theatres of operation are limited to Syria, with no institutional links with non-Syrian groups like al-Qaeda and IS. Fourthly, while they are essentially 'radical' groupings in the sense that they aim to establish a purely Islamic state, they have been subject to extensive internal change in the years since they were established. Finally, they belong to different schools of thought and ideological currents.

The ASH model is as an extension of 'national' Jihadi-Salafism in Syria (as opposed to the global Jihadist Salafism represented by al-Qaeda and IS), while AoI gives expression to scholarly Salafism and FSH emerged from the accumulated experience of the SMB, producing a model that is centred on its intellectual and ideological ethos without any direct organisational affiliation. Accordingly, focusing on these models and their similarities and differences might draw a clearer picture of the revival of Islamism in Syria after 2011, and the motivations behind transformations within armed Islamist movements in general—either in Syria or in the same context elsewhere.

This study categorises the selected case study groups as *Islamic hybrid movements* that simultaneously combine the characteristics of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and social movements. Their hybridity derives from their complex organisations where political, social, economic, ideological and military dimensions are inextricably intertwined. In this vein, Tilly and Wood argue that social movements combine three essential elements as follows: '**1**. campaign: a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities; **2**. repertoire: combinations from among the following forms of political action: creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processes, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media, and pamphleteering; and **3**. WUNC displays: participants' concerted public representations of WUNC: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies' (2004, p. 4). These elements could more clearly distinguish social movements from other types of organisations such as militia parties and NSAGs (ibid., p. 10). Tilly and Wood's classification is adopted in this study as it will show through the analysis in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 how the three selected cases by the end of the evolutionary phase transformed at organisational level from an NSAG to a social movement.

C. Semi-Structured Interviews

A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a range of interviewees, including individuals from Syrian armed Islamist movements, leaders and negotiators from *inside* and *outside* Syria of various political inclinations, professionals and key figures in the discipline from different geographic locations, and of varying ages.

Many scholars, including McCracken and Sarantakos, consider the semi-structured interview an important tool, crucial to social sciences, which seeks to acquire reliable information representing data on the ground. Semi-structured interviews have a systematic quality which helps to preserve objectivity, protecting data against the sort of bias that might normally result from the subjective reading of a document or text. Moreover, as McCracken argues, semi-structured interviews help investigators to step into the minds and experiences of their interviewees (1988, p. 9).

Accordingly, making use of semi-structured interviews can help us to understand the environment in which armed Islamist movements exist and throw further light on how they have engaged with formal institutions and other tensions. It is, in fact, a more useful tool than structured interviews in explaining the causal mechanisms of developments on the ground, detecting non-observed behaviour patterns, handling complexity, correcting misunderstandings by respondents, and controlling the environment and the identity of the respondents (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 296).

Klaus Jensen, writing on the significance of interviews to understanding the subject under consideration, argues that:

> Interviewing language is serving two different purposes in the research process. On one hand, verbal language is the basic tool of interviewing as a form of interpersonal communication. Through language, the interviewer gains the chance to negotiate and understand the subject matter through questioning the concerned people together with performing preliminary interpretations of responses and offering commentary. On the other hand, the interaction as a whole, in the form of

tapes and transcripts, subsequently becomes the aim of further textual analysis and interpretation (1995, p. 131).

This study has gained several advantages from semi-structured interviews with leaders of the movements chosen. Firstly, these interviews helped to fill in gaps in the information that is publicly available: semi-structured interviews constitute private encounters, allowing interviewees to provide information that they might be unwilling to disclose in a public meeting, in press coverage or in a questionnaire. Interviews are also conducted with former Syrian political leaders who have been asked questions about how Islamist movements have been structured systemically and under which factors they have transformed their behaviour and ideology.

Finally, interviews offered a clear idea of the agendas of these three Islamist movements in Syria, how these agendas are set and how people see them. They provided the study with valuable material that helped to support the findings of the content analysis. Moreover, they also provided an insight into how the interviewees perceived the changes that happened within these Islamist movements. Semi-structured interviews also offered an insight into the relationship between the political parties and the émigré opposition on the ground, and into the extent of those parties' influence on the Islamist opposition within the country.

In achieving its aforementioned objectives this study recruited about 40 participants. Different sampling methods were used in this project, depending on the nature of participation and the participant, as follows:

- Movement leaders and members, current and former. This included the leaders of the three movements, such as ASH's former leaders; FSH's leading and founding

figure Haitham Rahma, and AoI's leader Essam al-Buwaydhani, spokesperson Hamzah Birkdar and head of the political bureau Yaser Dalwan, among others. Many former leaders and mid-ranking commanders and soldiers (current or previous) were interviewed as will be seen in each chapter

- Group-society interviews including: grassroot members, defectors, contractors, and competitors; and civil activists and journalists who lived under their authority or have direct/indirect links to the selected movements. This provided a balance between insider and outsider perspectives, preserving the positionality and objectivity of the research
- Secular and liberal Syrian opposite figures who participated in serious and long negotiations with these movements such as Riyad Farid Hijab, the former Prime Minister of Syria and the General Coordinator of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), Ahmad al-Jarba, the former president of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and Burhan Ghalioun, a Syrian thinker and the first president of the National Council of Syria (NCS)
- Experts on the subject, analysts and scholars who have looked at the work of these movements from different perspectives

The interviews were conducted over Skype and other internet-based communication channels due to the exceptional conditions in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. After receiving the certificate of the ethical approval, participants were recruited in a number of ways. Purposive sampling involved direct contact (by email, text messages or telephone) with individuals when there was direct contact within an institution/community. The indirect communication was a challenge, especially among the

three movements' members. Besides the high-security procedures (using acronyms rather than given names, the general lack-of-trust rooted in their experience, and even the semi-paranoia resulting from long prison incarceration and the harsh conditions experienced by many of them) followed, the lack of intimate contact made mutual trust-building a difficult mission. This was exacerbated due to their stereotype perspective of the researcher: as a Director of Syria TV and his ideological background perceived by them as secular or liberal. They were hesitant and very cautious in providing information and many of them even refused to be interviewed in the first place.

To make a breakthrough, three procedures were followed: employing a research assistant, recruiting a key informant, and sampling using the snowball technique. To help with the interviews particularly, and with the approval of the supervisor and in line with ethical and practical procedures, Laila Alrefaai was employed as a research assistant. Laila is a Syrian writer specialising in the Syrian religious field and has published many articles in prominent platforms, such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Given Laila's Islamic background and specialisation, she was particularly helpful in breaking the ice with the interviewees of ASH and created the mutual trust needed to provide information. While Abd al-Nasser al-Qadri, a Turkey-based journalist and specialist in Syrian Islamism, helped me to reach many of AoI's mid-ranking commanders, grassroots, and soldiers, as he lived in the same areas in which they were operating, Bara Abd Alruhman, a Syrian activist and former member of AoI's media office was the main conduit for contacts with AoI's leaders. With their valuable assistance, I was able to overcome many difficulties in recruiting in the particularly short period (from July until November 2021) I was given by the Ethics Committee to conduct interviews.

Second, given the divergent backgrounds of the pool of interviewees, even inside their respective movements, a potential key informant was recruited, based on previous knowledge or mutual references to bridge the trust, whether by the researcher or the research assistant. Once the interview was done, the informant himself referred and connected the researcher with other interviewees, and so on. Once a cluster, a given current or trend in the movement was covered, the same technique was followed in other groups. Here, a remarkable breakthrough was made. It is worth mentioning that the snowball sampling became easier as time passed: not only because trust was made, but because the other 'party' (current or trend) was more eager to talk for fear of losing the opportunity of telling his narrative of the same events or of being marginalised.

To avoid confusion and to verify data, interviews were compared with each other to get as close as possible to what 'actually' happened. Also, a third independent source (whether as a record or an interview) was utilised to make a final check. This helped to decrease the huge number of interviews, a process that was enhanced by a selective approach to extract the relevant and most important data of tens of hours of interviews.

D. Content and Discourse Analysis

Alongside interviews, qualitative content and discourse analysis of interview data was undertaken; Arabic and English language primary and secondary sources were investigated; and content analysis of the historical records of the three movements studied, including official websites, newspapers, organisational documents, and autobiographies. This variety of methods was essential to unpack the ideational content of Islamic revivalism and the changes that have taken place in Islamist thought and

interpretations since the Syrian uprising. It was also important to examine how these changes have impacted on the Islamist political project in Syria in the context of the armed conflict. That required a micro-analysis of influential Islamist texts to highlight the 'the creative engagements between texts and situated actors who feel urged to articulate concrete answers to the pressing issues of the present through these texts', as Dunya D. Cakir argues (2015, p. 543).

Generally, qualitative content analysis is defined as a 'set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts of many kinds, addressing not only manifest content but also the themes and core ideas found in texts as primary content' (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 82). It should be noted that 'texts' here does not only mean books but extends to a variety of media, including images, physical artefacts, audio files and video files (ibid., p. 85). The hermeneutic function of this method goes beyond describing the content and key themes found in the texts to explore 'new topics, describe complex phenomena in open systems, compare and contrast group differences, and develop and test theories' (ibid., p. 86).

Accordingly, qualitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis were used to test and develop framing process theory, which is one of the three central pillars of the theoretical frameworks that I propose to use. Despite the cross-section and commonalties between the two previous methods, discourse analysis focuses on the components and forms of speech, as opposed to the concentration on meaning in content analysis (ibid.). In other words, while content analysis emphasises the process of meaning production, discourse analysis explores the production of language and how

both written and spoken language enact social and cultural perspectives and identities (Gee, 2011, p. 1).

1.3.3 Positionality

The power relations and politics of the research process and the importance of researcher accountability have often been underlined in the social sciences, particularly when contending with topics of power and its legitimation. Some scholars believe that 'normativity' as well as 'subjectivity' are unavoidable in the social sciences because concepts themselves are usually normatively established, and because of the subjective incentives involved in the choice of research process and question. More specifically, personal attitudes, values and beliefs often influence the way researchers experience and interpret reality (Della Porta and Keating, 2008, p. 8; Schiffer, 2020, p. 419).

However, ensuring 'objectivity' in examining social phenomena and producing knowledge does not so much oblige a researcher to be 'neutral' as to take responsibility for the 'I' in research and practice and to 'position her/himself', as Patricia Collins contends (1990, pp. 85-88). The term 'positionality' thus describes 'people's social standing or representation as influenced by personal characteristics such as gender, marital status, age, level of education, ethnicity and even personality' (Schiffer, 2020, p. 420).

Consequently, I need to clarify my own personal relational position with respect to the topic of research, a position in which I seem simultaneously to be both an insider and an outsider. I am a Syrian citizen fully conscious of the reality of 'authoritarianism' in my country, a country whose ruling regime has been described as 'one of the world's most repressive' according to Freedom House index of the year 2022 (Freedom House, 2022).

On the one hand, despite participating in some peaceful opposition activities since 2011, I have no organisational affiliation with any of the political or armed opposition groups inside or outside Syria—including the three organisations that are the subject of the study—although it is worth noting that my publications and position as director of Syria TV (based in Turkey) have given me access to many Syrian opposition leaders in both political and armed organisations despite my consistently critical stance towards them.

On the other hand, I am an outsider in various respects, having lived in Qatar for almost nine years, even before the Syrian uprising, and enjoyed the privileges of education, work and travel. Thus, to use Patricia Collins's term, I am positioning myself as an 'outsider within'(Collins, 1999, p. 85): I am within the struggle against the authoritarian regime in Syria but not within the Islamist groups (Collins, 1999, p. 85). Nevertheless, this research will be conducted with full awareness of the necessity of ensuring objectivity and academic integrity and avoiding subjectivity.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

In addition to the current chapter, this study is divided into six chapters:

Chapter 2: Literature Review: Understanding the Rise of Islamism in Syria

The rise of Islamism in Syria has gripped the attention of many researchers since 2011. Several studies have appeared in this regard that have provided a better understanding of the internal and external determinants of the ongoing conflict and the role played by the armed Islamist movements in it. As a result, this chapter is dedicated to reviewing the literature written by specialised scholars and researchers in Syria, and it has indispensable references for understanding the ongoing conflict. The main aim here is to

engage theoretically with these studies in an attempt to fill the knowledge gaps and to determine the added value that this study will provide.

Chapter 3: From Reformists to Jihadists:

The Development of 'Political Islamism' in Contemporary Syria

While the movements chosen for study can be described as 'newly established' inasmuch as they emerged after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in mid-March 2011, we cannot properly understand their establishment or their development outside the historical context of Islamism in contemporary Syria. This chapter will provide a general historical overview of the development of the various schools and currents of the Syrian Islamic Movement (Reformist Salafism, Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabism and Salafi-Jihadism) since Syria's independence from the Ottoman Empire. It also scrutinizes the emergence of many contemporary armed Islamist movements in the context of their relations with the state as well their interaction with different Jihadi experiences outside Syria.

Chapter 4: Ahrar al-Sham:

Ahrar al-Sham: From Salafi-Jihadi brigades to Reformist Political Movement

The behavioural, organisational and ideational changes of this movement from its foundation through to 2021 will be examined in this chapter. By focusing on internal discussion, organisational divisions, and internal revisions of ideology conducted during the Syrian conflict, it reveals the most forceful determinants motivating ASH's leaders to renounce Salafi-Jihadi ideology and realign as a reformist movement seeking gradual

political and social change, in keeping with the spirit of modern times as well as the diverse nature of Syrian society.

Chapter 5: The Army of Islam:

From Scholarly Salafism to the "Syrian National Army"

This chapter examines the foundation, evolution and transformations of the Army of Islam movement. It explores AoI's model which, especially during the establishment phase, was a novelty on the Syrian Islamist scene and 'exceptional' compared with Wahhabi groups and other parties across the Middle East and North Africa. It also scrutinizes the causal mechanism behind AoI's abandonment of radical ideology and its integration into the political and armed bodies of the Syrian opposition.

Chapter 6: The Sham Legion: Transformations in the Context of its Ambiguous Relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood

Given the intellectual and former organisational affiliation between the leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and that of FSH, a full understanding of the formation and evolution of the latter group requires an assessment of transformations inside the Brotherhood over the last three decades. This chapter explores the ambiguous relationship between the SMB and FSH in order to explain why the latter has adopted contradictory stances and ideational positions during the years of the conflict in Syria.

The Concluding Chapter: Determinants and Mechanisms of Transformations within Armed Islamist Movements in Syria: A Comparative Framework

Based on the findings of the comparative analysis of the paths and transformations of the three selected cases in this study, this concluding chapter provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain the nature and mechanisms of transformations within the armed Islamist movements. It also provides an assessment of the nature of these transformations and their future implications.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review: Understanding the Rise of Islamism in Syria

Since 2011 academics across the world have shown a great deal of interest in Syria. This unprecedented research attention is a direct result of the ongoing conflict, which has had major ramifications for the MENA region and globally as a whole. It has been particularly intensive since the emergence of Jihadist groups in Syria and the subsequent establishment of IS and its declaration of a 'Caliphate' in 2014. Since then, much of the published literature has concentrated on the rise of Islamism and the development of 'Syrian Jihadism', in an attempt to produce a deeper understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Given the extent of the literature and the impracticability of covering all of it here, this study will limit itself to reviewing some of the more prominent research in the field. In order to make the review more straightforward and draw out the most important points, the selected works are subdivided by the major issues that they cover.

2.1 The Sectarian Dimension

Arguably, many scholars proceed from an ideological perspective emphasising the sectarian factor as an independent variable that explains, whether alone or sometimes alongside other dependent variables, how Islamist movements' positions have developed over the course of the uprising. Sami Hadaya, for example, notices that 'terms like "political Alawism", an "Alawi-led regime", "minoritarian rule", and "Sunni revolution" are

coined by academics that overwhelmingly do not align with the primordial school of thought and who are generally nuanced in their analysis' (2020, p.609).

Nibras Kazimi's *Syria through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy* (2010) was instrumental in the popularisation of a sectarian understanding of contemporary Islamic activism in Syria. Although it was published a year prior to the uprising, Kazimi predicted that due to its ancient historical position and religious make-up, Syria would be the next attraction and battleground for Jihadists after their defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq (2010, p. 1-2). He argues that the new generation of Jihadists raised on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's ideology in Iraq would struggle to find as clear and perfect an enemy as Syria's 'Nusayri-Alawite minority' because, since Ibn Taymiyya and the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, Alawites have been categorised by various Sunni theologians as 'apostates' or 'heretics' (ibid., p. 5). From his point of view, these classical advisory opinions – *fatwa*s – have provided the rebellious Jihadists of the 1980s armed uprising, and succeeding generations, with a blueprint on to 'how to handle a *Nusayri*-Alawite threat' (ibid., pp. 10-15). In that light, Kazmi refers to Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's article that tackled 'the survival strategy' of the Syrian Sunnis under the 'Alawites domination' after the death the former president Hafez al-Assad as an exemplary clue to the resilience of these fatwas among Jihadists, which will continually urge them to return to Syria to exact a severe retaliation and violently translate their leader's instructions into reality (ibid, pp. 3, 32-34).

Drawing on this understanding, Aron Lund has argued that the Islamisation of the uprising was driven by 'the descent into sectarian conflict, [pitting] Sunni Muslims against supporters of the secular, Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar el-Assad' (2012, p. 5). Both he and Fabrice Balanche argue that the identity rifts dividing Syrians cannot be

hidden because the vast majority of rebels, their ideological differences notwithstanding, are Sunni Arabs (Lund, 2012, p.10; Balanche, 2018, pp. 14-15). The popularity of the sectarian narrative is thus attributed to its importance in assisting Sunni militants and Jihadist groups to 'manifest a Sunni identity in the most radical way possible, while also providing them with a theological explanation for the war against *Shia* Muslims, a sense of belonging, and spiritual security' (Lund 2013, p. 10). Heiko Wimmen contends that sectarianism has long been rooted in Syrian society, since before the current war. Its origins were due to the 'legacy of violence' in contemporary Syrian history especially after the military confrontation in the 1980s. As a result, the sectarian polarisation between Sunnis and Alawites in mixed cities such as Homs and Baniyas was more visible and therefore violence erupted earlier than in other locations (Wimmen, 2017, p. 67).

Besides being simplistic, this analysis is unable to provide a plausible explanation for the peaceful period throughout the first year of the uprising, when protesters as well as the opposition emphasised national and secular values. Kevin Mazur argues that the Syrian conflict is not "an ethnic civil war resulting from ethnically exclusive rule'. Contrary to general belief, it started as a 'nonviolent protest movement with participants from all of the country's ethnic backgrounds, making various claims ranging from national-level political reform to the redress of town-level grievances". He adds that only a year after the outbreak of the first protests, the uprising began resembling an ethnic conflict (2021, pp. 1-3). At that time, there was a near consensus on the national character of the conflict as a democratic struggle against Assad's tyranny, dictatorship, and the one-party system (Stolleis, 2015; Brønd, 2016, pp. 19-30). Therefore, besides the common slogan *Ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam* (the people want to topple the regime), which came from other

Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain, the demonstrators highlighted national unity in their slogans and banners such as ‘One, one, one, the Syrian people are one’. This also served to counter regime propaganda accusing Salafists and Jihadists of orchestrating the protests in order to incite sectarian strife, as many scholars have claimed (Droz-Vincent, 2014, pp. 35-45; Van Dam, 2017, pp. 56-70; Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 54).

Building on this point, Emile Hokayem contended that sectarianism was a ‘survival tool’ for the Syrian regime besides having originated in the country. In his view, similar to Iraq and Lebanon, ‘all the ingredients for cataclysmic upheaval were already there [in Syria]. The explosion, crystallisation, and weaponisation/militarisation of sectarian passions owe much to circumstance, local agency, political structure, and leadership choices’ (National Security for Insiders, 2016). This might explain why Christopher Philips uses the term ‘semi-sectarian’ to describe the Syrian conflict and to challenge the sectarian narrative which, in his view, depends on various incorrect perceptions (2015, pp. 358-59). Likewise, Philips draws on constructivist and modernist approaches to link the emergence of sectarian or sub-national identities with the failure of the modern ‘nation’-state in the Middle East: the Iraqi state’s collapse after 2003, for example, created a vacuum filled by ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ (2015, p. 362).

In Syria, Philips attributes the ‘sectorization’ of the conflict to ‘excessive violence’ deployed by the Syrian regime, not in order to counter the peaceful demonstrations, but ‘to provoke them into a war that his better-armed military would probably win’ and to create a security dilemma that, in turn, might encourage most of the religious minorities to align with the regime and reinforce the identification of opposition with sectarian actors

such as al-Qaeda and IS (ibid., p. 369). In this vein, repression as the sole regime response to the Syrian uprising and insurgency was not so much 'stupid', as Reinoud Leenders has described it, as a systematic choice to play the sectarian and ethnic identity card (2015, pp. 253-255).

Ideology built on sectarian narratives and strict religious interpretations indisputably plays a crucial role in legitimising violence and radicalisation, as Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko argue (2011, pp. 219-222). However, ideology alone cannot explain Jihadist actions as a whole. For instance, the sectarian account is incapable of explaining the motivations behind the 2014-armed confrontation between IS and the armed Syrian opposition including Salafi-Jihadi movements such as ASH, which ended with the expulsion of IS's fighters from Northwest Syria (Celso, 2017, p. 94; Lister, 2015, p. 6).

Moreover, it cannot explain various other phenomena. Why has the al-Qaeda-affiliated NF sided with the rebels in this round of fighting, but fought them in 2017? Why, during its first two years of existence, did IS avoid confrontation with the Syrian regime despite its belief that they are heretics, focusing its expansion efforts on cities under opposition control in northern and north-eastern Syria? (Lister, 2015, p. 40). According to the sectarian account, Sunni Arabs should have united to fight the 'Alawites' and the Shi'a militias to fulfil their ideological commitments and religious prophesies. They should have refrained from intra-Jihadi conflict until the fall of the regime. Mullin thus argues that 'it would be a reductionist and essentialist argument to arbitrarily link the rise of radical Islamist groups with the substantial Sunni population in Syria with no additional evidence

[…] and more is needed to explain the resonance of the Salafi-jihadi ideology in the context of the Syrian civil war' (Mullin, 2015).

The Syrian regime has intentionally manipulated the diversity of Syrian society and exploited sectarianism as a 'survival strategy', as Emile Hokayem observes (2017, pp. 16-17). Moreover, Joshua Landis notes that it has sought to sectarianise the army and security forces by incorporating more Alawite soldiers and officers and empowering them over their counterparts from other sects especially in 'the main strike forces, such as the Republican Guard led by Bashar's brother' (2012, pp. 72-74). However, the tendency to treat the Syrian regime as 'Alawite-sectarian' is simplistic. The Syrian regime is neither sectarian nor 'secular'. It is an 'authoritarian regime' and has, in Steven Heydemann's words, managed to remain resilient by upgrading its behaviour and ideology as circumstances change (2013, pp. 61-65). In more detail, as Khaddour and Mazur argue, the high level of violence was 'an effective tactic to steer the conflict towards an informal reconciliation. The security forces, but also the intermediaries, often found that this method could deliver a faster, more effective, and more durable solution' (2019, p. 22).

2.2 The Regime's Social Coalitions: Rural vs Urban

In his seminal book *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (1999), Hanna Batatu describes how urban areas welcomed Hafez al-Assad's assumption to power in 1971 because he succeeded in excluding the radical leftist elites that had ruled Syria since the 1963 Ba'athist coup marginalised the urban middle and upper classes, especially in the state bureaucracy (1999, pp. 155-56). Batatu argues that alongside control of the armed forces, the main pillar of the patriarch Assad's

rule was alignment with the peasantry as well as the urban petty-bourgeoisie. Raymond Hinnebusch adopts a similar analysis, pointing out that the policies adopted by the Ba'athist officers (1963–1970) were not expressions of sectarianism so much as political alignment with marginalised rural forces, including religious minorities (2019, pp. 51-52). Therefore, Hafez al-Assad's strategy was an extension of these policies, with one difference: he used the family-sectarian 'Alawite' elite in sensitive security posts and urban technocrats to create networks and closer relations with the urban Sunni bourgeoisie (ibid., p. 53). But the nuanced balance between rural and urban forces under Assad *père* has been disrupted under his successor. According to Jamal Barout and Philip Proudfoot, the neoliberal policies adopted by Bashar al-Assad contributed to the emergence of a new political alignment between the regime and traditional merchants and new entrepreneurs, especially in Damascus and Aleppo (Barout, 2012, pp. 70-76; Proudfoot, 2017, pp. 548-489).

As a result, rural areas became vulnerable to Salafist ideas brought back to Syria by expatriates working in the Gulf states or Jihadis returning from combat in neighbouring countries like Iraq and Lebanon. These ideas, which also benefited from sectarian polarisation after the Iraqi Civil War (2006–2008), flourished in plain sight in the impoverished peripheries and among the urban poor without a serious response from the government (Proudfoot, 2017, pp. 492-495).

Azmi Bishara develops this account further in his exploration of the causes of the rise of Islamism in Syria after 2000 outside the hegemonic sectarian narrative. He argues that the rural officers that Hafez al-Assad relied upon in the army and security forces

reinvented themselves in the business sector through partnerships with urban businessmen, accommodating the political and economic liberalisation (*infitah*) promised by the new president (2013, pp. 305-310) [21]. These developments, whether directed by the current president or not, led to a steady deterioration in the traditional role of the Ba'ath party in society, which in turn created a vacuum that many ideologies (liberal, leftist, Islamist etc.) sought to fill (ibid., pp. 301-303).

Bishara notes that the peaceful uprising initially broke out not in traditional 'opposition' cities like Hama but in places like Deraa that had historically backed the Ba'athist regime. At the same time, he disputes the assumption that the Syrian uprising particularly during its first year was a 'revolution of the poor'. Although Damascus and Aleppo remained silent because of the aforementioned alliance, demonstrations were started in the cities (Latakia, Homs, Hama, and Deir ez-Zor) by a new democratic elite that had grown away from the Baathist narrative and had been influenced by the 'Arab spring' revolutions (ibid., pp. 92-95). Accordingly, Salafist slogans appeared only when the peaceful uprising had been supressed in city centres and pushed back into rural areas where Salafist networks had become deeply entrenched and were waiting for the moment of revolution (ibid, p. 347). Nevertheless, Salafists found no real foothold until late 2011, when sectarian massacres committed by regime forces and state-sponsored militias–*Shabiha*—intensified dramatically. These massacres would be employed by Salafists as tangible evidence supporting their sectarian understanding of the conflict with the regime.

In a related point, Lina Khatib contends that during the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad's rule, Syria witnessed deliberate state re-Islamisation of the public sphere. This

[21] This paved the way not only for a new political association but also overstepped the sectarian barrier to intermarriage and relative bonds in copying to what Bashar al-Assad had done.

process contributed to ‘Islamic revivalism’ and the re-appearance of Islamists as an essential socio-political force after two decades of relative absence (2012, pp. 4-6). Re-Islamisation coincided with a ‘de-secularisation’ process, clearly visible in policy moves such as an end to the ban on the hijab in public schools, allowing many opposition figures to return home, releasing the SMB prisoners, the re-emergence of the religious bourgeoisie, the end to the longstanding ban on prayer in the army, invitations to Muslim and Christian religious authorities to lecture at the military academy, the hosting of Islamic conferences ‘renewing’ religious discourse, and the establishment of Islamic banks (ibid., pp. 115-118). This re-Islamisation or top-down Islamisation was part of the regime’s survival strategy, especially after the American intervention in Iraq, and was key to a liberal economic transformation that required the participation of the urban Sunni bourgeoisie (ibid., pp. 142-144). Khatib concludes that after a decade of Islamisation, secularism in Syria was defeated; Islamists dominated Syrian society for a full decade before the uprising and became the only credible legitimate opposition (ibid.). Building on this insight, Rahaf Aldoughli argues that religion has been an instrument used by the Syrian regime to legitimise its rule, albeit the official secularity of the Syrian state. In her perspective, the official discourse shifted after the 2011uprising and ‘has become explicitly religious and anti-secular, ending an era of official secularity since the 1970s’ (2022, pp.360-362).

2.3 The ‘Legacy’ of Syrian Jihadists

To move past the sectarian account of the conflict, some scholars have emphasised the ramifications of earlier Jihadi experiences in Syria. Fouad Ajami, for instance, suggests that the ‘phantom’ of the 1964 Hama revolt and 1982 massacre was visible in the 2011

upheaval (2012, pp. 85-88). Anthony N. Celso cites ‘Hama rules’ to demonstrate how ‘the massacre of the Brotherhood’s stronghold inspired future generations of jihadists to avenge the memory of their slain brothers’ (2019, p. 87). Raphael Lefevre likewise emphasises the historical continuity between the Islamist revolt in Hafez al-Assad’s era and the rebellion in his son’s reign, noting that both Islamists and regime supporters tend to label the contemporary uprising as the newest round of a dormant conflict (2013, p. 12). In his view, this continuity has equipped the regime with a moral narrative that it can use not only to justify excessive repression of the opposition, but also for political mobilisation. The same applies to Islamists, in particular the SMB, as ‘the memory of atrocities that they suffered [...] at the hands of the regime seemed to be an increasingly important mobilizing factor in the uprisings’ (ibid).

Memory often generates a constant desire for revenge, which has been given expression by many Islamist groups over the years of the conflict (specifically, revenge for the Hama massacre). At the same time, it may produce a new behavioural and cognitive pattern that takes into consideration the necessity of moving beyond an impasse to prevent the repetition of past mistakes. Based on this diagnosis, Lefevre coined ‘the generation dilemma’ to describe the continuous crisis within the SMB. While the older generation looks at the future through the lens of the past and focuses only on the ‘leadership’ within the movement, the new generation is less ideological, looking at a future outside organisational belonging and working on the national project for the future of Syria. In short, the new generation is focused on solutions (ibid., pp. 197-200).

The prominence of the memory of Hama may explain some aspects of the current conflict (Ismail, 2018). However, interpreting Islamic activism retroactively carries many

risks. Firstly, the context of the 2011 uprising is different from the mid-1970s and the early 1980s. This uprising began as a democratic protest in which a significant part of the Syrian people in most parts of the country–including members of religious minorities, however limited their numbers—participated in peaceful demonstrations. It turned into an armed struggle when Islamists exploited the vacuum left behind by the central government to return to activism. The earlier conflict, on the other hand, began in 1975 as an armed rebellion launched by the Fighting Vanguard (FV) (a Brotherhood splinter faction); the formal announcement of an Islamic revolution by the Brotherhood in 1980 was an attempt to reproduce the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution in Syria (Conduit, 2019).

Secondly, exaggerating the impact of the 1982 Hama Massacre as a driver of armed conflict does not necessarily reflect certain realities since 2011. Hama itself only joined the protests relatively late and was reluctant to take part in the armed struggle. The people of Hama became involved in the revolution once they were sure that most of the other provinces were already participating and they would not stand alone as in 1982. Their collective consciousness and the weight of experience made them reluctant to take up arms again because they knew how devastating the consequences would be if the armed struggle failed. Unlike in the 1980s, the city of Hama has not provided fertile ground for military efforts in the current conflict—although many Hamawis have established armed groups nearby or in the hinterland of Idlib, or else joined Islamist movements like ASH.

Thirdly, and most importantly, this analysis can only be productively applied to a few armed groups associated with or close to SMB groups like SRC and CPC—particularly with regard to Lefevre's 'generation dilemma'. It cannot provide a reasonable

explanation for the emergence of scholarly Salafi groups such as the AoI in Damascus and its countryside, and the Authenticity and Development Front in Deir ez-Zor. Moreover, it might not be the best way of understanding Salafi-Jihadi movements like ASH and NF, which have been influenced more by experiences of global Jihad (particularly in Iraq and Lebanon) than the 1975–1982 armed conflict.

2.4. Manipulation of Jihadists

Some scholars have looked for explanations beyond the Islamists and Jihadists themselves in their attempts to understand the dramatic proliferation of Jihadist groups during the civil war, because the rapid emergence of these groups raises many questions about their capacity to establish networks in a state like Syria, ruled by a repressive regime. These scholars have shed light on how the Syrian regime instrumentalised Jihadists and contributed to the establishment of many Jihadist networks or at least facilitated their activities in various countries. Ecaterina Cepoi argues that investment in radical groups has consistently been an integral part of the Syrian regime's foreign policy. Since the 1990s, Damascus has relied on Islamist groups like Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad as 'proxies' to further Syrian policy in Lebanon and Palestine. The same might apply to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish parties (2013, p. 552).

Under Bashar al-Assad this policy has intensified, with the Syrian government even supporting al-Qaeda affiliates such as Lebanon's Fatah al-Sham Group.[22] Charles R. Lister maintains that Syria's recent past may explain the dramatic growth in Jihadist

[22] This group was formed in 2006 by Shakir al-Abassi who had close connections with the Syrian intelligence services and al-Zarqawi's network in Iraq after 2003 (Cepoi, 2013, p. 523).

militancy since 2011. Specifically, he argues that the Syrian leadership developed an extensive relationship with Jihadists in order to 'export threats against its enemies, rather than face them at home' (2015a, p. 31).

In 2003, as David Lesch points out, this enemy was the nearly 150,000 American troops on the ground in Iraq, whom the regime feared might find their way into Syria if Iraq were to be stabilised (2013, p. 14-20) [23]. Elizabeth O'Bagy notes the regime's tolerance for both local and foreign Jihadists in this period, when Syria became a major transit zone for those seeking to enter Iraq (2012, p. 15). The intention here was to bog down US troops in an enduring conflict that would preclude any attempt to do in Syria what had already been done in Iraq, and to force the US to engage in intelligence coordination with Syria in order to counter the expected Jihadist threat.

Lister provides statistics taken from American intelligence that illustrate that 'By the end of 2007, 85-90% of the foreign fighters in Iraq came from Syria, and within that 90% of suicide bombers entered Iraq from Syrian territory' (Lister, 2015, p. 48). Furthermore, Murad Batal al-Shishani argues that the Iraq War created a new generation of Syrian Jihadists: Syrians made up 13 per cent of all foreign Jihadists in Iraq and were the second largest group after the Saudis (2011, p. 53). Sherifa Zuhur also contends that the release of Islamists and Jihadists in the early months of the peaceful demonstrations reflected a desire to instrumentalise those prisoners in order to implement the regime's domestic policy. From his perspective, labelling the uprising as a foreign-backed Jihadist threat was to be the main pillar of the regime's formal propaganda from 2012 onwards (2015, pp. 148-149). It worth noting that this narrative is widely accepted among the

[23] Syria has been on the US Department of State's official list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979.

Syrian regime's opponents, especially those with a secular orientation, in interpreting the 'Islamisation of the revolution'. They are, for example, deliberating an old photo of a gathering of three of the most influential armed Islamist group leaders (Hassan Abboud, the former leader of ASH; Zahran Alloush the former leader of AoI; and Ahmed Abu Issa the current leader of the Suqour al-Sham–Sham Falcons) who were imprisoned in Saydnaya prison and released after many presidential amnesties in 2011, as a tangible proof of the regime's succession in transforming the political rights movement into a caustic sectarian conflict.

Despite its importance, the central problem of this analysis is that it neglects the impact of structures and the external environment as drivers of Jihadi collective action, instead focusing on individuals— 'the primacy of agency over structure'. The Jihadists' release did meaningfully contribute to the way they organised their activities and framed their ideology; this only happened subsequently when conditions became ripe. Moreover, in some cases prison contributed to a rationalisation of Jihadi ideology. ASH is a clear example: as leaders decided to abandon the ideology of internationalist jihadism and break organisational ties with al-Qaeda, as will be demonstrated in the fourth chapter.

2.5. The International Factor

Other scholars, attempting to extend their analysis beyond domestic factors, have emphasised the significant role played by foreign actors in the radicalisation of Syrian armed movements and the development of Jihadism (Phillips, 2016; Van Dam, 2017; Phillips and Valbjørn, 2018; Hinnebusch, et al., 2019; Leenders and Giustozzi 2020,

p.3)[24]. Lund approaches the activities of regional powers and non-state actors from a sectarian perspective, arguing that 'the sectarian conflict inside Syria, for example, is reflected in the regional power struggle'. In his view, as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are closely connected to Sunni Islamism, their support for 'Sunni' armed groups in Syria is to be expected. This also applies to private donors, who were mostly Syrian Islamists or involved with Islamic associations and charities in the Gulf, where a sectarian narrative is dominant (Lund, 2012, p. 18). Conversely, alongside the first sectarian association, the other coalition—Iran, Iraq and Russia— is an 'alliance of the region's non-Sunni governments' (ibid., p. 7). Researchers writing from this perspective often cite the Farouq Brigade as an exemplary case of pragmatic transformation towards Salafism. To secure financial support, this group, which was formed in Homs in late 2011 from Syrian army defectors, gradually acclimatised its ideology with the Salafist ideas of donors in the Gulf[25] (Mullin, 2015, p. 98).

Lina Khatib challenges the sectarian narrative of the influence of regional powers since 2011, arguing that the sectarianism that emerged in regime propaganda from mid-March 2011 onwards only became a reality in 2013. In her view, the Syrian uprising endangered the autocratic structure of authority in Syria as well as in the Gulf states. The counter-strategies of both sides were thus based on instrumentalising the social identities of the Syrian people (2019, pp. 386-392). She concludes that Gulf intervention in the

[24] As the political struggle turned into civil war, the intervention of the international players significantly increased in backing both sides of the conflict. Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, and the Iraqi popular mobilisation Forces (PMF) intensified their support as time passed. They sent their military troops to prevent the expected fall of the al-Assad regime and, subsequently, assist the Syrian army to recapture most of the territories that had been lost since 2012. In contrast, while Turkey, Qatar, and KSA offered military and financial support to various parts of the armed opposition, Gilbert Achcar's study explains how most of the American and European contribution was limited to logistic and intelligence assistance (2016, pp. 19-20).

[25] The organisation, for example, renounced its national logo and replaced it with a black flag with crossed swords.

Syrian conflict (Qatar, KSA, and the UAE) was driven less by their Sunni identity than by precautionary efforts to pre-empt the prospective threat posed by both Sunni and Shia armed groups to their authority in the Gulf region (ibid, p. 293).

There are several shortcomings in the analysis linking sectarian or religious impulses to the role played by foreign powers in Syria (Pierret, 2016a). It does not explain the alliance and distinctive relationship with both Qatar and Turkey before and during the first six months of the uprising[26]. Moreover, it cannot account for the financial support provided to the regime by KSA, a Sunni monarchy, in early 2011 to help it find a way out of the crisis, as Yehuda U. Blanga notes (2017, pp. 51-52). The complex and changeable alliances surrounding the Syrian conflict cannot be understood through a simple approach focusing on sub-identities as an independent variable determinative of alliance formation in the Arab world.

For example, despite Saudi Arabia's opposition to 'political Islam', it has often found itself compelled to support numerous Islamist groups like ASH and FSH, and in early 2015 to coordinate with Qatar and Turkey. It did so in order to alter the military balance of power and expel the regime from northern Syria, which was achieved in Idlib before the Russian military intervention in late 2015 (ibid., 2017, p. 55). Zuhur notes that even the Hazem Group, closely linked to the SMB, received military training and support from KSA as well as the US to fight both regime troops and Jihadist groups such as the al-Qaeda affiliated NF (2017, p. 146)[27]. Equally, KSA also provided support to the

[26] Both countries have significantly contributed to bringing Bashar al-Assad out of compulsory international isolation following the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005. Furthermore, it does not interpret the reluctance of both countries to support the Syrian opposition during the first six months of the uprising.
[27] However, this support was limited, uneven and inadequate. Thus, the Hazem group was no longer capable of surviving when the NF fighters launched an enormous offensive in early 2015 and succeeded in eradicating the group without any protection from the US.

scholarly Salafi armed opposition (the AoI) in order to counterbalance the SMB and Salafi-Jihadi factions in the Damascus countryside from 2013 to 2015 (Khatib, 2019, p. 396).

Notwithstanding the pivotal influence of foreign actors in the re-emergence and rapid growth of Islamism in Syria, certain countries also played a significant role in reshaping Islamist groups' positions to accommodate political reality. Celso emphasises Turkish and Qatari efforts in 2017 to persuade ASH to avoid any coalition with NF or any al-Qaeda–linked groups. (2017, p. 97). However, more research is needed in order to fill the gap in our understanding of how the foreign factor has affected de-radicalisation and moderation.

2.6 Debates between Jihadists

Alongside these approaches, which consider Islamist movements from outside, some scholars have tried to find a different interpretation casting light on ideological differences between Jihadists themselves and between their political projects. Arguably, all Jihadists view adherents of the Syrian regime as 'infidels' and want revenge for its 'bloody history' of anti-Islamist repression, as well as its manipulation of Islamists to achieve political goals. Moreover, most Jihadists are looking for foreign funding, especially in the foundation phase. The question that these studies try to answer is: given all these similarities, why are there so many Jihadist groups within a single country, and why are they often at one another's throats, even, on occasion, accusing one another of apostasy?

Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, 2015have tried to answer this question by looking at internal debates within Jihadism over whether to prioritise the so-called 'near enemy' (regimes in the Arab and Muslim world) or the 'far enemy' (the West).

These debates, which attracted the interest of many Jihadi ideologues and theoreticians on the *Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad* website,[28] increased with the advent of the Iraqi Jihad after 2003 (2015, pp. 57-63).

According to Fawaz A. Gerges, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi adopted a hybrid ideology combining the 'near enemy' strategy with the sectarian dimension of the Iraqi faction following the American intervention. Unlike al-Qaeda, Zarqawi asserted that the Shia were religiously 'heterodox' and the most dangerous threat to the Islamic community, *Umma*, as they had 'befriended and supported the Americans and stood in their ranks against the mujahidin'. Thus, all Iraqi Shias—not only their political leaders or the armed forces— were to be targeted (2016, p. 83-86).

Abu Haniya traces the development of this ideology by looking at two books: Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir's *Issues in the Jurisprudence of Jihad* (commonly known as *The Jurisprudence of Blood*), and Abu Bakr Naji's *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through Which the Islamic Nation Will Pass'*. These books have been central in legitimising Jihadist barbarities as a means of bringing about the Islamic state (2018, pp. 160-168). After seven years of 'brutal Jihad' in Iraq, that even other Jihadists distanced themselves from—including Osama bin Laden, the former leader of al-Qaeda, who was critical of this approach—Jihadist efforts to make the transition to Syria take into consideration the negative impact of this strategy, which had driven most Iraqi Sunnis to expel al-Qaeda fighters from their districts in 2007. This might explain why NF attempted to isolate itself from local communities during the establishment phase and applied a soft

[28] These scholars are the Egyptian Islamic Jihadi Hani AlSibai, the Mauritanian Abu l-Mundhir al-Shinqitim, the Bahraini Turkı al-Binbalı (known at the time as Abu¯ Humam Bakr b. Abd al-bAzız al-Atharı) and others. Although several important Jihadı-Salafı¯ scholars, such as the Syrian-British Abu Basir al-Tartusi , the Jordanian Abu Qatada al-Filastini and the Kuwaiti Hamid al-Alı¯, never became members of the council, their views were not fundamentally different from the scholars who did.

engagement strategy to avoid the repetition of Iraqi mistakes in Syria: a strategy which, in turn, led to a 'struggle for global Jihadism' between al-Qaeda and its new Syrian model on the one hand, and IS on the other, after the latter declared itself a caliphate (Abu Hanieh and Abu-Rumman, 2015, pp. 80-84, 185-188).

Jihadi debates were not limited to the overall strategy. Many unprecedented issues have triggered unconventional debates and division in the context of the Syrian uprising —for example, whether to participate in peaceful demonstrations calling for democracy given the emphasis on comprehensive violent change in Salafi-Jihadi ideology; or what sort of relationships Jihadis should form with other armed Islamist and non-Islamist groups, since the Jihadis' idiosyncratic view of the world tended to cast them as fighters for God, elevated above the common people in order to spread His word on earth. This study will cast more light on these debates, which have left their mark on the fate of the war, as well as other issues that have escaped scholars' attention (see Chapter 3).

2.7. Gap in the literature: What is new?

Arguably, the approaches mentioned above contributed to providing a better understanding of Syrian Islamism. However, there are several general shortcomings.

First, there is no single factor that could alone explain the rise of Islamism in Syria, but a variety of interrelated factors that might draw a clearer picture of this phenomenon. Thomas Pierret in this regard argues that the rise of Islamism in Syria during the uprising, particularly the advent of Salafist groups, should be investigated through four dimensions as follows (2017, p. 138):

1. The context of sectarian polarization

2. The revenge of the country's peripheries over the centre as these marginalized areas had been home to the Salafi networks before the revolution
3. The subsequent collapse of state control over the country which opened the door to the influence of the transitional Salafi networks based in Iraq
4. Foreign support giving Syrian Salafi factions a military weight

Moreover, the importance of each dimension varies from case to case, from time to time, and as the circumstances in the external political environment change.

Second, most of the literature, as shown above, has focused more on the emergence and rise of armed Islamist groups than their subsequent transformation. In other words, most scholars have been immersed in the path towards 'radicalisation', while paying less attention to the difficult processes by which movements have revised their ideology, worldviews, and future strategies, the so-called behavioural and ideological transformation towards 'de-radicalisation' and 'moderation' (See Chapter 2).

Third, those researchers who have tackled transformations within local armed Islamist movements in Syria have concentrated on ASH, neglecting other movements. Regarding ASH, Thomas Pierret and Ahmad Abazeid have both done important work explaining how the Syrian conflict and its complex dimensions have forced the movement's leaders to completely abandon the 'global Jihad' ideology to engage in the national opposition bodies at both the political and military levels (Pierret, 2017, pp. 49-151; Abazeid, 2015a, pp. 40-45).

Creighton A. Mullins has likewise produced a study drawing on elements of radicalisation theory, insurgency theory, and cultural framing from social movement

theory as an analytical framework in order to understand radicalisation within three armed groups such as IS, NF, and ASH (2015, pp. 14-15). Recently, Karin Göldner-Ebenthal and Ahmed Elsayed have published an in-depth study analysing three strategic shifts of de-radicalisation within ASH and the organisational, ideological and external factors that contributed to these moves (2019, pp. 3-14). Drawing on Soifer's (2012, pp. 1572-1592) understanding of critical junctures, which is defined not by the significance of the outcomes of the transformation process but by factors allowing and/or producing change, they have provided a multi-level analysis of the mechanisms of change that led to behavioural de-radicalisation within ASH. This contribution, as well as Mullins' work, is one of the central inspirations for the theoretical approach of this study.

Fourth, much of the corpus comprises policy analysis papers rather than 'academic research' that uses simple 'policy analysis' tools and secondary resources in a quick response to the high demand from decision makers, think tanks, and in a not inconsiderable part to public opinion, to explore the expected effects of this conflict that attracted regional and international powers to intervene especially after the establishment of IS. Thus, the pressing need to diagnose the Syrian crisis and offer political recommendations overwhelmed the necessity to evaluate whether the theoretical approaches that emerged over the last two decades to handle Islamist movements could apply to Syria. How studying Syrian Islamism and Jihadism will contribute to the theoretical discussion on the main processes of transformation within Islamist movements (radicalisation, de-radicalisation and moderation), is one of the main aims of this study, as mentioned before.

Given the dearth of scholarship in this regard, this study seeks to provide comparative analysis of the transformations within three such movements: ASH, the AoI and FSH. By using PPA, the study sets out to analyse the mechanisms of change, the determinants of their behaviour, and the contextual and structural contexts in which they operate.

Chapter 3:

From Reformists to Jihadists: The Development of 'Political Islamism' in Contemporary Syria

The development of various sub-movements in Syria's Islamic movement provides the focus for this chapter. It refers in particular to the Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth the SMB), scholarly Salafism or 'Wahhabism', and Salafi Jihadism by considering their relationship with the state in the post-Ottoman era. Although the country's official religious establishment preserved the Ottoman heritage by adopting the Sunni denomination of the Ash'ari School, other movements and groups developed in the wake of independence and presented their different religious and political visions for administration of the state and the community. This applied to participation in governance, including election to the parliament (SMB in the fifties), missionary activity/*dawah* (scholarly Salafism) and armed conflict (*al-Tali'a al-Mukatila*/Fighting Vanguard (FV).

Accordingly, this chapter briefly engages with some of the most prominent phases of the Syrian Islamic movement, and considers its activities in relation to the state: in so doing, it specifically emphasises the period after the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963. Moreover, the applicability of two theses, 'moderation through inclusion' and moderation through exclusion', will be examined throughout the analysis.

3.1. The Roots of the Islamic Movement in Syria

The origins of the modern Islamic movement can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, and to what has alternately been referred to as 'Reformist Salafism' or 'Islamic Modernism'. This branch of Salafism was chiefly developed in Egypt by Sheikh Muḥammad Abduh (1849–1905) and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and then moved into Syria

in the early twentieth century. It was ‘Reformist’ because it emerged in opposition to the despotism and backwardness of the Ottoman Empire as well as the western cultural challenge (Lefèvre, 2013a, pp. 5-8; Pierret, 2016b). Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Kawakibi (1855–1902), Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1886–1914) and Mohammad Rasheed Ridha (1865–1935) were among its most prominent figures. Ridha continually relocated between Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria, headed the national council during the reign of Faisal I and pioneered ‘Rational Salafism’ or ‘Neo-Mu’tazillim’ as an extension of the *Mu’tizila* school, a medieval Islamic school of theology based on Rationalism (Commins, 1990; Schilcher ,1993; Abu Rumman 2013, p. 25).

These religious reformers studied a traditional religious curriculum and their ‘school’ (Damascus School) was essentially built on the insight that Islam is a rational religion (‘Islam calls on man to use reason; and whoever employs reason to study the natural world will grow in faith’). In other words, they sought to reinvent Islam as ‘rational’ by framing it against western modernity (Commins, 1986, pp. 407-8). Although its members are often celebrated for contributing to the rise of Arabic ‘national’ sentiment, most actually supported federalism rather than complete independence from the Ottoman Empire (Tibi and Sluglett, 1990).

In the post-Ottoman era, several associations sprang from this movement, and were subsequently influential in the country’s political life. Al-Jame’iyaat al-Gharaa (The Noble Association) and Jame’ayat al-Tamaddun al-Islami (Society of the Islamic Civilization), respectively established in 1924 and 1930, were the most prominent. In 1946, the latter established a journal that some observers consider to be the most important record of the Levantine Salafi reformist movement and its activities (Pierret,

2013, pp. 137-139; Abu Rumman, 2013, p. 30). The Zayd group, a Damascus-based and merchant-backed Islamic education network founded by Sheikh Abdul-Karim al-Rifai (1904–73) was also originally established in this context as a revivalist religious movement. In its initial phases, it showed clear Sufi tendencies and carried out charitable and advocacy activities, including educational and pedagogical sessions, in Damascus mosques (Pierret and Selvik, 2009, p. 579; Rifai, 2020, p. 3). However, as the group developed and expanded, new members with Salafi ideologies joined, who later allied with the FV leadership to fight the Syrian regime in the 1970s and 80s (al-Haj, 2010, p. 15).

Since its establishment, scholarly Salafism had been associated with traditional theologians such as Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350). Sheikh Mohammad Bin Abdulwahhab (1703–92) later sought to revive their thoughts during the first Saudi state (1744–1818) by founding a socio-religious reform movement calling for the purification of the Islamic creed (*aqidah*), which he claimed should be nothing but pure *tawhid* (divine Oneness); religious judgment, he added, should only be based on the Qur'an, Sunna and *ijma'* (consensus) of pious ancestors (Lacroix, 2011, p. 11; Nahouza, 2018, p. 80).

However, in the first half of the twentieth century, scholarly Salafism was marginal in Syria, which was reflected in the fact that it was less concerned with organisation and other political activities and more focused on preaching and scholarly pursuits. (Imad, 2013, p. 1489; Abu-Rumman, 2013, p. 30). Other factors included the theological domination of Asháriism and Sufism and the existence of various Muslim associations including the Muslim Youth (Damascus), *Dar al-Arqam* (Aleppo), Muslim Brotherhood

(Hama), *Dar al-Ansar* (Deir Ez Zor) and Muslim Youth (Latakia) that Mustafa al-Sibai[29] merged into the SMB in 1946 (Saad al-Din, 2006, pp. 49-54; Nayouf, 2011, pp. 20-21; Conduit, 2019, pp. 24-25).

After Syria's independence, scholarly Salafism held a significant presence in the country's religious landscape, and was especially prominent in Damascus. Contemporary scholarly Salafism owes its revival in Syria to Sheikh Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914–1999)[30], Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Arna'ut (1928–2004) and Sheikh Muhammad Eid al-Abbasi (1938—present), and al-Arna'ut's student, who planted its ideas in the Sharia institutes (particularly the *Al-Zahraa* Islamic Institute in Damascus) and the *Dek al-Bab* Mosque, which later became the headquarters of Syria's scholarly Salafism. These institutes, which attracted many Arab students (especially those from the Gulf) and cooperated closely with the Saudi Cultural Mission, played a vital role in spreading Wahhabi thoughts within Damascus's Sharia student community through educational and pedagogical courses and providing books, references, and traditional Salafi literature (Imad, 2013, p. 1490; Pierret, 2013, pp. 105-106).

However, scholarly Salafi activism, predominantly confined to Salafi advocacy (*Dawah*), tended to be apolitical and was preferred to rivalry when engaging with Sufism and Asháriism in jurisprudential debates (Brown, 1999, pp. 41-43). Its emphasis on *Dawah* activism and its apolitical stance clearly distinguished it from the SMB, whose attachment

[29] Al-Sibai (1915–65) was a Syrian political thinker, educator and writer who established the SMB. He was previously involved in political activism in Egypt, where he was a member of the MB and was associated with Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the MB. After joining demonstrators against the British authorities in Egypt, he was imprisoned. Later returning to Syria, he established Shabab Muhammad (Muhammad's Youth) and was subsequently arrested and tortured by the French authorities. In 1946, he formed the SMB by merging different Islamic organisations.

[30] Oxford Bibliographies cites al-Albani as one of the most influential Salafi scholars of the 20th century. He tried to reform Islam by encouraging Muslims to return to a puritanical and literalist approach to scripture. Throughout his scholarly career, he battled with traditional jurists on the validity of following a *madhhab* and particular principles of Islamic legal theory.

to political Islam defined it until it exited the Syrian political stage after the 1982 Hama massacre (Imad, 2013, pp. 1490-1492).

Although this brand, also known as 'quietist Salafism', remained apolitical, the Syrian authorities, who remained cautious after their conflict with Islamists in the 1970s and 80s, banned it. Most of its leaders were arrested, including Sheikh Nasir al-Din al-Albani, who was forced into exile in Jordan. Sheikh Muhammad Eid al-Abbasi was arrested in the early 1980s and spent twelve years in prison and Sheikh Abdul al-Qadir al-Arnaout was prevented from delivering sermons in any of the Damascus mosques.

Furthermore, the security services closed *al-Maktab al-Islami*, the 'Islamic Office', in the early 1990s that distributed Salafi publications (ibid. Olidort, 2015, pp. 14-15). They also kidnapped Sheikh Zuhair Shawish, who was supervising the development of the Office, and then detained him in Damascus (Lo, 2018, p. 272). However, security restrictions and the arrest of most of the traditional scholarly Salafi leaders resulted in many of its supporters joining the Jihadist Salafist movement. They were influenced by the experience of fighting in Afghanistan and the thoughts of Abdullah Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Suri, as this chapter will later demonstrate in further detail.

'Political Salafism' or *Sururism* (a name derived from its founder, Muhammad Surur bin Nayif Zayn al-'Abidin (1938–2016)) is another Salafi school that emerged from the same intellectual origin as scholarly Salafism with one key difference in its apolitical stance (Lacroix, 2011, p. 2). Surur, who was a member of the SMB, converted initially to scholarly Salafism after moving to KSA in 1965 and observing 'the MB's tolerance with Sufi members' (Hassan, 2011, p. 98; Barout, 2012, p. 293). He later developed a new branch of Wahhabism by combining the political views of Sayyed Qutub and the

organisational methods of the Muslim Brotherhood with the theological puritanism of scholarly Salafism (Ali and Hanon ,2021, p. 202). Despite his fundamental rejection of overthrowing the Muslim regimes as a source of *Fitna,* the Saudi authorities expelled him 1974 (Lacroix, 2011).

Following his move to London as a new exile, Surur founded the Centre for Islamic Studies, and established the '*Sunna* magazine'. Due to this intellectual combination and his anti-Shia stance, particularly after his book '*Wa Ja'a Dawr al-Majus* -The Era of the Magicians Has Come' that tackled the Islamic revolution in Iran as a religious threat and strategic turning point for the domination of Shiite powers in the Arab and Islamic countries, Sururism became popular among Jihadists and Jihadi movements and Surur publications have been quoted by their leaders, such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Abo Muhamad al-Maqdisi (Lacroix, 2011, pp. 394-395).

3.2 The Fighting Vanguard: The Seeds of Jihadist Salafism

As outlined in Chapter 1, repression-aggression theory argues that radicalisation is perceived as a reaction to repressive settings and forced exclusion (Della Porta and LaFree, 2012, pp. 7-8). In this vein, Ashour asserts that 'radical movements and ideologies which are prone to violence were all born in authoritarian states during highly repressive periods' (2009, p. 22)

Besides the general idea that despotism produces extremism, political repression may convince 'moderate' Islamist movements that peaceful political participation is unprofitable—as has happened in various MENA countries. Moreover, repression typically weakens the position of reformists or soft-liners in favour of radicals,

conservatives and hard-liners. Repression may also have knock-on effects beyond the Islamists themselves, including Islamist youth, causing them to rethink the feasibility of political participation and consider joining either traditional Salafi movements that ban any type of political activism or Salafi Jihadi movements that seek to use violence to advance their agenda. Finally, persistent exclusion may lead to reduced tolerance within society and an increase in social, sectarian, and religious tensions (al-Anani, 2010, pp. 7-9; Davenport and Inman, 2012). This insight applies to the path of the SMB from its establishment to exile after the 1982 Hama massacre.

This chapter has already observed that the roots of the SMB trace back to the mid-1930s, through many Islamic charities and cultural associations that were unified under Mustafa al-Sibai in the mid-1940s, and declared itself a branch of the MB that was founded by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928. The personal link between Hassan al-Banna and Mustafa al-Sibai was also instrumental in the advent of the SMB and contributed to its emergence as one of the most effective regional 'branches'. On the strength of this, it was nominated to host the guidance office headquarters after what the MB referred to as the ‘Distress of the Fifties’, namely its clash with the former Egyptian president Jamal Abdel Nasser in the middle of the decade (Barout, 2000, p. 256; Teitelbaum, 2011, pp. 214-15; Pierret, 2020, pp. 2-3).

Although it was affiliated to the Egyptian guidance office *(Maktab al-Irshad)*, the Syrian 'branch' had significant political and organisational independence, as confirmed by the fact that it did not, unlike its Egyptian counterpart, propose the application of Sharia rules in governance and political administration. Instead, it promoted a multiparty system and sought political and electoral alliances with other political actors (ibid., pp. 221-22;

Lefèvre, 2013a, pp. 23-27; Ramírez Díaz, 2017). This was shown in 1949, when it established the Islamic Socialist Front. In the country's so-called 'democratic era' (1947–63), it also participated in parliamentary elections and its members even served as ministers in the government (see the table below).

Table 1: Status of the Syrian political System between 1947-1963

Dates	Political system	Coups	Parliamentary Elections held	Status of the SMB
1947- 49	Democratic	March 1949	July 1947	Minor participant
Mar-Aug 1949	Authoritarian	August 1949	-	-
Aug 1949 - 52	Mixed	December 1949	November 1949	Minor participant, cabinet member
1952 - 4	Authoritarian	February 1954	-	Banned
1954 - 8	Democratic	-	September 1954	-
1958 - 61	Authoritarian	September 1961	-	Banned
1961-3	Democratic	March 1962 April 1962 March 1963	December 1961	Minor participant, cabinet member
1963-current	Authoritarian Ba'th	February 1966 November 1970	-	Banned

(Source: Conduit, 2019, p. 28).

Barout (2000) claims that al-Sibai tried to draw on European Social and Christian Democracy to establish the SMB as a democratic Islamic party. In 1943, he emerged as one of the strongest defenders of the country's republican system when Abdullah I bin Al-Hussein, the ruler of Jordan, put forward his Greater Syria/Syrian Union proposal: that the different parts of the Levant (Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria) should be unified under his rule (Porath, 1984, p. 172).

His most important contribution came during negotiation of the country's 1950 constitution, when he was credited with the withdrawal of a proposed constitutional article that, if accepted, would have explicitly established Islam as the state religion. The Article, which was put forward by the SMB and several conservative socialists, was strongly criticised and opposed by representatives of religious minorities (including the Christian, Druze, Ismaili, and Jewish minorities) and liberal and social democratic parliamentary parties. Al-Sibai also called for 'radical' reform at the national level and economic and political cooperation with the Soviet Union at the international level, although he made it clear that this should be conditional on 'positive neutrality' (Barout, 2000, pp. 257-59; Teitelbaum, 2004, p. 144; Rabil, 2010, pp. 75-78).

Despite the experience of the SMB in the early 1950s which can be considered as an empirical support of the 'inclusion-moderation' thesis, al-Sibai's position caused controversy and division within the SMB, resulting in the first schism in 1954 (Booysen, 2018, pp. 153-154; Conduit, 2019, pp.25-26). A young radical wing had emerged that objected to al-Sibai's leadership approach and his willingness to ally with secular parties. The wing consisted of second-grade cadres led by Abdul Majid al-Taraboulsi. It sought to establish a special secret apparatus that resembled the one in Egypt, and also provided military training to some of the SMB's younger members (Barout, 2000, p. 260).

Other factors contributed to this schism and influenced a drift towards violence within the SMB. First, in 1951, President Adib al-Shishakli dissolved Syria's civilian government, and the following year banned all political parties. This sparked an internal debate within the SMB about whether to comply with this ban or continue to operate. Meanwhile, in Egypt, Nasser cracked down on the MB in 1954, and also banned the SMB,

jailing its members during the years when Syria was a member of the United Arab Republic ‘UAR’, 1958–1961. When the Ba’ath Party seized power in 1963, the country's political pluralism came to an end and the SMB was again outlawed. In this changed political environment, the SMB was increasingly willing to use violence and its radical wing also progressively challenged the leadership (Ziadeh, 2011, p. 384; Conduit, 2019, p. 29).

Both tendencies clearly emerged during the 1964 Hama rebellion (studies frequently use 'rebellion' interchangeably with 'disobedience', 'riot', 'revolt' or 'events'), which began as a strike in Othman al-Hourani Secondary School (by Nasserite and socialist students); it then morphed into general civil disobedience before transforming into an armed insurgency that lasted for 29 days (Barout, 2000, p. 268). Marwan Hadid, or ‘Shyek Marwan’ and Saeed Hawa, the SMB's official in the city, appealed to the SMB's standard line of justification at the time, namely that: 1) the Ba’ath Party had been brought to power by a coup; and 2) the radical economic and social programme approved by the first national conference (in 1963) could result in the abolition of the Islamic education module, endowments and the Law of Personal Status (Hawa, 2007, pp. 68-71; Conduit, 2019, p. 96; al-Bayanouni, 2021). The rebellion also revealed a rift between the Hama and Damascus wings. The leaders claimed it was authorised, but this was denied by the leadership in Damascus, including Sheikh Issam al-Attar, who said: ‘The group's leadership does not believe in reaching power except by peaceful means even if it cost them five hundred years of waiting and one of the group's intellectuals is more important than a battalion of tanks.' (Barout, 2000, p. 269, Ramírez Díaz, 2017).

Hadid, in contrast, was convinced that violent *jihad* was the only way to eliminate a ‘scourge’ like the Ba’ath Party. Hadid was heavily influenced by the ideas of Sayyid Qutb while studying in Egypt, and even tried to transfer copies of *Ma´alem fi al-Tariq* back to Syria (Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 281). Hadid tried to persuade the leadership to prepare for a confrontation with the regime, and to form a military arm for this purpose, but they refused and rejected his argument (Batatu, 1999, pp. 261-62, Saad al-Dein, 2006, pp. 370-86).

Civil disobedience in Hama produced a 'sit-in' in *al-Sultan* Mosque that was only brought to an end when the Syrian army and police bombarded the mosque and stormed it. Several protesters were killed and others, including Marwan Hadid, were arrested and sentenced to death. However, pressure from scholars and clerics (led by Sheikh Muhammad al-Hamid) on Amin al-Hafiz, the then president, resulted in Hadid and his fellow prisoners being released (Ramírez Díaz, 2017; Almawla, 2017, p. 578).

After his release, Hadid decided to independently establish an armed group. He and his supporters left Syria in the period 1968–1970 and began military training in Qawaid al-Shuyukh (The Shaykhs’ Bases), which is in the Jordan Valley. The camp was operated by the Jordanian MB and trained Islamist Palestinian fighters to fight against Israel. Hadid used this training and the Jordanian MB networks to establish the first elite Jihadist group (ibid., p. 579). Conduit (2019, p.98) observes that ‘[a]t least 30 of Hadid’s supporters undertook military training at the camp, including Abd al-Sattar al-Zaim, who later became the leader of the ‘FV’ (*at-Tali’a al-Muqatila*).

When Hadid returned to Syria in 1970, the SMB had split into two wings: the first (Damascus) wing was led by Sheikh Issam al-Attar, the second supreme guide; and the

second (Aleppo) wing was led by his successor Sheikh Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda and his deputy, Adnan Saad al-Din (ibid.). The internal rift arose from various factors, including decision-making authority and strategic readjustment to the new Marxist trends within the military committee that Salah Jadid had brought to power in the second Ba'athist coup in 1966, also known as the '23 February movement'.

Hadid tried to persuade the conflicting wings to put aside their differences and prepare to confront the Ba'athist regime. However, after they rejected Hadid's proposal, he established the Fighting Vanguard Party of Allah/Hezbollah (henceforth FV) (Saad al-Dein, 2006, p. 385; Shorbaji, 2007, pp. 25-30). The SMB then dismissed Hadid and his supporters; but many younger members followed him, having been attracted by the prospect of armed conflict (Almawla, 2017, pp. 578-79, al-Bayanouni, 2021).

The three cells that operated in Hama, Damascus and Aleppo targeted the Syrian army and security forces; in some supportive areas, they wandered the streets, openly threatening to 'shed the blood' of Ba'ath Party members (Seale, 1989; Shamiya, 2011, p. 208). Hadid was arrested in late 1970 in Damascus after an armed clash with the Syrian intelligence forces, and remained in prison until 1975, when he was executed. Abd al-Sattar al-Zaeem, a dentist born in Hama, was then appointed as the new FV leader and remained in his position as leader until intelligence forces in Damascus assassinated him in mid-1979. Adnan Uqla replaced him. (Alhamadi, 2014, pp. 142-143; al-Bayanouni, 2021).

The FV also assassinated government officials in the period 1975–1979. In 1979, it changed its name to 'Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood', with the aim of attracting more youth from the SMB. It declared Jihad against the Syrian regime, and its

guerrilla operations within cities targeted army and intelligence officials (Seale, 1988, pp. 317-21; Shorbaji, 2007, pp. 48-50). One of the most significant operations was the Aleppo artillery school massacre of 16 June 1979, which marked the beginning of an unfinished conflict between the Syrian regime and political Islam. The FV claimed that it was only Alawites who were targeted, but Ahmad Iskandar, the then minister of information, rejected this claim announcing that the victims included Christians and Sunnis (Almawla, 2017).

Even after the FV confirmed its members were part of the cell responsible, the Syrian regime persisted with its accusations against the SMB and Adnan Saad al-Din, its General Observer. On June 22, 1979, Adnan al-Dabbagh, the Minister of the Interior, declared that the SMB would be held responsible for all future attacks. The Syrian People's Assembly then passed Law 49, which made all SMB members subject to the death penalty (Barout, 2000, p.290-91).

In late 1979, Amin Yakan, one of the SMB's leaders, recognised the escalating situation and tried to negotiate a truce with the government. The resulting agreement was short-lived, and ended abruptly when an assassination attempt against Hafez al-Assad (on 26 June 1980) failed (ibid.). At the Ba'ath Party's thirteenth national conference, which was held in Damascus in July 1980, Hafez al-Assad said: 'The political plan with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood and their likes cannot be anything but eradication i.e., a plan that does not content itself with exposing them and fighting them politically as this type of war does not affect much on their effectiveness ... we must apply an offensive plan against them.' (Shamiya, 2011, p. 249).

On 9 November 1980, Adnan Saad al-Din, Saeed Hawa and Ali al-Bayanouni, three SMB leaders, responded by signing the ‘Declaration of the Program of the Islamic Revolution in Syria’ (Abu Rumman, 2013, p. 18; Conduit, 2019, p. 116). It held the regime responsible for ‘pushing the tragedy towards its end’ and clearly established it would not consider a 'truce or [...] laying down of arms until the regime is toppled once and for all'. The declaration also said: ‘We strongly believe that it is not absolutely necessary for problems to be resolved by violence. On the contrary, the natural thing is for such problems to be solved through constructive dialogue and mutual confidence. However, nothing could be done if one side insists on ignoring the other and refusing to deal with it except by force. Due to this, and because of our belief that the present regime has reached the point of no return, and that it is now impossible for it to undergo a radical revision, we declare that there will be no truce, no laying down of arms and no negotiation’ (Conduit, 2019, p. 116). This enabled the SMB to seize the leadership of the Jihadist movement, and many Sufis and the Salafis joined their ‘Islamic Revolution’. (Saad al-Din, 2010, pp. 370-72).

After the 1982 Hama massacre, the FV began to collapse, in large part due to the ability of the Syrian intelligence services to successfully infiltrate it. In 1984 its leader, Adnan Uqla, was arrested by the Syrian secret service. His successor, Hashem Shaban, entered into negotiations with the regime with the aim of arranging a prisoner release and a comprehensive amnesty, and managed to successfully realise this by the end of 1984 (Alhamadi, 2014, p.145). The FV then issued a statement announcing the cessation of armed operations against the regime, although a number of members rejected this as a ‘betrayal’, and declared they would continue to wage *jihad*. They appointed Abd al-Sattar

Abboud as their leader, and carried out many assassinations and bombings in 1986–1990. But the FV's affiliates were dispersed, scattered and easily penetrated, and their members were either detained or forced to flee abroad. These developments strongly impacted on the FV, and it ultimately vanished from the country's political landscape (ibid.).

However, the FV's legacy was considerably longer-lasting. Contemporary Jihadist Salafists in Syria revere Sheikh Marwan Hadid, and claim he is second only to Sayyid Qutb. Syrian Jihadists 'exported' to other countries were also products of the FV. Perhaps the best example is Abu Musab al-Suri, who became an ideologue of Jihadist movements in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Syria. In retrospect, it is clear that, in the 70s and 80s, the FV planted the seeds that later flowered into the country's contemporary Jihadist movement.

3.3 The Deadlock of 'Exclusion': The Salafism of 'Nonviolence' vs Jihadist Salafism

The armed confrontation of the 1970s and 80s created confusion in the country's Islamic movement. Although the FV and the SMB were at the forefront of the armed confrontation against the Syrian regime, the use of violence was not exclusive to them as Sufi members (the Zayd Group) and scholarly Salafists (al-Albani's followers and Arnaout's students) joined the rebellion. Thus, they were also subject to repressive measures such as prison and exile. For example, Sheikh Osama al-Rifai, the son of Sheikh Abdul Karim al-Rifai (the founder of the Zayd Group) was forced into exile in the 1980s but was allowed to return to Syria in the late 1990s (Rifai, 2020, pp. 4-5).

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, advocates of the 'moderation through exclusion' theory claim that ideological or comprehensive moderation, as opposed to behavioural and tactical moderation, cannot be brought about through inclusion. Indeed, they argue that inclusion may afford Islamist movements an opportunity to spread their 'destructive' ideas and promote their interests in society. Exclusion, on the other hand, may convince both leaders and members that their radical ideology has failed to achieve any concrete results, and that survival in such an exploitive environment requires not only behavioural compromise, but also substantive ideological alterations (Arslan, 2018, pp. 898-989; Tepe, 2019). Cavatorta and Merone attribute the success of Tunisia's Ennahda party during the post-2011 transition process to longstanding state repression and popular antipathy from large sections of society, especially from the socialist and secularist opposition (2013, pp. 859-61). As a result, Ennahda was willing to join opposition alliances and become an integral part of peaceful activism against former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which forced its leader to adopt the term 'civil state' as an alternative to 'Islamic state'. Moreover, unlike the MB in Egypt, Ennahda preferred to be part of a power-sharing government than to rule alone (ibid.). Hamid likewise argues that the setbacks and defeats suffered by Islamist movements in the 1990s compelled their leaders to pragmatically take steps towards behavioural moderation. Conversely, political liberalisation following the 'Arab Spring' has shown that exclusion policies produced better results than the subsequent era of inclusion (2014, pp. 40-46).

With regards to Syria, Hanlie Booysen's work *Explaining the moderate platform of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: Against the inclusion-moderation hypothesis* (2018) is one of the rare academic monographs that advocates the 'moderation through inclusion'

thesis. She contends that 'the SMB's ultimate exclusion from the Syrian political arena was an important driver of its moderate policy, as reflected in its 2001 and 2004 policy documents' (2018, pp. 137-140). This does not include the SMB, but the exclusion, particularly after the 1982 Hama massacre (she named it 'carnage') contributed to the appearance of a new 'moderate' school of thought and theologians (ibid.).

Jawdat Sa'id (1931–2022), a noted Islamic scholar, is considered as one who peacefully reflected on the Islamic rebellions of the 1960s and 1980s (al-Haj, 2010, pp. 20-21). He contended that recourse to any type of violence is an illegitimate act, even if in self-defence. In both Islamic jurisprudence and independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), he may have been the only Syrian scholar vocal in banning and prohibiting the use of violence, irrespective of justification. He combined rationalist and historical approaches to develop and promote his reformist perspectives, claiming the Qur'an was not the only source of knowledge, on the grounds it could also be obtained from human nature and history (Lohlker, 2022, pp. 2-3). He also criticised the basis on which Muslims read and understand the Qur'an, as Belhaj clarifies when he observes that '[Sa'id] believes that the effective reading of the Qur'an should be a contemporary Qur'anic understanding, *fahm qurʾani muʿasir*, a posture rather than a method, whereby the reader thinks about the Qur'an in terms of human knowledge today' (2017, p. 234).

Sa'id's work, which was influenced by the Pakistani thinker Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), established him as the most prominent Syrian cleric to challenge Sayyid Qutb, and in particular his views on the permissibility of using violence to achieve political and social change (Menghini, 2019, pp. 51-52). In his book, entitled *Doctrine of the Son of Adam, the First Problem of Violence in the Islamic Work*, Sa'id rejected any claimed

Islamic justification for murder, assassination or enforcing an opinion on another, and observed that the prophet attained power through peaceful and persuasive means, and only used *jihad* to combat those who mislead about religion and/or forced others to follow their religion (2008, pp. 41-42). He accordingly drew a clear distinction between Jihad and *Khuruj*, observing that whereas the former refers to the use of force after assuming power based on the principle that 'there is no compulsion in religion', the latter relates to the use of violence to gain power and fight disbelief. (ibid., p. 43; Belhaj, 2017, pp. 235-36).

Sa'id's teachings and positionality were welcomed by Hafez al-Assad, who recognised that potentially sectarianism could flare after the 1982 Hama massacre, and pitted the 'Alawite' regime against a 'Sunni' opposition. He therefore sought an Islamic 'nonviolence' approach to matters of *dawah*, religious education and social work, that would fill the gap left by the many traditional leaders and movements who had left Syria. It would need to prohibit opposition or confrontation, even in the event of regime provocations extending to the whole of society. This was the essence of his proposition.

The Syrian regime was well pleased with Sa'id's *dawah* activities, and accordingly permitted him to operate in wider society without any obstacles. He relatively criticised the ruling regime and was also allowed to openly discuss internal and external political issues. Being without personal political ambition, he committed himself to spreading his views. In the 1980s, he established a 'group' that was more like a cultural assembly. It had no organisational structure and its 'members', who were more like friends, were linked directly to Sa'id. The only hierarchy was among the female members, limited to Hanan al-Lahham, a preacher and Sa'id's student, who was privileged above the others (al-Ha,j

2010, pp. 21-22). In a practical application of his theory of ‘nonviolent Islam’, Sa'id and his students joined the 2011 peaceful uprising and delivered speeches on the importance of peace and democracy in several areas including Daraa, Damascus, and its countryside[31]. Among his students, Yahya al-Sharbaji and Ghaith Matar (known for distributing water and flowers to soldiers during peaceful demonstrations in 2011) were murdered under torture after being arrested by the security forces, becoming one of the most prominent icons of the ‘Syrian uprising’. As an incidence of the failure of the ‘exclusion’ explanation, the intensive repression applied by the Syrian regime against the ‘non-violent’ activists forced Sa’id to leave Syria to his last exile in Istanbul where he died in 2022 (the Syrian Observer, 2022). In other works, relying on repression as the only tool to deal with all types of Islamists, including non-violent activists, created a vacuum for the more ‘radical’ currents to fill.

Sheikh Muhammad Saeed Ramadan al-Bouti[32] also emerged as a key figure in the 'Islamism of Nonviolence’ and was not obstructed when he travelled to deliver his religious lessons in mosques across Syria, quickly gaining supporters and followers as a result. In advocating conservative Sunni Islam, he strongly stressed the relevance of traditional doctrinal Islamic jurisprudence to Salafism and Jihadist Salafism (Ziadeh, 2011, p. 382; Pierret, 2020). His writings, and particularly *Jihad in Islam: How to Understand It and How to Practice It* (1993) were controversial, especially among

[31] In a press interview in 2011 Sa’id said: ‘It is young people who have demanded democracy, freedom, and non-coercion in religion, not their teachers. The Arab world does not have secular-religious scholars’, adding that the university professor and imam of the mosque do not play the role required of them’ (the Syrian Observer, 2022).
[32] Of Kurdish origin, born in 1929 in the village of Jilka, belonging to the island of Botan located in Turkey near the Iraqi border, he immigrated with his father to Damascus when he was four years old. His father was Mullah Ramadan Al-Bouti, the Sheikh of Sufis. He received religious and formal education in Damascus schools, then moved to Egypt to study at Al-Azhar, and obtained a doctorate from the Faculty of Sharia. He authored more than forty books dealing with various Islamic issues.

Jihadists. Salafists and Jihadi Salafists published a large corpus of material that accused him of being ‘misguided’ and even ‘ignorant’.

His writings and his outspoken criticism of the SMB for its actions during the 1980s did, however, establish the basis for a rapprochement with Hafez al-Assad, and his subsequent emergence as the most important religious figure in the country. In the early 1990s, he also delivered juristic, religious and even political commentary on official Syrian media outlets. al-Bouti also sought to bridge the gap between the regime and the Islamist opposition, and mediate on behalf of detainees and exiles, including senior members of the SMB and leaders of the Zayd Group (Alkhatib, 2012; Pierret, 2013, pp. 76-82; Rifai, 2020, pp.3-4).

al-Bouti fell out of favour after 2000 as Bashar al-Assad wanted to open a new chapter in the relations between the religious and conservative communities in Syria. In doing so, al-Bouti’s rivals at the Zayd Group, whose exiled leaders had been allowed to return to Syria in the 1990s, were chosen to be allies of the new president. Despite slight differences, he continued supporting the regime and justifying all methods taken to suppress the uprising until his assassination in 2013 in the bombing of the Al-Iman Mosque in Damascus (Rifai, 2020, pp. 4-5).

In short, the Syrian regime's intentions and ultimate aim were quite clear: it sought to promote a ‘spiritual’ Islam with the intention of offsetting the danger of ‘sedition’ returning the country to the ‘calamity’ it suffered in the 1980s. Accordingly, it committed itself to promoting Sufism, public morals and charities. These measures, in combination with repressive and coercive security force actions, greatly reduced the influence of political Islam and Jihadist sentiment within Syrian society.

This began to change in the 1990s as important events contributed to the revival of Jihadism in Syria including: 1) The experience of Arab Jihadis in Afghanistan. The 'Arab Afghans' viewed this as a hugely significant event. It influenced Arab youth and Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, who was assassinated in Pakistan in 1993 and later became a symbol of the 'Salafi Awakening'. 2) the Islamic resistance movements in Palestine. Hamas and Islamic Jihad were widely admired for their activism after the First Intifada (1987–93), and Syrians even debated if their activities could be adapted and applied in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. If achieved, this would decisively break with the 'calm fronts' policy in place since the disengagement agreement of 1974. 3) Hezbollah's activities in Lebanon were similarly widely admired in the country. 4) Russia's military intervention in Chechnya or 'The First Chechen War' (1994-1995). The government was pro-Russian but public and religious opinion supported Chechnya (al-Mustapha, 2013, p. 3).

Consequently, small Salafi Jihadist groups formed in Syria in response to these events, although they did not have any organisational structure. They took inspiration from the Jihadist experience in each of these foreign countries. For some youth, the Jihadi Salafist ideology has become the only ideological alternative to Sufism because it effectively functions to justify both social and religious repression.

However, despite that Syria did not experience significant Jihadi activity during the 1990s as the small Jihadi groups that were influenced by global jihadist ideology migrated outside to engage in *jihad* in various parts of the world, the presence of the Syrian Jihadists in many countries including Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chechnya, before moving to other trouble spots after the establishment of al-Qaeda in February 1998, offered them

knowledge and training to relocate in Syria after 2011 (al-Haj, 2010, p. 45; Abu Hanieh and Abu-Rumman, 2015, pp. 96-97).

3.4. The Attraction of al-Qaeda's Jihadists: Syria's Role in Iraq

After Bashar al-Assad became the country's president, Jihadist Salafism and al-Qaeda gained a new foothold in the country. Although precise clarity is lacking, closer inspection suggests the country became an essential base for jihadists in the region during this period. It can be argued that the attacks of 11 September 2001 gave great momentum to Jihadist ideology and its various organisations, foremost of which was al-Qaeda. Technological developments were key in this regard, as Jihadist forums on the Internet made it possible for Jihadists to share information and spread their ideology more quickly. In this 'virtual space', it was also harder for authoritarian regimes to hinder the transfer of information and obstruct communication (Awan, 2007, pp. 393-95; Abu Hanieh and Abu-Rumman 2015, pp. 234-35). The Syrian regime then stepped up its arrest of 'hard-line' Islamists in 2000–2002, including Shaker al-Abssi, who subsequently became the leader of the Conquest of Islam *Fatah al-Islam* group (Imad, 2011, p.1491).

By cracking down, Bashar al-Assad also wanted to show his support for the so-called 'War on Terror' that the then US President George W. Bush announced after the attacks on 11 September 2001. Intelligence cooperation between the United States (US) and Syria had facilitated the arrest of many Jihadists wanted by the US. However, the Syrian regime abruptly reversed its position in the run-up to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq by allowing Jihadists from across the world to infiltrate its border with Iraq (Lister,

2015, pp. 48-50). In a curious development, one of the most staunchly secular regimes in the region justified this by citing the need to fight ‘infidels.

On 26 March 2003, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, the country's late Grand Mufti, called on Muslims from across the world to engage in Jihad. He said: ‘[R]esisting the invaders is an obligation imposed on all Muslim men and women, falling on the people of Iraq first and then the closest according to need’. He then endorsed the ‘use of all possible means to defeat aggression, including martyrdom operations against the Zionist warring American and British invaders' (Zaitouneh, 2011, p. 340). Sheikh Muhammad Saeed Ramadan al-Bouti, who is classified as a ‘non-violent’ scholar, as outlined earlier, echoed this in his Friday sermon of 13 June 2003, and called on young Muslims to ‘go after the great reward that Allah, the Almighty, has provided for the fighters’. And he strongly avowed that the duty of following this ‘obligatory jihad’ had 'never ever been so clear as it is during this era' (ibid).

In the aftermath of the US-led invasion, Syria provided safe passage to Jihadists seeking to cross to Iraq. The Syrian regime had a clear incentive to do this because it would decrease the likelihood of a US-led invasion of Syria which Colin Powell, the then US Secretary of State, had explicitly raised as a possibility on 3 May 2003 (Bishara, 2013). The Syrian regime genuinely feared that the US would seek a 'regime change' in Syria, and so it sought to 'tie down' US forces in Iraq by giving Jihadists free passage. It correctly calculated that the US would have to seek its assistance in order to stabilise the country. Another main incentive was to get rid of local Salafists, thrusting them into the longstanding conflict from which the majority would never return to Syria (Abu Hanieh and Abu-Rumman, 2015, p.100)

The story of Muhammad Gul Aghassi (Abu al-Qaqa), a preacher from Aleppo, is particularly insightful. He rose to prominence after the 2003 invasion by delivering vociferous sermons in the Alaa Bin al-Hadhrami and al-Iman mosques in Aleppo. His Salafi Jihadist narrative closely resembled al-Qaeda's, and he also had established links with Salafi Sheikhs in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Countries). He openly encouraged the youth to fight a holy war against the 'crusader infidel' Western invasion, trained groups of his followers (with the full knowledge of the Syrian regime) and personally facilitated the crossing of hundreds of Arab volunteers to Iraq. Many young Syrian Jihadis cited him as an influence and recordings of his sermons began to spread in Syria and neighbouring countries (Imad, 2011, p. 1492; Aljazeera Media Network, 2015b).

There are strong grounds for suspecting that he was effectively fashioned by the Syrian intelligence services. The strongest piece of evidence is that he was allowed to freely conduct religious activities with strong political overtones in a country that does not permit Islamic political activity, even by regime-endorsed religious institutions. Furthermore, his sermonising was abruptly curtailed at the end of 2006, when US-Syrian intelligence cooperation in Iraq was beginning. And it is by no means coincidental that many young Jihadis reached this conclusion and accused him of being an agent of the Syrian security services as a special documentary on Aljazeera (2015) has shown. Aghassi was assassinated on 28 September 2007 as he left the mosque after participating in Friday prayers in the city of Aleppo.

In the period 2003–2005, small Jihadi groups were able to establish support and supply bases in several Syrian areas that became incubators of Jihadist thought. These included al-Bukamal and al-Mayadeen in Deir ez zor and the Idlib countryside; and

villages in the Adra, Khan Al-Sheih and Qatana areas of the Damascus countryside. Many Syrian Jihadis later emerged from these areas. These bases, which initially operated with partial official endorsement as Iraq Support Committees, were responsible for recruiting Syrian fighters and facilitating the passage of ‘combat groups’ from outside Syria, who were predominantly from the western Arab Maghreb and GCC regions. Their committees also collected donations through charities and rural mosques (Barout, 2012, pp. 202-203; Abu Hanieh and Abu-Rumman, 2015, pp. 234-35).

The Syria regime had been diplomatically isolated since being accused of involvement in the 2005 assassination of Rafik al-Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon. The US needed to stabilise the country after the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections, and this was the main reason for the change in its attitude towards Syria, including the gradual retrenchment of a threatened regime change. Significantly, US officials began to speak of encouraging Syria to change its behaviour, disengage from Iran and withdraw its support for 'terrorist' organisations. Cooperation between American and Syrian intelligence services was intended to control the 'long borders' with Iraq and prevent Jihadis from crossing into Iraq. This developed in the period after 2005, when the Syrian regime gradually began to impose restrictions on the movement of Jihadis. The Syrian security services then began to arrest the Jihadis, and returnees from Iraq were summoned, interrogated and imprisoned (Lesch, 2013, pp.18-23).

At the end of 2006, the Syrian regime agreed to a US request to deploy 7000 additional soldiers on its borders with Iraq. It also formally recognised the Iraqi government and restored diplomatic relations that had been severed since the 1990s. US-Syrian cooperation enabled the US to conduct an airdrop ‘commando’ operation in

2008 in the border region of al-Bukamal, which targeted al-Qaeda leaders who were overseeing the supply and facilitation of Jihadists. This led to a change in al-Qaeda's position, and it now committed to confronting the Syrian regime. After 2008, Syrian Jihadi cells affiliated to al-Qaeda carried out suicide bomb and armed attacks in Damascus (the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2012).

It is therefore clear that the activity of Jihadi groups in the country predated the start of the uprising by several decades. However, the influence of Syrian Jihadi Salafism was, in the last decade, largely limited to isolated and small local groups in poor and marginalised regions of the country. The international Jihadi exploits of organisations such as al-Qaeda had a local resonance, but there was no real organisational link in place. The most prominent groups were Jund al-Sham for the Call to Jihad, Fatah al-Islam, Takfir and Hijra. The limited influence of Jihadism was due to several factors. Firstly, the popular influence of Sufism. Salafism and Jihadism also diverged in the country. Secondly, Jihadists in Iraq frequently targeted civilians, and this alienated public opinion in Syria. Thirdly, the regime successfully eliminated most Jihadi groups in Syria and arrested many of their members and supporters. (al-Haj, 2013; Abu Hanieh and Abu-Rumman, 2015, p. 97).

3.5 Jihadist Revivalism: The Predicament of the Arab Revolutions

It initially appeared that the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen had been successful, and this created clear problems for Jihadi and Salafi organisations, and al-Qaeda in particular. Reformist Islamist parties developed within the contemporary nation states and this clearly contrasted with the ‘global’ orientation of the Jihadists. Jihadists, for example,

invoked the principle of '*Hakimiyyah* /governance' to claim that the regimes and contemporary Islamic states were created after the decline of the colonial period. Any radical revolutionary ideology that wanted to overthrow the 'Jahiliya/pre-Islam' authoritarian regimes in the Arab and Islamic world would clearly be disadvantaged if a 'peaceful' popular movement achieved its desired aim. On precisely this basis and inspired by 'moderation through inclusion' , many researchers such as Manuel Almeida and Fawaz Gerges, voiced their expectation that the Arab revolutions would weaken al-Qaeda and Jihadism more generally, and confidently predicted that bin Laden's death would expedite this outcome (Almeida, 2012, 22-23; Gerges, 2012, pp. 222-25).

Against the socio-political structure of the 'moderation through exclusion' thesis, the revolutions produced heated debates within Jihadist Salafi movements, including al-Qaeda, about the respective benefits of a 'popular' or 'elite' focus. The popular revolutions were significant in this regard because they suggested that peaceful demonstrations could produce meaningful political change. al-Qaeda, as result, changed its strategy to absorb more local support, and worked to achieve its aims throughout local Ansar (Supporters) proxy groups. This phenomenon was first witnessed in Yemen, and later duplicated in a number of Arab countries, including Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and in Egypt (Abu Hanieh and Abu-Rumman, 2015, pp. 113-14; Volpi, 2020). al-Qaeda's debates about the respective benefits of centralisation and decentralisation that had been discussed by Abu Musab al-Suri were also largely a response to these wider political developments. Al-Suri, in this regard, is considered one of the most prominent advocates of the decentralisation of al-Qaeda. (2004, pp. 890-896.).

Here reference is made to the ‘Bin Laden Documents’, also known as the ‘Abbottabad Documents’, and in particular Document No. 10, which was written on 10 April 2011. It proposed various strategies to ‘incite the people who did not revolt, encourage them to oppose the rules and then rebel against them’ (Hamada, 2014, p. 24). This sentiment was echoed by the rulings (*fatwas*) issued by the Platform for Tawhid and Jihad in 2011. In addition to dedicating a specific section to this question, it also published a letter issued by the Sharia Committee of al-Qaeda entitled ‘Questions about participation in peaceful demonstrations’ in Syria. In doing so, it provided a number of significant clarifications.

The Committee authorised participation in demonstrations even if slogans of democracy and national unity were chanted. While it regarded outbursts of this kind as illegitimate, it contended they were not ‘apostasy’ and should be tolerated because they are spontaneous slogans shouted by uncontrolled masses. It also clarified that self-defence was permissible if the regime’s violence and arbitrary detention continued. The Committee clearly distinguished calls for the regime’s removal (a ‘legitimate matter’) from the more general (and ‘forbidden’) demand for democracy and made it clear that the revolution had come as a shock to the Jihadist movements and had caused them to adopt a more pragmatic position. Although it continued to prohibit democracy, it was willing to countenance it on instrumental grounds—namely that it could potentially open the way for *dawah* and the application of God's law [Sharia law] (ibid.).

The implications of this 'popular' shift extend to Jihadist Salafi movements more generally. At the beginning of the 'Arab Spring', al-Qaeda and other groups found themselves outside ‘the calculations of the peoples’. But the subsequent militarisation of

these revolutions brought al-Qaeda and other Jihadi groups back to the forefront of the struggle. As a result, 'violent jihad' and 'internationalism' were again foregrounded in the struggle against the 'near' enemy working for a 'distant' one (Gerges, 2012, pp. 223).

In Libya, the jihadist Salafist groups were present in the revolution from an early stage, but their influence remained limited for several reasons. First, the Libyan opposition quickly established the Libyan National Council (LNC), which became the legitimate political and military front for the revolution and an effective proto-state. This prevented Jihadists from infiltrating the revolutionary battalions. Second, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s intervention forced them to seek a degree of accommodation with actors it considered to be infidels and was committed to fight against. Libya was not therefore attractive to global Jihadi groups (al-Mustapha, 2013, pp. 5-6).

Incidentally, the Jihadist movements were not initially interested in participating in the Syrian revolution, when it appeared to be a struggle for democracy. But this changed when the struggle became militarised, and the absence of external military intervention provided an added incentive for Jihadists to move into the country (Hinnebusch, 2019, pp. 54-55). Despite this, large-scale demonstrations that were held in city squares every Friday continued to call for international military intervention. On 9 September 2011, demonstrators called for international protection; on 28 October 2011, they demanded the establishment of a no-fly zone; on 25 November, they celebrated the role of the FSA in protecting them; and on 2 December, they called for a buffer zone that would provide shelter (al-Mustafa, 2012).

The regime's violence and criminality prevented Syria from following the examples of Tunisia and Egypt and overthrowing the regime through peaceful means. Young people

in some cities and rural areas took up arms, and fought alongside defectors from the Syrian army. The first armed attack occurred on 6 June 2011 in Jisr al-Shughur when armed fighters responded to the massacre of 38 inhabitants. Regime sources claimed they attacked the city's security headquarters and killed 120. Armed resistance could only be sustained by an organisational structure, and Lieutenant-Colonel Hussein Harmoush responded to the events in Jisr al-Shughur by establishing a Free Officers Brigade (FOB) from army defectors. On 29 July 2011, Riad al-Asaad, a defected colonel, established the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and announced it would henceforth protect peaceful demonstrations (Bishara 2013, p. 194-195).

The militarisation of the revolution was an important turning point for the Jihadist movements that enabled them to penetrate the wider popular struggle. By as early as July 2011, Jihadist groups had begun to activate ‘sleeper’ cells in the wider movement. The regime recognised the threat of a broad-based popular uprising, and released many prisoners, including those detained in the notorious Saydnaya prison. They later included leaders of the largest Salafist brigades, such as Hassan Abboud (ASH), Ahmed al-Sheikh (Suoqur al-Sham) and Zahran Alloush (AoI), who were all released under an amnesty decree issued in June 2013.

It was however inaccurate to claim, as the Syrian secular opposition frequently did, that these groups were created by the Syrian regime. Instead, the latter contributed to their establishment with the clear intention of undermining the non-sectarian character of the popular uprising. Although the released Jihadists found ample opportunity to pursue their interests, both armed local community groups and the FSA consciously tried to keep a degree of distance from them. As in Libya, several attempts were made to create military

formations led by defected army officers. The Opposition increasingly came to view this as the only way of removing the regime after the Syrian army expanded its military operations in Deir ez Zor, Hama and Homs in early August 2011 (Bishara, pp. 253. 256).

At the beginning of 2012, the Syrian uprising became increasingly militarised, and groups such as al-Nusra Front (NF) assumed a more prominent role in the resistance. This was due to a number of factors. First, large numbers of protesters believed peaceful demonstrations would not topple the regime. Its brutality and the tightening of its power in Aleppo and Damascus further reinforced this impression. The subsequent predominance of armed resistance strengthened the Salafist and Jihadist claim that peaceful struggle was futile in the face of the regime's brutality (ICG, 2012, pp. 12-13). Second, many battalions of the Syrian resistance wanted to imitate the Libyan example. But the Jihadist 'turn' was to a large extent a response to the high civilian death toll and the international community's failure to intervene (ibid). Third, several sectarian massacres by the security forces and allied militias provoked rising sectarianism.

Therefore, various calls for Jihad were issued on pro-Revolution Facebook pages and Saudi religious channels (Wissal and Safa in particular). Sheikh Adnan al-Arror' call for a 'Pre-Jihad Friday' was also enthusiastically received on the Revolution's social media page, although civilian activists and intellectuals rejected his proposal. Demonstrations in Homs, Idlib and the Damascus countryside did, however, later adopt the slogan (Al-Mustafa, 2012, pp. 95-96). In such context, many armed Islamist groups have formally announced their declaration, as it will be further discussed in the next chapter with the case of ASH.

Chapter 4:

Ahrar al-Sham: From Salafi-Jihadi brigades to Reformist Political Movement

Since its founding in 2011, the north Syria-based Ahrar al-Sham Movement (ASH) was known for its tight organisation, while distancing itself from being branded a Salafi formation despite the fact that Salafi thought was the driving intellectual force for the entire ASH leadership.

ASH transformed itself from a structure of 'brigades' to a 'movement' gaining domestic, regional, and international significance. However, it rapidly declined after the assassination of its leader Hassan Abboud (Abu Abdallah al-Hamwi). For ASH, this was the beginning of the end, as it was struggling to address rapid military and political changes. ASH, ultimately, lost its territories and sphere of control. The movement saw many defections at core level, thereby losing its identity and political and military potency in northern Syria.

Still, the ASH movement was a unique experiment, being the first attempt to establish an armed and national Salafi Jihadi movement, as opposed to the global groups of Jihadi Salafism and the SMB. To that end, the movement went through many ideological, behavioural, and structural transformations that need to be closely examined, despite the widespread fragmentation and stagnation that plagued ASH ten years into the Syrian uprising.

This chapter will study ASH over three phases. Similar to the other case studies, three mechanisms will be adopted: external environment, resource mobilisation, and ideological framing.

4.1 The Evolutionary phase: From Uneven Structures to a Discernible Movement

To fully understand ASH, it is essential to provide context by shedding light on some critical historical junctures between the turn of the millennium and the beginning of the Syrian uprising. It will then be possible to tackle the first phase that extends from ASH's formation in November 2011 to the formation of the Islamic Front (IF) in response to the rise of the Islamic State (IS). More particularly, the focus will be on the intellectual seeds of ASH and how it was able to establish its network of relationships and resources that were subsequently employed to fund the movement and shape its core leadership.

4.1.1 The 'Revolution' Opportunity and Structural Threats

PPA emphasises the importance of the 'opportunity/threat' mechanism in triggering collective action and mass mobilisation. In particular, the availability/unavailability of political opportunities and threats regulates the ways and means of the movement's response as well as the repertoires of action and collective claim-making (Bosi, et al., 2019, p. 135). In the meantime, mobilising armed collective activity is a risky matter as it might threaten the organisation itself and the community that it operates within (ibid.). Accordingly, tracing the path of the establishment of ASH as a 'state-focused' Salafi Jihadi organisation, and changes in the external political environment before and after the 2011 uprising, illustrates how the movement collectively rose up in response to both the 'opportunities' and 'threats' it faced.

A. Foundation: Exclusive Combat Brigades

Salafism saw a further resurgence, at a regional level, with the 2003 Iraqi War, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 3. A large number of ASH leaders, including its first leader Hassan Abboud as well as Shura Council members, took part in the Iraqi War, whether directly in combat or indirectly by providing logistic support from Syria. Many of those were arrested on charges of being involved in the Iraqi War and reunited in Saydnaya Prison according to Mohammad Nuer, known as Abu Abdalrahman al-Hamwi[33].

Saydnaya Prison is perceived as Syria's most notorious jail and a 'place where the Syrian state quietly slaughters its own people' as described by Amnesty International (2017). Considering its reputation and despite that the experiences of prison might be initially considered a 'threat', it did, however, offer a structured 'opportunity' to ASH leaders, particularly after the 2008 rebellion that broke out in the solitary wing. The Syrian regime lost control of the prison between 5 July 2008 and 27 January 2009. This incident was notable for highlighting the differences between the various factions of the Syrian Islamist current vis-à-vis their behaviour and politics. According to Hasan Sofan[34], the rebellion was a crucial moment for all prisoners. It was, in a way, an experiment that tested the practical means of each group (2021).

Accordingly, many of those who would later become leaders of ASH left Saydnaya fully convinced that al-Qaeda should not gain a foothold in Syria, believing it to be a fruitless ideology in both an intellectual and a practical sense (al-Hamwi, 2021). The reason behind that was the rejection by al-Qaeda prisoners of the negotiation with the

[33] Interview with Abu Abdalrahman al-Hamwi the former member of ASH Shura Council, 17/7/2021.
[34] Interview with Hasan Sofan, a prominent Jihadist figure before and throughout the Syrian uprising and one of the current top leaders of ASH, 15/7/2021.

Syrian regime that had been suggested by two prominent current leaders of ASH to reach a peaceful settlement: the riot ended with brute force[35] (Sofan, 2021).

Drawing on this experience and by applying the 'political learning' mechanism, it can be explained why many ASH leaders, upon their release from the prison following the 2011 presidential pardon, were eager to distinguish themselves from global Jihadist Salafism and its experiences such as al-Qaeda in order to better seize the opportunity provided by the Syrian uprising. At the same time, the newly released prisoners also decided to isolate themselves from the demonstrations for objective and subjective reasons: they did not want to draw attention to potential threats, particularly the terrorist charges levelled against them, according to Abd Al Rahman al-Hamwi and Abu Haydra Raqqa[36], who were imprisoned in Saydnaya (2021).

SMTs agree that collective action and armed mobilisation do not start in a vacuum. In Jerome Drevon's words, 'Armed groups might believe in a set of violent ideas, but the timing and modalities of their embrace of armed violence are contingent on their environments' (2019, p. 4). In an oppressive environment such as in the Syrian context, and as PPA suggests, an armed Islamist group during it foundation tends to build an exclusive organisation with a small number of loyalists and a high level of strict ideology.

[35] The rebellion started as a peaceful protest in the form of knocking on doors and demanding improved living conditions for prisoners in the solitary wing. Nonetheless, it turned into a violent struggle and was ended by brute force. Over 1,110 Syrian regime personnel were captured, 65 prisoners were killed, and the ten prisoners responsible for the rebellion were sentenced to death. Of those, four were executed, while six subsequently received a lighter sentence (Sofan, 2021; al-Hamwi, 2021). A negotiation committee was chosen by the prisoners which notably represented a diverse range of groups, including Hasan Sofan and Mohammad Ayman Abu al-Toot (Abu al-Abbas al-Shami). The latter is considered the intellectual godfather of ASH (see Lund, 2017a). Both represented non-Jihadi Salafists, while Abu Huthayfa al-Ordoni and Fawwaz al-Lubnani represented al-Qaeda, in addition to other names (Sofan, 2021). The prisoners' representatives held talks with a high-level committee commissioned by the Syrian regime. Not only did the different groups take diverse positions during the riots, but they also occupied discrete points as their bases. The groups' response to the rebellion ranged from taking arms (Salafi Jihadists), to negotiation (the majority Syrian Salafists) and self-isolation (the Syria MB and Hizb ut-Tahrir) (Sofan, 2021).

[36] Interview with Abu Haydra Raqqa, one of the former prominent military commanders of ASH, 32/7/2021.

In such a hostile environment, a movement remains vulnerable to a security breach by government agents[37] (Hafez, 2003 pp. 21-22).

ASH members were believers in militancy and were convinced that peaceful demonstrations would fall short of overthrowing the Syrian regime (Abu Haydra, 2021). According to Talal Bazrbashi[38], the first seeds of ASH were isolated brigades founded separately by the leaders[39]. Each brigade consisted of 70-100 local fighters (2021). The middleman among the brigades was 'Abu Noran' from Saraqib, who was the link between the first ASH leader Abu Abdullah al-Hamwi and Khaled Abu Anas who would later be known as 'the second man' of ASH (ibid.). Subsequently, the latter worked on coordinating and connecting with the other brigades through secretive meetings held at his house. Ultimately, the ASH Brigades was formally announced in November 2011 as an umbrella for these brigades, as related by Khaled Abu Anas[40] (2021).

Having to adapt to a complexly hostile environment manifesting in the continued external threat of the Syrian regime, in addition to concerns regarding military elimination and security penetration, the Brigades established themselves as a closed and secretive body in their founding phase with a decentralised and loosely connected structure (ibid.).

[37] In other words, the security forces consistently seek to destroy it from the inside, or at least deepen the existing divisions between the base and leaders, among leaders themselves, and the movement itself and its supporters or competitors in the political arena. To survive, the movement's leaders will be compelled, particularly during the establishment phase, to limit membership to a small group of activists who are unquestionably loyal.

[38] Interview with Talal Bazrbashi, the founder and former member of ASH's Shura Council, 11/8/2021.

[39] Abu Anas Saraqib led the al-Furqan Brigade (Katibat al-Furqan) in the Saraqib (Idlib) countryside, while Talal Bazrbashi (Abu Abdul Rahman al-Suri) led the Green Brigade (al-Katiba al-Khadra) in Idlib city. Additionally, Abu Abdullah al-Hamwi founded, along with Abu Talha and Tammam, the Osama bin Zayd Brigade in Sahl al-Ghab, northern Hama countryside; Abu Ayman and Abul Khair founded the almost identically named Osama bin Zaid Brigades in Ram Hamdan and Taoum, Idlib countryside; and Abul Bara founded the Martyrs Fleet Brigade (Katibat Qawafel al-Shuhada) in M'arshmarin, Idlib countryside (Bazrbashi, 2021).
Besides the aforementioned brigades, ASH comprised over 80 other brigades across Damascus and its countryside; the Syrian coast; Aleppo, al-Ghab, Hama, Idlib and their surrounding areas; Daraa; and Eastern Syria (Ahrar al-Sham Brigades, 2013).

[40] Interview with Khaled Abu Anas (his real name Mohammad Khaled Abd Algani), the founder and former member of ASH's Shura Council, 14/8/ 2021.

ASH's main tactics at this stage were IEDs and ambushes, which were documented in videos to highlight its activism and attract support, especially from the Gulf (ibid.).

It could be argued that ASH Brigades were the essence of a domestic Jihadist endeavour not unlike Afghanistan's Taliban Movement (Steinberg, 2016; Bazrbashi, 2021). When compared to other Salafi Jihadist formations, ASH was unique in its assertion that it was not an extension of other movements or groups (ASH's official website, 2012a). Its founder described it also as 'Mujahid brigades' rather than 'Jihadist brigades' (Aljazeera Media Network, 2013). It was clear that ASH leaders were well aware of the multifaceted threats to their environment from the Syrian regime and potentially being designated as a terrorist group. In the sense of the opportunity/threat mechanism, they realised that any al-Qaeda-like formation would face being designated as a terrorist group, which would make their venture short-lived (Abu Anas, 2021; al-Hamwi, 2021).

Further, ASH adopted a hybrid approach that combined militancy and preaching efforts that were consistent with social realities and conventional thinking norms, with the intention of establishing an Islamic rule through appeasement, rather than coercion. Another unique aspect of ASH was its refusal to enlist foreign fighters, which was in line with what ASH dubbed 'popular Jihad' that focused on mobilising and rehabilitating local youth, as Ahmad Abazeid notes[41] (2021). To that end, ASH adopted a selective process to enlist its fighters that relied on recommendations, paired with somewhat flexible criteria with respect to religiosity or subscribing to Salafi thought, as claimed by Abu Anas, who was close to this procedure (2021).

[41] Interview with Ahamad Abazeid, a Syrian writer and researcher specialized in the armed Islamist movements, 3/7/2021.

B. Re-invention: a Political Movement

The basic hypotheses of PPA contend that both 'threat' and 'opportunity' always need to be contextualised within the changing political environment that provides inducement for social and political actors to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure (Tarrow 1994, p. 85; Leenders and Heydemann 2012, p. 141). In a more detailed explanation, the process of reproducing and expanding opportunity as a new opening generally appears as a ramification of the vulnerability and weakness of the state and prompts collective action (McAdam et al., 1996).

Applied to ASH, the external political environment in early 2012 was undergoing a major change. On the international landscape, a political effort, spearheaded by the US and the Arab League, was being made to de-legitimise Bashar Assad, in order to compel him to leave power (Lister, 2015). Domestically, the Syrian armed opposition managed to take over large swathes of northern Syria, and ultimately ended the Syrian regime's existence there, which compelled many Syrians in the diaspora, who had acquired a wide range of expertise and skills, to return to Syria and take part in the uprising. In that context, the fourth head of ASH, Ali al-Omar[42] said that ASH paved the way for Syrians to return after taking over the Aqrabat Passage on the Syrian-Turkish border (2021).

Another crucial development was foreign Jihadis heading for Syria to join in the fray. Most notable, however, was Abu Mohammad al-Julani's establishment of the al-Nusra Front (NF) on 24 January 2012 (Aljazeera, 2012). The NF quickly made its presence known in Syria,[43] which perplexed ASH command on multiple levels. For one,

[42] Interview with Ali al-Omar known as (Abu Ammar), the former leader of ASH's Shura Council, 14/7/ 2021
[43] This was due to number of reasons including unconventional suicide attacks, highly charged ideologised rhetoric, and even attempts to compel ASH Brigades to pledge allegiance by attacking its fighters.

the group had to find a way to restrain its fighters who were attracted by its more ideologised and aggressive rhetoric compared to ASH and other formations in northern Syria. Also, the NF itself was a complex issue, not least because it accepted nothing less than a full pledge of allegiance from ASH Brigades.

The true political test, however, came in the second half of 2012. At that time, ASH was still shaping its political identity, claiming it believed that having a political wing was necessary, even if it did not possess the necessary political instruments (Bazrbashi, 2021). In other words, ASH had to restructure itself as a non-secretive formation beyond loosely-connected brigades, as it then existed in a less hostile atmosphere. Indeed, the brigades gradually transformed into an organised body with a clear public mandate, which, in turn, brought new challenges in the form of engaging with the outside world[44] (Bazrbashi, 2021; al-Hamwi, 2021). Additionally, ASH's hesitancy to enter the political arena was due to its fear of a potential backlash from its fighters who had not yet accepted the notion of engaging with political action, especially with the emergence of the NF in early 2012 and its persistent discourse on the wickedness of politics (ibid). Nonetheless, those minor frictions made ASH realise that it had to enter the political realm. The group then actively worked to establish a political bureau tasked with assessing the general political reality and devising mechanisms to engage with domestic and international political developments (al-Hamwi, 2021).

[44] First came unofficial talks with representatives from Qatar, KSA, and to a lesser extent Kuwait, and indirect communication channels with the US and France. Those governments wanted to know what ASH thought of the reality on the ground and the nature of their political agenda in a post-Assad Syria. Further, ASH talked with non-Arab journalists, as well as media outlets, including Aljazeera, the BBC, and al-Arabiya. However, ASH did not take part in the Geneva I peace talks which were held in Switzerland in June 2012. The same happened at Geneva II (January 2014), save for a non-public involvement in preparatory meetings, as the group at that point wished to see how the political process in Syria was being run (al-Hamwi).

With the dominance of the NF's religious rhetoric and its continued attacks on ASH bases, together with ASH's lacklustre political performance in a rapidly-changing political reality, it was no secret that ASH was struggling. However, the group found a lifeline after taking over Taftanaz Military Airbase, the second largest airbase in Syria after Tadmur (Aljazeera, 2013a). The victory came at a much-needed time, and created the momentum for ASH to generate more funding, while regaining its popularity. In light of this new reality, more recruits wished to join ASH; however, the group struggled to take large numbers on board owing to the lack of a well-institutionalised structure (Abu Anas, 2021).

Accordingly, PPA contends that an exclusive Islamist group often transforms into an inclusive organisation once the external political environment becomes open or less hostel (Hafez, 2003; Al-Anani, 2016). By the end of 2012, ASH began mapping a bylaw to make sense of its structure. The group was further enhanced by Abu al-Abbas al-Shami, who had recently been released from Saydnaya Prison. One of the most influential thinkers from the Saydnaya days who used to hold debates and discussions, Abu al-Abbas used his influence to convince a number of groups to overcome their differences and merge to establish the ASH Movement (Haj Youssef, 2015; Abu Anas, 2021; al-Hamwi, 2021, Bazrbashi, 2021). These groups included the 'Dawn Islamic Movement' [45] (*Harakat al-Fajr Movement*), the Faith Fighting Brigades[46] (*Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatela*), and the Islamic Fighting Vanguard[47] (*Jama'at al-Tali'a al-Islamiyya al-Muqatila*).

[45] The Dawn Islamic Movement held a strategic position between Idlib and Aleppo (Lund, 2013a) and would later be among the largest blocs within ASH following a merger, with over 1,000 fighters, most of whom had university degrees including medicine, engineering, and Islamic studies. The group was led by the physician Mohammad al-Hasan (Abu Abdullah al-Shami).
[46] Led by Muheb al-Din al-Shami, the group was a small, yet active formation in the Damascus countryside (Bazrbashi, 2021).
[47] Positioned in the Idlib countryside, the group housed around 250 fighters that merged with the ASH Brigades.

Those mergers paved the way, on 31 January 2013, for the transformation of ASH Brigades into the 'Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement' or *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya*. In other words, ASH reinvented itself as an all-encompassing entity—no longer just a military player but also a social and political actor (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed, 2019, pp. 9-10).

In a more general sense, this transformation was also a pre-emptive step to evade potential designation as a terrorist group, which was signaled by switching from 'Brigades' (a military term) to a 'Movement' (a political term). This highlighted the fact that ASH was now willing to enter the international political arena, notwithstanding its later failure to keep pace with rapid developments. Further, this was also an attempt to devise a more modernised paradigm that would be better able to effect change domestically and externally without abandoning its ideological tenets. Accordingly, it can be argued that ASH, starting from 2013, has gained the three essential elements (Campaign, repertoire, and WUNC displays) that usually distinguish social movements from other types of organisation like armed groups and militia parties as Tilly and Wood indicate (2013, pp. 4-5).

A little more than a month after the emergence of the 'new' ASH, the movement launched one of its most important offensives, using the arms spoils they gained from the Taftanaz Airbase. Indeed, the Raqqa offensive proved to be a seminal victory for ASH[48],

[48] Abu Mosab al-Emarati along with Abu Haydra, a former Saydnaya prisoner and a Raqqa native from his mother's side, orchestrated the offensive in a way that the city would be 'liberated' from the Syrian regime, but without having ASH actually enter the city. Instead, the city would be self-administered by local tribes, while ASH handled the protection of government departments, the hospital, power stations, and other service institutions to prevent them being destroyed or looted. ASH lost 40 fighters in the battle, in addition to Abu Mosab al-Emarati whose death considerably undermined ASH's military capabilities. However, this was not the only loss ASH would concede in that offensive. As the movement was heavily occupied with its offensive, the NF sneaked into the city and started to establish bases and collect the fruits of the 'liberation', all the while clashing with the local community. Abu Haydra, who was designated as the head of ASH in Raqqa after it was captured, had long talks with the NF to reach a compromise on how to manage the city (Abu Haydara, 2021).

although short-lived, due to a number of factors, not the least of which was the rise of IS. Additionally, ASH's fighting capability was stretched too thin as it had to guard several strategic points.[49] Above all, the native Idlib fighters had to return to Idlib to take part in the battles there, leaving Raqqa to be governed by its people (Abu Haydara, 2021).

ASH was enjoying a more open and friendly environment, relatively at least, with the exception of non-existential threats such as the NF. However, the situation changed with the emergence of IS, which crept into areas controlled by Islamist groups. Most notably, a yet-to-fully-mature ASH had to contend with this new threat. The fight against IS required a new merger into the Islamic Front (IF): the largest 'experimental merger' to date among Islamist factions[50], as described by Ali al-Omar who participated in the formation (2021).

4.1.2 Resource and Structure: Local and Interim Network

In the early days of revolution and rebellions, armed groups usually depend on 'per-war networks' to mobilise, recruit members, and shape their organisation, whereas, according to Mullins, they are 'not only essential to acquire manpower, leadership and resources, but contribute to social learning, adaptation, and form repertoires of contention' (2015, pp. 58-59).

Social and political pre-war networks are crucial in collective action because they 'provide important clues as to why and how opportunities for mobilization are translated

[49] These included the airport, the 17th Division base, and all Raqqa and its countryside.
[50] The merger was the result of six-month-long talks about the form the new body would take, as well as its intellectual position, structure, and decision-making mechanisms. Ali al-Omar, the then-deputy command of 'Hawks of the Levant' (Suqour al-Sham) was instrumental in making this merger a reality. He was a crucial middleman between the two bodies most primed to head the Islamic Front, namely the AoI and ASH. The latter saw AoI leader Zahran Alloush's charisma as a threat, especially after he was voted to lead (al-Omar, 2021). To add to that, there was a real desire to gain momentum in the fight against IS (Bazrbashi, 2021).

into action, and how threats come to be framed in ways that prompt action instead of submission' (Tarrow,1999, p. 136; Leenders and Heydemann, 2012, p. 145). As shown in Chapter 3, the Syrian regime has prevented formal civil Islamic activism (Pierret, 2013; Drevon 2019, p. 6). However, the informal social and religious networks that existed in Syria before 2011 played a prominent role after 2011 as these networks 1) 'served as a social site relatively independent from the state's authoritarian surveillance where grievances and resistance to Ba'athist, 2) provided an important sense of solidarity and presented the background against which recruitment for mobilization took place, 3) supplied skills and resources that made mobilization, 4) helped to sustain it under prohibitive conditions of massive repression' (Leenders and Heydemann, 2012, p. 145).

During its foundation, ASH relied mainly on two core pre-war networks. The first was in Saydnaya prison which included many of the movement's top leaders who established different logistic networks to support the insurgency in Iraq between 2003-2006, particularly in the Hama countryside and Idlib where the majority of the ASH movement's cadre (leaders and fighters) came from (Abazeid and Pierret, 2018; al-Hamwi, 2021). In parallel, outside Saydnaya prison, another group was trying to form a network of isolated cells across Syria in anticipation of an opportunity for change. This network was founded by Khaled Abu Anas (Abu Haydara, 2021, Abazeid, 2021). Coming from Saraqib, Idlib, he had been attempting to found such a group since the early nineties, with the aim of fighting Sufism and spreading traditional Jihadism. According to Abu Anas himself, his network eventually numbered 40 members across Saraqib, Idlib, Aleppo, and Raqqa who would meet regularly for various activities and readings of Salafi thought. He claims that he and his Saudi Arabia-built network self-funded the group (2021).

The two currents—Saydnaya-Iraq, and Abu Anas's network—were remote and distant. No communication channels, or even knowledge of the other's existence, would emerge until the Syrian uprising broke out in March 2011, when they started to collectively coordinate their efforts before institutionalising as a group (Abu Anas, 2021; al-Hamwi, 2021). Even after its formal foundation, ASH was a cluster of brigades in the early stages. With no centralised financial authority, each brigade would have to secure its own funding from its local network, especially construction suppliers, contractors, and people working in real estate, particularly in Idlib. Those funders pledged to support their brigades with monthly payments out of a sense of social bonding, away from any ideological sensibilities. The networks also included personal associates, relatives, and Syrians in the diaspora (Bazrbashi, 2021). This bottom-up process enabled ASH to expand in most Syrian regions as 'this mode of the organisation did not rely on one particular region or strong-man' (Drevon, 2021, p. 7-8). Additionally, these networks provided ASH with access to a various sources of funding including private external donors, diaspora, refugee and religious organisations, wealthy individuals and the Syrian opposition (Bazrbashi, 2021; Abazeid, 2021).

By 2012 the Salafist identity had actualised and with it a religious cover for popular financial support for the ASH brigades, particularly in the Gulf. As such, raising funds for the fighting factions was carried out openly (Pierret, 2017; Pierret and Abazeid, 2018). Kuwait, the greatest supporter of ASH, held public campaigns to raise funds for Syrian groups. Obviously, the ideological aspect played a role, where Salafist networks vied for influence, both domestically and externally, by supporting certain groups. One notable supporter was religious preacher Shafi al-Ajami, who had recently received a seven-year

prison sentence with hard labour and was fined 700,000 Kuwaiti Dinars (Approximately 2 million dollars) for funding terror activities (Lund, 2016b; Pierret, 2018; Asharq Al-Awsat, 2021; Bazrbashi, 2021). It is worth noting that private Salafist funding from the Gulf increased significantly in the second half of 2012, when two prominent outsiders joined ASH'S ranks. The first was Mohammad Bahaya[51] who was known for his involvement in Afghanistan and close connections with al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, and Abu Musab al-Suri (Lund, 2014b; Abazeid, 2014b). Second, was the retired Emirati colonel Mohammed al-Abdouli, Secretary General of the Ummah Party in the UAE. Known by his aliases Abu Mosab al-Emarati/Abu Abdullah al-Diri, Abdouli was the one who planned the battles at al-Jarrah Airport, Taftanaz[52], Raqqa, and al-Ekarda, according to ASH's spokesperson Ahmad Kara Ali[53] and its leading figure Abu Haydra (2021). These two figures respectively offered to ASH a 'political entrepreneur' and a 'violence specialist' which are considered by Charles Tilly the most important components for collective violence (2017, p. 36). The former describes actors who activate, connect, coordinate and represent different networks and communities while the latter is dedicated to those who control the means of 'inflicting damage' (ibid.).

In addition to its clear Salafi identity, the emergence of ASH as a rising military force encouraged private Salafi donors in the Gulf, who were looking for a foothold in the Syrian conflict, to empower the group to create an umbrella for the Islamist armed opposition, particularly when NF was designated a terrorist organisation by the US in early

[51] He was ASH's leader in Aleppo and played an instrumental role in the meetings between NF and ASH, and later in attempting to resolve the dispute between NF and IS.
[52] Abu Mosab al-Emarati was a significant boost from a military standpoint. According to Abu Anas, Abu Mosab trained military cadres to launch a series of military operations. Indeed, thanks to Abu Mosab's planning, an ASH offensive led by Abu Saleh Tahhan, who was also known for his military proficiency, successfully took over the airbase with the help of other military factions on 11 January 2013 (Abu Anas, 2021).
[53] Interview with Ahmad Kara Ali, the former spokesperson of ASH's Shura Council, 15/7/ 2021

December 2012 (Bazrbashi, 2021). Within this context, the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) was established in December 2012, which then included a large spectrum of the Salafist factions (Zelin, 2013).

Not only the Salafist donors, but the National Council of Syria (NCS), the main body of the Syrian opposition at that time, sought for rapprochement with ASH. According to Iyad al-Sha'ar[54], ASH received support from the NCS 's central military command which imposed no hierarchical authority over it, thanks to ASH's 'revolutionary' affiliation and impressive performance in the field (2021). However, the main aim of this support was to convince its leaders to join the Syria Revolutionaries Front [55](SRF). Nonetheless, the SRF was a short-lived experiment, as it lost its significance and ASH reverted to relying only on the Salafi networks in the Gulf[56], which had been quite generous' (Abazeid, 2021; al-Hamwi, 2021).

Besides the funds from the NCS and private Salafi networks in the Gulf, the military effectiveness of ASH and its successive victories contributed to attracting governmental funding from Qatar, Turkey, and KSA (Lister, 2015; Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019, p. 11; Drevon, 2021; Bazrbashi, 2021). Accordingly, ASH went through an institutionalisation process, as a priority, establishing a finance office that devised budgets and managed expenses. The office was also responsible for communicating and

[54] Interview with Iyad al-Sha'ar, the former military spokesperson of ASH, 21/7/2021.

[55] ASH agreed to join the (SRF) in June 2012. The formation was a Syria-wide faction that aimed to 'topple the ruling regime in Syria, establish a righteous Islamic rule, and present a vision for resurrecting the Umma' according to the charter found on the ASH Brigades' website (ASH official website, 2012c). Nonetheless, ASH suspended its decision only a day later because the SRF 'took advantage of the decision to join in order to repurpose [ASH] as a military wing for the (NSC), whereas ASH's original understanding was that it was joining the SRF as a revolutionary, Jihadist coalition composed of independent factions, rather than a military manifestation of any existing entity' (Ahrar al-sham Brigades, 2012b). Six weeks later, ASH returned to the SRF after the NCS denied having any association with it (France 24, 2012).

[56] At the end of 2012, ASH received two arm shipments from Libya via the Aegean Sea, and the Atma Broder Crossing with Turkey. The two shipments were the fruit of personal connections and the Gulf donors channelled through Abdelhakim Belhaj, who was the head of the military council in Tripoli at the time. Bazrabashi claims that the shipments contained shotguns, shells, anti-aircraft artillery, and Katyusha and Grad rocket launchers (2021).

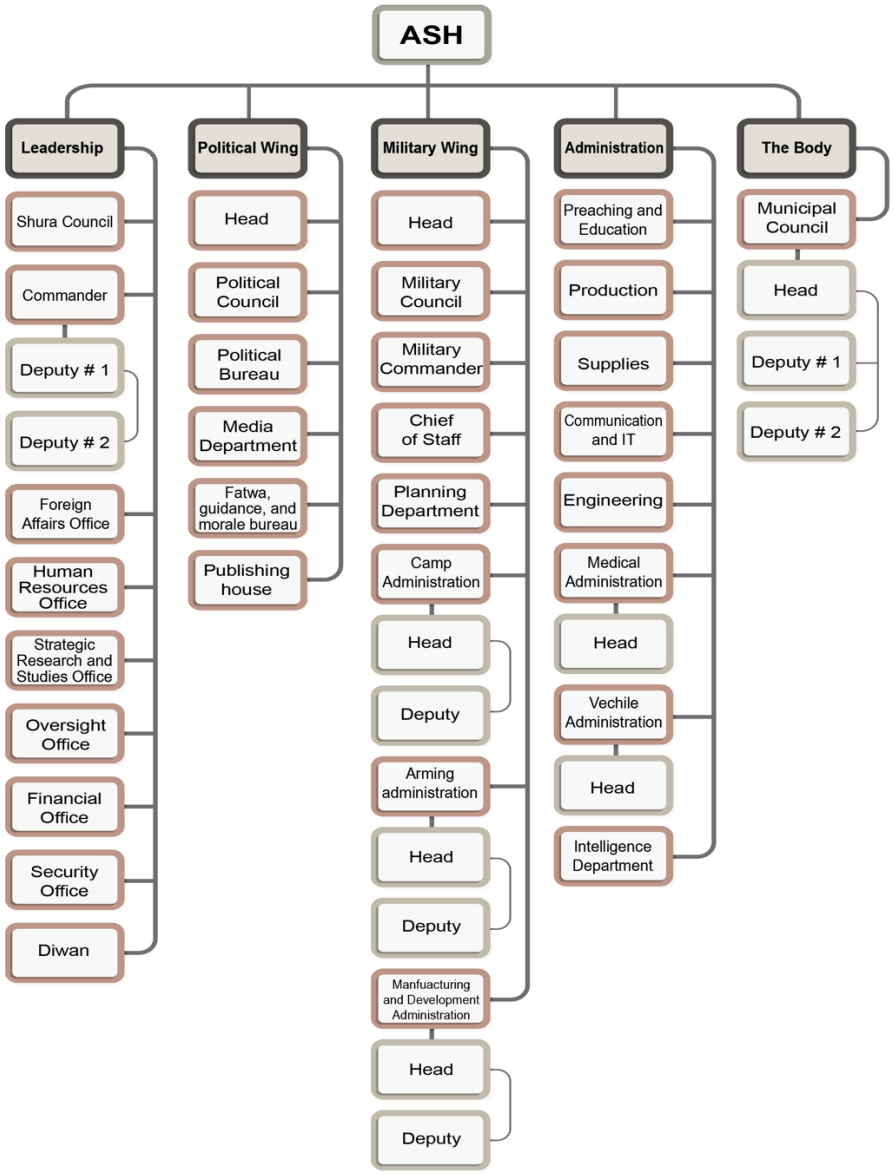
coordinating with supporters and imposing financial control procedures. Moreover, the office aimed to create a flow of self-funding through external investments that included restaurants, hotels, and factories in Turkey and the Gulf countries with revenues of up to two million dollars[57] (Bazrbashi, 2021; Kara Ali, 2021). In this vein, the success of ASH in capturing Bab al-Hawa border crossing generated an independent income because it was a major transit point for the humanitarian aid coming to northern Syria as well as a commercial traffic route for high-value goods like construction material (Lund, 2013a).

The availability of resources was an essential factor that motivated ASH to re-establish itself in early 2013 as an inclusive organisation 'movement' after absorbing a number of armed factions whether they were Islamist or not. An inclusive organisation is usually defined as 'one with relatively unrestricted criteria for membership, it usually requires minimum levels of initial commitment–a pledge of general support without specific duties, short introduction period or none at all' (Garner and Zald, 1981). In comparison with its early days which were confined to Salafi Jihadism loyalists, joining ASH was based on a personal connection, recommendations, and criteria such as religiosity and discipline (Abu Haydra, 2021; Abu Anas, 2021). However, those criteria varied with the lack of centralisation and geographical expansion, as well as the local environment and leaders' personal preferences and ideologies: different brigades tolerated, or prohibited, different kinds of behaviours (ibid.). In tandem, a bylaw was devised within a framework that incorporated military and civilian facets. The latter would be concerned with matters of education, preaching, relief, media, politics, and providing services. According to the new internal system, the ASH movement consisted of

[57] That side of operations was managed by Talal al-Ahmad Tamam, head of the external office, who was killed with the other leaders of ASH on 9 September 2014.

leadership, a political wing, the military wing, an administration, and a body. Each sector had a number of offices.

Chart 1: Organisational Structure of ASH



(Source: unpublished documents seen and designed by the researcher)

The chart illustrates the key features of the ASH leadership, as well as its military, political, and service bodies. Further, the development of the Shura Council and its influence in relation to the movement's leadership is shown.

Despite the established hierarchy, the ASH movement's decision-making was decentralised, in consideration of its wide territories and its incorporation of various bodies. As per the law, the leader's influence was strictly limited insofar as he had no power to interfere in the policies of a sub-office that was operating within the bounds of ASH's public policies. More notably, however, ASH was unique in making the decisions of its Shura Council binding, rather than of an advisory nature, unlike other Islam-oriented movements (Kara Ali, 2021). ASH expanded the powers of the Shura Council as the highest advisory body, entrusted with making major decisions such as war and peace, and appointing and discharging heads. Indeed, this shielded ASH from potentially becoming a cult personality movement ruled by a dominant charismatic leader or having the potential to monopolise decision-making. However, it also meant that the decision-making process was highly bureaucratised to the point that it impeded ASH from taking swift action at crucial junctures (ibid).

Thanks to the merger phase, ASH was revitalised at an institution level, with many new names joining the Shura Council, as well as its offices. Many individuals proved to be instrumental.[58] This gave birth to new approaches during internal intellectual discussions and radical revisions as ASH was trying to create its distinct identity, as will be further discussed in the next section.

[58] Such as Dawn Movement's 'Abu Yazan al-Shami', 'Abu Sariya al-Shami', and 'Abu Ayman' who influenced the intellectual orientation of ASH, Vanguard's Abu Jamil Qutub and Abu Yousuf Binnish, and Faith Fighting Brigades' Muhb al-din Mohammad al-Shami (Kara Ali, 2021).

PPA claims that movement structure and the organisational aspects of collective action touch upon the structure of a group's activity and the degree of organisational capability shaping the actions of actors in achieving their goals (Tilly, 1978). In other words, the process of decentralising the movement's structure had many positive aspects, especially with regard to the flexibility of military decision-making at the middle and lower organisational levels when the enemy or opponent was clear (the Syrian regime). Additionally, the institutionalisation of the movement contributed to its revitalisation, which in turn led to an internal debate regarding major objectives and priorities. This resulted in the emergence of a general orientation that made the achievement of major goals (such as establishing Shari'a rule) subject to capacity and community acceptance, with the possibility of accepting their non-implementation provided there is freedom to preach and practice politics (Almustafa, 2021; Kara Ali, 2021). On the other hand, the bureaucracy resulting from decentralisation contributed to the delay in making crucial decisions such as becoming involved in the fight against IS[59] that would have a significant impact on the future of ASH (Bazrbashi, 2021).

4.1.3 Beyond Salafi Jihadism: From Elitist 'Jihadism' to Popular 'Jihad'

Violence and radicalisation are usually studied by different mechanisms that explain the diffusion of new ideological frames and the adoption of new repertoires of violence. In this

[59] For example, the Shura Council held an extra-ordinary meeting to discuss a potential declaration of war against IS. At this point, IS had caused too much destruction and bloodshed in north Syria, particularly killing a relief worker affiliated with ASH, the former head of Tal Abyad checkpoint in Raqqa, and most notably the leading figure Doctor Hussein Suleiman, known as Abu Rayyan Maskana, who was tortured to death (Enab Baladi, 2014a). However, the six-hour meeting failed to yield a decisive statement. Colliding intellectual currents surfaced as a serious issue. To add to that, ASH was concerned with the overt brutality of IS and its highly ideologised and more explicit rhetoric. Yet, the IS issue had to be addressed, and so ASH commissioned a special committee with the task of making a binding decision on fighting IS. The committee decided that ASH was to declare war on IS. Notably, Abu Abdul Malek al-Shar'I, who at that point, for health reasons, had never taken part in any battle, was a leader in that conflict. The decision was made public in December 2013.

vein, the framing process is considered as a 'mediator' among various factors, affecting collective action especially during the initial phase 'by setting the grievances around which activists mobilize— advantaging some claims and disadvantaging others' (Sarfati, 2013, p. 19; Alimi Bosi and Demetriou, 2015; Drevon, 2021, p. 3). Building on this point, the elements of such a collective action frame 'are injustice, as a combination of individual cognitive judgement and emotional reactions to a certain situation, agency and identity— the process of building a collectively *us* and distinguishing specific others *them*' (Gamson, 1992, p. 7; Westphal, 2017, p. 21). Accordingly, the framing process will be employed here to explore ASH's ideological interpretation and the use of the group's ideology to justify violence as well as how ASH sought to introduce itself as the 'post-Jihadism'.

Social movements do not invent ideas but build on an 'ideological heritage' that imbues their claims with greater resonance in society (Klandermans, 2004, p. 368; Westphal, 2018, p. 21). The diversification of the foundations upon which ASH was established, including individuals, currents, and experiences, reflected on the ideological frames of ASH. As stated above, ASH was a 'Salafi incubator' that tried to manage and contain internal disputes spanning a wide spectrum of Islamic movements insofar as the ASH Brigades/Movement appeared to be a kaleidoscope of the Syrian uprising as a whole (Shabbo, 2016; Heller, 2016), within broad fundamentals, acknowledged in the founding statement: '*Hal Ataka Hadith al-Kata'ib* -Has the story of brigades reached you' (ASH official website, 2012a). The founding leader, Hassan Aboud, confirmed that ASH was an independent organisation 'that is not an extension to any organization, party, or group' (Aljazeera Media Network, 2013). It was as if ASH knew what it did not want without determining what it wanted.

Nonetheless, an exception was ASH's alignment with the Salafi ideals of emphasising the adherence to the doctrine of the Sunnah '*Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama'a*', and the 'pious scholars who stayed the course in following the Holy Quran and the canonical Sunnah, as guided by the righteous predecessors. Additionally, ASH stated that it sought to establish Islamic good governance and adopt 'fighting' and 'Jihad' to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime, especially after protests and strikes had failed (ASH official website, 2012a).

By these words, it is seen how ASH aligned itself within the polar Sunni narrative, building consciously and strategically on the collective action frame by identifying the causes of the oppression of Syrian Sunnis since 1963 and creating a collective identity emphasising their heritage, memory, experience, the possibility for change and the need for violence. In other words, Islamic symbolism serves as an interpretative lens that explains and assigns meaning to its socio-political context and thereby grants moral justification for ASH's violent collective action. This identity, based on a Sunni/Alawite dichotomy was used to seize the opportunity to violently bring about comprehensive social change and establish the Islamic state in the early years of the Syrian uprising. Accordingly, ASH's discourse like other Jihadi groups establishes a 'collective identity through victimization based on shared experiences of discrimination and oppression and through the belonging to an exclusivist, truthful and superior community that is vindicated by a transcendent authority' (Westphal, 2017, p. 27). It worth noting that the previous sectarian ideological frames would not have succeeded and resonated in society had it not been for the intense repression as well as many sectarian massacres carried out by the Syrian regime (Pierret, 2017, pp. 137-38). And as Hafez stated, anti-system collective

action and anti-institutional strategies can be more effective in repressive environments compared with environments that enable all opposition movements to participate partially or fully in political life. Islamic social movements in such environments typically use the general feeling of 'victimisation' within the group to depict the government and its institutions as a 'corrupt elite' and raise questions within the group and broader society about its legitimacy or effectiveness in ruling the country (2003, pp. 41-42).

Apart from framing the Syrian conflict, the ideological variations within ASH became problematic even to observers and researchers. Descriptions of ASH varied to include Political Salafism (Abu Rumman, 2013), National/Local Salafi Jihadism (Abazeid, 2014a), Corrective/Reformist Jihadism, and Post-Salafi Jihadism (Heller, 2016). In fact, all these descriptions apply to some extent. Each of these ideas has representatives and branches within ASH itself, as well.

At the beginning, some of ASH's founders, such as Khaled Abu Anas, were directly influenced by 'Political Salafism' in its most prominent form, represented by the Sururi Movement and Saudi Sahwa (Awakening) Movement (Abu Anas, 2021; Lacroix, 2011). At the same time, ASH was considered an extension of the 1982 Fighting Vanguard (FV) as many of its old leaders, who left for Afghanistan after the 1982 Hama massacre, returned to Syria and joined ASH—such as Abu Khaled al-Suri and al-Mun'em Mustafa Halima or Abu Bassir al-Tartusi [60] (Lister, 2015)

On another hand, ASH was a clear representation of the 'local' Salfai Jihadi trend of *Jama'et Saydnaya* (Saydnaya Group) represented by Abu al-Abbas al-Shami, the godfather of ASH as described by its leaders and fighters, including its spokesperson

[60] He described ASH as a good example, distinguishing it from all other movements and factions as 'salt of the earth' (al-Tartusi, 2017).

Kara Ali[61] (2021). However, Abu Yazan Mohamed al Shami[62], one of Abu al-Abbas' most prominent associates in Saydnaya, would represent and lead the reformist and corrective movement in his speeches, attitudes, and statements, the most famous of which was his apology for the adoption of 'Salafi Jihadism', five days before his assassination with other leaders of ASH (Enab Baladi, 2014b; al-Amin, 2014).

These characters can be described as "post-Jihadism characters", given their embrace of and subsequent disengagement from global Jihadism, all while preserving a certain degree of contact and symbolism within the Movement. This is also in line with their sharia, intellectual, and practical views, earning them the description: 'Reformist/Corrective Jihadism'. Considering the five elements identified for Salafi Jihadism by Shiraz Maher (*Tawheed* "Monotheism", *Hakemia* "Allah's sovereignty", *Wala'a wa Bara'a* "Allegiance and Disownment", Jihad, and *takfir*) (Maher, 2016, p. 14), ASH adopted some of them (*Tawheed*, *Hakemia*, and Jihad) and ignored the other two.

When researching common features of nuances that may, at first glance, seem very distant from one another, we find a two-pronged dialogue: shifting from restricted Jihadist ideology to the wide nature of Jihad, and from its extreme sense of elitism represented by the *Firqa Najia* "the only creed deserving of salvation" to a more popular grassroot stance (Maher 2016, p. 7). Although this discourse was present at various stages of ASH, starting with the foundation statement, which adopted the term 'revolution', ASH maintained a certain distinction by not adopting the independence flag (the revolution flag) and keeping its own flag with a continuation of the main rule: 'We are

[61] Interview with Ahmad Kara Ali, the former spokesperson of ASH, 3/8/2021.
[62] He was born in Damascus 1986 and arrested before completing his master's degree in comparative jurisprudence. He joined the Islamic Dawn Movement after he left Saydnaya, rising to the position of Sharia Jurist before its abovementioned merger with ASH, within which he will also become a prominent jurist.

not Salafi Jihadism, nor an FSA or SMB,' which would have consequences in the second stage that tilted towards a more extreme dialogue.

I refer to this phenomenon as 'post-Jihadism' because it has been obliged to use the vocabulary of revolutionary discourse to differentiate itself from its Jihadist counterpart such as NF and vice versa—although at the time of its establishment the Salafist element was more dominant than the revolutionary one (Almustafa, 2021). Budling on a multifaceted identity, it can be explained how ASH, that was founded as an 'armed group' with an obvious aim to construct 'Islamic Rule', re-established itself as an 'Islamist-reformist movement' to create a 'civilized Islamic society' instead of 'setting up an Islamist rule' (ASH official website, 2013). The character of ASH also incorporated an Islamist-Revivalist *(tajdidi*) discourse addressing for the first-time debatable issues such as religious minorities, moderation, alignment with Islam, and women's rights. The addition of the word "Syrian" was the most important because it formally established the national dimension ("local-national") in ASH's ideology' (Shabbo, 2016; Almustafa, 2021).

However, the framing process is interactive, whose frames and outcomes can be transformed as structural and contextual factors change. Given the importance of this issue, Snow outlines three different forms of frame transformation (2004, p. 393):

- Event-initiated, which usually produces a partial change of an existing frame.
- Agent-initiated, which contributes to a more fundamental transformation in the way in which the objective of orientation is perceived.
- 'Hearts and minds', which results in comprehensive change at the individual and group level.

While the first two are quite feasible within social movements, the third may be 'unthinkable until a tremendous task of altering people's views of reality had been accomplished'.

The previous ideological developments, which might be described as 'agent-initiated' transformation, gave ambiguous indications that ASH has started a process of radical ideological review. However, the establishment of IS was an 'Event-initiated' form that forced ASH to revise its intellectual stance, its declaration of a 'Caliphate', and its adoption of a discourse of fully-fledged ideological warfare. Domination (*shawkat al-nikaya wa al-tamkin*) left direct repercussions on ASH, given the hesitancy of its leaders and fighters in combatting IS, even as it expelled ASH from different areas.

It was here that ASH realised the depth of the dilemma facing it within its base: intellectual and ideological debates had been confined to a particular elite, while its fighters had been mobilised with strict Salafi religious interpretations and justifications framed within a Sunni/Alwite or Sunni/Shi'a dichotomy to combat the regime, Iran and its proxies, with no real doctrinal and ideological preparation to fight outside this dichotomy, as Jihad al-Dalati stated[63] (2021). Accordingly, and as I argue in my previous work on ASH, 'the movement's leadership decided that the best defence was a good offence, making a volte-face away from all previous ideological discussions as well as all the work done with another Islamist group' on a political/intellectual project. By doing so, they sought to prove to both IS and ASH fighters that they were not Islamist-coloured militias subordinated to the interests of others like the Iraqi Sahwat and that establishing Shari'a rule is the main objective' (Almustafa, 2021). It was within this vein 'the Ummah project'

[63] Interview with Abu Hamza, one of the former prominent leaders of ASH and former member of Shura council, 27/7/2021.

was announced after the declaration of IF in November 2013, which readopted the aim of ‘establishing an Islamic state’ as a local priority and rejected all other terms (democracy, secularism, civil state, nationalism) as incompatible with Islam (ibid; Sha’bo, 2016).

4.2 Fragmentation phase: from unity to defections

Between 2014 and 2017, the ASH movement suffered major setbacks that had a significant impact on the group’s military and political activities. In this period, ASH lost important cards despite its engagement in international negotiations. Meanwhile, the movement expanded horizontally by incorporating several smaller rebel groups. ASH’s core structure was not spared the repercussions of change on the international stage and one-upmanship in the Jihadi arena, suffering splits and defections that foretold the beginning of its end. At the ideological level, discussions of identity were put on the back burner as the movement was steered by three consecutive leaders with different ideological views in a relatively short span of time, namely Hashim al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber al-Sheikh/ Maskana/ Mahrada), Mohannad al-Masri (Abu Yahya al-Hamwi), and Ali al-Omar (Abu Ammar).

Table 2: The leaders of ASH between 2011-2021

Name	Acronym	Command duration		Category	Saydnaya
		From	to		
Hassan Abboud	Abu Abdallah al-Hamwi	May 2011	September 2014	reformist	Yes
Hashim al-Sheikh	Abu Jaber al-Sheikh/ Maskana/ Mahrada	September 2014	September 2015	hardliner	Yes
Mohannad al-Masri	Abu Yahya al-Hamwi	September 2015	November 2016	reformist	Yes
Ali al-Omar	Abu Ammar	November 2016	August 2017	reformist	No
Hasan Sofan	Abu al-Bara'a	August 2017	August 2018	hardliner	Yes
Jaber Ali Basha	_____	August 2018	November 2020	reformist	No
Amer al-Sheikh	Abu Obayda Qatana	January 2021	now	reformist	Yes

(Source: prepared by the researcher)

4.2.1 A Transitional Phase: Strategic Shifts Towards 'Revolutionism'

To focus on the factors and conditions contributing to ASH's transformations and strategic shifts during this phase, this section employs Soifer's (2012) understanding of 'critical juncture'. Soifer explains "critical junctures" as environmental factors allowing and/or producing change. They are either a 'permissive condition' that widens structural limits

for more agency or a 'productive condition' that allows for some divergence from older actions. Hence, for a critical juncture to happen, productive conditions must come together to widen structural limits and increase agency. Permissive conditions are often related to external factors, but also could be internal, like a change in the leadership. Productive conditions, as ideas and choices that drive decision-making, are internal (ibid; Volpi and Gerschewski, 2020)

As outlined earlier, IF's Charter titled 'the Ummah Project' *(Mashroua Ummah*) specified its goals, tools, and its position regarding a range of divisive terms (secularism, democracy, civilian state, minorities…) and emerged in response to IS and the threats it posed on 'national' Islamist movements (Lund; 2014c; Abazeid, 2021). The idealist-Islamist charter soon proved to be problematic to ASH's regional allies as well as to intranational powers such as the US, especially after defeating IS and expelling its troops from northwestern Syria. Hassan Abboud was called to an urgent meeting in Turkey that was attended by Turkish, Qatari, and Saudi representatives, as well as the US as an observer (al-Hamwi, 2021; al-Sh'aar, 2021). The meeting was held to draw ASH's attention to an imminent danger, namely the fact that the movement was being considered to be added to the US's designated terrorist list (ibid.). By using Sofier's words, this development represented a critical juncture and permissive condition 'threat' that required a significant strategic shift. In this vein and to eliminate that possibility, Abboud signed the 'Honour Revolutionary Charter of Fighting Brigades'[64] in May 2014 (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed, 2019, p. 15). He took that step without consulting with the Shura

[64] It is a charter signed by a group of Islamic opposition brigades, describing the political framework that organises the opposition. The charter essentially calls for the establishment of a state of justice, law and freedom, and welcomes cooperation with international and regional parties.

Council. The signed charter contained clear contradictions with the IF's charter. Inevitably, the rupture deepened within the Shura Council, that had yet to recover from the initial dispute over fighting IS. Those confusions soon carried over to the rank-and-file. However, Abboud returned and explained the situation, managing to alleviate the tension (Bazrbashi, 2021). That step left a positive impact, ultimately, and pushed ASH towards a new round of radical intellectual revisions that culminated in a new direction spearheaded by Shura Council member Abu Yazan al-Shami, as will be seen later.

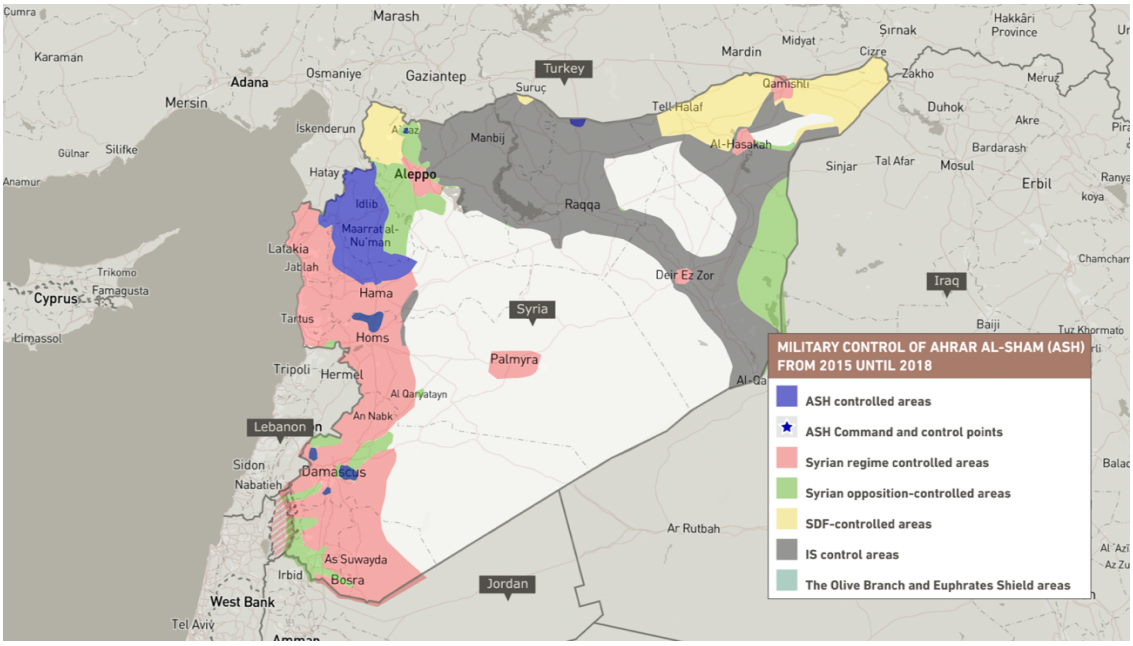
This came at a time of rapid developments on the international stage. In that landscape, several Islamist groups sought to establish an active political body in parallel with the SNC on the basis of the Honour Revolutionary Charter. To that end, attempts were made to establish a 'Syrian Revolution Command' inside Syria. The founding meetings were attended by the leaders of ASH, as Abd Al Rahman al-Kailani[65] confirmed (2021). ASH provided an initial agreement, pending the full agreement of the Shura Council. Unbeknown to the leaders of ASH, this would be their last meeting, as Hassan Abboud was killed, along with over 45 commanders including 13 first-rank and second-rank leaders, on 9 September 2014 in a bombing raid that targeted the Shura Council meeting at 'headquarters zero' in Ram Hamdan, Idlib countryside (Aljazeera, 2014b; al-Kailani, 2021). At the time of writing, the circumstances of that assassination have yet to be revealed (al-Hamwi, 2021).

The killing of ASH leaders was a combination of both permissive and productive conditions which, in turn, created existential threats as well as opportunities that needed to be dealt with. Militarily, in December 2014, ASH sought to showcase its military

[65] Interview with Abd Al Rahman al-Kailani, a Syrian activist and film maker who made the first documentary on ASH, 23/7/2021.

prowess and the cohesion of its base of fighters by declaring major offensives to capture the defence factories in southern Aleppo, and Wadi al-Deif, which contained the Syrian regime's largest barracks in Idlib, and Al-Hamidiyah army bases in the Idlib countryside (Kozak, 2015). ASH planned to launch the offensive alone, but NF suddenly joined the battle and clashed with ASH over the distribution of the spoils. However, this dispute did not prevent ASH from joining sides with NF in battles despite the movement 's keenness to assume a more revolutionary and nationalist stance. This approach manifested in the formation of AoC [66] (the Army of Conquest). The purpose behind the formation of AoC was to capture the city of Idlib, which fell to these forces three days later (Chabkoun, 2015). AoC did not seek to achieve a merger among its constituents as the alliance was limited to military coordination only.

Map 2: Military Control of ASH between 2015 – 2018



(Source: prepared by the researcher)

[66] AoC comprised ASH as Islamist revolutionary groups, NF and Jund al-Aqsa as Salafi-Jihadi groups, and Ajnad al-Sham, Jaysh al-Sunna, and Liwa al-Haq as ideologically moderate groups.

At the organisational level, ASH sought to assert itself on the scene as a major force comprising military formations through qualitative mergers, such as its merger with Liwa al-Haq[67] and the Kurdish Islamic Front[68] in December 2014. This merger was followed by a larger one in March 2015, when ASH and Suoqur al-Sham,[69] one of the earliest active armed Islamic groups, announced a merger (Lund, 2015a). Ali al-Omar adds that the merger was effectively a death knell for IF, which continued as a mere formality (2021).

Ideologically, these mergers were reflected in ASH's political discourse, which adopted the slogan of 'a people's revolution' rather than 'an Ummah project'. Television interviews were infused with new terms such as "a government emanating from the people, a consensual contract between the government and the people, and a constitution that guarantees the participation of religious minorities," according to Hashem al-Sheikh himself, the leader of the movement between 2014–2015 (Aljazeera**,** 2015a; Abazeid and Pierret, 2018). To a lesser extent, this was a message to the US to prevent a terrorist branding and gain their support by showing the intention to fight IS after the International Coalition was founded in 2014 (Bazrbashi, 2021). Additionally, it aimed to

[67] Liwa al-Haq was one of the local rebel groups in Homs province. It was formed as a development of 'Homs Revolutionaries Union' from ten smaller groups to become the second largest component of ASH, with a few thousand fighters. Despite having some roots in the SA, the groups forming Liwa al-Haq considered themselves Islamist, embracing various currents such as Salafism, Sufism, and the Muslim Brotherhood (Lund, 2013a).
[68] A small Kurdish Islamist group founded in 2013 with the support of ASH by Salah al-Din al-Kurdi with the aim of establishing Islamic rule in the predominantly Kurdish areas of Syria (Lund, 2014a).
[69] This group was operating mainly in Jabal al-Zawiya in the Idlib countryside. Suoqur al-Sham was established by Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh and was known for its downright hostility to IS. However, Suoqur al-Sham split again from ASH in September 2016 (Enab Baladi, 2016c).

relieve the Saudis who entered the scene after their implicit approval of AoC[70] (Sinjab, 2015).

The new figures and experiences that joined ASH through mergers instilled a new spirit, especially where foreign relations were concerned. Liwa al-Haq's Labib al-Nahhas, better known as Abu Ezzedine, who was born in Spain and studied in England, presided over the foreign relations bureau (Zambrana and Mourenza, 2016; Graham-Harrison et al., 2016). Al-Nahhas contributed to ASH's openness towards public opinion and Western decision-makers by publishing articles in foreign newspapers.[71] In addition, Al-Nahhas tried to open up towards the opposition's political bodies (the SNC and the Interim Government) without joining them. The former president of NCS Burhan Ghalioun[72] said that Labib tried, on the other hand, not to criticise the external political activities of these bodies (2021).

ASH's external discourse continued to shift towards revolutionism. This effort culminated in formulating a moderate discourse for ASH, positioning it as a third option other than IS and the Syrian regime, representing the Syrian revolution internationally. One case of such was the ASH delegation to the besieged factions of Zabadani, in the Damascus countryside, to negotiate with the Iranian regime, in parallel with a military offensive against the villages of Kefraya and Al-Foua[73] in the Idlib countryside to apply

[70] It is noteworthy that the Saudi support, which helped to establish AoC, came after the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran in July 2015, which reflects a change in the Saudi strategy after feeling abandoned by the Obama administration.
[71] These included the Washington Post in which he criticised Obama's policy which labelled the Syrian factions as moderate and non-moderate (al-Nahhas, 2015a) and The Telegraph's "I am a Syrian and I fight ISIL Everyday ... It will take the West more than bombs to defeat this menace [ISIL]", criticising British policy and presenting ASH as a majority Sunni Islamist faction to be an alternative to the regime and IS (al-Nahhas, 2015b).
[72] Interview with Burhan Ghalioun, a Syrian thinker and the first president of NSC, 28/7/2021.
[73] Karfaya and al-Fu'a are two towns, located in the northern Idlib countryside, and six to seven kilometers from Idlib city. They had a population of 50 thousand people, overwhelmingly Shia, before the uprising. However, this number decreased to 21 thousand due to fierce fighting and attempts of the opposition to control them. Eventually, they were evacuated on 30 April 2018, in a population transfer deal known as "The Four Towns Agreement", in which Kafraya

pressure for negotiation (Abazeid, 2015c, p. 22). This was a preliminary test of ASH's ability to deal with the external political environment after its leaders' deaths[74](Enawi, 2015).

In contradiction to established foreign policy, al-Sheikh remained committed to the discourse of hostility to political bodies such as the SNC and the Interim Government. In an interview with Aljazeera, he stressed that those bodies lacked legitimacy because they had not been elected by the people (Aljazeera**,** 2015a). Due to this approach, the Shura Council decided not to renew al-Sheikh's leadership when his term ended in late September 2015 and appointed his deputy Mohannad al-Masri, an engineer and a former detainee of Saydnaya, as the general leader of ASH[75] (Lund, 2015b; Kar Ali, 2021). As it related to external factors, the change in the leadership was another permissive condition that contributed to several strategic shifts within ASH.

Internally, al-Masri tried to interfere with the institutional structure of ASH and weaken the hardliner current by restructuring the Sharia Bureau, creating a judicial body (Radio al-Kul, 2015; Kara Ali, 2021), and trying to dismiss the military leader Abu Saleh Tahhan. These changes helped him to formulate an external discourse that promoted ASH as an ally of Western interests. In contrast to his predecessors, al-Masri considered joint political action important, and sent Labib al-Nahhas in December 2015 to participate

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and Fu'a, on one hand, and Zabadani and Madaya in Damascus countryside, on the other, were evacuated simultaneously. (OCHA, 2017).

[74] With Turkish mediation, in Istanbul, representatives of Iran and ASH met and agreed on a 48-hour cessation of hostilities in Zabadani[74], Al-Foua, and Kefraya (Enawi, 2015). Talks continued until the early days of al-Hamwi's leadership of ASH and resulted in a ceasefire with Iran in September 2015. ASH directly represented Sunni groups in Idlib. During these talks, ASH negotiated a six-month ceasefire between the regime's army and Hezbollah, and the opposition forces in Zabadani, Al-Foua, and Kefraya; and it agreed on a population swap deal whereby the Shiite population left Kefraya and Al-Foua for regime-controlled areas and the fighters withdrew from Zabadani to the opposition-controlled areas in Idlib (Mustafa, 2015).

[75] al-Masri's previous leadership roles in ASH, in addition to his family roots in the al-Ghab region, the birthplace of ASH's founders, may have played a role in his election.

in the Riyadh Conference, which resulted in the formation of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) that would represent the opposition in the Geneva talks in January 2016 (Enab Baladi, 2015c). This was a preemptive step after the Russian military intervention in late September 2015. Once again, the environmental factors pushed ASH more towards political participation. However, contrary to intention, the signing of the Riyadh conference revealed the cracks in ASH, quickly prompting it to issue a statement declaring its withdrawal from the talks as Riyad Hijab, the former head of HNC[76], confirmed (2021). ASH indicated that the reason for its withdrawal was the essential role that was given to some bodies and figures affiliated with the regime, which they deemed a breach of the revolutionary work. Nevertheless, al-Nahhas signed the conference document, increasing the rift between the currents (ibid). Indeed, ASH did not send a representative to the Geneva talks (Desina, 2016; Abazeid and Pierret, 2018).

ASH's reluctant position towards the Riyadh conference indicates that the internal divisions began to appear under different names, presenting themselves as an intellectual dispute but representing a struggle for power and influence within the movement. Accordingly, two currents emerged within the movement at that time: a "conservative" current on the ground represented by the tripartite leadership, and a more "liberal" (*infitahi*) current abroad, represented by the Political Bureau and the Office of Foreign Relations in Turkey. Regardless of the leadership's classification and biases, this split created an organisational paralysis within the movement, which became unable to take decisive decisions on many critical junctures (Kara Ali, 2021; Almustafa, 2021).

[76] Interview with Riyad Hijab, the former Prime Minister and the former head of HNC, 28/7/2021.

The external political environment witnessed two main variables at that time that threw their weight at the ASH movement—the Russian military intervention in favour of the Syrian regime, in September 2015, which turned the equation militarily and thus politically; and the Turkish intervention, in August 2016, through operation Euphrates Shield, which was militarily in support of the Syrian factions to expel IS from northern Syria (Aljazeera, 2016). ASH seemed reluctant to make the decision to participate in the fighting on the side of the Turkish ally. It did not issue its fatwa to permit the fight until a month after the start of the battle, justifying the fatwa on the necessity to get rid of the "Kharijites", i.e., IS, and the need to have an Islamic faction to control the areas that were under the control of IS after its decline. The fatwa led to internal conflicts that became clear with the defection of some brigades and figures, arguing that the religious conditions necessary for issuing such a fatwa were not met (al-Hamwi, 2021).

Additionally, Ali al-Omar, the fourth leader at this phase, refused to participate in the Astana talks, questioning the impartiality of Russia as a mediator (Akoum, 2017; al-Omar, 2021). al-Omar saw no reason to join the talks in Astana. ASH was invited to Ankara ahead of the talks. 'They demanded an explanation of the Astana path, discussion points, and potential outputs (ibid.). The Turks refused to divulge such information and demanded ASH participate with no restrictions or conditions: ASH refused' (al-Omar, 2021). To ASH, losing Turkey's support was the lesser of those two evils. However, things were further exacerbated with the Qataris ending their support as well, due to the 2017 Gulf Crisis (Lund, 2017c).

As a consequence, ASH was attacked by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham which utilised this abandonment. Also, the aftermath of the factions' participation in Astana reflected on

ASH. Many factions quickly joined ASH on a promise of protection by al-Omar, thereby becoming an administrative burden as al-Omar's original plan was to reduce the number of fighters at training camps from 27,000 to 15,000 (al-Omar, 2021). On the other hand, In January 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham merged with four other factions to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) headed, shockingly, by al-Sheikh himself, the former leader of ASH (Sham News Network, 2017a) who was followed in joining HTS by Tahhan and al-Sadiq who took control of powerful units, further reinforcing HTS's control over all supply lines in northwestern Syria. (Al Modon, 2017).

This merger caused a bloody fight between the movement and HTS and ended with the submission of al-Omar's resignation to the Shura Council before the end of his term, thereby sacrificing foreign political opportunities, losing his chance to bridge the internal rift in ASH, opening the door to a new phase of ASH's life, and giving the opportunity to Hasan Sofan, newly released from Saydnaya, and the head of the Shura Council.

4.2.2 The Fading of Local and Regional Networks

PPA emphasises the influence of external backers on the sustainability of collective action and of the movement, particularly state support or an international sponsor (Byman et al., 2001, pp.71-80; Leenders and Giustozzi, 2020). External support depends on the sponsors' desires and ultimate goals. States offering support typically aim to expand their regional influence, destabilise neighbours, retaliate, ensure influence within the opposition, promote their own internal security, support members of their religion or ethnic group, or pursue irredentist aims (Byman et al., 2001, pp. 23-37). Particularly in

strategically important countries, state actors often treat internal conflicts as ‘proxy wars’, giving intensive support to one of the ‘proxies’ to maximise favourable results. External sponsorship of this kind can have a negative impact: movements are often compelled to accommodate their foreign state sponsor’s desires to guarantee support (Mumford, 2013, pp. 42-43). Moreover, international and regional actors who offer material and financial assistance might endorse factionalism and stoke the conflict, prolonging a civil war to serve their interests (Mullins, 2015, pp. 88-90).

On the other hand, external support can also have positive effects, especially in urging radical movements to review their ideology and strategy in order to obtain much-needed support and ensure their survival during conflict or in the post-political settlement phase. For this reason, SMTs highlight the effect of the international factor not only on strengthening the radicalisation process, but also on de-radicalisation and moderation, a phenomenon that will be highlighted in detail in this thesis (Schwedler, 2011).

Increased reliance on foreign state support, as opposed to wider transnational Islamist networks, narrowed down ASH’s options. The movement gradually lost most of its margin for manoeuvre. Despite the initial rapprochement with Turkey, which led to internal divisions and a split, relations with Turkey strengthened over time (Sofan, 2021). ASH was not necessarily an easy-going movement for Turkey, considering its reluctance to endorse Turkey’s decisions. Turkey was paradoxically constrained, as a state, by ASH's inability to impose new decisions internally. In many cases, the movement preferred to abstain on several important issues including participation in the Riyadh conference in 2015 and the Astana process two years later (Enab Baladi, 2015b; Abo Hamza, 2021).

Thus, it is clearly seen how different types of foreign support diverge and influence behavioural moderation. Mainly, relying on official support, rather than pre-war ideological and/or personal networks, pushes away from radicalisation, drawing closer to mainstream worldwide values and practices (Volpi and Clark, 2019). Conversely, having ideologically-directed support makes a given group much stricter and inward looking, for this support is, covertly or overtly, preconditioned by its ideological alignment with the patron. However, establishing a relationship with international supporters and responding to their suggestions for behavioural or ideological changes usually has organisational implications as it opens the door for intra-group discussion. In the absence of historical and charismatic leadership that can justify and substantively legitimise the de-radicalisation or moderation processes, internal debates can lead to movement division (Ashour, 2011).

On a structural level, the movement's former overall commander, Hassan Abboud, avidly sought to protect ASH from the danger of fragmentation by attempting to keep internal differences and disputes confined to Shura Council sessions and preventing them from reaching the rank and file. However, this situation changed following his death along with all the senior commanders, i.e., potential successors. According to Bazrabashi who attended an extra-ordinary meeting on 10 September 2014 and attempted to preserve the movement's already-shaken cohesion (and fear of potential advancement by the NF and IS), the remaining six members of the Shura Council made the decision to elect a new overall leader of ASH (2021). Leaders of the brigades and sectors were all involved in the decision-making. Ultimately, Abu Jaber al-Sheikh was elected (ibid).

Behind the scenes, two prominent figures were competing to be ASH's shadow commanders: Abu Anas and Abu Jamil Qutb. The latter, who had a greater influence over Abu Jaber, was indeed the de facto leader of the movement (Bazrbashi, 2021; Abu Hamza, 2021). In a symbolic gesture, Qutb, whom Abu Jaber appointed as his deputy, was the one who read the statement announcing the appointment of al-Sheikh as emir of ASH, and the appointment of Abu Salih Tahhan as the general military commander (Anadolu Agency, 2014). This leadership hierarchy was short-lived as Abu Jamil died a few months later during a battle in Idlib countryside (Bajis, 2015).

As for Abu Jaber, he began restructuring ASH with the aim of centralising the decision-making process and by appointing personalities closest to his ideological trend to senior positions. He appointed Abu Muhammad al-Sadiq as the overall ideologue and Tahhan as a military commander. These three personalities were viewed as belonging to the Salafi-Jihadi currents nearest to the vision of NF, which would make ASH's stance clearer towards NF, FSA, and SNC. The results of these appointments soon became apparent (Abu Anas, 2021; Abu Hamza, 2021).

Bazrbashi states that Abu Jaber sought to limit the powers of the Shura Council and make its decisions more consultative than binding. Unable to achieve this goal, he called for an increase in the members of the Shura Council from seven to twenty-four (2021). He also called for the closure of some of the movement's sub-offices, such as the medical office, and changed the structure of the political bureau in line with his ideological visions. Also, al-Sheikh sought to sideline some of ASH's co-founders (ibid).

All these transformations occurred in a relatively safe environment as both the Syrian regime and IS had almost completely been eliminated, particularly after battles

early in 2014 that forced IS out of northern Syria (Arab Centre, 2014). One of the organisational changes made by Abu Jaber al-Sheikh once he assumed the leadership was creating what was known as the 'external office' responsible for external military and logistical relations. The holder of this office was intended to be an external emir for ASH in parallel with Abu Jaber, the internal emir [77] (Anonymous source, 2021). The financial bureau maintained its structure, but became more organised under Abu Jaber in terms of resources and their distribution; yet, with an absence of transparency in numbers and prevention of questioning about the mechanism by any party, even the Shura Council, its dominance over decision-making and accountability declined. This conflict made many of ASH's financial assets fall under complete confidentiality and consequently led to their loss (Anonymous, 2021).

Under Abu Jaber, external financial support was unstable. Qatari support noticeably stopped due to US pressure, and, in another sense, as part of an attempt to reorganise the opposition through a new operations centre (Lund, 2015b; Kara Ali, 2021). This scarcity of financial support coincided with the almost complete cut-off of individual funding from Kuwaitis, who had been a key backer of ASH, in light of American pressure on Kuwait and other Gulf states to discontinue funding Salafist movements (Pierret, 2018; al-Hamwi, 2021; al-Kailani, 2021). These measures even affected the Kuwaiti Minister of Justice, who submitted his resignation due to his involvement in fundraising activities (Lund, 2015b).

[77] It was headed by Abu Ali al-Sheikh/al-Sahil, who was not known before the death of the leaders and was not a member of the Shura Council. However, he was known for his leaning towards the hardliner trio. This newly created position was a hybrid of tasks. The external commander of ASH was responsible for ASH's external investments and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.

Mohannad al-Masri's term was considered more stable in terms of external financial resources, and that stage was the most vital period for support. Generating revenue was done in the hope of furthering the establishment of ASH locally, which in turn established a serviced office that assumed quasi-state tasks in the running of people's daily lives. It sought to strengthen its influence militarily and then politically so as to be the only alternative to IS and the Syrian regime in international forums. Al-Nahhas sought to represent ASH externally. al-Masri's policy, which was in step with al-Nahhas's approach, made ASH more trustworthy to Gulf supporters, especially the Qataris. Saudis, as well, evinced cautious interest in ASH, especially after it lost its ally in northern Syria (Hassan, 2015).

However, this support quickly declined, especially after ASH's withdrawal from the Riyadh conference. When al-Omar assumed leadership, he inherited a dearth of resources as a thorny problem that he must address along with a multitude of other issues. This scarcity continued until support completely stopped because ASH refused to participate in Astana, making ASH totally dependent on its investments and revenue from the Bab al-Hawa crossing to finance its military operations and to pay the stipends of its members, which ranged between 75 and 100 dollars a month (al-Omar, 2016; al-Kailani, 2021).

This duality in political engagement and dealing with political bodies demonstrated the presence of two prominent currents within ASH. The first is represented by a trio that is closer to hardliners and considered one of the remnants of ASH's first stage even though it was not consistent with the original intellectual messages: al-Sheikh, the general leader; Tahhan, the military commander; and al-Sadiq, the general jurist. A second

reformist current was gaining prominence, thanks to Labib al-Nahhas and the political bureau. The first current tried to demonise the reformist current and incite the fighters against them under the pretext that they were diluting the identity of ASH, labelling them as “politicians” (Abu Anas, 2021; Kara Ali; 2021). The final decision, whether to join in any political activity, was in the hands of the general leader and the Shura Council, contributing to the predominance of the hardliners over the reformists (al-Omar, 2021). Furthermore, addressing the West with its language was a difficult strategy to accept within ASH and the Islamist groups in general. According to Kara Ali and ASH’s Political Bureau member Munir al-Sayyal[78] (2021); this made the external current prey to one-upmanship by the Islamist fighting groups, especially NF, giving the first current a pretext to interfere with political statements and restrict the activities of the political faction.

At the same time, the Shura Council began deliberating the idea of merging with NF after it cut its ties with al-Qaeda and rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in July 2016, exacerbating the schism within ASH, which started the process of electing a new leader. Although the majority in the Shura Council voted for al-Masri’s deputy, Ali al-Omar[79] to assume ASH’s leadership, members who supported Jabhat Fatah al-Sham refused to accept any candidates other than al-Sheikh, the former leader, or Tahhan, the military commander, as the movement’s new leader. Following the elections, eight

[78] Interview with Munir al-Sayyal, the ASH’s Political Bureau member, 25/7/2021.
[79] Ali al-Omar hails from a Muslim Brotherhood family that was expelled from Syria following the events of Hama in the eighties. He gained military experience with al-Qaeda in Iraq. He returned to Syria in early 2013 and was a deputy to Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh, leader of Suoqur al-Sham. He was known for his inclination to dialogue with all parties and for engineering major alliances and mergers such as the Islamic Front and the merger of ASH with Suoqur al-Sham(al-Omar, 2021). al-Omar and Abu Yahya, the former leader, were considered among the revolutionary reformist figures at this stage in contrast to the more hardliner current represented by the trio: Abu Jaber al-Sheikh, Abu Muhammad al-Sadiq, and Abu Saleh Tahhan.

members of the Shura Council (led by the hardliner trio) suspended their membership from the 22-member Shura Council (Hussein, 2016b; Abu Hamza, 2021).

Ali al-Omar was appointed at a most complex juncture internally and externally. He began his duties by meeting with members of the Shura Council who suspended their membership, as well as leaders who defected during the era of al-Masri (al-Omar, 2016). Meanwhile, Abu Jaber al-Sheikh announced the formation of 'Jaysh al-Ahrar' a new faction within ASH, at a time when Syrian regime forces were aggressively regaining territories in Eastern Aleppo and Ghouta. al-Omar found himself facing this split within ASH, which ended with the Sheikh's return to ASH, as the purpose of 'Jaysh al-Ahrar', he said, was to exert pressure towards reform and reorganisation (Sham News Network, 2017b).

In similar vein, Ali al-Omar approached Jabhat Fatah al-Sham to coordinate a merger involving ASH and several other factions under the leadership of al-Omar with Abo Mohammad al-Jolani as military commander. Ali al-Omar was delegated by some of the factions to negotiate. Despite difficulties, al-Omar agreed to the merger, but the factions rescinded their position, and the decision was rejected by numerous members of the Shura Council. Eventually, it was rescinded by al-Omar, as he confirmed (2021).

This complete defection ended the internal schism between the reformists and the hardliners, who officially left and joined the HTS. It allowed the moderate reformist current within ASH to undertake measures which had lagged behind since the day of its establishment, not least, recognising the flag of the revolution. al-Omar, the leader of ASH, appeared in a video recording in which he affirmed the revolutionary principles of ASH, its willingness to participate in any revolutionary project based on the revolutionary

Charter of Honour, and its desire to unify political action and conditionally participate in the political process (al-Omar 2021). He also called for the formation of an independent civil administration to govern northwest Syria. Also, as HTS' threat of a clash was increasingly looming on the horizon, ASH at that stage leaned closer to the revolutionary camp to distinguish itself from its foes. Hence, for ASH the resolution to adopt the revolution flag was swift and without adequate debate(Al Modon, 2017).

A bloody conflict with HTS was inevitable. It kicked off after an attack on ASH in Idlib. Consequently, ASH lost most of its locations and areas of control, including the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from which al-Omar and most of the leaders withdrew with a limited military force and surrendered their heavy weapons (Abu Hamza, 2021; Abazeid, 2021). This rapid collapse of ASH resulted from the neutral position taken by a number of ASH battalions. ASH's reluctance was similar to its stance fighting IS and NF, attributed to the weak ideological framework of ASH that lacked a sound conception of identity, allies, and enemies. This weakness that began with the establishment of ASH continued until its collapse was its worst undoing.

4.2.3 From 'an Ummah's Project' to 'a People's Revolution': 'Hardliners' versus 'Reformists'

The ASH leaders were assassinated before crystallising their ideological and theoretical identity. As such, the deaths of ASH's leadership could be seen as 'an event-initiated' frame transformation (Snow 2004, p. 393), in which intra-group dichotomy/binary (reformists vs. hardliners) emerged, leading to major changes on the ideological and structural fronts. When al-Sheikh, who was closer to the hardliner wing of the command,

assumed leadership, ASH entered a new ideological phase. It was marked not only by the rise of the hardliner current, but also witnessed a sudden rise in the reformist current. While contradictory at first glance, this can be attributed to the institutional dimension represented by the 'collective' nature of decision-making by the leadership and executive bureaus as well as the major role played by the Shura Council, as former Shura Council member Jihad al-Dalati [80] stated (2021).

During the year he spent as its leader, Abu Jaber sought to move ASH towards the hardliners by appointing more hawks in leadership positions (Abazeid, 2015c; al-Sayyal, 2021). This prompted historical figures from ASH, who were at the head of the reformist movement, including Abu al-Abbas al-Shami and Muhammad Talal Bazrbashi (Abu Abdul Rahman al-Suri), to defect, establishing 'Jaysh al-Sham'. [81]

While the General Leader of ASH can appoint executive officials, he does not have the power to exclude anyone from the Shura Council. The council still maintained a majority of reformists, whose role was strengthened by the merger with the Kurdish Islamic Front and Liwa al-Haq in Homs in December 2014. This contributed specifically to an increase in politics and pragmatism within ASH, with the two brothers Labib and Kinan al-Nahhas (Abu Azzam al-Ansari) taking over the political bureau, in addition to the merger with Suoqur al-Sham brigades. This also coincided with ASH's announcement of changing its freedom slogan from 'an ummah's project' to 'a people's revolution' in a clean break from the Jihadist conceptual framework and a closer approach to revolutionary political discourse (Abazeid and Pierret, 2018; al-Sayyal, 2021).

[80] Interviews with Jihad al-Dalati, a former member in ASH's Shura council, 13/8/2021.
[81] This formation sought to adopt a national-Islamic formula under the slogan 'a revolution against tyrants and extremists' and adopting the flag of the Syrian revolution (Abazeid, 2015b).

When al-Nahhas was in charge of foreign relations in the political bureau, its political role was activated inside ASH. Its effectiveness increased by issuing statements and commentaries on surrounding events such as Operation Decisive Storm, the death of Mullah Omar, and al-Zabadani negotiations, amongst others, making ASH look like a politicised movement (Drevon, 2021). In terms of discourse, it changed towards a more revolutionary direction through prominent figures.[82]

While ASH made efforts to present an alternative discourse to Jihadism, this did not mean its automatic rapprochement towards revolutionaries, including the FSA. It followed a policy of 'negative neutrality' of sorts (Abazeid and Pierret, 2018; al-Dalati, 2021). Between July 2014 and February 2015, NF and other Jihadist factions such as Jund al-Aqsa launched a series of military operations against FSA factions on the pretext of 'deterring corruption'. The true intention, however, was establishing local authority and influence. It was able to end, dismantle, or exclude many factions from the FSA.[83] ASH's response was limited, in the form of statements of condemnation and calls for forming joint courts to rule on the attacks. ASH sought to form a separation force that did not perform its role. No practical steps were taken to stop the fighting in any of these clashes (Abazeid, 2015c; Abu Hamza, 2021).

ASH's avoidance of confrontation was not ideologically motivated by the hardliners who were seeking to converge with the Jihadists; rather it was to a great extent due to pragmatic military and field considerations, the most prominent of which was ASH needing a field alliance with the Jihadists to achieve military gains, especially as the AoC

[82] These figures included Ahmad Kara Ali, the official spokesman of ASH; Iyad Al-Shaar (Abu Al-Hassan Al-Tabuki), the military spokesman; or Husam Abu Bakr, a local leader who appeared more than once next to the revolution flag (Abazeid, 2015c; Kara Ali, 2021).
[83] Those included, most notably, the 'Syria Revolutionaries Front' led by Jamal Maarouf and 'Hazm', which was accused of representing the American stance.

was preparing for the battle for Idlib (al-Sayyal, 2021; al-Dalati, 2021). This battle was the greatest victory achieved by the Syrian opposition, after a series of retreats or halts in expansion, controlling most of Idlib province and large areas of the Hama countryside. Further, ASH joined the operations room "The Conquest Army of Aleppo" that was mostly made up of FSA factions, unlike the AoC, which reflects ASH's pragmatic approach at the time (Abazeid and Pierret, 2018; al-Sayyal, 2021). However, it did not succeed like its counterpart in Idlib, partly due to the ideological heterogeneity between ASH and FSA factions in Aleppo (Gade et al., 2019).

Al-Sheikh's term ended with field expansion and civil participation in the administration of Idlib city within AoC. In tandem, reformist discourse and politics saw a rise, in contrast with military alliances with the NF in September 2015. By the end of al-Sheikh's term and the election of al-Masri, the reformist majority in the Shura Council was established and expanded.[84] These changes prompted some reformists, including 'Jaysh al-Sham' figures, to return to ASH. Also, it provided the political bureau with an opportunity to further expand, creating more controversy and attempts to frame and define its role by the hardliners: the clearest of which was the confusion that took place around the Riyadh statement, explained above, and the Turkish intervention in the 'Euphrates Shield' operation in August 2016 (Abazeid and Pierret, 2018; Kara Ali, 2021).

One month later, al-Masri's term ended, and the hardliners tried to bring back Tahhan and al-Sheikh to the leadership of ASH, facing the reformist majority that decided

[84] This was reflected in a direct executive decision with al-Hamwi's attempt, only two months after taking over, to weaken the hardliner wing by restructuring the 'Sharia Bureau', headed by Abu Muhammad al-Sadiq
However, the most important and influential decision was the attempt to dismiss Abu Saleh Tahhan, the military commander, in June 2016, which prompted some leaders close to Tahhan to arrest a number of reformist Shura Council members such as Khaled Abu Anas and Abu Abdul Rahman al-Hamwi, albeit briefly (Abu Hamza, 2021). The situation ended with the demotion of Tahhan to deputy commander for military affairs.

to appoint al-Omar. As a response, the hardliners froze the elections for two months before eight of them, including the hardliner trio, issued a brief statement withdrawing from the movement 'after reaching a dead end, not being able to resolve the accumulated crises within ASH for the past year,' according to the statement (Hussein, 2016b).

Al-Omar's negotiation with the members who froze their membership failed. A month later, they announced the formation of 'Jaysh al-Ahrar,' which is closer to what can be described as a *pronunciamento*.[85] Eventually, Jaysh al-Ahrar defected and joined HTS. (Lund, 2016b).

Although this split cost ASH a few thousand fighters, it was able to make up for the loss by taking in factions that were attacked by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Most importantly, it resolved the differences that had remained the most prominent feature of its rule since the killing of its leaders. This made it easier for al-Omar to take bolder and faster steps towards adopting the revolution flag and the principles of the revolution, applying the 'Unified Arab Law', and calling for the establishment of an independent civil administration to rule the north, which was under the control of the Syrian opposition (Social Press Center, 2017).

ASH, especially with its recent public transformations, presented the last obstacle facing HTS to control the areas of Idlib. Therefore, HTS launched a broad campaign against an exhausted and fragmented ASH, resulting in rapid gains (al-Sayyal, 2021; al-Dalati, 2021). ASH also was not able to merge with the FSA factions, making the ideological transformations that it underwent a mere symbolic discourse that did not turn

[85] That is the classical "soft coup" of Latin American politics where several dissidents declare their objection so that the rest of the army units join them. If they succeed, they will become the ones holding the reins of rule without any bullets; and if they fail, which was the case here, ASH would be in a dilemma that would push it to defect or return to an entity that had become institutionally fragile.

into a solid organisational institution or a central military force that could benefit from its new peers within the revolutionary forces (Abu Hamza, 2021).

While its ideologically confusing passive definition was finally dropped, the new 'project' lacked direction or support from the grassroots and allies of ASH. This defeat was the climax of a long period of indecision, anxious identity, and the loss of allies (Abazeid, 2017). By the end of al-Omar's term, ASH's ideology was closer to a revolutionary one than to any Salafist ideology. The question that remained was to what extent would ASH maintain its revolutionary nature and its ability to survive at the same time, considering the brutality of HTS and the increasing regional and international disinterest in Syria?

4.3 The Military defeat: From Potential Revival to Rapid Fall

This phase spans from 2017 until 2021. With the emergence of Hasan Sofan, who was a prominent Jihadist figure before the Syrian uprising, as a lifeline to save ASH, some had, initially at least, a hopeful outlook for what was to come. Sofan's attempts didn't only fail: they eventually played a role in the fall of ASH.

4.3.1 Structure or Agency: Schisms, Infightings, and Confrontations

PPA claims that social movements tend to constitute and reconstitute their organisational structure to respond to opportunities and threats in their wider political environment rather than structural factors or 'the primacy of process over structure or agency' (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, pp. 6-9). Within an external political, less aggressive environment, compared to the founding stage, ASH, despite various existing threats, such

as Iran-affiliated militias and/or IS, managed to make use of the political opportunity resulting from the uprising to build up an inclusive institutionalised organisation with codes regulating how it should be operated, as well as how decisions must be taken. Such an institutionalised structure, along with other factors, including concerns over international designation, lack of resources, and growing dependency on international sponsors, helped activate internal discussions about this movement's identity, ideology, and the future role it is meant to play in Syria.

Although these discussions have led, as we have already discussed, to giving up the Jihadist identity in favour of the emerging reformist current overwhelming the movement, they have also led to divisions within the movement, so that the hard-line current, including the 'Jihadist elite', have broken away. Such a development would never affect ASH's continued opting for 'moderation' in politics unless there were changes in the external environment, caused by Russia's intervention, which created totally different threats that could not be confronted by ASH. Despite threats surrounding the movement, as it was increasingly targeted by Russia and the Syrian regime, the biggest threat at that time came from HTS. According to Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed, 80 per cent of ASH's military efforts were dedicated to any clash within HTS (2019, p. 201).

What made this threat dramatically bigger is that HTS commanders became aware of ASH's shortcomings and defaults after pursuing activities within the same geographical space, as well as because many former commanders and elements of ASH joined HTS (al-Hamwi, 2021; Abu Hamza, 2021). Concisely, ASH ended up with only two options. It could either succumb to its own hard-line current, which would mean retracting its previous "rebels-affiliated" political options, and then joining a politico-military alliance with

other Jihadist groups and risking that it might be designated as a terrorist movement internationally; or go further with the reformist current, risking a long-term battle with HTS, which kept trying to predominate in the north of Syria, among other survival strategies following Russia's intervention. Considering quantitative, or theoretical indicators meant to gauge the power of both movements in terms of the number of militants and weapons, ASH clearly outnumbered the other movement (Abu Hamza, 2021). However, the movement was grappling with a leadership-level crisis, not to mention HTS's ability to influence or at least neutralise, via its increasing religion-oriented discourse, the militants of ASH, during any military confrontation (Drevon, 2021).

With regard to leadership, Ashour argues that historical and charismatic leaders within the armed Islamist movements can play a significant role in facilitating and substantively legitimising the de-radicalisation process if they: 1) enjoy the respect, confidence, and support of the majority of members at the different levels of the organisation; 2) have long experience of armed operations within the radical organisation and similar groups; 3) have solid religious and spiritual credentials (2009, pp.136-138). Still suffering from the fallout of its defeat against HTS, ASH turned to Hasan Sofan in August 2017, a Jihadist figure widely known as a 'moderate' charismatic leader, to salvage the ship after losing Idlib and Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing (Abazeid, 2017; Abu Anas, 2021). However, his mission was not as difficult as he expected (Sofan, 2021).

What ensued following HTS's expansion of its control in Idlib[86] was a rapid war of extermination that lasted an entire year, sparked by the 'Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement'

[86] HTS capitalised on its control by establishing the Salvation Government with 11 cabinets that would serve as its civilian arm. The new government body supplanted the SNC's interim government, and thereby took control of the crossings with Turkey and the Syrian regime's areas, which would be a new source of income for HTS (Enab Baladi, 2019b).

(Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki) defecting from HTS in July 2017 after the latter waged war against ASH (Grinstead, 2018). As such, the movement decided to side with ASH. Indeed, the two formed 'The Front for the Liberation of Syria' (*Jabhat Tahrir Suriya*), headed by Hasan Sofan with Tawfiq Shehab, the general commander of Nour al-din al-Zenki, serving as his deputy (Enab Baladi, 2018b). The decision backfired, as it only led to more infighting. The clashes lasted for two and a half months despite several attempts at intervention and meditation, most notably by FSH (Syria TV, 2018). After hundreds were killed and injured, a ceasefire was reached on 24 April with HTS expanding its territories into the Idlib countryside and tracts to the west of Aleppo (Alking, 2018a).

Relative peace lasted for approximately four months, during which Turkey sought to restructure the factions of Idlib in the image of its other areas of control. Consequently, the National Liberation Front (*al-Jabha al-Wantaniyya Le al-Tahrir*) (NLF) was formed.[87]

Idlib and its countryside were now divided between two powers—HTS and NLF. Internally, and contrary to initial expectation, Hasan Sofan's term was set to end only days after joining NLF, and he was succeeded by Jaber Ali Basha (Enab Baladi, 2018e). In other words, Sofan realised early on that the hostile external environment, especially with Turkey's refusal to officially adopt ASH, would not enable him to advance the movement again. Considering his personal ambitions, he preferred to retreat and await the outcome of the confrontation with HTS, as well as Turkey's attempt to avoid a battle with Russian forces and the Syrian regime in Idlib, by uniting factions and dismantling HTS to refute

[87] NLF was formed by 11 factions at the end of May 2018. The most prominent faction was FSH, with its leader Colonel Fadellah al-Hajji assuming the duties of leading the NLF as well. The new Front was funded by Turkey which pledged to pay steady wages to its fighters (Enab Baladi, 2018c). Two months after its formation, the Front for the Liberation of Syria joined in early August, among others. According to Anadolu Agency, the formation had a manpower of 100,000 fighters (Anadolu Agency, 2018).

any ‘terror’ pretexts, or, at the very least preparation for such conflict, by reorganising the opposition forces (Abu Hamza, 2021).

As the possibility of a showdown with the Syrian regime was eliminated under the Sochi Agreement (Jusoor for Studies, 2019), HTS agitated a new round of infighting that lasted for three months, ending with an HTS victory.[88] Russia took advantage of HTS’s rapid expansion and promoted the narrative that Idlib was now “fully controlled by the terrorists”. That description was used to justify the ‘Dawn of Idlib 1’ (Fajr Idlib 1) offensive by the Syrian regime in late April 2019, through which it managed to take control of Kafrnbouda and Qal’at al-Madiq, as well nearby villages in the Hama countryside, but they soon returned to take control of the opposition through a two-phase operation: ‘Fending Aggression’ (*Dhar’a al-Udwan*) and ‘Definitive Conquest’ (*al-Fat’h al-Mubeen*). The manoeuvre saw the establishment of an operations room as a military umbrella, similar to AoC, that included HTS, NLF, and the ‘Pride Army’ (al-Khatib, 2019).

With the conclusion of the first offensive at the end of August, the Syrian regime managed to expand its control into the Hama countryside, where it seized strategic points in the area that were both the main stronghold and the birthplace of ASH, such as Khan Sheikhoun and Qal’at al-Madiq. A ceasefire agreement, albeit fragile, was reached between the Syrian regime and Russia, on one side, and the opposition and Turkey on the other side (Reuters, 2019), which gave Turkey some room to reorganise the

[88] The HTS targeted the NLF in its bases in the countryside surrounding Aleppo and Hama. In January 2019, HTS managed to take control of the strongholds of the Nour al-Din Zenki Movement located in western Aleppo. The latter retreated to the Turkish-protected region of Afrin (Zenki Retreats from Its Territores in Western Aleppo to the Favor of HTS, 2019). A few days later, ASH disassembled in the Hama countryside and surrendered its areas and civilian administration to the salvation government (Enab Baladi, 2019a). HTS’s defeat of the NLF was similar to the ASH scenario, as in both cases the losing groups lacked a fighting doctrine and central coordination, while HTS adopted a divide-and-conquer tactic in both battles. Further, the major formations took a passive impartial position that was limited to mere statements and meditations with no military involvement. In the latter case, it was FSH that took such a position even though it was a part of NLF (Fahham, 2019).

opposition by repurposing the 'Syrian National Army' (*al-Jaish al-Watany*- SNA) to include the NLF. Evidently, this was solely a Turkish decision, as neither the SNA nor the NLF were aware of such arrangements (Al-Aswad and Soylu, 2019).

The short-lived ceasefire ended with the launch of a wider offensive by the Russian-backed Syrian regime on 19 December 2019, in which it made strategic gains.[89] Subsequently, a new agreement was reached by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Vladmir Putin that redrew the lines of the Sochi agreement , while the two sides agreed on running joint patrols (Syria TV, 2021b). The factions used the relative peace to redistribute their military powers through what came to be called the 'Military Council' in July of the same year. It was headed by a three-sided committee comprising the command of the three major military formations in the area: HTS, ASH, and NLF. (Al-Dghaim, 2021).

In tandem, the idea of having a political body as an extension of the Military Council was discussed. Hasan Sofan said he was considered the head of the proposed body. His position caused a dispute between him and the leadership of his formation that culminated in his resignation from ASH and the NLF in May 2019 (Enab Baladi, 2019c).

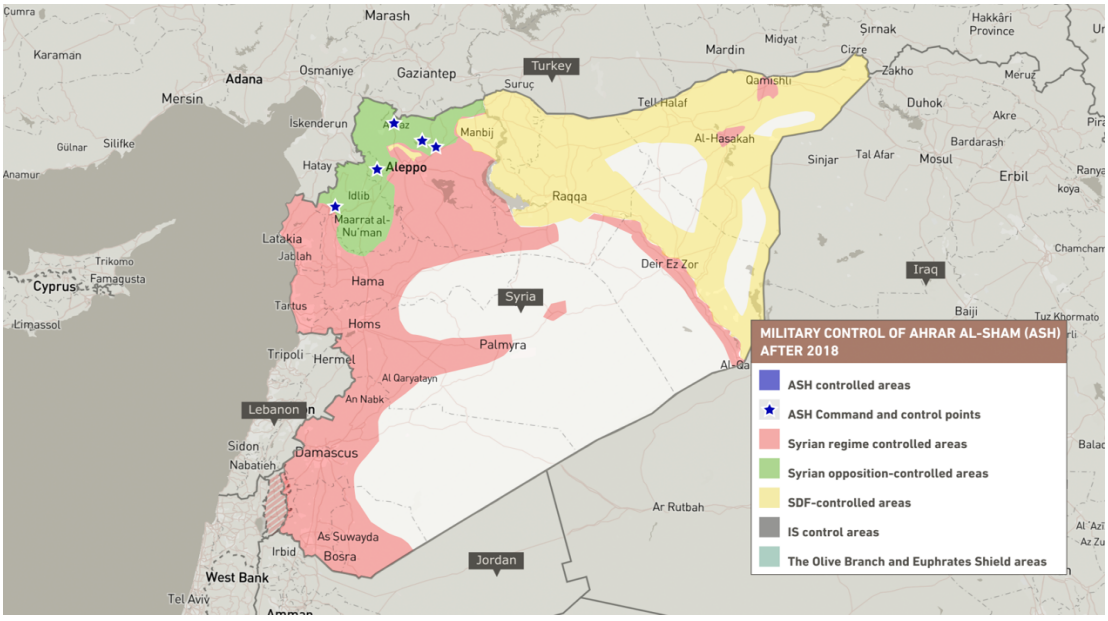
In October 2020, however, ASH's military wing, headed by Inad Darwish (Abu al-Munthir), attempted a coup d'état against the leadership, calling for reinstatement of Hasan Sofan, who agreed to return. The HTS supported the new direction, as it gave it more influence in the Military Council (Syria TV, 2020b).

[89] The offensive, which lasted for two and a half months, was a success for the Syrian regime that managed to take over more strategic towns in the Idlib and the western Hama countryside, including Ma'aret al-Nu'man, Saraqib, and wide tracts of Sahl al-Ghab, as well as seizing full control of the M5 international highway (Enab Baladi, 2020a). The offensive concluded in early March, after Turkey had launched operation Spring Shield that saw the use of Bayraktar drones and heavy Turkish weapons, eliminating thousands of Syrian regime fighters and dozens of vehicles in response to the killing of 33 Turkish soldiers in a bombing by the Syrian regime on a military point in southern Idlib.

Still, Jaber Ali Basha survived and remained the head of ASH. He consequently isolated and restructured the military wing, with the help of the Turkish side (Fahham, 2020). The power struggle ended after some meditation and initiatives that settled on Abu Yahya al-Hamwi as a one-month interim leader, followed by the appointment of Amer al-Sheikh (Abu Obayda Qatana) as head of ASH after three long months of dispute (Syria TV, 2021a).

In an attempt to heal the existing schism, the Shura Council disbanded and had Abu Obayda establish a new command board with a different structure to the old Shura Councils. The new leadership included only two figures from the outgoing leadership (Syria TV, 2021e), leading to even more disputes and divisions within ASH that involved resignation or the discharge of prominent figures and defection of whole brigades. Yet Abu Obayda actually succeeded in minimising the number of fighters that decided to retire from ASH from 15000 to 3000 (ibid).

Map 3: Military Control of ASH after 2018



(Source: prepared by the researcher)

To conclude, al-Sheikh was the head of a body that was entirely changed from the old ASH in name, leadership, structure, and performance. Ultimately, ASH existed in different, mostly harsh, conditions and fought vicious battles against a range of foes ranging from the Syrian regime to the NF. The latter, however, proved to be ASH's Achilles' heel.

By applying PPA, the rapid fall of ASH was due to neither to structural factors nor agency, it was a result of the dynamism of the political environment after the Russian intervention, the imbalance of military power in favour of the Syrian regime, and the threat of HTS.

4.3.2 Scrambling for Resources: One Entity for One Donor

As outlined earlier, resource mobilisation is not only affected by domestic dynamics, but also by regional and global geopolitics. Financial, diplomatic, military, and logistical foreign support could lengthen any given conflict (Dudouet 2015, p. 14). However, this trend of state sponsorship for armed struggles or rebellions witnessed a decline from the end of the Cold War and, more recently, the post- 9/11 'war on terror' (ibid). Building on the last point, Tilly and Tarrow coined a new term within SMT, "decertification', in referring to the foreign sponsor's signalling of withdrawal of its support, which motivates domestic actors to deploy more attractive strategies to build foreign support and empathy, both on doctrine and practice levels (2007, p. 83).

Before this phase, ASH had never experienced such a dire lack of resources. By 2018, ASH had lost all its Gulf donors, most important of whom were the Qataris. At that time, Qatari financial support to the armed Islamist movement including ASH was one of the main contentious issues with its Gulf neighbours, as well as the Trump administration,

during the second GCC crisis (2017-2021). In tandem, the international community was shifting away from a military route towards building a political resolution that did not guarantee Assad's exit from power. This resource mobilisation had a great effect at the organisational level as well as on the nature of ASH's relation with Turkey.

Despite the intra-group consensus he received for the movement, Sofan had to deal with a complex reality. At the time, ASH was facing three serious challenges: scarcity of resources, a fragmented structure, and large losses in manpower and inventory following the defection of the Jaysh al-Ahrar, (Bazrbashi, 2021). Sofan tried to strike a delicate balance within ASH. He appointed the reformist figure Abu Azzam al-Ansari as head of the political wing in order to reattract Turkey's support and gave the more radical wing some power by selecting Abu Ali al-Sheikh/al-Shahel for the position of secretary to the general commander, while Abu Adnan Zaitoun/Zabadani, a close aide of Abu Saleh Tahhan, was appointed as a military commander (Ali, 2017). Despite Sofan's attempts, ASH reached a point of unsalvageable fragmentation after Turkish decertification due to ASH's reluctance to participate in the Astana peace talks, of which Turkey was one of the three guarantor countries beside Iran and Russia. Soon thereafter, Abu Adnan resigned following ASH's defeat in the battle of Armanaz against the HTS (Enab Baladi, 2017d). This decision would have a domino effect, as many other prominent figures followed suit[90] (Enab Baladi, 2018d).

Under Sofan, ASH went through its first incorporation into a larger body in the form of the Front for the Liberation of Syria. Even though Sofan assumed the duties of a higher commander, ASH did not wield the largest influence, as was the case with its former

[90] Those include: Abu Saleh Tahhan, the former military commander, Abu Mohammad al-Sadeq, the former religious legislator, and Labib al-Nahhas, the former head of the political bureau.

mergers. By the time ASH was in a fully-fledged war with the HTS, it had lost all kinds of its external support. (Anonymous source, 2021). Yet, a glimmer of hope emerged with humble, yet comparatively better than before, support in the form of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch. ASH leaders were eventually convinced that they must go along with the Turkish vision and goals for Turkey—"the last and most significant regional ally to the Syrians"—as confirmed by Sofan, ASH's leader during the operation (2021). As Turkey revived ASH's agency in the operation, it wanted to show its competence as an ally in order to fortify its future power (ibid).

Jaber Ali Basha succeeded Sofan at a time when Turkey was trying yet again to restructure the factions of Idlib into the NLF. ASH, and all other factions at this stage, had really no agency of their own in such decisions since Turkey was their only source of support and the only international ally they had.

Jaber Ali Basha's ASH was little different vis-à-vis its structural management. However, some changes eventually came about after the Shura Council voted in favour of extending his term. Consequently, Basha, with the help of his deputy Alaa Fahham, tried to reshape some aspects of ASH, most notably the military wing that saw a number of discharges (Syria TV, 2020b).

In turn, the military wing published a statement calling on its fighters to suspend the powers of Basha and his deputy to preserve the unity of ASH and avoid internal conflict. The insurgence split ASH into two blocs. Ultimately, Basha reversed his decision, realising that a split would mean the end of the already scarce Turkish support,[91] whereas Sofan and his military wing received direct support from HTS (Syria TV, 2020a).

[91] At this point, Turkey's support did not even cover wages (1,760,000 Turkish Lira a month overall).

The Shura Council promptly made a decision to form a conflict resolution committee. Yet, the rebelling military wing rejected the proposal and made a statement in which it charged Hasan Sofan, former head of ASH, to resolve the conflict with the current leadership.[92]

The positive outcome was that Turkey resumed its financial support that had been suspended due to the dispute. As a result, Abu Obayda al-Sheikh, the former deputy to Jaber Ali Basha and a member of the outgoing Shura Council, was chosen as the new leader. Abu Obayda was the first leader from outside northern Syria. He is from Qatana, in the Damascus countryside, and was formerly a leader of ASH's wing in Daraa (Syria TV, 2021a).

4.3.3 No More Ambiguity: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

During its evolutionary phase, ASH fashioned a passive definition for itself: "[We are not] [pan]Jihadism, not FSA, nor Muslim Brotherhood". Moreover, ASH was not limited to Jihadi Salafism as its source of ideology. Rather, it was a Salafist melting pot that tried to combine different currents. Nonetheless, ASH experienced a great deal of intellectual compromise, ideological battles, and intellectual evolution in parallel with several disputes, debates, and clashes with the NF and IS. Slowly, the ambiguity of the past was no more, with Hasan Sofan assuming the mantle of leadership from al-Omar. By that time, ASH had expressed a clear position and removed any ideological uncertainty. Symbolically, ASH had legally adopted the flag of the 'Syrian revolution', under the Unified

[92] The insurgency lasted from October 2019 to January 2020. Maher Alloush, a prominent Sheikh in northern Syria, with Turkish mediation intervened to settle the issue. Eventually, it was agreed that the Shura Council would be disassembled and replaced with a command board of six members that included Sofan and Darwish Abul Munthir, while the remaining four seats were to be named by the outgoing Council. The outcome was in favour of the insurgents who received positions on the new command board, but the Turks were pushing to resolve the conflict no matter the cost (Al-Sheikh Establishes a Leadership Council for ASH and Fears of Intenral Divison, 2021).

Arab Law. Further, the hardliners had already defected to HTS, prior to the clash between the two factions. It was in that atmosphere that Hasan Sofan assumed leadership duties to salvage ASH, relying on his Jihadist legacy and known charisma.[93] However, that decision seemed like a step backwards for a movement that always emphasised institutional leadership over a personalist/charismatic one.

Even though he was released in 2017, Sofan confirmed that he was observing and even participating from inside prison, through unknown means, under the alias 'Shadi al-Mahdi' (2021).

A quick analysis of Shadi al-Mahdi's tweets (Shadi al-Mahdi, n.d.)[94] paints a picture of a realist political figure who recognises the importance of "religious and administrative firmness" as well as criticism, but through engagement, not ex-communication. To that end, al-Mahdi was explicit in his criticism of al-Qaeda and the "Kharijites of IS"; yet he expressed his criticism from the position of a "concerned adviser" who has the best interests of the movement and its emir at heart. Al-Mahdi's position was centrist, relative to the "reformists" who called for completely renouncing the NF and Salafi Jihadism, and the "hardliners" who called for merging with said groups. Yet, he adopted the original concept in ASH's ideology "popular Jihad not elitist Jihadism".

In his first public appearance as the leader of ASH, Sofan spoke of a comprehensive reform that would involve all organs of ASH that has fallen into stagnation. He also stressed his willingness to work with all actors within the framework of a national revolutionary project that addressed military, political, and civil matters (Baladi News,

[93] At Saydnaya, Sofan played a prominent role as the official spokesperson in negotiations during the 2008-2009 rebellion, which afforded him wide recognition and respect from the different spectrums. He also gained a reputation as a critical, yet moderate, figure, which is why ASH was keen on rescuing him from prison in a special deal (Enab Baladi, 2017b).

[94] The following excerpts are cited from various tweets.

2017). Sofan's speech broadcast clear messages that ASH was still committed to the ideological revolutionary discourse that al-Omar established, from the flag of the 'Syrian revolution' appearing next to Sofan during his speech to using 'forbidden' terms in Jihadist circles (national, revolutionary, political action, civilian action). Hence, ASH revealed that it sided with the revolutionary camp, which was further affirmed by releasing a statement supporting and accepting the initiative proposed by the SIC to establish a defence ministry for the revolution that would serve as an umbrella for revolutionary formations as a replacement for the faction system (ASH official website, 2017).

HTS was going through ideological transformations of its own that were no less dramatic than those of ASH. Still, as outlined above, this was not enough to prevent prolonged and bloody infighting. Those clashes, however, were not fuelled by ideology, but rather they were over territory, control, and influence. Territorial, as opposed to ideological, clashes would later become the prevalent norm even to the time of writing.

After Sofan stepped down, ASH joined the Turkish-supported NLF in order to address existential threats such as scarcity of resources and structure. Jaber Ali Basha assumed leadership duties at the time even though he had a religious, not a military, background, and thereby lacked symbolic and Jihadist legitimacy since he was not one of the Saydnaya prisoners (Enab Baladi, 2018e). Similar to Ali al-Omar, Basha also lacked legitimacy, leading to a major dispute. Again, ASH lost the Hama and the Idlib countryside to HTS under Basha's leadership.

The Syrian regime's offensive on Idlib reshuffled the priorities of the fighting factions that banded together and culminated in the Military Council, as detailed above. Seemingly, Sofan had a significant role within the Military Council, as it conformed to the

ideas he unveiled as al-Mahdi. Sofan saw the Military Council as the final solution to the problems on the ground (2021), even if it was ruled by HTS, that would provide this aforementioned ‘religious and administrative firmness’.

With the end of this phase, ASH had taken a firm position that ended its ideological ambiguity. This intellectual and symbolic clarity had yet to materialise on an institutional and management level ever since al-Omar became leader. In what was another step backwards, with the military wing again dominating the political wing, the Shura Council and collective leadership, two distinct characteristics of ASH, were eliminated.

To summarise this chapter, as proven ASH has finished its intellectual, behavioural and organisational transformations, as the Syrian conflict, despite military stalemate, continues. What can be confirmed is that, despite its weak military strength, it has become a new movement compared to its founding, a movement that has experienced a new/high level of ‘politicisation’ and compatibility more with the characteristic of the nation-State than with its Jihadist Salafist personality, which its former and current leaders rely on to have a future role in any political process in Syria and under the religious umbrella of ‘The Syrian Islamic Council’ (SIC) along with other Islamic currents, as will be seen in the next chapter studying the transformations of the AoI.

Chapter 5:

The Army of Islam: From Scholarly Salafism to the "Syrian National Army"

Up until April 2018, the Jaysh al-Islam (AoI) was one of the most prominent and active Syrian armed movements. Although present across the country, it was centralised in the Damascus area, and accordingly posed a significant military threat to the Syrian regime. Russia made it a priority to undermine and neutralise AoI after its military intervention, and in early 2018 forced the AoI to strike a deal with the 'Russian Reconciliation Center' (RRC) that involved its fighters retreating from Eastern Ghouta to the Turkish-controlled regions in northern Syria.

As the first militant scholarly Salafi movement, the AoI was a novel Islamic experiment of unique scholarly interest. A decade after being established as a theology-driven movement that sought to establish Sharia rule, it was incorporated into the Syrian opposition's political bodies, and was, *ipso facto*, bound by its ideological convictions, political necessities and paths.

This chapter studies the transformation of the AoI over three phases, and identifies its distinct characteristics and contexts in each one. In doing so, it applies three mechanisms, specifically external environment, resource mobilisation and ideological framing.

5.1. Foundation Phase: A Company, a Brigade and then an Army

This phase covers two time periods: the first extends from the establishment of the Islam Company (*Sariyat al-Islam*) in Douma to the formation of the Islam brigade (*Liwa al-Islam*) in Eastern Ghouta (September 2011–June 2012); and the second to the AoI's

consolidation into the largest armed umbrella that covered active factions in the two Ghoutas and Damascus's southern neighbourhoods.

5.1.1 Eastern Ghouta: An Oppressive Environment and Accumulated Social Grievances

PPA asserts that environmental mechanisms (threat/opportunity mechanism) alter relations between the relevant social circumstances and the external environment. The availability of political opportunities determines the movement's response and the reactions of authorities, potential allies and opponents. Likewise, political context shapes repertoires of action, and this is why radicalisation is considered to be the result of interaction between institutional actors and protest (Bosi et al., 2019, p. 135). The AoI's shift towards violence and radicalisation was incentivised by complex challenges it confronted in its external political environment in the period after 1990.

These challenges did not only stem from the Syrian regime's oppressive/police nature but were instead rooted in the position of scholarly Salafism in the country and the competition with other Islamic schools of thought that limited its presence in pre-2011 Syria. Its surge was due to a range of factors that included the general rise of Islamism in the country and the return of Syrian expats from Gulf countries to settle or invest.[95] The Gulf's Syrian communities were influenced by Wahhabism and, on their return to the home country, increasingly indulged in beards and niqabs and attended mosques and religious lessons more frequently. This 'return' also produced a new class of preachers and scholars (al-Haj 2010; p. 20).

[95] This was encouraged by the partial political and economic liberalisation produced by Law No. 10 (1991) (Barout, 2012, p. 42).

Abdullah Alloush (1937-2020), the father of the AoI's founder, personifies these developments. He briefly lived in KSA, where he was influenced by Wahabist figures, including Bin Baz and Uthaymeen, at the Medina School. He then returned to Douma, the Hanbli Fiqh school's stronghold in Syria, in the early eighties and began to spread his newfound teachings (Al Daoud, 2012; Arab Center, 2015, p. 4). His work in Douma's al-Tawhid Mosque and the Assad Institute for the Memorization of the Quran made an essential contribution to scholarly Salafism's resurgence in the country. As his popularity rapidly increased, he attracted large numbers of Islamic students from across the country, which disturbed the regime and traditional ulama who opposed scholarly Salafism, according to according to Osama Hawa[96] of AoI's Legal Bureau (2021) and Orabi Orabi[97] (2021).

PPA establishes that in a repressive environment and undemocratic regimes, it is difficult for anyone to make contentious claims during prescribed performances when the authorities are fully aware of them. Although he was not arrested, Alloush was banned from giving Friday sermons at al-Tawhid Mosque in 1992, despite having an official licence. He was also prohibited from teaching in the main mosques, although he was free to deliver personal and religious lessons elsewhere (ibid.). This was part of a deliberate governmental strategy that tried to create competition among Islamists, with the aim of causing ideological and behavioural fragmentation. It duly deployed both containment and alliance construction. In addressing itself to scholarly Salafism, it used a hybrid strategy of moderate oppression and relative openness, and managed to contain scholarly Salafism in its Hanbali bases in the Damascus countryside (al-Haj, 2010, p. 22). But this

[96] Interview with Osama Hawa, a member of the legal Bureau of the AoI, 23/8/2021.
[97] Interview with Orabi abdulhay Orabi, a Turkey-based Syrian Researcher and specialist in Syrian Islamism, 25/8/2021.

arrangement came to an end in 2006 when the Syrian regime, as part of an unannounced security understanding with the US, began to crackdown on Islamists, which involved curtailing logistical support to them and retaking control of its borders.

Whereas Jihadist Salafists managed to confront the US occupation of Iraq by constructing bases and networks in Syria, scholarly Salafism instead restricted itself to preaching and social activism and, in contrast to some of its erstwhile supporters, resisted the temptation to respond to growing sectarian polarisation with violence (Hawa, 2021). But this did not satisfy the Syrian regime, which imprisoned various scholarly Salafism leaders[98] in Saydnaya Prison in 2009, sometimes for the 'offence' of mere association with Salafism (Ramírez Díaz, 2014).

By applying the repression-aggression approach, we conclude that the State's indiscriminate repression played an essential role in encouraging scholarly Salafists, including Zahran Alloush, to participate in the armed action, and to break with a previous reticence shown in the 2003 Iraq war as Yaser Dalwan[99], Head of the Political Bureau of AoI, stated (2021).

On 25 March 2011, one week after the Daraa protests, Douma joined the uprising. It soon became the most important incubator of opposition action through its pivotal role in inflaming other cities in the Eastern Ghouta and Damascus countryside (Bishara, 2013, p. 130). Activists from the city, which is only 10 km from Damascus, were also credited with seeking to fuel an uprising in the capital, by participating in a 22 April 2011 'sit-in' in Abbassiyyin Square. 'Great Friday' sought to replicate the Tahrir Square scenes of the

[98] Including Zahran Alloush, who followed in his father's footsteps by engaging in 'unlicensed' preaching, possessing arms and conspiring to carry out an armed coup d'état in Syria. He, along with other Islamist prisoners, was released after the Syrian uprising broke out (Dalwan, 2021).
[99] Interview with Yaser Dalwan, Head of the Political Bureau of AoI, 20/8/2021.

Egyptian uprising (Khalifa, 2021), and was subsequently acknowledged as a significant 'moment' in the uprising, both because of the number of protester deaths (112 persons in one day) and the first open calls for 'regime change' (Bishara, 2013, p. 131).

Ted Curr's Theory of Relative Deprivation identifies economic marginalisation as one of the most significant causes of the Eastern Ghouta uprising. Bashar al-Assad's neoliberal economic policies prioritised the importation of goods from vital sectors, which produced impoverishment because agriculture was previously a major source of income for Douma's residents (ibid, p. 2019). This shift could be traced back to long-term demographic and spatial shifts that began under Hafez al-Assad's presidency (1970-2000). Douma, a rich agricultural area previously known as the capital's 'lung/paradise', was deeply impacted by its neighbour's haphazard urban expansion and internal migration from other provinces, and transformed into an ecologically harmful human mass (Al-Azma, 2013, p. 147).

In addition to economic marginalisation, Douma was also afflicted by the legacy of historical and political grievances. It was at the forefront of the country's struggle against the French Mandate (1920–1946) but, unlike the capital's traditional and family elites, never received its due political representation in post-independence Syria (Lund, 2016c, p. 5). Its resulting sense of injustice pushed its originally religiously conservative population to embrace socialist/Nasserist ideals, and it emerged as the country's main stronghold of Nasserism in the fifties and sixties (Barout, 2012, p.333).

Soon after, Douma's new allegiances proved costly when a dispute arose between Baathist and Nasserist officers after the second Baathist coup in Syria (the movement of 23 February 1966). Douma's political marginalisation deepened during Hafez Assad's

reign as Nasserism faded away and it hosted battles between Ash'arist, Ikhwani, Sufi and Salafist religious schools (Harmon Center, 2018, p. 5). The application of Frustration-Aggression Theory to this context highlights accumulated political, religious and social grievances and shows it was entirely to be expected that broad sections of the city's population would join the uprising at an early stage.

Eastern Ghouta's religiously conservative rural communities generally observe Sufism, and Rifai (Zayed Group) is the most widespread of its orders *tariqa* (Batatu, 1999, p. 41). Douma, one of the few Syrian cities that follows the Hanbali school, is a major exception in this regard. But Douma's collective scholarly Salafist movement failed to find a foothold here at the beginning of the uprising, although some individuals had more success in this regard, according to AoI's Media Office member Bara'a Abd al-Rahman[100] (2021). Here the national sentiment, upheld by a political elite of residents and activists from the capital, instead prevailed, and dissident action was organised through 'coordinations' that ran human rights, medical and relief offices. It was only after the armed movement emerged, and the FSA was formed by locals and defected officers and soldiers to protect demonstrators, that Douma's Salafists saw an opportunity to join the uprising.

Building on this point, PPA demonstrates that increases and/or decreases in collective violence and radicalisation are mainly intelligible in relation to socially imposed control over motives and socially created opportunities to express said motives. Theoretically, the Syrian uprising represented a structured political opportunity for

[100] Interview with Bara'a Abd al-Rahman, a Syrian activist, former member of the media office of AoI. 2/8/2021.

representatives of scholarly Salafism to revive their anti-regime activism, in which motives were insufficient. Tilly (2017) identifies two regime variations (government capacity and level of democracy) that significantly affect the character and intensity of collective activism and violence. In principle, he varies between almost no (low) and almost absolute (high) control; 1) Low-capacity democratic regimes, 2) High-capacity democratic regimes, 3) Low-capacity undemocratic regimes, 4) High-capacity undemocratic regimes.

An assessment of the Syrian army's 2011 military strength (320,000 personnel) confirms it was a high-capacity undemocratic regime at the time. In such context, Salwa Ismail observes 'this security regime (*al-nizam al-amni*) has consistently acted in ways that affirm violence as the primary and organising modality of action for dealing with domestic opposition. The extent and scope of killing and destruction by the Regime's security and military forces over four decades clearly affirms extermination and annihilation are integral to its rule. Its actions are not irrational or entirely repressive, and this is confirmed by their shaping of regime–citizen relations, formation of political subjectivities and fulfilment of productive and performative functions' (2018, pp. 1-2). Accordingly, she observes that when excluded political actors face high-capacity regimes in such repressive contexts, they often choose to combine underground communication with clandestine physical attacks on rulers' or enemies' persons and possessions (ibid).

The previous insight is crucial in explaining the AoI's evolutionary phase. In June 2011, Zahran Alloush and other like-minded prisoners from Saydnaya Prison were released by a presidential decree. They quickly joined the uprising and, despite scarce resources and numerous external obstacles, established an armed group whose recruitment, mobilisation and strategisation were kept secret. On 14 September, 2011,

Alloush formed his first cell in Douma. Sarriyat al-Islam (as the group subsequently became known) included 14 former Saydnaya prisoners and ideologues who regarded Alloush as their ideological leader (Abd al-Rahman, 2021). It was an extremely selective, ideologically strict and organised group that the security services could not penetrate. Its members included Sheikh Samir Ka'ka, the current head of AoI's religious committee and Essam al-Buwaydhani, a current commander (Haj Saleh, 2017). Ideological identity and family ties provided the nascent group with a flexible and secure environment. Family ties are highly valued in the Damascus countryside and sometimes supersede the State as a means of achieving conflict resolution and social solidarity (ibid).

In the case of the AoI, they guaranteed a strong sense of allegiance and established an initial basis for recruitment (Abazeid, 2021). Most new recruits were young men fuelled by economic and social grievances rooted in oppression and sectarian polarisation. An ex-fighter with AoI, Majed Shaher,[101] said they were not strictly scholarly Salafist, as the daily threat trumped ideology in their calculations (2021). For its first six months, the Islam Company could easily be mistaken for a mythical entity. Its founders were nameless, it had no media presence, released no statements and published no reports on its military operations. It also initially adopted unconventional warfare, including assassinations and attacks on military checkpoints and ammunition depots. This enabled it to drain opponents, but without eliciting a counter offensive (Abd al-Rahman, 2021).

In early-2012, the US and the Arab League spearheaded a diplomatic effort to de-legitimise and 'dethrone' the president Bashar al-Assad, at a time when the militant opposition was expanding at the expense of drained regime forces that were losing

[101] Interview with Majed Shaher, an Ex-combatant of AoI, 3/8/2021.

manpower and ammunition. In response, the regime withdrew from rural areas and redeployed its forces to the capital and main cities. This provided local opposition groups with the opportunity to reconstruct themselves and enter the national political arena. The Islam Company accumulated more resources and, in the absence of an immediate security threat, became integral to military groups that included all of Douma's factions.

On 1 June 2012, Alloush turned to Liwa al-Islam ('Brigade of Islam'), which had more than 1,500 fighters (Lund, 2012, p. 12). Secrecy was no longer an operational requirement, and in August 2012 the Brigade of Islam began posting its battles on its YouTube channel. The group quickly grew and its 'liberation' efforts in Eastern Ghouta, along with Zahran Alloush, quickly became familiar to Syria's Islamists as ASH's former leader Ali al-Omar observes (2021). Alloush's charisma and status as a commander involved on multiple fronts bolstered his image, and distinguished him from most Islamist commanders who used aliases and indirectly addressed their followers according to AoI's leading figure Mohammad al-Hussein[102] (2021). In August 2012, the Syria regime was forced to retreat from Eastern Ghouta, and this allowed Alloush to create an open organisation that included non-Salafist groups. The AoI was established on 29 September 2013 as an 'army', when the Brigade of Islam merged with over 43 factions based in Aleppo, Damascus (and its surrounding countryside), Deir Ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Idlib and Latakia, and this eventually produced a formation with more than 10,000 fighters (al-Hussein, 2021; Abazeid, 2021). AoI's focus shifted from the sub-national to the national level, as it increasingly sought to engage the national political process.

[102] Interview with Mohammad Ahmad al-Hussein, a brigade commander of AoI.

5.1.2 Resources and organisation: the role of ‘political entrepreneurs’

In their foundation phase, PPA suggests, armed movements require legitimacy and identity more than institutional, material or organisational resources. In this phase, its membership will typically be limited to a small set of loyal activists, as this helps to prevent security force penetration. Upon initiating armed conflict, they will typically adopt guerrilla tactics that do not require much equipment, firepower and/or manpower (Hafez, 2003). In the vein and build on what tilly called Tilly called the “netness” of groups—the ways that their members are tied to one another and the state, Kevin Mazur argues ‘that mobilization within an excluded group should occur among local communities where members are densely linked and lack network access to state-controlled resources’ (2020, p. 482). Form his perspective, ‘exclusion from state networks creates a grievance for individuals, and dense networks (1) make their members share the grievances of other network members, regardless of their personal material situation, and (2) provide capacity for costly mobilization. Where these dense local networks are absent, mobilization of excluded ethnic-group members should be less frequent and less intense’ (ibid, pp. 482-83), and the AoI’s formation cycle is a case in point.

According to Abd al-Rahman, the AoI’s military approach in its infancy was akin to guerrilla warfare. Such tactics rely more on planning and the element of surprise and less so on firepower and manpower. It is also instructive to note that the group sustained itself through direct funding from Zahran Alloush, and contributions from Salafists and merchant networks (ibid). Zahran, unlike his sheikh father, combined business and religious activism (Orabi, 2021). But in this regard, he was merely emulating an established ulema tradition that, in the guise of religious institutions, charities and

educational programmes, grew in sophistication and scope during Bashar al-Assad's term (al-Haj, 2010, p. 16; al-Qadri, 2021).

His real estate and honey dealings enabled Alloush to build a fruitful network of relationships with merchants in Damascus and its countryside. After he was released from prison, Alloush turned to his old business partners, including Numan al-Ajwa, to convince them to fund his armed group (Lund, 2016c). Al-Ajwa was an academic and merchant from a well-known Douma family, who had, along with his brother Mohammad, quickly risen in AoI, despite not being particularly Salafist (Khalifa, 2019; Abd al-Rahman, 2021). One of the AoI's main strategic goals was to get hold of weapons by attacking passing units or ammunition depots in and around Douma as Ali Abd al-Baqi[103], Chief of Staff of the AoI, revealed (2021). One example was the battle of Katibat Housh al-Ash'art in late 2011 that was later repurposed as a recruitment centre (ibid.).

The international community saw that regime change was broadly supported in Syria and this made it easier to obtain financial and military support at the turn of 2012. The KSA's decision to support the Syrian uprising, for example, significantly enhanced the AoI's military impact and organizational development (Barnes-Dacey, 2018). Salafist preachers and Syrian political entrepreneurs in Gulf countries played a key role by mobilising their support bases to collect donations in support of the uprising. Adnan al-Aroor, a Syrian Ikhwan-turned-Salafist who appeared regularly on the KSA-funded TV channels Wesal and Safa, was a key figure whose collection of donations from diaspora Syrians and non-official Gulf support channels established him as one of the most

[103] Interview with Ali Abd al-Baqi, Chief of Staff of the AoI, 7/8/2021.

important sources of support for opposition military action in Syria (Lund, 2016c, p. 13; Pierret, 2018).

SMT emphasises the role of 'political entrepreneurs' in collective violence and radicalisation and establishes how they emerge at times of war and revolution and engage in various forms of brokerage, including creating new connections between previously unconnected social sites. Tilly, however, suggests their specialisation in activation, connection, coordination, and representation means they have an even broader role (2017, pp. 28-30). 'When promoting violence, they activate boundaries, relations and stories that have already amassed histories of violence. And they connect already violent actors with previously nonviolent allies coordinate destructive campaigns and represent constituencies through threats of violence' (ibid). AoI's evolutionary phase provides a procedural example of the role of political entrepreneurs and also gives insight into the role of the pre-war network in the resource mobilisation process.

Alloush's Salafist background and connections meant it was easy for him to access the funds raised by Arror and the Saudi Salafists. His father was a disciple of prominent Salafist authorities, including Bin Baz, Uthaymeen and Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al ash-Sheikh (Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti); he also studied alongside some of the most notable Wahabist figures in his university years, including Saleh al-Fawzan and Saleh al-Luhaidan, and very much followed in his father's footsteps in this regard (al- Daoud, 2020; Hawa, 2021). He did not need to pass any ideological purity tests, but instead needed a middle-man trusted by al-Arror and KSA. This was Sheikh Mohammad Qashou, a Douma native in KSA, who later became one of the most active and influential actors in the AoI (Abd al-Rahman, 2021). The trust of both parties also encouraged some minor factions

to join the AoI.[104] In some cases, the military group's network extended beyond KSA—for example, in early 2012, when it was still in its formative stage, it received 1,000 rifles from a Libyan arms shipment.

Alloush used these favourable resources to build a sound organisation governed by rules that resembled those of formal military units. Unlike other FSA formations that coordinated military activities in joint operation rooms while maintaining organisational independence, all of the AoI's factions were restructured and fully incorporated. *Baia* (pledged allegiance), unconditional obedience (*same' We Ta'a*) and hierarchy were expected, and military and administrative 'wings' remained separate as AoI's Chief of Staff, Ali Abd al-Baqi said (2021).

At the lower levels, Salafism was not a membership requirement. Family and regional background were closely scrutinised during application, and a reference from within the AoI was required. But appearance, personal behaviour and indoctrination (wearing a beard, not smoking or attending certain indoctrination courses) were not that important as Mohmmad Kheir[105], one of AoI's commanders, revealed (2021). Those in senior positions, however, needed to meet identarian requirements and believe in the "true doctrine" (Haj Saleh, 2017).

In the period 2012–2013, the AoI tried to distinguish itself from other FSA factions, and Martyrs of Douma (Shuhada' Douma), a local competitor, in particular. It accordingly abstained from certain reprehensible 'behaviours' that its rival indulged in, including infringing upon properties, imposing tolls or invoking colonial antecedents.[106]

[104] This was especially true of areas dominated by Hanbalists, including the sensitive al-Dmier (Shaher, 2021).
[105] Interview with Mohamad Kheir, a military commander in AoI, 5/8/2021.
[106] Lund therefore refers to the anthropological emulation of the French Mandate's "Qabadayat" (informal enforcers) system (2016, p. 13).

In May 2012, the KSA banned popular fundraising for Syrian military factions, and made this the exclusive prerogative of certain commissioned entities (al-Arabiya, 2012). This was ostensibly intended to prevent the funding of al-Qaeda-aligned Jihadist factions, although the actual motivation was the precedent of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, when Islamists had achieved military and political dominance. The KSA's historical aversion to political Islam, which strengthened after the 'Arab Spring', was a further motivation (Pierret, 2018).

Funds had previously been dispersed on a highly selective basis, and non-Islamist factions had been encouraged to adopt Islamic agendas, rhetoric and sentiments. The KSA now proposed 'military councils' headed by defected military officials who would coordinate military operations across governorates, and tasked al-Arror with establishing the "Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils" (Kabalan, 2013, p. 51; Pierret, 2015; Barnes-Dacey, 2018).

The KSA's new policy affected AoI strategies, as Alloush was forced to ally with factions with incompatible (sub-national and national) ideologies, just to maintain the flow of Saudi funds. Ansar al-Islam was AoI's first sub-national alliance. It was founded on 8 August 2012 by a group of Islamist and nationalist factions (most notably Liwa Dar' al-Sham, Kataeb al-Furqan, Ahfad al-Rasoul and Liwa al-Habib al-Mustafa) which operated in Damascus and the surrounding countryside. On 12 September 2012, the AoI joined the Front for the Liberation of Syria - *Jabhat Tahrir Suriya* (FSL), its first national alliance with some of the largest Islamist factions in the country. The aim was to link these factions with the Joint Chiefs of Staff [107](Kabalan, 2013, p. 52; Arab Center, 2015, p. 4). But this

[107] the official and internationally recognized front that receives military and financial support

was a (sub-national and national) failure because of irreconcilable differences between the factions and disagreements about the level of regional support (especially from Qatar and Saudi Arabia). Iran's

increasingly overt (direct and indirect) military influence on the conflict had an even bigger impact on internal tensions.

The AoI later reasserted itself as a prominent actor and recipient of support when Gulf governments tried to counterbalance Iranian influence by turning a blind eye to fundraising on its behalf. Kuwaiti-based charities that were founded by political figures to fundraise for the revolution emerged in the first half of 2013. They included the 'Council of the Supporters of the Syrian Revolution", which was led by former Kuwaiti parliamentarian Mohammed Hayef al-Mutairi, one of Alloush's most important foreign patrons (Lund, 2016c, p. 15). Although ostensibly humanitarian, its affiliates did not deny they were funding and supporting armed factions.

One example was a June 2013 fundraising campaign (Mobilization for Syria's Mujahideen) that sought to support the manufacture of arms in Eastern Ghouta (ibid.). Unofficial estimates suggest Kuwaiti donations to Syria amounted to 240 million US dollars in 2012 and 2013 (Orient, 2013), of which 175 million US dollars was committed to Alloush to reengineer Eastern Ghouta in accordance with his own vision (Lund, 2016c; p. 16). The Brigade of Islam, no doubt inspired by this precedent, then established the Army of Islam with the aim of pursuing its own political project.

5.1.3 Armed Scholarly Salafism: "The Muslim People" at Odds with "Militant Elitism"

SMT defines collective violence as a form of contentious politics in which participants make claims that affect each other's interests (Tilly and wood, 2013). In other words, radicalisation is a framing or claim-making process undertaken during times of conquest or revolution, which seeks to build on categorical distinctions and polarisation to alter individual and collective perceptions. The mechanism of boundary activation consists of a shift in social interactions in which protagonists increasingly organise around a single us–them boundary and differentiate between 'within' and 'cross-boundary' interactions (ibid). Salwa Ismail refers to the wider Syrian conflict and notes: "the enactment of this violence is grounded in the polarisation of the body politics and in the introduction and continual nurturing of a break running through it – the 'us' and 'them' divide" (2018, p. 2).

As outlined in Chapter 3, scholarly Salafism in Syria maintained a preacher rhetoric which disdained political engagement, as confirmed by the fact that some Salafist sheikhs considered political parties to be a heretical innovation, or *bida,* with which Muslims should not engage (Hawa, 2021). In the post-2011 environment, this claim became increasingly difficult to sustain (Abdullah, 2013) as the uprising presented intellectual, methodological and practical challenges to scholarly Salafism. These tensions intensified as younger groups in Syrian society, under the influence of growing militancy, rejected official religious institutions and sought religious alternatives that would better 'frame' their activism. Meanwhile, other movements, such as Jihadi Salafism and the SMB, also sought to attract conservative youth. Scholarly Salafism thinkers were now challenged to provide satisfying answers to pressing questions in society where old traditions and

ideological frames had been shattered (Hawa, 2021; Orabi, 2021). Quite clearly, it was no longer tenable to reject politics, political action and revolt against the ruler.

These challenges, along with external promptings from Gulf-based Salafist sheikhs and Syrians, prompted a political shift that was embodied in scholarly Salafism's assertion that it was exclusively permissible to revolt against the Syrian "infidel ruler" (Arab Center, 2015, p. 2; Hawa, 2021). Scholarly Salafism sheikhs did not label the regime or Bashar al-Assad as an infidel entity or infidel until mid-2011 (Abdullah, 2013). Alloush and his aides, as the AoI's formative centre, went against their mentors and rationalised that it was appropriate to take up arms because Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite. It is an us-them boundary and therefore rested, from the very beginning, on an abusive sectarian distinction between Sunnis and Alawites.

Scholarly Salafism prisoners had previously adopted two very different positions. The first completely rejected the 'Syrian Revolution' on the grounds Bashar al-Assad is, in the Islamic sense, a legitimate guardian; by implication, revolt against him is completely forbidden and popular protests would produce nothing more than bloodshed. Samir Ka'ka, of the Jami current, was one of the foremost advocates of this view (Orabi, 2021; Abd al-Rahman, 2021). The second view maintained that revolt was only prohibited in relation to Muslim rulers and a Sharia constitution, according to an AoI ex-fighter Hassan Zein[108]. It also rejected demonstrations and peaceful protests, but instead on instrumental grounds—namely that change would only come through an armed movement committed to establishing a caliphate. Zahran Alloush was one of the foremost advocates of this

[108] Interview with Hassan Zein, an Ex-combatant of AoI, former detainee in Saydnaya prison, 9/8/2021.

position, which prevailed when Samir Ka'ka justified involvement in the uprising as a "necessary evil" (Abd al-Rahman, 2021; Hawa, 2021).

The AoI, with the support of Islamic jurists, legal scholars and ulama, saw jihad against the "infidel regime" and the establishment of a Sharia-based state as part of an inescapable duty to engage with politics, which was subject to *baia* principles, clear allegiances and unconditional obedience being honoured and upheld (ibid.).

This temporary and completely novel justification overcame scholarly Salafism's historical preference to preach political violence, as the head of AoI's Political Bureau, Yaser Dalwan, confirmed[109] (2021). While this was a pivotal shift, the then-Islam Company preferred not to commit itself to a detailed 'roadmap' for the establishment of an Islamic state, which implicitly acknowledged the predominantly civil character of opposition activities in the first year of the uprising. Douma had a broad ideological spectrum that included Nasserists, leftists and liberals, who organised protests and founded "local coordination committees' to lead the 'Syrian revolution' at the national level (al-Qadri, 2021). The FSA's 'Martyrs of Douma' also actively participated in "liberation" battles. Alloush did not want to confront civilian and national military forces at this early stage, and so sprinkled some sectarian (predominantly Sunni) grievances on top of the established revolutionary discourse (Haj Saleh, 2017). Douma had three main grievances. First, that after the 1980 crushing of the SMB in Hama, it experienced the largest number of deaths and arrests in the country; second, the marginalisation of the Hanbali school of Fiqh who are, compared to the Hanafi and Shafi schools of Fiqh, a Sunni "minority" concentrated in al-Dmier, al-Rhaiba and Douma; third, Douma is the

[109] Interview with Yaser Dalwan, Head of AoI's Political Bureau, 4/8/2021.

largest city in Eastern Ghouta and should, on this basis, be at the centre, rather than on the periphery, of the governance of the Rif Dimshaq/Damascus countryside. These three grievances fed into a 'Doumani superiority' that produced and sustained local recruitment and mobilisation and resonated in the local context (ibid).

However, despite the fact that the Sunni/Alwaite dichotomy dominated, new ideological frames have appeared. In late 2012, as the Syrian regime lost ground, Syria's Islamist factions outlined political and intellectual programmes and their future visions. But this meant that 'revolt against the infidel ruler' was no longer the sole justification for engaging with politics. Alternative ideological justifications were now needed to prevent followers from turning to other Islamist projects, including the Jihadi Salafism espoused by the NF and ASH (al-Qadri, 2021; Orabi, 2021).

These developments, which oscillated between event and agent-initiated frame transformations, reduced the impact of the Sunni/Alawite distinction and required AoI to seek new or multiple boundaries. In a similar manner to ASH, which sought to distinguish itself from the FSA and Salafi Jihadism, the AoI tried to set itself apart from other existing Islamist movements that sought to impose a particular vision, whether Salafist or Ikhwani. The AoI therefore 'sold' itself as a community-based project that rejected elitism and organised activism. In citing Sheikh Abdul Qader Arnaout, it venerated a 'Muslim public' who remained true to the main principles and sources of Sharia (the Quran and verifiable Sunna), and abstained from developing a well-defined political programme like that of the AoI (Hawa, 2021; Zein, 2021).

5.2 Expansion: Sub-Nationalism to Nationalism to Internationalism

In the period 2013–2016, the AoI's political programme was no longer focused on Douma or the two Ghoutas, instead it reached 'outwards' to build direct relationships with regional and international actors, and engage across the country.

5.2.1 Open Organisation: External Threats Offer New Opportunities

The 2013 festive event that celebrated the AoI's official foundation symbolised deep changes in the Syrian political landscape and conveyed two messages. First, that Eastern Ghouta is a relatively safe place that is impervious to regime attacks. Second, that the vindictive chemical attacks on the two Ghoutas (on 21 August 2013) would not end the popular struggle, as AoI's Chief of Staff Ali Abd al-Baqi iterated (2021).

The AoI's armoury included artillery, anti-tank weapons, rifles and tanks, along with two Russian-manufactured aerial defense systems (Osa)[110] seized from the Eastern Ghouta-based Otaya Air Battalion that provided relative protection against helicopters, as the AoI's spokesperson Hamza Bayrakdar[111] disclosed (2021). The AOI possessed Tilly's three elements (Campaign, repertoire and WUNC displays), and could therefore be defined as a social movement (rather than a militia).

Tilly notes that social movements in less hostile political environments have three kinds of claim. *Program* refers to stated support or opposition to actual/proposed actions by the objects of movement claims. *Identity* refers to assertions that 'we' (the claimants) are a unified force to be reckoned with; and *WUNC* (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment) refers to performances that support identity claims (2017, p. 15). While the

[110] They were successfully reoperationalised in August 2013 (Arab Center, 2015, p. 5).
[111] Interview with the AoI's spokesperson Hamza Bayrakdar, 23/8/2021.

last two were present to some degree in the AoI at this time, a nationwide political programme was not.

The AoI then started to represent itself as more than just a military body. In a 2013 interview with Aljazeera, Alloush declared his movement was ready to extend beyond defensive duties. He referred to "[…] a full-fledged political project" and expressed "[…] hope to play a political role in future Syria" that would draw inspiration from the Sharia and "affor[d] everyone justice". In adding he was willing to work with different political and military bodies, he expressed reservations about the Syrian National Council (SNC) and observed he had received minimal support from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Alloush, 2013).

This announcement marked a real change in the AoI's political agency and was rooted in actual programmes (Arab Center, 2015, p. 5). However, two key developments threatened this aspiration and even the AoI's very existence. First, Hezbollah officially entered the war on 1 May 2013, and then took less than a year to seize border areas adjacent to Lebanon.[112] Second IS entered the war on 9 April 2013 and, in a short period of time, managed to seize large swathes of territory, including the two Ghoutas and Damascus's southern neighbourhoods, which were then under AoI control (ibid., pp. 7-8).

Those new challenges and threats, namely the emergence of Hezbollah and IS, required new strategies, which was not possible without moving past ideological and organisational lines that previously stopped the AoI from tolerating other movements as Hamzah Birkdar[113], the spokesperson of AoI stated (2021). As such, the AoI command

[112] Including Qalamun, which is geographically connected to the two Ghoutas, bringing it into direct contact with the AoI.
[113] Interview with Hamzah Birkdar, the spokesperson of AoI, 5/8/2021.

made the decision to join the Islamic Front (IF) that was, as previously mentioned, the largest "experimental fusion" of factions with Islamist inclinations (Dalwan, 2021; al-Omar, 2021). Even though ideology was not a central factor in the process of forming the IF, it marked a new development, for the AoI, as scholarly Salafism is now officially recognised as part of the Islamist-Syrian roadmap next to more established Islamist schools in the Syrian context (Carnegie, 2013; Abazeid, 2021).

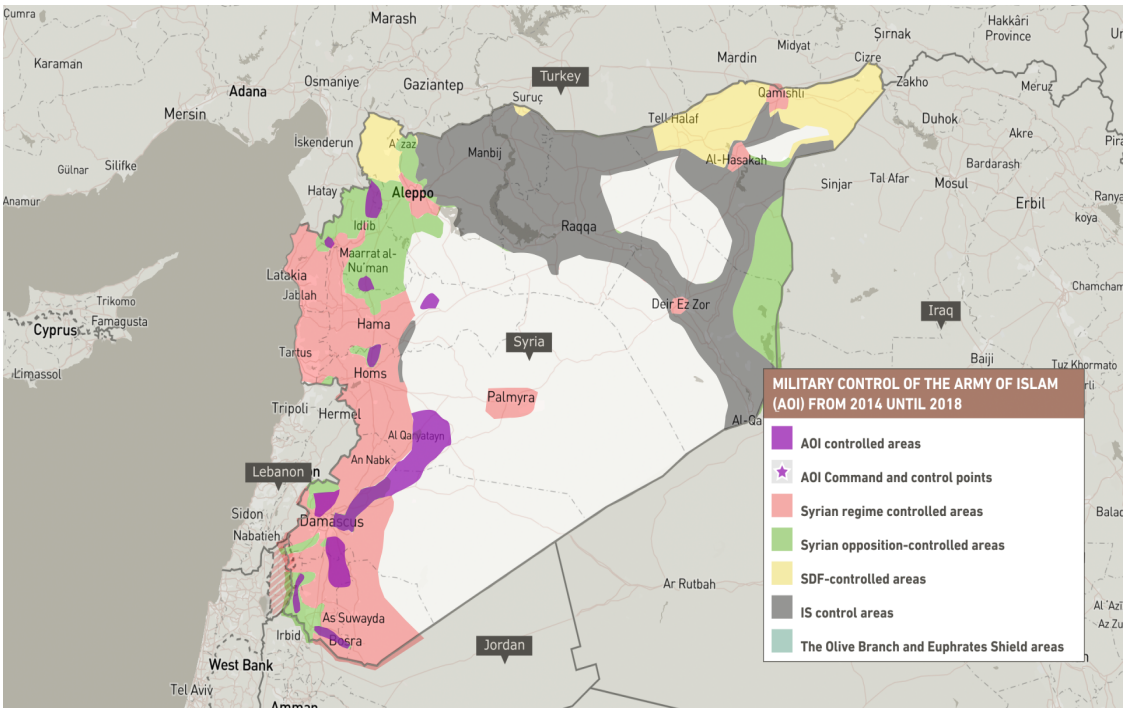
The IF's military successes restored military parity with the Syrian regime ahead of the 2014 Geneva II peace negotiations. It accommodated 'ideological' fighters and gained international support, robbing Hezbollah of its unique advantage and increasing the cost and time investment of its intervention (Arab Center, 2013). The AoI's desire to pre-emptively confront IS, however, generated a backlash, and Jihadist Salafis were foremost in this respect (Hassan, 2013). Alloush accused the IS of being "agents of the Syrian and Iranian regimes" and responsible for "the failure of any Jihadist project they are involved in"; he also issued Fatwas that explicitly called for these *'Takfiris'* (enemies of Islam) or "[…]Kharijites of our time" to be destroyed (Aljazeera, 2014a).

Indeed, the AoI managed to push IS out of Eastern Ghouta which reflected well on its political capital in relation to its competitors within the IF, as Raeed al-Dimashki[114] explained (2021). Consequently, the major Islamist factions of Eastern Ghouta agreed in August 2014 on forming a "unified military command", chaired by Alloush[115] (Al Modon, 2015; Lund, 2016b, p. 19; Kheir, 2021).

[114] Interview with Raeed al-Dimashki, Syrian media activist for Eastren Ghouta, 19/8/2021.
[115] With Yasser al-Qadri, commander of the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, as his deputy and First Lieutenant Abdul Nasser Shmier, commander of the Failaq al-Rahman (al-Rahman Legion), as military commander

While it played an important role in fending off Hezbollah, it was the AoI's timely and decisive decision to involve itself in the fight against IS that caught the interest of regional and international forces that wanted to end the threat of IS before it extended beyond the confines of Syria and Iraq. Alloush himself was aware of that, as he implicitly offered to work with the International Coalition fighting IS (Alloush, 2014).

Map 4: Military Control of AoI between 2014-2018



(Source: Prepared by the researcher.)

Since then, the AoI, albeit with some criticisms leveled against it, was seen as a moderate, strong, and well-organised movement that could play an integral role in fighting both IS and the Syrian regime[116](MacDonald, 2015). Alloush, who was again aware of this, launched a new quest to build a network of international relations for the AoI. His visit to

[116] In that sense, the AoI was considered as a contender for the task of securing Damascus and protecting its residents and vital facilities should a chance arise to topple the Syrian regime.

Turkey in April 2015 was a major development on the political front, where he appeared more open to other opposition movements, and even more committed to their political positions and future programmes. On that visit, Alloush sought to win the approval of the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC), the most prominent Islamic authority on the opposition's side, while trying to promote the AoI as a force with effective presence towards the future of Syria (the New Arab, 2015; Kheir, 2021; al-Hussein, 2021).

Another notable shift in the politics of the AoI was marked by its abandonment of its old rhetoric that centred around Sharia rule and rejection of democracy, and showed a more progressive position in relation to other major Islamist movements[117] (Daily Beast, 2015).

This shift culminated in the AoI joining the HNC, a negotiating body representing the Syrian opposition, as the former Prime Minister and former head of HNC, Riyad Hijab,[118] contends (2021). Notably, the HNC's founding statement stressed that it was working towards establishing a pluralistic, democratic civilian state on the basis of equal citizenship and human rights (ibid). Unbeknownst to the AoI, it was to face its biggest challenge and threat yet, only two weeks later, with the assassination of Zahran Alloush in an airstrike on 25 December 2015. The assassination, naturally, drastically changed the landscape of Eastern Ghouta (New York Times 2015).

[117] Relatedly, more AoI commanders would appear on US and western media outlets. The AoI spoke of an informed plan that meets needs such as security, protection of public facilities and state institution, and the people's right to choose the form its regime and state takes. The AoI stated that it would be willing to be a part of a "national Syrian army in charge of maintaining security, disarmament, and fending the Takfiri and Iranian projects off Syria.". In that, the AoI showed a more progressive position in relation to other major Islamist movements.

[118] Interview with Riyad Farid Hijab, a Former Prime Minister, and the General Coordinator of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), 29/9/2021.

5.2.2 In Search of an International Patron: Replicating the Hezbollah Model

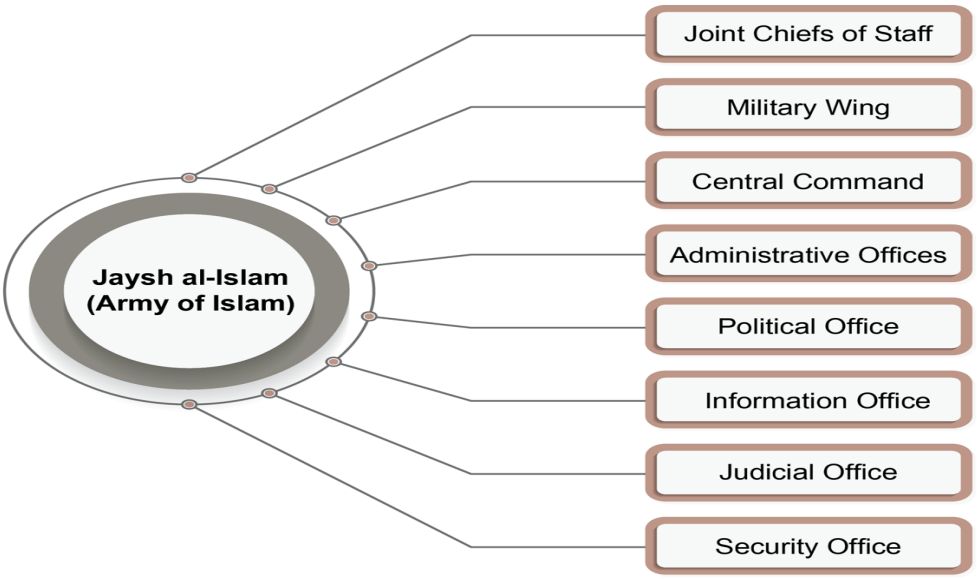
There is near consensus within social movement and conflict studies that an insurgency cannot be maintained, expanded and sustained by mobilising resources based on local networks and private donors alone while adopting guerrilla tactics (Byman et al., 2001). The AoI's ambition to be a constant and effective national actor required a new form of funding, beyond a network of donors that, more often than not, lacks consistency. The AoI command, accordingly, realised that establishing military and political agency in a complex situation such as Syria would require state patronship. The AoI command anticipated that KSA would jump at the chance to be the official patron of the AoI on account of their compatible ideological views, especially after Iran came into play (Dalwan, 2021 and Kheir, 2021). However, that was not the case, or at least was done only at a low level. Those speculations are corroborated by Alloush's 2013 statements to Reuters where he revealed that tribal figures contacted him in lieu of Saudi intelligence. According to Alloush, he was offered informal support in return of allegiance and steering away from al-Qaeda (Owesis, 2013). Conversely, this falls in line with KSA's position on Arab uprisings, as pointed out earlier.

To appease international sponsors, Alloush put the AoI through a process of an institutionalisation centred around a rigid hierarchy with binding duties that is similar to formal armies, as seen in the figure below. Further, a "professional" Chiefs of Staff composed of officers and civilian commanders who acquired military experience over the course of the uprising was established, in order to move to a more planned and deliberate formation[119] (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2013; Abd al-Baqi, 2021). On the judicial side, the AoI

[119] The Chiefs of Staff was a central command that communicated with local groups, on one hand, and oversees service and educational facilities on the other.

worked with other Eastern Ghouta factions to build an overarching judicial institution to fill the gap created by the absence of formal institutions concerned with conflict resolution and arbitration. Such a body, 'Unified Judiciary', was founded in 2014. As regards security and intelligence, the AoI founded a sound security body to address the targeting of AoI's areas of control in the course of its zero-sum clash with IS (The Unit for Political Studies, 2018, pp. 37-40; al-Dimashki, 2021). Moreover, the AoI tried to dominate civil society by establishing community-based organisations headed by AoI officials or pro-AoI figures. According to Omaran al-Derani[120], those organisations were responsible for matters such as relief aid, development, medicine, agriculture, religion, and education, offering a wide range of services to the locals[121] (2021).

Chart 2: Organisational Structure of AoI



(Source: prepared by the researcher)

[120] Interview with Omaran al-Derani, a Syrian media activist from Eastern Ghouta,
[121] Those organisations include the Council of Douma Residents, the Public Sharia Commission, Adala (Justice), and Iqra Institution for Education.

Through its institutions and leverage in the Unified Judiciary, the AoI wanted to establish an authoritarian governance in which it was the sole authority in Eastern Ghouta. To that end, the AoI went to great lengths to eliminate its enemies and competitors[122]. According to Fadel Abdul Ghani, the head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the AoI has been responsible for 249 acts of extrajudicial killing and 619 cases of arbitrary arrests and detentions over the last 10 years[123].

While novel in relation to Syrian Islamist movements, the AoI's organisational model can be seen as a replication of Hezbollah. One can pinpoint similarities, starting with the semantical weight of the name both movements chose for themselves (Army of Islam/Party of God) that imbued a sense of sacredness and demonize opposing formations even if they were ideologically close. The two movements are also similar with respect to their centre. Syria's Douma and Lebanon's Southern Suburbs both serve as a gateway to the capital cities and extend to both international airports. Additionally, similarities can be found when examining both movement's administrative autonomy: the AoI strove to build its own mini-state that is autonomous from the formal Syrian state body, effectively emulating Hezbollah. The AoI also used similar means to undermine its competitors and opponents. Hezbollah has Iran's Islamic Republic as a political and

[122] The AoI is even accused of abducting and eliminating civilian activists Razan Zaitouneh, Samira Khalil, Nazem Hamadi, and Wael Khalil[122] (Alquds Alarabi, 2016). While definitely the most high-profile, it was one of a host of incidents recorded where the AoI arrested media activists and opposing politicians that were detained in newly built prisons such as the al-Tawba Center (Repentance Center) and the al-Batoun Prison, as well as female detention centres (as Alderani mentioned in an interview in 2021). AoI fighters were responsible for serious human rights violations that qualify as infringements of rules of engagement and armed conflicts as established by the Geneva Convention. Said violations ranged from extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests during clashes to abducting pro-Syrian regime civilians and placing them in cages in public squares as a means to "deter" Syrian regime warplanes from bombing civilian areas in Eastern Ghouta (HRW, 2015).

[123] Interview with Fadel Abdul Ghani, Executive Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 3/7/2021.

intellectual backer, while the AoI turned to KSA and its ulama institution that serve the same function. Both also legitimised their existence using a narrative of sectarian grievance. For the AoI, it was the marginalisation of the Sunni majority, that sounds similar to the Shiite-Karbala grievance of Hezbollah. As regards their chief figures, both leaders enjoyed a prominent religious and central status they used to mobilise and attract fighters. Lastly, their military parades tried to emulate those of formal militaries, but with an added aspect of ideology.

The chief difference between the two, however, would be the fact that KSA refused to back the AoI despite the latter's avid attempts with the assistance of Salafist and tribal networks. For instance, some AoI commanders anticipated that deciding to join the IF and work with its components, which are funded by KSA, Turkey, and Qatar, would prompt the Saudis to reconsider; yet that was not the case. A similar sentiment prevailed after the AoI's preemptive clash with IS and Hezbollah in 2014 (Kheir, 2012; and Dalwan, 2021). In a twist of irony, the AoI's intellectual inclinations was, in this case, a barrier rather than an advantage. Scholarly Salafism, revived by Alloush and his father in Syria, no longer holds that much weight for Saudi decisionmakers since the rise of Mohammed bin Salman and his "modernizing" project. AoI's fragile position was further exacerbated in 2014 by US pressure on Gulf countries to dismantle informal donor networks—including the Council of Kuwaiti Donors, which was a major financial backer for the AoI—as part of US efforts to kill sources of support for designated terrorist groups, such as IS and NF (Lund 2016, p. 34). In October 2014, KSA sent an implicit message to Zahran Alloush, who was performing pilgrimage in Mecca, by capturing Mohammad Qashou at

Riyadh Airport and seizing the funds he was carrying [124](Abd al-Rahman, 2021; Dalwan, 2021).

To respond to the new international reality, the AoI looked to build an infrastructure that achieves two goals—create a self-sustaining system that meets basic life needs, and maintain its military activity. For instance, the AoI continued to build arms factories in Eastern Ghouta, while it worked on reviving economic and service sectors that generate steady income (Birkdar, 2021). Seeing that Eastern Ghouta was by nature an agricultural region, it was no surprise that the AoI paid special attention to agriculture, through which it looked to overcome the grueling economic conditions under a suffocating siege (al-Derani, 2021; Birkdar, 2021). As the Syrian regime finally managed to isolate Ghouta from the outside world in August 2014, after taking control of al-Mleiha town (The Unit for Political Studies, 2018, pp. 8-9), military factions looked for alternatives, which involved first and foremost relying more heavily on agriculture and encouraging locals to plant crops. Another alternative was digging tunnels connecting the Ghouta to nearby Damascus neighbourhoods (Barza, al-Qaboun, and Tishreen), as well as using smuggling routes. While those alternatives partially broke the siege, they were soon cut off. Subsequently, the only access point into Douma was al-Rafideen crossing, which was under the control of the Syrian regime that imposed hefty fees on goods, food supplies, and fuel entering Douma (ibid, p. 10).

As the tunnels grew more sophisticated, they became a route for transferring fighters and ammunition, as well as civilians and goods. Those tunnels shortly became a

[124] Qashou was released four months later and moved to Turkey, thanks to Arror who had intervened through channels of Saudi princes and tribal chefs. At that point, the AoI command was convinced that pursuing a Saudi patronship is an exercise in futility and as such started exploring other options.

main financial source, even if that caused a widespread popular backlash in light of the fees imposed by AoI for using the tunnels (al-Dimashki, 2021). In conclusion, the AoI managed to maintain its military capabilities despite the siege, but the search for an international patron continued.

As pointed out earlier, the foundation of the Army of Conquest (AoC) in early 2015 and its notable and swift feat in taking control of Idlib, marked a then-unprecedented rapprochement between the main regional actors that support the Syrian opposition—KSA, Qatar, and Turkey. Even with the limited presence of the AoI in northern Syria, Alloush looked to translate the newfound rapprochement into military gains, where he could open channels with Qatar and Turkey without potentially upsetting KSA. To that specific end, Alloush visited Istanbul in April 2015 where he established a political and media office. More importantly, with the help of active political actors, such as Moaz al-Khatib, the former head of the SNC, the AoI made unannounced visits to Doha, during which the Qatari side agreed to provide direct financial support for the first time (Dalwan, 2021).

The other channel the AoI pursued was the Southern Front. Founded in 2015, the Southern Front encompassed about 50 national factions backed by the US and the European states, as well as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan. The Southern Front was highly organised thanks to a Jordan-based central command known as the Military Operation Center (MOC). As such, the Southern Front gained substantial territories in Daraa and southern Syria, and presented itself as a well-organised military model, compared to the Islamist factions in Syria. In addition, the high level of organisation

enabled the Southern Front to work closely with local civilian councils and consequently earned national legitimacy (Khatib, 2015).

Considering the geographical and operational proximity of Daraa and Damascus, Alloush sought to convince the backers of the Southern Front, particularly the US, that he could serve as an extension to the scope of the Southern Front's operations. It is worth noting the pragmatist approach that was clear in Alloush's rhetoric to achieve that end. In an interview, Alloush called on the Obama administration to play a larger role in the Syrian conflict in favour of the Syrian opposition, stressing that the US will always be an integral actor in any issue in which it takes part. On the other hand, Alloush stressed that the AoI does not believe in the notion of global Jihad or transnational militancy. Moreover, Alloush denied that the AoI had any specific agenda with respect to Israel, adding that the Arab-Israeli conflict would be addressed as part of the foreign policy of the future Syrian state. Lastly, Alloush noted that the AoI condemns any acts of violence against civilians globally, not only in the West (Daily Beast, 2015).

Indeed, meetings were held between the AoI, US and UK officials that resulted in limited financial and military support for the AoI from the states operating the MOC in Jordan (Birkdar, 2021; Dalwan, 2021).

5.2.3 Reclaiming the Umayyad State: Fighting "Safavids", Takfiris, and "Corrupters"

PPA establishes the *framing process* denotes 'conscious strategic efforts to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action' [which] delegitimize opponents' (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 6).

SMT scholars address a sub-process known as ‘category formation’, which is a crucial political process in itself. According to Tilly ‘social category consists of a set of sites that share a boundary distinguishing all of them from (and relating all of them as well to) at least one set of sites visibly excluded by the boundary’ (2017, p. 29). Category formation occurs by means of three different mechanisms: invention, borrowing, and encounter. Invention involves authoritative drawing of a boundary and prescription of relations across that boundary. Borrowing involves importation of a boundary-cum-relations package already existing elsewhere and its installation in the local setting. Encounter involves initial contact between previously separate (but internally well-connected) networks in the course of which members of one network begin competing over resources with members of the other, interactively generating definitions of the boundary and relations across it (ibid, p. 30).

In the foundational phase, simplistic ideological justifications (such as “revolting against the infidel ruler” and Sunni/Doumani grievances) were sufficient to rationalise political engagement and the taking up of arms. However, in the new and more complex phase, when the external environment presented more threats and opportunities, a new ideological framing was required. Accordingly, the AoI identified three imminent threats:

A. The Safavid threat (Invention):

In contrast to other Arab uprisings that the Iranian regime supported and hailed as an extension of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran opposed the Syrian uprising as a “U.S.-pushed conspiracy that targets the Axis of Resistance.” After limiting its support for the Syrian regime, which was facing protests at the time, to economic aids and security

consultations, the Iranian regime fully entered the Syrian conflict through direct military intervention and proxy groups as opposition factions were rapidly gaining territories[125](Idlbi, 2021, p. 9). Iran and its allies, accordingly, needed to adopt a rhetoric to prepare their popular bases for a new stage of a "fight beyond borders". Hezbollah used the rhetoric of "protecting Shiite villages", where, for example, Hezbollah showed a sudden interest in 23 villages in the vicinity of the al-Qsier city populated by 30,000 Lebanese (Hage Ali, 2019). "Protecting Shiite sacred sites in Syria" was another frequently-cited cause[126] on both the level of leadership and supporters (ibid.).

In Eastern Ghouta, the siege was only the first step made by Iran to protect Damascus. While Hezbollah forces were stationed in Qalamun and al-Badiya, the side of Eastern Ghouta opposing Damascus saw a heavy deployment of Iraqi and Afghani militias (Abd al-Baqi, 2021; al-Dimashki, 2021). Moreover, protecting Damascus was not confined to the military sphere, as many Shiite religious centres, known as Hussainiyas, were established in Damascus and its vicinities, not to mention the many universities, institutes, cultural centres, and evangelisation groups that all worked on spreading Shiite faith (Idlibi, 2021, p. 9). Damascus, for the first time, housed widespread Shiite religious and celebratory rituals inside Old Damascus neighbourhoods and the Umayyad Mosque. It is worth noting that those rituals saw battle cries against historical figures known, even

[125] With footage of multiple funerals held for Revolutionary Guard or Hezbollah officers that were traced back to Syria, denying Iran's military involvement or justifying it as merely individual decisions became unfeasible despite early attempts to do so.

[126] In his speech made on 1 May 2013, Nasrallah acknowledged that Hezbollah fighters were fighting in Syria, stressing that "friends of Syria will not let the country fall into the hands of the U.S., Israel, and Takfiris." (Nasrallah, 2013). In tandem, Hezbollah launched a propaganda campaign targeting its base and using slogans and religious songs – most notably the song "Zainab shall not be demeaned twice" by the official singer of Hezbollah, Ali Barakat. The song called on the Shiite youth to perform their Jihad duty in Syria. Similarly, Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser to the Supreme Leader in International Affairs, declared in a press conference held in Iran's Qom on 4 May 2013 that "Syria is not alone… Iran will not leave it alone in the arena," "Iran will not reveal all of its cards in Syria, but will not let it fall." He adds (Arab Center, 2013).

in the collective popular imagination, as the founders of the current Syrian Arab State, especially Muawiyah I, the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty in Damascus (ibid., pp. 11-13).

While it may be true that Iran's involvement posed a direct threat to Syrian Islamists on a military level, it proved of greatly useful at the same time. Drawing on (McAdam, et al., 2003) contribution to the 'dynamics of contention', Iran entering the Syrian conflict gave weight and significance to the AoI's primary narrative (a Sunni vs. Alawite regime conflict), in contrast to the original narrative of the Syrian uprising (socio-political grievances/despot regime). On a more regional scale, Tehran's involvement was a gateway to a Sunni/Shiite polarisation that manifested on a multitude of levels – "Arab/Farsi", "Khaliji/Iranian"—that all fueled regional opportunities to invest in the Syrian conflict.

Islamist movements were not oblivious to those polarisations. Indeed, the majority of them utilized a rhetoric along those lines to mobilise and fuel support, fighters, and bases. Shiite militias emphasised history, particularly the Umayyads' unfavorable treatment of *Ahl al-Bayt* (the extended family of the Prophet Mohammad), to justify their involvement in Syria. In the same vein, the AoI was keen on inventing/reinventing an ideological frame that portrays its battle as an extension of history, but from the perspective of a Farsi/Shiite conspiracy against the Umayyad state in the Levant on the heels of the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate.

Since then, Alloush has used many derogatory sectarian-fueled slurs in his speeches in reference to the Alawites, from which President Bashar al-Assad hails, such as "Nusayris", "Filthy Shiites", and "Raifda/Majus", as he pledges to reclaim the glory of

the Umayyad Dynasty that, according to Alloush, “crushed the heads of the Rafidas” (Landis, 2013; Alloush, 2015).

The ideological frame founded on the slogan “reclaiming the Umayyad State” is fueled by a conflict over the correct historical narrative of Islam. It also highlights a nationalist/sectarian identification that antagonises the “Shiite Safavids” that, according to the AoI, is embodied by the Iranian regime, instead of a “political Alawites” represented by the Syrian regime, which was initially the foundations of the ideological framing. In either case, when put under the simplest scrutiny, the rhetoric used betrays that its ideological frame has been hastily put together and lacks any coherent deliberation or Fiqh foundation. It was ultimately a populist transitory rhetoric that served the purpose of mobilisation. In other words, it did not stem from well-written literature, but was leveled to address a temporary threat. As shown above, that rhetoric was completely abandoned after it served its purpose.

B. Takfiris (Borrowing):

Fighting IS became the top priority of the AoI. It was an even more rewarding deed, in the religious sense, as put by Alloush: “He who falls in the battles with the [Syrian] regime army will be rewarded as a martyr, but those killed in the IS battles are doubly rewarded.” Such sentiment captures the intense level of hostility between the two sides. From very early on, each side declared the other an infidel and, as such, went to battle against each other. Hostile propaganda climaxed when the two collided in 2014. “A battle of faith and infidelity,” the AoI declared. “Ending the existence of the [IS] formation is well within the interests of our Sharia. There is no going back on this by any means” (Aljazeera, 2014b;

Hussein, 2014). Alloush's hardline position can be attributed to a mix of circumstantial and historical factors particularly when traditional Salafists in KSA declared Jihadi Salafists as apostles by branding them as Kharijites[127] after the Second Gulf war (Alhmadi, 2014, pp. 15-18; Dalwan, 2021).

By borrowing this Saudi-originated boundary, the AoI made a swift decision to carry arms against IS by again branding them as Kharijites, unlike other Islamist factions that had to synthesise a position. It was particularly due to that, the AoI was able to end the conflict with IS with acceptable costs and losses, paired with a great moral victory in the form of clearing their names from any potential designated terror lists, which was an issue for other Salafist movements in Syria (Kheir, 2021; Zien, 2021). The AoI even matched IS's mobilisation and propaganda rhetoric to the point that they mimicked IS's propaganda methods and videos that show advanced cinematic techniques that have not been demonstrated before by any other armed movement in the world[128] (Alhies and Almustafa, 2014, p. 14).

C. Corruptors (Encounter):

[127] IS's spell in Iraq that involved massacres and serious human rights violations, as well exhibiting severely exclusionary behaviour towards nationalist Iraqi factions, was established to fight US forces and left a hugely repulsive impression. This was the case when IS sought to re-establish a rule in Syria. Alloush, in particular, was one of the first to warn of the threat of IS (Abazeid, 2015a; al-Qadrei, 2021). Historical, and rather direct factors, stem from the competition between scholarly and Jihadist Salafism in the wake of the First Gulf War that fueled an intense religious feud between the two schools after decades of intellectual, or at least, interest-based, rapprochement (Dalwan, 2021). At the time, Jihadist Salafist thinkers deemed Saudi Arabia allying itself with the US during the Second Gulf War an act of apostasy that necessitates carrying arms against the state, something Osama bin Laden and his Qaida proponents in KSA have carried out in the form of guerrilla warfare that aimed to take down the Saudi Regime on account of pledging allegiance to "infidels and polytheists."

[128] For instance, the AoI produced a video with English captions entitled: "Retribution of the Oppressed Mujahideen against this Age's Rogue Kharijites". The video depicts the execution of 18 IS fighters and commanders in Eastern Ghouta (Alsibai, 2015). The video imitated the style of IS's video production but with some twists, such as having the executors wearing orange clothes to convey an image of a prisoner exacting vengeance against their jailor.

AoI was not the only active opposition movement in Eastern Ghouta and southern Damascus. While AoI's approach to other actors varied form cooperative to competitive, a clash was imminent as the Syrian regime was quickly retreating in 2012, and maintained a covert nature throughout 2013, as opposition movements were occupied addressing more immediate threats such as Hezbollah, as Wael Olwan[129], the former spokesperson of Failaq al-Rahman, discloses (2021). The clash, however, was soon publicised as the Brigade of Islam was repurposed as the Army of Islam with thousands of fighters joining its ranks following the ousting of IS from Ghouta. At that point Alloush sought to seize control of the public sphere in order to consolidate his centre of operations and expand his sphere of influence (ibid; al-Derani, 2021).

In 2014, the AoI had every advantage to become the sole ruler of Eastern Ghouta. Military capability, resources, a popular base, and legitimacy gained through victories against the Syrian regime, Iranian militias, and IS, as well as a conscious willingness to establish a military and administrative rule in which it is the sole ruler (al-Qadri, 2021; al-Hussein, 2021). The only element missing was an ideological frame that served the function of legitimising this goal first, and, second, unshackled the AoI from any alliances and obligations they had made to competing and/or allied Islamist movements, be it within the unified military command, such as the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, al-Rahman Legion, or the Unified Judiciary such as ASH. A competitor to the AoI was found in Jaysh al-Umma (The Army of the Umma) or (AoU) that was founded on 19 September 2014. AoU was established outside the confines of the unified military command and announced that it reported to the FSA and its political institutions. More importantly, the AoU tried to

[129] Interview with Wael Olwan, a senior research fellow at Jusoor Center for Studies and the former spokesperson of Failaq al-Rahman, 28/7/2021.

establish an alternative rule to that of the AoI in Douma (Khalifa, 2016; Saleh, 2017). Similar to his approach to IS, Alloush tried to preemptively and completely eliminate the AoU before it could establish a footing. However, the charges levelled by Alloush against the new group, such as being an agent of the Syrian regime, were rather unconvincing in light of the fact that Ahmad Taha, the head of the AoU, actively contributed to ousting Syrian regime forces from Douma; nor were the charges of its fighters and commanders being affiliates of IS, as Anas al-Shami stated[130] (2021). As such, the AoI had no choice but to adopt a gradual approach, through which they could slowly and steadily mobilise their popular base in anticipation of the right moment to attack (Olwan, 2021; al-Shami, 2021).

The emergence of the AoU destabilised Douma, that saw a number of assassinations of both AoI and AoU commanders. In tandem, some fighters affiliated with the AoU committed offences against civilians that included theft, taking fees by force, and drug dealing and consumption. Consequently, the group faced a wave of popular outcry that, paired with the unstable security, Alloush levelled to eliminate the Army of the Umma in early January 2015 as part of a campaign he called “eliminating the corrupters” (Enab Baladi, 2015a; al-Shami, 2021). While it may be true there was an ostensible consensus by the Unified Judiciary, the decision to act against the AoU did not have the approval of the other Islamist movements, insofar that a joint statement was issued that expressed disapproval in eradicating the AoU (Khalifa, 2016). The statement noted that such a move was a precursor for the AoI to take control of the Unified Judiciary, as well as the armed movements in the two Ghoutas and Southern Damascus. The statement added that the

[130] Interview with Anas al-Shami, a photographer, and media activist from Eastern Ghouta, 19/8/2021.

AoI used those incidents as a pretence to eliminate any groups that opposed it[131] (Arab Center, 2015, p. 10; Olwan, 2021).

A few months after the campaign to “eliminate corrupters”, the AoI, in a similar fashion to Hezbollah, organised a military parade that was the largest in the areas not controlled by the Syrian regime. The event was also a graduation ceremony for hundreds of fighters, in which heavy weapons and military formations were exhibited. The event conveyed a message to the competing movements that the AoI alone was in control of the Eastern Ghouta and southern Damascus (Arabi21, 2015; Kheir, 2021).

5.3 The Beginning of the End: from an Army to a Company

The third and most recent phase, 2016–2021, saw a crucial change in the scale of powers that reshaped the trajectory of Syria’s armed conflict in light of the Russian military intervention that uprooted the AoI from its territories and broke its social and religious bases in the two Ghoutas and southern Damascus.

5.3.1 Migrating North: A New Environment in Light of the Russian Intervention

Dubbed as an intervention to ‘combat terrorism’, Russia had to officially state that it had launched a military intervention in Syria on 30 September 2015[132] (Foreign Policy, 2015). However, Russia was more liberal in its terrorist brandings with terror lists that extended well beyond those of the UN. Most of the Islamist Syrian movements, accordingly, were

[131] Those divisions reflected on the popular levels with some supporting the AoI’s methods as necessary to maintain order, while others saw them as an attempt to consolidate an authoritarian rule in the Two Ghoutas, particularly supporters of the AoU who held demonstrations against the AoI and called for the release of prisoners, as was the case in the Saqba protests (al-Qadri, 2021; al-Shami, 2021).

[132] Following years of insistent denials amid the strong indicators suggesting otherwise, including videos of Russian fighters and weapons and satellite imagery captured by the US of Hmeimim Military Airbase’s runaways.

designated as terrorist groups, including the AoI. Islamist movements sensed the imminent threat and the dawn of a new phase with the emergence of the Russians in Syria, the Chechen War (1994-1995) being a potent reminder.

According to the "opportunity/threat" mechanism, the Russian intervention represented an existential threat, both medium and long-term, as the external political environment shifted from "relatively open" or "less hostile" to a "hostile environment", especially after the adoption of "Carpet bombing" tactics. Based on PPA, this should push AoI towards radicalisation. To the contrary, AoI adopted a 'moderate' political stance and programmes completely different from its previous ideological frames. How this can be explained?

Theoretically, according to Tilly's regime classification, the Russian intervention was an indication showing the Syrian regime's transition from 'High-capacity undemocratic' to 'Low-capacity undemocratic' that offered an opportunity for the AoI to rebuild itself as an 'open organisation' and to adopt a less radicalised ideology. In other words, the environmental mechanism in this phase was 'hybrid' as it combined opportunities and threats, which in turn contributed to the emergence of conflicting positions later.

In September 2015, the AoI launched a large-scale, pre-emptive offensive on multiple fronts named, 'Allah Prevails' (*Allah Ghaleb*). The offensive aimed to take over the southeastern mountain range in the vicinity of Damascus which would cut off Damascus-Aleppo Highway (Abd al-Baqi, 2021), yet it was no surprise that such an effort would have a marginal likelihood of success given the superior manpower and military capabilities of the other side. Still, the AoI managed to gain crucial ground thanks to good

planning and the element of surprise, and for two months the map of control was in favour of the AoI (ibid). Those very developments accelerated the official Russian intervention that successfully, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov puts it, prevented Damascus from falling into the hands of the "terrorists" in a reference to the AoI (Aljazeera, 2017).

Further, the Allah Prevails offensive exposed the military and organisational vulnerability of the Syrian regime forces, as well as their excessive reliance on Iranian and Russian military support to survive[133]. This development might explain the brutality of the Russian aerial offensive that brought unprecedented losses to the AoI, with over 1,000 fighters dead and many others wounded (Abd al-Baqi, 2021; al-Shami, 2021). The Allah Prevails offensive posed a serious threat to Russian interests in Syria that, from Russia's perspective, demanded an immediate and decisive response, in the form of the assassination of Zahran Alloush on 25 December 2015, in addition to providing support for the Syrian regime that managed to impose a complete and full military blockade on the Ghouta.

With the AoI contained and Damascus protected, Russia directed its attention in 2016 to northern Syria in which Islamist factions were rapidly gaining territory. The situation remained largely the same in 2017 in light of the Astana peace process where the three negotiating sides (Iran, Turkey, and Russia) established in a cessation of hostilities agreement on 4 May 2017, which established four de-escalation zones:

[133] The Syrian regime, which exposed an inability to protect the capital Damascus on its own, suffered shocking strategic losses in the offensive, including the Central Artillery Brigade, the Military Security Building, and most importantly the Reserve Staff Command that holds significant political and symbolic weight. The AoI published documentary footage in which fighters appeared inside the building, which was built inside a mountain and was designed to withstand excessive bombing, The videos show car routes, corridors and passages designed for high-ranking military and security officers (The AoI official website, 2016).

northwestern Syria, northern Homs suburbs, Eastern Ghouta, and southern Syria (Arab Center, 2017).

The AoI's decision to take part in the political process (Geneva, Vienna, and Astana) as part of the political opposition's body was not halted even with the assassination of Zahran Alloush[134]. The AoI's involvement was by no means merely symbolic, signalled by the fact that a member of the AoI's political office was the lead negotiator at the HNC (BBC, 2016). Riyad Hijab, the former prime minister in the Syrian regime's government and the then head of the HNC, believes that the decision to have Alloush fill a leading position served as an incentive to the AoI, that accepted all the principles and commitments of the HNC that aimed to "build a democratic state in Syria" and to refute Moscow's accusations of the Syrian Islamist formations as violent movements that reject the political path (Hijab, 2021).

Indeed, the AoI abided by the outcomes of the talks, consistently sending appeasing messages to the different regional and international powers as an actor committed to combatting terrorism and fighting against IS, as well as to the international conventions, particularly with regard to confining its activities to Syrian lands and the Arab-Israeli conflict (Lake, 2016). However, a clash soon emerged between the AoI's commitment to the other actors and its own ideological principles that were established by the late Zahran Alloush—most notably recognising the flag of the Syrian revolution and reconciling with the term 'Free Army', which both seemed a precursor to abandoning the movement's current name and its ideological package, which would necessitate a

[134] Especially after the complete takeover of Idlib, as well as large parts of Aleppo, and parts of the Kurd and Turkmen Mountains in Latakia suburbs that are dangerously close to the Hmeimim Airbase. Moscow moved quickly to take out the military formations from those strategic and vital areas, and most important of all is Aleppo, Syria's beating economic heart (Arab Center, 2016).

core-level transformation involving high- and middle-leadership, as well as the movement's fighters and popular base (Abd al-Rahman, 2021; al-Qadri, 2021).

In early-2018, Russia, deviating from its commitments established in the Astana, dramatically escalated its military operations in the four de-escalation zones as an attempt to end any presence of the opposition in said zones. It had become quickly obvious that the agreements were part of a larger tactical gambit, through which Russia wanted to stabilise the fronts of northern and southern Syria, as it directed its efforts to expand into the east in Syria's Badia and Deir Ez-Zour[135](Arab Center, 2018). Of the four de-escalation zones, Moscow would start its offensive in Eastern Ghouta in light of its strategic proximity to the capital, as well as the dire situation there, on a societal and humanitarian level, after a suffocating siege that had at that point been going on for five years. Additionally, Russia had auxiliary support from Iranian and Iraqi militias who had been stationed in the vicinity of Ghouta since 2013. On the other hand, the opposition factions were exhausted from intense inner conflicts that culminated in military confrontations, which certainly played a role in dissipating the resources and power of the opposition[136] (Lund, 2017b).

Still, and despite an exhausted opposition and population, Damascus's and Moscow's Operation Damascus Steel, which was launched on 5 February 2018 with the goal of taking back control of the Ghouta, proved arduous. In fact, the Syrian regime was confronted by a well-organised resistance that blocked land progress for over two months despite the heavy airstrikes that primarily targeted civilians in the hopes of pitting them

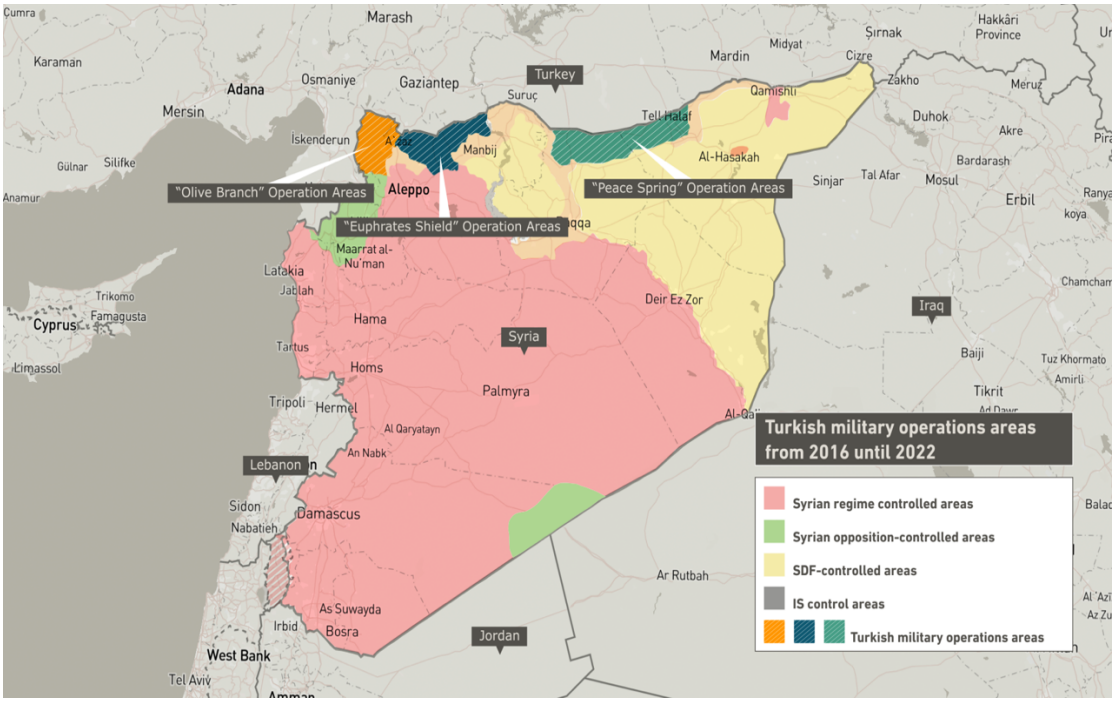
[135] At the time, both the US and Moscow were vying to seize control of the territories previously controlled by IS that was retreating under the continued airstrikes carried out by the international coalition.
[136] Indeed, by December 2016, the Syrian regime was in control of large areas in the south of Eastern Ghouta, tightening its grip further on the AoI in Douma and the outskirts of Damascus.

against the opposition, as the head of AoI, Essam al-Buwaydhani[137], stated (2021). Those particular attempts were not in vain, however. A rampant state of popular panic had put great pressure on the AoI that ultimately agreed to surrender on 14 April. The AoI accepted Moscow's proposal that provided for a safe exit for fighters and any locals wishing to leave for northern Syria (ibid). That decision was largely due to fear, shared by both the fighters and residents of Douma, of another chemical attack, as the memories of the Ghoutas Chemical Attacks of August 2013, in which over 1,200 victims were killed[138], were still too agonising (ibid). With the settlement, which included Damascus's southern neighbourhood and Qalamun, a new phase commenced that was much more difficult, thereby necessitating a restructuring process for the AoI (Aljazeera, 2018).

Unlike the majority of the opposition military movements that were involved in reconciliations and settlements with the Russian side, the AoI refused to head for Idlib governorate, where Jihadist movements, such as the NF and ASH, with whom the AoI were at odds, were in power. Instead, the AoI opted for the Turkish-controlled areas in Aleppo suburbs (Birkdar, 2021). Notably, this decision reflects the new direction taken by the AoI command since 2015 to seek rapprochement with Turkey and Qatar following KSA's dismissive treatment. In fact, the AoI was involved in 2016's Operation Euphrates Shield against IS, as well as 2018's Operation Olive Branch against the PYD. The AoI has effectively become a military movement affiliated with the Turkey-backed SNA (Birkdar, 2021).

[137] Interview with Essam al-Buwaydhani, the head of AoI, 15/9/2025.
[138] Those fears were exacerbated by developments in the political realm where Russia gave the Syrian regime a lifeline in the form of an agreement with the US that was enshrined in Security Council resolution no. 2118 that provided for the destruction of the Syrian regime's chemical arsenal, which would spare the Syrian regime a military strike that was being prepared. Ultimately, as al-Qadri puts it, individual desire for life won over the collective spirit of resistance (2021).

Map 5: Turkish Militarily Operations in Syria between 2016- 2022



(Source: prepared by the researcher)

Though suffering a military loss, one could say that the AoI had overcome the most serious existential threat it had faced. The movement, despite the overwhelming political and social conditions in northern Syria, has successfully reorganised and reasserted its footing, especially after the movement's active involvement in 2019's Operation Peace Spring, through which the AoI wanted to establish itself as a main actor. However, the "native" and "stranger" complex, a prevalent mentality in Syria that, as pointed out earlier, played an integral role in the armed movement in Syria, remained the most testing obstacle. This even led to clashes between the AoI and some northern groups. To address this obstacle and maintain relevancy, the AoI command had to make the difficult decision of merging with the Shami Front (*al-Jabha al-Shamiya*), the largest and main Islamist faction in the SNA, despite its ideological differences with the Ikhwani and Sufi currents that shaped the intellectual foundations of the Shami Front (Abd al-Rahman,

2021; al-Buwaydhani, 2021). Turkey, the primary funder of the SNA, was keen on such a merger in order to minimise internal divisions towards building a military body that is capable of responding to the emerging needs of the Syrian conflict, be it military or political. As such, al-Buwaydhani, the commander of the AoI, was appointed as deputy commander to Mohammad Khalaf, known as Abu Ahmad Noor, the commander of the Shami Front.

5.3.2 Everyone for Themselves: A Struggle for Resources and Survival

As illustrated above, the AoI had a reliable financial and military capital under Zahran Alloush who diversified the movement's funding channels to include states such as Turkey and Qatar primarily, as well as receiving military and intelligence support from the US-headed MOC. Furthermore, during the battle of 'Allah Ghaleb', AoI obtained additional funding from the SNC under the presidency of Ahmad al-Jarba, who is close to KSA. This funding was presented as 'selective incentives from Ashour's prespective' in exchange for the openness and political flexibility shown by Zahran towards engagement in the political process under SNC's umbrella, as the former president of SNC Ahmad al-Jarba[139] confirmed (2021).

Thanks to favourable resources, the AoI's combat abilities and organisational structure improved, which was best demonstrated by the Allah Prevails offensive. The documentary uploaded on its official website (2016) depicts an AoI that is a professional army operating under a centralised operations room that has put offensive plans and used surveillance to pinpoint the areas to be attacked, as well as rudimentary drones to assess

[139] Interview with Ahmad al-Jarba, the former head of SNC, 19/9/2011.

the enemy's capabilities and vulnerabilities that can be exploited in the attack. Further, the AoI dug Hamas-esque tunnels to facilitate passage for its fighters, ammunition, and explosives to those areas. Those tunnels gave AoI the advantage of surprise that plays a most crucial role in traditional warfare (Abd al-Baqi, 2021). On a battle management level, the AoI proved superior to its enemy that betrayed a tactical fragility demonstrated in uncalculated responses that cost them grave losses[140] (ibid).

Thanks to its organisational coherence, clear hierarchy, and institutional structure, the AoI managed to survive the most testing moment in its history, namely the assassination of its chief commander Zahran Alloush, who was perceived as the charismatic religious and military leader of the movement (al-Qadri, 2021; Abazeid, 2021). More importantly, the AoI went through this transformation while suffering no defections, whether at the level of the leadership or developing formations. The movement instantly announced al-Buwaydhani, born in Douma in 1975, as the new head of the AoI. A close friend of Zahran and member of the core group that formed the AoI, al-Buwaydhani was the natural successor[141] (Dalwan, 2021; al-Hussein, 2021).

Still, Alloush left a towering legacy, in which the new commander had to quickly respond to an increasingly hostile environment, let alone the internal challenges such as mobilisation of resources, structure[142], and military strategies going forward (al-

[140] For instance, the AoI employed a tactic fashioned as 'Ma'arek Mushaghala' (diversionary battles), where they launched an attack on Adra City and its women prisons that also targeted Dahiyat al-Assad, the largest quarters for Syrian army officers. As the Syrian regime was scrambling and redeploying its forces to push back the attack on those two areas, the AoI's "elite forces" and "special units" progressed and took control of the Artillery Brigade, and the Reserve Command, cutting off the Damascus-Aleppo Highway (Abd al-Baqi, 2021; and Abazeid, 2021).

[141] He first headed the Liwa al-Ansar, before he was selected to command the Damascus suburbs operations, after which he presided over the AoI Brigades, and finally became a deputy commander. According to al-Buwaydhani himself (2021), "following the martyrdom of Sheikh Zahran, the Chiefs of Staff met. Three candidates were named to lead the AoI: Yasser al-Wazir, Ali Abd al-Baqi, and Essam al-Buwaydhani. After the matter was discussed, the latter was unanimously selected. All of this took place before Sheikh Zahran Alloush was buried and seven hours after his death."

[142] The AoI suffered great human and material losses in the Allah Prevails battle, in which the AoI had to contend with a severe shortage of defensive weaponry and ammunition. The AoI established a 'Military Fortification Administration' in the wake of the offensive that was charged with innovating new defensive tactics to address offensive technologies

Buwaydhani, 2021). On the other side, regional donors and international actors had to reconsider their position in light of the new Russian role and the US-imposed restrictions on external funding. As a consequence, in 2016 the AoI was forced to become more reserved owing to shrinking governmental support and limited network support (ibid; Khalifa, 2016). KSA, for instance, was wary of the Russian intervention, but soon changed its perspective on the basis of a hypothesis, promoted by Moscow itself, that the Russian intervention would limit Iranian influence or at least create a power struggle, an outcome KSA favoured (Rumer, 2016, p. 18) [143]. In either case, KSA's more restrained approach corresponded with the Russian military intervention and was reinforced as KSA was involved in other matters—most notably the conflict in Yemen and the Gulf Crisis that forced all of its players, who previously took an anti-Assad stance, to open channels of communication with Moscow to keep it at bay from the Gulf power struggle, which required some compromises with regard to Syria (Fakude, 2017, pp. 4-5).

PPA generally argues that a lack of resources has direct repercussions on collective action, and opens the door to competition and infighting among political actors. According to Hafez, 'Islamists who command martial, organisational, and ideological resources have many strategic options and are capable of collective action. Those who lack these resources will encounter difficulties and are likely to mobilize few people' (2003, p. 20). In this regard, the AoI's diminishing funds were probably the greatest challenge faced by the movement in the aftermath of Alloush's assassination. In fact, it

that was used for the first time after the Russian intervention: they included carpet bombing and Armored Vehicle-Launched Bridges (AVLB)

[143] As such, the changing political wind led to a shift in the Saudi approach, marked by a different political rhetoric with respect to Syria in tandem with the first visit made by the current Crown Prince to Moscow in October 2015. Adel al-Jubair, the then Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that the Kingdom supported a "political process that ends with Bashar al-Assad exiting power", which was previously a prerequisite for Saudi Arabia to engage in the same process (Rassd, 2015).

was one of the main causes of an armed conflict that embroiled the Ghouta-based opposition movements. The conflict broke out in 2016 and played out on interrupted intervals for two years. It is worth noting that the infighting did not stop even during the Russian offensive that eventually drove all the opposition movements to northern Syria (al-Qadri, 2021; Orabi, 2021). While there may be some causes on the surface, as the players involved tried to rationalise the infighting using politics and ideology, it was in essence a struggle for scarce resources in a zero-sum survival-of-the-fittest game (Lund, 2016c, pp. 33-34; Khalifa, 2016). More specifically, the fighting groups were vying for control of the al-Wafideen crossing, the only official access point into Ghouta, through which all economic goods and humanitarian aid had to pass, and the tunnels that reach the outskirts of Damascus, which were more or less a lifeline for the residents and an indispensable source of income for the warring movements (ibid).

In this context and by using Ashour's (2009) contribution on 'Charismatic leadership', al-Buwaydhani's lack of charisma and religious authority, compared with the late founder of the AoI, had a considerable impact on the level of residents and fighters. As such, other movements, despite their competing ideologies, agreed to join forces against the AoI[144], in order to end the hegemony that the movement had enjoyed since

[144] The rupture started with Shmier, commander of the al-Rahman Legion, relieving himself from the former understandings he established with Zahran Alloush that culminated in the complete incorporation of al-Rahman Legion and the AoI. In February 2016, subsequently, the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, which has well-documented problems with the AoI, was incorporated into the al-Rahman Legion that had become the second-largest armed movement in Eastern Ghouta and the worthiest competition the AoI had in years. Afterwards, the al-Rahman Legion started to frame itself as a "central power in Eastern Ghouta", i.e., it contested the 'sole' claim that the AoI had tried to make since its inception (Lund, 2016a). In March 2016, NF and ASH, with a minor formation known as the Fajr al-Umma (The Dawn of the Umma), announced the formation of Jaysh al-Fustat (al-Fustat Army) as the largest umbrella for Jihadi Salafism, which was a red flag for the AoI due to the bad blood between the two camps and severe ideological tension to the point that each side declared the other as an apostle (Kheir, 2021; Abazeid, 2021).
It was obvious that mergers and joint military coordination were not the end in and of themselves, as much they were to compete or challenge the status quo in Eastern Ghouta. As such, the AoI faced a complex and crucial situation. Consequently, resorting to carrying arms against the other groups would undermine their military power in relation to the Syrian regime especially tin hat the al-Rahman Legion and ASH were holding the main fronts in Jobar and Harasta. On the other hand, going to war with those movements might upset and potentially end the Qatari flow of money, at a

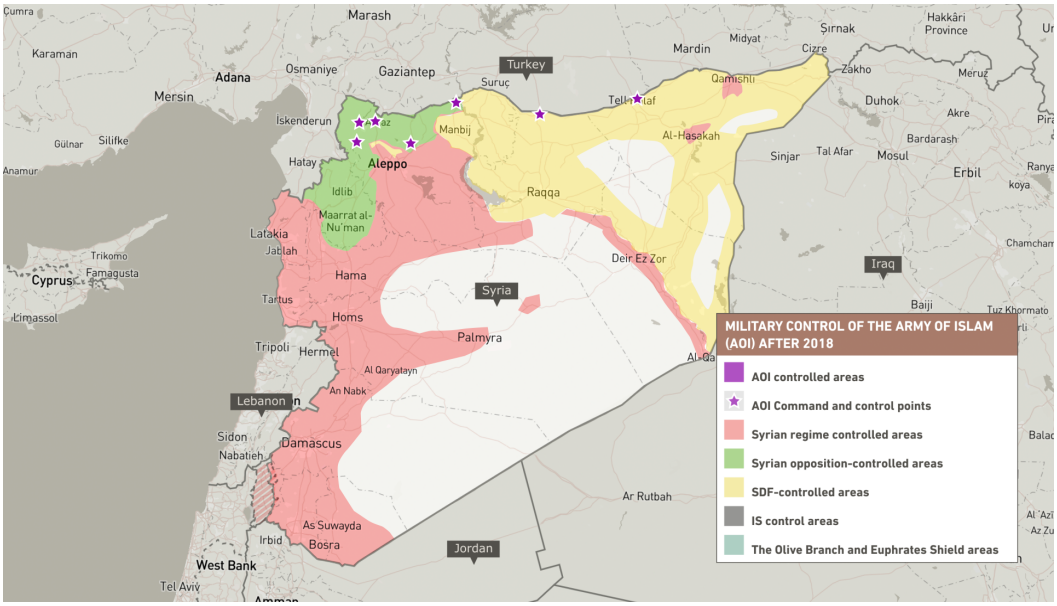
2014 through the unified military command and the Unified Judiciary (Kheir, 2021; Shaher, 2021). The Syrian regime took advantage of the exhausted opposition and gained new territories in the Ghouta, ahead of a wide offensive that would end the existence of the opposition in the vicinity of Damascus (Al Rayan, 2017).

With its image tarnished, the AoI was not a welcome presence in northern Syria by the majority of the opposition factions that allied themselves with Turkey. AoI fighters faced antagonism and pressures and had their movement restricted, as they were living in isolated designated camps (Kheir, 2021). Thanks to its long experience and financial resources amassed through donations from Syrians in diaspora and the movement's own investments, however, the AoI managed to restructure itself. The movement moved its fighters and supporters to more organised tents built on land bought in Aleppo suburbs, and, soon thereafter, resumed military operations (Dalwan, 2021; Shaher, 2021). As the AoI had forged a new life and adapted to its new environment, it attracted former and new fighters. The movement had approximately 2,500 active fighters and operated training camps in Ifreen and al-Bab, which paved the way for the AoI's incorporation into the Turkey-backed SNA (Khalifa, 2019). This is the largest transformation the AoI has gone through to date, as it was repurposed as a minor military group whose behaviour and

time when Qatar was the only international player that could access Ghouta, thanks to the close relationship between those movements and Doha. Conversely, accepting the new reality will be the beginning of the end for the AoI's stature and domination over the military and political landscape (Birkdar, 2021; Abd al-Rahman, 2021). Even though the AoI perhaps was hoping to delay what seems an inevitable conflict or avoid it altogether, the assassination of the chief judge of Eastern Ghouta, Khaled Taffour, in Hamouriya town exacerbated tensions and sparked the first round of opposition infighting, which ensued following the al-Rahman Legion holding AoI responsible for the assassination and all past assassinations in Eastern Ghouta, demanding that the latter surrender those who are responsible (Enab Baladi, 2016b). The first round of infighting saw the AoI clashing with the al-Rahman Legion and the al-Fustat Army. The clashes came to an end following a Qatar mediation headed by the former Prime Minister Riyad Hijab after dozens were killed and wounded (Hijab, 2021). Subsequently, a second, larger round of infighting started when the AoI accused the al-Rahman Legion of initiating the conflict (Olwan, 2021; Dalwan, 2021). Despite popular calls to end the infighting and work on a reconciliation, clashes went on for about four months, killing 67 fighters from both sides, in addition to dozens wounded. Additionally, dozens of civilians were killed and wounded. The infighting came to an end after the SIC intervened on 22 August 2017.

political rhetoric falls, by necessity, in line with the SNC. As such, the existence of the AoI's military activism is now contingent upon Turkish backing, which has deeply impacted and weakened the AoI's scholarly Salafism (Abd al-Rahman, 2021).

Map 6: Military Control of AoI after 2018



(Source: Prepared by the researcher)

5.3.3 Clashing Identities: Gradually Abandoning Scholarly Salafism

By using (Snow, 2004) interactive transformation forms, the Russian military intervention was an exemplary event-initiated frame transformation, that produced a partial alteration of AoI's dominant frames and boundaries (Sunni/Alawite). In this regard, Ideological framing against the Russian troops was not a difficult task, for a variety of reasons. For one, Russia explicitly branded the AoI as a "terrorist organization" and actively sought to eradicate it. More importantly, however, the vast majority of the Syrian opposition spectrum, including secularist and Islamist currents, resented the involvement of Russia that not only provided a political/legal cover for the Syrian regime, but also

launched a military intervention, effectively keeping it in power (Hijab, 2021; al-Buwaydhani, 2021). To Islamists, simply reminding themselves of the early statements made by Lavrov in 2012 about Russia's refusal to let "a Sunni rule in Syria come to be" was enough to fuel the Sunni grievance, but in this case. on an international scale, one that extends far beyond local and regional stakes (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2012). On the other hand, the imagery of Russia's war in Syria, especially the Russian orthodox clergy blessing the war in Syria as a "holy war" against terrorism, using the pretence of "protecting Christians and churches" in the Middle East added new ideological facets to the Syrian conflict (Comerford, 2015). For instance, phrases such as "a new Crusade" or "reviving the Crusades" were circulated by Islamist fighters (Aljazeera, 2015c). The AoI, however, refrained from using such rationalisations, despite their effectiveness, for a number of reasons, one of which was the AoI's hopes of winning the support of Western powers, especially the US. Moreover, that rhetoric was exhausted by IS in its ideological mobilisation against the international coalition; but more importantly, was the AoI's decision to be an active player in the opposition's political representative bodies and the US-led political process (Dalwan, 2021; al-Qadri, 2021).

Faced with this new reality, the AoI adopted a dual, pragmatic approach that in reality employed two, contradictory, political rhetorics. To the outsider, the AoI exhibited an open rhetoric and political positions that chiefly aimed to attract support and thwart Russian aims to brand it as a terror group. Its second was ideologically charged and used *ad hoc* to mobilise its base (reference). On 23 February 2017, the AoI made an official decision to adopt the flag of the Syrian revolution next to its own white flag that bore its

name. This very decision was the epitome of a nationalistic-Islamist duality approach, where either symbol is highlighted as needed (Birkdar, 2021; al-Qadri, 2021).

Yet, this duality reflected a power struggle between two wings: a more traditional one represented by the founding core who abide by scholarly Salafist ideals, and a "technocratic" one that was initially enlisted for their expertise and skills to help with structuring and external relationships. Zahran's charisma and central status enabled him to strike a delicate balance. This very lack of charisma in his successors turned what was a healthy competition to a power struggle between the traditional elite headed by the new leader al-Buwaydhani and the deputy commander Nu'man al-Ajwa (Abd al-Rahman, 2021; Shaher, 2021; Orabi, 2021).

In the view of this study, matters of military backing and preventing a terror branding rose to the top of priorities for the AoI command after the Russian intervention. Notably, it was al-Ajwa, who had handled those matters since the inception of the AoI, who shook the status of al-Buwaydhani and the traditional elite. Thus, ideology was employed in the AoI's inner power struggle, as al-Buwyadhani repeatedly criticised and tried to tarnish the image of al-Ajwa as someone who abandoned AoI's political and intellectual principles, while accusing him of being an agent for the US, seeing that he was the point of communication with Washington. This attack was not limited to al-Ajwa or even to the confines of the Ghouta, as it targeted any and all names who were not fully aligned with the traditional Sheikh current, such as Islam Alloush, the former spokesperson for the AoI, who was dismissed from his duties (Anonymous source, 2021). In such a charged atmosphere, the assassination of Nu'man al-Ajwa and his brother Mohammad one week before the decision was made to surrender in the Ghouta in 2018

was a puzzling mystery in light of the fact that the AoI made no official statement on the matter (Khalifa, 2019). In other words, scholarly Salafism turned, for the first time, inwards. It was used as an ideological frame in the power struggle, not only against enemies and competitors. Consequently, scholarly Salafism transfigured from an ideological foundation that embodied the entirety of the AoI to a tool that could be wielded as needed.

The Ghouta infightings were another explicit example of such. Even if, as outlined earlier, it was a struggle for resources and power, religious justifications, such as “ending injustice” and “fending off aggressors”, were cited, and in turn the pre-uprising scholarly Salafism problem was emphasised, but this time it was not a rhetoric pushed by the Syrian regime. Rather, those justifications were used by different traditional Islamic currents such as Sufism, the SMB, and new ones such as Jihadi Salafism. Those schools joined forces despite their intellectual incompatibility. On the other side, scholarly Salafism has run its functional course and took a back seat when it decided to accept the Syrian Islamic council (SIC) as a mediator in 2017 that embodied a new and wholly different ideological frame. This decision thus served as an official recognition of the SIC as a religious authority with traditional Ash’ari sensibilities. That is not to say that the body of the SIC did not house other schools of thought, but the fact that Sheikh Osama Rifai, the most prominent Ash’ari figure in all of Syria, was selected as the head of the council is emblematic of the prevalence of the Ash’ari school with its well-known friction with Salafism in general, and scholarly Salafism specifically (Rifai, 2020, p. 4). For instance, Sheikh Saria Rifai, a co-founder, spoke out against the AoI when the infighting started in Ghouta in 2016, noting that “Salafis deem Ash’aris as infidels” which was interpreted as

him taking the side of the al-Rahman Legion, even if he later retracted that statement (Hussein, 2016a).

As much as it was a useful tool to mobilise a base in the Hanbali-majority Douma, scholarly Salafism was a heavy package in northern Syria. The AoI felt it has no choice but to ease it if it wanted to coexist with the other groups and the local community that had adopted clashing beliefs in many aspects. Since then, the AoI has deferred to the Fatwas of the SIC that rationalised and provided religious justifications for the fight against three opponents: the Syrian regime, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and Kurdish autonomism, particularly the Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Dalwan, 2021).

Accepting the SIC as a religious authority implied adopting the body's narrative of the Syrian conflict. Dubbed as the "Fiqh Adaptation of the Ongoing Battle with the [Syrian] Regime", to the SIC, fighting the Syrian regime is mandatory not only because its head is an Alawite, which is "a non-Muslim sect as per all Muslim scholars" according to the council, but also because the Syrian regime has adopted a "Baathist-Secularist agenda that it is forcing upon the people" (SIC, 2015).

According to PPA, the framing process that shapes armed conflicts, revolutions and wars, produces 'polarisation'. This occurs because it makes the 'us–them' boundary more salient, hollows out the uninvolved middle category, intensifies conflict across the boundary, raises the stakes of winning or losing and enhances opportunities for leaders to initiate action against their enemies. In this vein, Tilly argued that 'polarization involves the widening of political and social space between claimants in a contentious episode, and it also extends to previously uncommitted or moderate actors who gravitate towards

one, or both, extremes' (2017, p.21). It combines category formation, competition, omnipresent brokerage and opportunity–threat spiral mechanisms (ibid, p.22).

In this regard, Secularism being cited in the Islamic justification for the uprising against the Syrian regime was a new and unusual aspect in the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. In the beginning, the Syrian uprising broke out in a number of areas at the hands of activists from various political beliefs who were united in their national goal. Syria's Islamists were not the ones behind the uprising. Rather, they joined later, and took centre stage as military action took over the Syrian landscape. Yet, secular activists contributed significantly to holding peaceful protests, establishing slogans, organising humanitarian efforts, and leading the opposition's political process (Van Dam, 2017).

As such, pointing out secularism heralded a new clash not only with the Syrian regime, but other secular forces, including those within the opposition. Khatib (2021), in this context, attributes the establishment of the SIC to political tendencies fueled by religious fears harboured by some Syrian Islamist actors of secularism and anti-religious forces potentially taking over in a post-uprising Syria. Those fears were captured in the statement of the founding council that named three objectives for the SIC: reaffirming the Islamic project, reviving the role of the religious institution, and empowering the Syrian people's Islamic roots to play its leading role (SIC, 2014). Those same sentiments surfaced in the fight against the Syrian Democratic Forces with descriptions such as "secularism" and "hateful secularism" used as a justification for the military confrontation (SIC, 2016a). An opposing sentiment was highlighted in the fight against IS that was rooted in behavioural/political justifications, more so than intellectual/ideological, such as

declaring an Islamic state that lacks a Sharia foundation, excessive takfir, the refusal to defer to an independent judicial body, and their Kharijite similarities (SIC, 2014).

After a period of relative stability in light of a Russian-led effort to establish a constitutional constitution charged with devising a new constitution, the SIC's rhetoric introduced a new dichotomy to the Syrian conflict that has been noticeably present in Syrian political discord since 2019. The Islamist/secularist boundary established a new frame that would shape future distinctions and competition. As such, one's political position was not as significant as one's intellectual and ideological school of thought, considering that the conflict was no longer over a political regime, but "the identity of the Umma". Thus, the SIC published the Charter of the Syrian Identity on 20 February 2021, in which it intended to enshrine the "Islamic identity" of the Syrian people in the face of what the statement described as "attempts made by some to blur, create suspicions, and omit the Syrian identity."[145](SIC, 2021). The charter was met with wide controversy within the Syrian opposition due to the fact that it tries to prematurely address a political issue before devising a political resolution that affords the Syrian people the right to determine their identity and the form of their state (Ghalioun, 2021). However, the SIC believed that this was a pressing and inescapable need even before the ousting of the Syrian regime amid efforts made by local and international secularist players to alter the essence of the Syrian identity (al-Hussein, 2021).

[145] This supposed identity is marked by five identifiers: "First: Islam is the faith of choice for the majority of the Syrian people, and as such is a cultural and civilizational foundation for all of Syrians. Second: Syria is an essential component of the Arab and Islamic World. Third: Arabic is the dominant and official language of Syria. Fourth: The cultural values and norms shaping the civilisations that rose on the Syrian lands throughout history are primary sources for the identity of Syria. Fifth: Syria's historical landscape that includes diverse cultures, languages, faiths, and identities are inherent components with inalienable rights. The freedoms of every person are protected in harmony with the true Syrian identity that shall not invalidate said rights and freedoms."(add reference)

In the view of this study, the SIC's persistence on highlighting the issue of the Syrian identity as a pressing need regardless of the existing political and societal fragmentation encapsulates the crisis that plagued Syria's Islamist currents. Indeed, that crisis was born out in their failure to achieve tangible political and military successes which would have maintained their political relevancy. Further, the mistakes made by the armed Islamist movements over the course of the Syrian conflict have de-legitimised their alleged social grievances and undermined popular support. Therefore, rallying behind the issue of an "Islamic identity" is one of the most essential means of survival for Islamists in a time of political and military decline since 2015. Such ideological rhetoric necessitates an "other" on which those justifications and rationalisations are projected. Out of this landscape the Islamist-secularist dichotomy was conceived, which prevailed in dissident Syrian discord from 2018 after all religious and sectarian dichotomies had been exhausted. Indeed, this rhetoric proved popular among most of the armed Islamist movements, including the AoI, as they are facing testing realities, paired with their urgent need for a religious authority that can protect and maintain their existence in northern Syria, which hardly accepts scholarly Salafism in the specific case of the AoI. This environment hardly accepted the SMB after 30 years in exile, as will discussed further in the next chapter in order to document the structural and intellectual transformations that FSH has experienced since 2014, which have profoundly shaped its alliances, military activism and political choices.

Chapter 6:

The Sham Legion: Transformations in the Context of its Ambiguous Relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood

Despite its relatively late formation in 2014, Failaq al-Sham (the Sham Legion) or (FSH) was distinguished from the rest of the armed forces in Syria by its high organisational discipline, as it was commanded by “professional” defected officers. Other distinguishing features were the presence of a political office that dominated military decisions and the fact that FSH was “close to Turkey”. It was also characterised by its active participation in different alliances and operations rooms and its relative convergence with the majority of actors regardless of their affiliations, from the FSA to NF. This had earned FSH continuous financial and military support, making it one of the significant actors in the Syrian landscape.

Within this context, FSH is considered one of the most complex movements in terms of its intellectual and political reference. Despite it having a command, a political office, and a public relations office that speaks on its behalf, in more than one instance, FSH was described as being the “military arm” of the SMB (Lister, 2015, p. 216; Alking, 2018b; Barish, 2020; Ali, 2020). On the other hand, FSH’s command denied any organisational or political links to the SMB, which, in turn, denied the existence of such a link, defining its relationship with FSH as being in the framework of the necessary political coordination to support the revolution, in addition to providing symbolic support to FSH, as being one of the “good groups”, according to the SMB ’s leadership member and former official spokesperson, Molham al-Droubi. (Quoted in Conduit, 2019, p. 217).

Being established on the ruins of the SMB 's political, military and intellectual experience, FSH had transformed quickly to be Turkey's "striking force" in the north of Syria. FSH, in its latest transformation, had become a cornerstone in the Turkish-backed SNA, after having merged with ASH and other groups in the NFL.

Similar to ASH and the AoI, this chapter examines the transformations of FSH during three time periods, each of which has its own unique characteristics and contexts, based on examining its three main mechanisms: external environment, resource mobilisation, and ideological framing. However, considering the fact that FSH was established on the remnants and roots of the SMB 's experience, this chapter provides a brief review of the SMB from the Massacre of Hama (1982) until the outbreak of the Syrian uprising (2011), with a view to offering a more accurate understanding of FSH and its transformations.

6.1 The Syrian Brotherhood after Hama: Political and Organisational Survival Attempts

Despite the fact that the SMB was often reduced in its political behaviour during the 1980s' crisis, viewed as a violent, sectarian, ideological organisation that did not believe in democracy, it was, as explained in Chapter 3, established as a political movement that seeks to achieve reasonable and strategic goals, and practice peaceful political activities, including making alliances and organising protests and elections, both internally and publicly. However, the repressive, authoritarian environment created by the Ba'ath regime that targeted Islamists in general, and the SMB in particular, prompted it to adopt violence as a temporary tactical option before giving it up later. (Lefèvre, 2013a).

6.1.1 An Opposition Political Movement in Exile

According to Conduit (2019), the SMB before, during and after the Massacre of Hama was characterised by three main attributes: individualism, ideological flexibility, and pragmatism, which in later stages reached opportunism. These characteristics negatively impacted on the movement and made society and other political actors in Syria lose confidence in it and start viewing the movement as being ready to go with the current, achieving interests at the expense of principles (ibid). These characteristics, however, contributed to the survival and permanence of the movement despite the political and social turmoil that hit Syria, and particularly the SMB, and were reflected its dynamism in interacting with the external political environment according to the threat/opportunity mechanism and the related changes in material resource mobilisation, organisational, and ideological “strategies” or “tactics”, the result of which were repercussions on the nature and outcomes of collective action (Lund, 2013b).

The 1982 Hama massacre established new rules for a repressive political environment that resulted in uprooting the SMB and their sympathisers entirely from political life. (Friedman, 1990, p. 76; The Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2022). The political propaganda of the Syrian regime at that time was busy promoting the massacre as a great victory over religious fundamentalism nationwide, and a painful defeat to Israel and the US and its allies across the region. In other words, the official state discourse stripped the 1980s’ crisis of “localism” and place it within a broader frame as a “complex conspiracy” the SMB was executing in Syria on behalf of Arab, regional and international powers. Thus, exclusion and full uprooting were the only way to safeguard the state and

society, and force extremist Islamists to modify their propositions as suggested by former president Hafez al-Assad [146] (Weeden ,1999; Seurat, 2012; Ramírez Diaz, 2012)

The threats and opportunities faced by any social movement, as seen in previous chapters, are reflected in its organisational structure and strategies as well. A movement tends, if operating in a suppressive, very aggressive environment—PPA argues, to establish a secret organisation to continue accumulating social and political grievances against the regime in the form of ideological frames and symbols which could find resonance among supporters or the nurturing environment (McAdam et al., 2004). Applying this to the SMB, the Massacre of Hama, as described by the then supreme guide of the movement, Hassan Howeidi, was more like an organisational "earthquake" within the movement's leadership, offices, and grassroots. The regime's tendency to deal with the insurgency with an unprecedented amount of violence surprised the SMB leadership and led to an organisational nosedive in decision-making, communication, and coordination[147]. The years following the massacre witnessed an exchange of blame among the movement's leadership and resignations that led in 1986 to a split into two wings, before it regrouped in 1991 (Pargeter, 2010, pp. 85-86; Lefèvre, 2013a, p. 170).

Within this hostile environment, and with Law no. 49 that sentences SMB's affiliate members and sympathisers to death, entering into force, the return to "underground" action, which the movement had experienced intermittently in earlier periods, was difficult

[146] Such exclusion had reached a level where intermediate and secondary students were obliged to collectively pledge in schools' morning slogan, for two successive decades, to continue to fight the treacherous group until crushed as follows: "Our pledge .. to counter Imperialism, Zionism, and Reactionary and crush their criminal tool, the puppet Muslim Brotherhood" (Abdurrahman, 2018).

[147] This dysfunction manifested when the movement's leadership declared, in February 1982, "general mobilization" to take up arms and called for members from around the world to come and train in camps set up in Iraq in preparation for having them enter Syria to assist fighters and civilians in Hama. However, it suddenly repealed the decision in March of the same year, justifying that it "would cause more victims with no avail and would prolong the conflict". This caused a huge wave of outrage and grief in the camps and translated into mass defections and organisational divisions.

too due to its risky outcomes and high costs, especially with the Syrian security services infiltrating the SMB's secret cells or the Fighting Vanguard (FV) who wished to continue the armed confrontation (al-Hamadi, 2014; Abdurrahman, 2018).

Consequently, the only available choice for the SMB within its survival strategies was to transform into an opposition political movement in exile to preserve the movement's organisational structure and the efficiency of its leadership frameworks, awaiting future critical changes. Despite the fact that the main drive to this change was "threat", some aspects took the form of responding or taking a political opportunity that appeared on the horizon on the regional level. The Iraq-Iran War escalade, and Iraq and Jordan emerged as international sponsors or regional patrons that provided the necessary resources for survival and political efficiency, which led to the emergence of new ideological frames and boundaries that went beyond the local dimension of the conflict.

In this context, and despite the horror of the massacre and its heavy political and organisational repercussions, and contrary to the assumption of moderation through exclusion thesis, the SMB did not make any real intellectual reconsiderations to evaluate what happened and embrace new alternative strategies for the future that would lead it to moderation, or at least de-radicalisation. Instead, the group confined itself to forming an internal committee headed by Muhammad al-Hashimi. The committee's work took about 12 years before handing over the "evaluation report" to the Shura Council in 1998, without sharing the report with the rest of the members or with the public (Conduit, 2019, p. 132), which raises a major question on the drives and goals.

PPA provides a more comprehensive and coherent answer. According to Hafez, Islamic social movements in such repressive environments tend to use the general feeling of ‘victimisation’ within the movement to depict the government and its institutions as a ‘corrupt elite’ and raise questions within the group and broader society about its legitimacy or effectiveness in ruling the country (2003, pp.41-42). From his perspective "[t]hat can make anti-system collective action and anti-institutional strategies can be more effective in repressive environments compared with environments that enable all opposition movements to participate partially or fully in political life" (ibid.).

Therefore, the process of ideological framing focused on accumulating ‘Hama’s grievance’ and transforming it into a national sectarian grievance that was not limited to the SMB or the residents of Hama but a new grievance for “Sunni” Syrians against an oppressive “Alawite” regime. In other words, the movement worked on creating new ideological frames as well as boundaries based on the dichotomy of (Sunni/Alawite) rather than (democratic/oppressive). In short, Hama had turned into a recalled memory in the hearts and minds of a large segment of Syrians[148], examples of which are given as an indication of the dysfunction in building the collective national identity during the rule of the Ba’ath regime and as an example of the sectarian policies followed by the Assad family. This contributed to the emergence of a “Brotherhood-specific grievance” that the movement worked on abroad to ensure its “supremacy” over all opposition forces inside Syria, as being the one that made the biggest sacrifice (Celso, 2019).

[148] The movement also made use of the press and political reports and investigations that started to spread nationally and internationally, detailing the massacre and what had been used in it from methods of killing and deliberate humiliation, let alone the systematic destruction of the city.

Applying the interaction between resource mobilisation and ideological framing that PPA highlights, the "Hama grievance" has been employed with its "Sunni" burdens in regional polarisation, especially during the Iraq-Iran War (1980–1988) where the Syrian regime opposed the stances of the Gulf States and many Arab countries which supported Iraq and chose to align with Iran and support it financially and militarily. Regardless of the drives and political justifications which the Syrian regime had provided to justify this behaviour, the political propaganda of its regional adversaries worked a lot on that, being tangible evidence of the Syrian regime's "sectarianism", which pushed it to support a "Shia" religious regime in Iran confronting a neighbouring Arab country ruled by the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party as well. The SMB exploited this climate, based on its pragmatism, to build relationships with a number of Arab countries, top of which were Iraq, Jordan, and KSA, in order to solicit financial support to survive and continue (Moussalli, 2000).

Iraq's support to the SMB was direct support provided through the Iraqi vice-president Taha Ramadan[149] (Conduit, 2019, pp. 137-138). However, significant as it was, that support started dwindling, for many reasons, starting from 1985. It was mainly that the former Iraqi regime led by Saddam Hussein, despite intense animosity towards Hafez al-Assad and the leftist Ba'ath wing in Syria, did not want the SMB to come to power in Syria because this might push the SMB in Iraq and the groups of political Shia Islam there to adopt the same approach in light of the presence of a regional factor such as Iran that was not hiding its desire to "export the revolution" through making an alliance with Islamic movements, both Sunni and Shia (Lefèvre, 2013a).

[149] It was also a broad support as it included military training camps, weapons, money and intelligence support, apart from allowing the SMB to use "Sawt al-Arab" radio station to communicate their messages through the Syrian ether, as one of the few ways to communicate with their cadre from exile, in addition to allowing them to join universities and giving resources to them to live a new life there.

The relationship of the SMB with Jordan was similar to that with Iraq, but relatively less strong. In Jordan, they found a safe haven for themselves and their families that allowed them to absorb the initial shock after the 1982 massacre, which contributed to reuniting the then scattered organisation. The operation of the movement, however, still had many restrictions, especially after King Hussein's declaration in 1985 that, "the SMB are outlaws and had perpetrated crimes," which put them at the mercy of the Jordanian regime and how it approached the fluctuating and strained relationship with the Syrian regime, as Obaydah Amer[150] stated [151](2021). In light of that, and with the normalisation of relationships between the two counties in 2000 after the death of both King Hussein and Hafez al-Assad, Jordan formally asked the SMB leadership, including Ali Sadr al-Deen al-Bayanouni, Muhammd Riyadh al-Shiqfeh, and the member of the executive office, Muhammad al-Hassnawi, to leave the country. (AlBawaba, 2001; al-Bayanouni, 2021). As for KSA, The SMB members lived there and were able to establish successful businesses which would have a significant and future role in the movement's journey and on entering the educational university system, along with their significant role in what is known as the Saudi "awakening" current (Lacroix, 2011; Lefèvre, 2013c).

6.1.2 A Preaching Group: Painful Concessions Seeking Return

Living in exile provided protection, education and resources for the SMB members. The movement was able to rebuild its institutional structure and maintain its leadership and major administrative cadres. It was also able to reach out to and invest in Syrian expatriate

[150] Interview with Obaydah Ghadban (known as Obaydah Amer), a Syrian researcher belonging to a leading family in the SMB, 13/9/2021.
[151] In other words, Jordan wanted to take advantage of the presence of the SMB as a leverage to threaten Hafez al-Assad in case he decided to interfere with Jordan's internal affairs, similar to what had happened in Black September of 1970.

communities and came in contact with regional and international powers (al-Bayanouni, 2021). In exile, a “new generation” emerged that was not “politically raised” in terms of organisation. This generation lived in different political and social environments in the West and in the Gulf states, interacted with different political and intellectual movements, accumulated academic and practical experiences which benefitted from living in countries more advanced than Syria in terms of science and technology, and engaged in interparty networks that would play a major role at the start of the uprising (Ramírez Diaz, 2012; Amer, 2021).

Opening up to the external political environment helped the SMB’s transition from an exclusive organisation inside Syria to a more inclusive organisation in terms of overt activity, rejection of violence, and pursuing political means to mobilise against the Syrian regime. This was a procedural application of PPA assumptions about the impact of environmental mechanisms. However, this opening up was relative and circumstantial and the extent of political action, especially in neighbouring countries, remained dependent on several factors, including the relationship between these countries and the Syrian regime and the countries’ different approaches to Islamist movements in them, as explained earlier in the case of Iraq and Jordan. This prompted the SMB to show relative flexibility and to respond to the regime’s multiple calls for both secret and public negotiations, although they were convinced that these negotiations would lead nowhere and were intended to achieve goals other than reaching a settlement to resolve a conflict that has not been resolved until then[152] (Conduit, 2019, p. 151; al-Bayanouni, 2021).

[152] Negotiations can be tracked back to the first round that started in 1978 and continued until 1980. The focus of the negotiations at the time was the release of Islamist detainees from government prisons in return for a pledge by the SMB to end assassinations and attacks on regime leaders. Al-Bayanouni, who was a member of the SMB’s negotiating team led by Amin Yakan, blamed the failure of these negotiations on the regime’s failure to deliver on its commitments.

According to (Tilly, 2017), high-capacity undemocratic regimes tend to inflict direct and indirect damage on their adversaries by using high levels of collective violence or through less violent means. In other words, and as Hafez explained, the security forces consistently seek to destroy it from the inside, or at least deepen the existing divisions between the base and leaders, among leaders themselves, and the movement itself and its supporters or competitors in the political arena (2003).

Considering that, and given that the SMB was operating abroad, negotiations, both secret and public, were the regime's best strategy to undermine the SMB from the inside[153]. According to al-Bayanouni's testimony by Abdulhalim Khaddam, the former Syrian vice president, the Syrian regime was not serious about several rounds of negotiations in the1980s and was seeking to incite conflict inside the SMB over the benefit of reconciliation with the regime and to estimate the weakness of the exiled organisation and dissidence in its ranks (Conduit 2019, p. 81; al-Bayanouni, 2021). The regime achieved its goals when public divisions emerged, following the failure of the negotiations, between the "Aleppo wing" led by Abdulfattah Abu Ghoddeh, who chose negotiation and called for a political solution, and the "Hama wing" led by Adnan Saadeddine, who completely rejected negotiations and insisted on armed action. The division deepened with the dismissal of the latter in 1986; he was not reinstated until 1991 after he pledged to renounce violence in the battle with the regime and to abide by the political approach of the organisation's leadership (Lefèvre, 2013a, pp. 165-166).

Other members said the SMB leadership had a "joint responsibility together with the regime" because it exaggerated its influence on al-Tali'ah al-Moqatelah, which conducted most of those attacks. (Conduit, 2019; al-Bayanouni, 2021).

[153] The most prominent example was the negotiation round in Bonne, Germany in late 1984 between the SMB leadership and a senior regime delegation comprising Ali Douba, Military Intelligence Director, and his two deputies Hisham Bakhtiyar and Hassan Khalil, when the two sides reached a practical understanding to initiate a comprehensive settlement, but the regime drew back from it (al-Bayanouni, 2021).

In the 1990s, the SMB again returned to the negotiation table with the regime, but unlike previous rounds, for the first time this one rendered some results, including allowing 3000 members, including former secretary general Abdulfattah Abu Ghoddah, to return to Syria on condition that he abstained from political activity (Lefèvre, 2013a). The regime's flexibility at the time did not reflect the real change; rather, it was an attempt to adapt to the changing international environment following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the regime's ally, and the end of the bipolar international system that, to a great extent, provided political protection and an international cover for totalitarian regimes. The regime's leniency towards the SMB was one step in a larger approach in the 1990s that included passing some "liberal" economy laws, loosening the security grip on society and pre-empting external calls and pressure for reform by measures such as releasing a large number of political detainees with different political affiliations, including from the SMB[154] (Bishara, 2013).

The relative improvement of the political environment in Syria by the end of Hafez's rule revived the interest in returning to Syria; the return turned into an objective and a future strategy that necessitated behavioural, organisational and intellectual changes that the SMB had not been able to consider before. The second Gulf war and the heavy losses incurred by Iraq, the movement's ally and fund provider, pushed the SMB further in that direction[155] (ibid.; Lesch, 2012). Given that situation, seeking regime change was no

[154] In addition to these considerations, Hafez Assad's attention was focused on preparing his eldest son Basel, who was promoted to Major in the armed forces, to succeed him; Assad wanted to address the thorny SMB issue so that it would not be left for his successor to face after his death. However, the death of Basel Assad in 1994 in a car accident, according to the official account, confused both the regime and the opposition. Ailing president Assad's top priority had become preparing his other son, Bashar, as an heir – promoting him in the Ba'ath Party and the Army and ensuring that the regime leadership approved of him.

[155] While Iraq was suffering from international sanctions, the Syrian Army's involvement in the international coalition to liberate Kuwait, which comprised 32 states, helped improve the regime's image and opened the door for international cooperation.

longer an option, and the SMB had to look for different methods and tools. In that context, the rise of the “Aleppo wing” led by al-Bayanouni, who became the supreme guide in 1996, can be understood. According to Zuhair Salem, the SMB ’s theoriser and former spokesperson, al-Bayanouni revitalised the movement at an organisational and intellectual level and started to take practical steps to correct its course (Ramírez Diaz, 2012, pp. 115-16; Conduit 2019, pp. 59-60). The first step was to officially admit the mistake of “being drawn into violence” and the SMB ’s implicit responsibility in that regard, in contrast to the movement’s continued denial of such a responsibility in its official rhetoric in the 1980s (ibid; al-Bayanouni, 2021).

The “moderation through inclusion” thesis and PPA are similar in that they both consider the “political opportunity” mechanism in influencing the strategies of Islamic social movements, but they do not agree on the nature or quality of the “opportunity”. In other words, resorting to violence or radicalism may be an “opportunity” from the perspective of these movements, as we have seen before with the AoI. According to the ‘inclusion-moderation’ thesis, however, political opportunity occurs only when radical Islamist movements are convinced of the potential for obtaining popular support or political gains through political participation or elections, rather than going through more risky paths or adopting more dangerous instruments such as “political violence” (Tezcür 2010, pp. 71-73; Buehler, 2013, p. 216). In any case, the two theories agree that a relatively open environment with structural stimuli such as “a degree of economic liberalism,” “political openness” and an “electoral process” allow such movements to engage and participate within it (Somer, 2014).

Such political opportunity and structural inducements opened up for the SMB following the death of Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar taking power in 2000, not only in promises of political reform given by the new president, or the start of what was called "Damascus Spring", but also as a result of successive amnesty decrees to release hundreds of political detainees, mostly belonging to the movement, and the closure of notorious prisons such as Al-Mazzah and Palmyra (Tadmur), which was reserved for Islamist detainees after the 1980s' crisis (Aljazeera, 2001; George, 2003, p. 40; Human Rights Watch, 2010; Ramírez Diaz, 2012; pp. 117-19).

The SMB, driven by its pragmatism, and ideological flexibility, tried to exploit the available political opportunity and respond to the then-dominant 'zeitgeist', through the global rise of democracy represented by the "third wave of democracy", colour revolutions, and the democratisation of Islamists in theory and practice. (Mandaville, 2014, pp. 121-202; Brudny, 2013). It worked on two different tracks, intellectual/ideological, and political, with both the opposition and the regime, to rebuild its reputation and standing in Syria.

Intellectually, invoking the movement's founding liberal principles as established by the founding fathers, al-Bayanouni prompted the issuance of two major intellectual documents, one in May 2001 under the name "The National Charter of Honor", and the second in 2004, called the "The Political Project of Future Syria", which was an updated, more extensive and detailed version of the first document (about 120 pages). The first document called, in unequivocal language, for the renunciation of violence, acceptance of the other, and all forms of pluralism[156]. Rhetorically, it featured a new vocabulary where

[156] al-Bayanouni also sought to translate the charter into practice when the group called for the "Syria for all its Children" conference in August 2002. Several opposition groups based abroad, including Islamists, Marxists and independents,

“freedom is a political and cultural achievement and a fundamental right of the people”, and “fundamental and political freedoms and civil rights are not negotiable’’ (The SMB official website, 2002; Ramírez Diaz, 2012, pp. 119-21; Lefèvre, 2013a, p. 170).

The second document identified basic foundations for building a modern state, including that it derives reference “from the identity and constants of the Arab and Islamic nation” and will be “civil, contractual, representative, pluralistic, institutional, and legal”. Although the word “democracy” was not mentioned in the project, it emphasised the principle of equal citizenship and non-violence and acknowledged the mistake of resorting to it during the 1980s. The document also called on all parties, including the “ruling party and the political and cultural movements in the Syria arena”, to transcend the 1980s’ narrative[157], undertake reviews, and initiate national reconciliation and a new national contract (The SMB official website, 2004). The movement attempted to translate this into practice by signing the 2005 “Damascus Declaration” initiative, which sought to become an umbrella framework for opposition movements “demanding multi-party democracy [158], calling for a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy and equality for all citizens” (The Syrian Observer, 2012). As for the ideological framing process, the signing of the

participated in the conference, as well as representatives of Kurdish movements, and Alawite and Christian figures (Aljazeera, 2014c). After study, deliberations, discussions, and amendment of some paragraphs, the draft Charter of Honor was approved and signed by the conference participants, with its name amended to “The National Charter”. A seven-person “National Charter Committee”, was also formed, including Ali Sadr al-Deen al-Bayanouni (Al-Ahmad, 2005).

[157]The Charter states: “The armed confrontation that took place in the 1980s was an exceptional case in the history of the SMB, and the history of the Syrian state as well. This has resulted in heavy losses paid for by all the people of the country, innocent lives were lost, and sanctities were violated, the effects of which remain and are manifested in prisons, exiles, severe social screening, and the feeling of despair and lack of horizon by Syrians of all affiliations." (The SMB official website, 2004)

[158] Although joining the Damascus Declaration was the first organisational point of convergence between the Islamic and secular opposition in Syria, the group's decision to ally with former "defector" Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam and establish the National Salvation Front with him in 2006, created great resentment among their partners in the Damascus Declaration, who asked them choose to remain in only one of the two platforms (AlBayan, 2006). It also created a public impression at the national level of the SMB as an opportunistic movement, politically and socially (Shain, 2005, pp. 31-32; Conduit , 2019, p.89)

Damascus Declaration was an event-initiated frame transportation that helped to bring the curtain down on differentiation within the Sunni/Alawite sectarian boundaries, moving towards a new ideological frame that focuses, at least at the level of political discourse, on democratic/authoritarian differentiation.

Politically, the movement's leadership sent a conciliatory message, carried by an Arab head of state who attended Hafez al-Assad's funeral and delivered it to his son Bashar al-Assad before he officially took office, expressing its desire to “leave the past behind” and its willingness to enter negotiations, with the aim of negotiating its return to Syria (Hanlie, 2018). After the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey joined the mediation efforts for dialogue between the movement and the Syrian regime, taking advantage of the steady improvement in relations between the two countries at the time. The mediation efforts led by Ahmet Davutoglu, then Turkish Foreign Minister[159], continued for years with no success, despite the formation of committees and several meetings held between the intelligence services of the two countries (al-Bayanouni, 2021). The conciliatory trend and concessions for it culminated during the Gaza War (2008–2009), when it unilaterally announced the suspension of its opposition work under the pretext of “gathering all efforts on a path to resist aggression”, declaring its desire to return to Syria as an advocacy or ‘preaching’ group (Ramírez Diaz, 2012; Almustafa, 2021). With this, the movement

[159]"During the rule of Bashar al-Assad, I went to Turkey at the invitation of Ahmet Davutoglu, who said that ‘In his meeting with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Bashar al-Assad said good things about the SMB, and was open to the possibility of engaging in dialogue with them. So, are you willing to engage in such a dialogue," Al-Bayanouni said in his testimony on The Syrian Memory programme on Syria TV. "We agreed, as we are open to dialogue as a principle and we are not against it. However, I told Ahmet Davutoglu that they (the regime) had made many such promises to us in the past, to which Ahmet Davutoglu said that ‘they will not be able to deceive you this time’, and he requested a committee be formed for this purpose," Al-Bayanouni said. Commenting on the outcomes, Al-Bayanouni says: "The regime was evasive and would manoeuvre despite its positive promises to Turkey, and it is being responsive to the work of the committees. The Turks were eventually convinced that the regime was not serious and stopped pursuing the mediation" (al-Bayanouni, 2021).

abandoned one of its most important classic and established positions, and the ideological justification for its survival as a group abroad (Conduit 2019, pp. 82-83).

To borrow Schwedler's ratings (2011), it can be said that, with these actions, the group reached a "behavioural moderation", which refers to the adoption of political instruments as the single approach to political action with a willingness to participate in elections. It also made great strides towards ideological moderation which reflect a relative adaptation to open and tolerant worldviews instead of a rigid and closed perspective.

However, as PPA argues, regardless of the radical movement's consideration, the transition from a protest/violent arena to the electoral/peaceful arena requires either a political opportunity from a "democratic" or "semi-democratic" centre that allows the movement to participate, or positively deal with initiatives put forward by the radical movement and engages in a non-violent political process such as "negotiation" to reach a "settlement" that prevents the perpetuation of violence and allows for peaceful resolution of conflict and disputes (Hutter 2014, p. 28; Bamyeh 2019, pp. 11-12). Otherwise, the movement's path toward "deradicalization" or "moderation", as (Ashour, 2009) argues, will create debates and disagreements within it that will end either with its division or defection or by the emergence of more radical currents within it, especially if the movement lacks a "charismatic and historical leadership" that can justify the ideology and realism of this path; this is exactly what happened with the SMB.

The decision to stop the opposition work generated anger within the SMB's grassroots, one of whom described the leadership as "opportunistic, does not adhere to its principles or words, and goes wherever the wind takes it" (Amer 2021). It led to the

end of the “Aleppo Wing”’s long journey of leadership in the internal elections in 2010 and the rise of the conservative “Hama” movement led by Mohamed Riad al-Shaqfa (former Supreme Guide) and Farouk Tayfour (Deputy Supreme Guide) taking over movement leadership (Lund, 2013b; Conduit 2019, pp. 82-3). Ironically, reminiscent of the emergence of the “Hama Wing” in the 1980s, the leadership change was accompanied by the emergence of a group close to Aleppo’s leadership called “The National Action Group” in 2010, led by Obaida Nahhas, who was an assistant to al-Bayanouni, and is said to have done so by support and assistance from him and Ahmed Ramadan (Conduit, 2019, 84). This change in leadership reflected not only a horizontal shift from the Aleppo Wing to the Hama Wing, but also a vertical ‘generation’ shift between the old leaders and young emerging personalities and leaders who were seeking a foothold to play a political role in the “organizationally lax” movement, a new feature that would emerge more clearly after the revolution, with the emergence of young figures from SMB families, and within the movement itself through “youth leadership” assuming power in the movement after the Hama leadership (Ramírez Diaz, 2012; Lefèvre, 2013b; Amer, 2021).

Risky as this decision was at an organisational level, as we have seen before, it involved “deferred” political gains and opportunities in respect of the relationship with Turkey. In short, and away from the idea of inspiration from the AKP experience as a successful attempt to integrate Islamist movements into government, the movement’s decision to go along with Ankara and accept its mediation to engage in unconditional dialogue with the regime, despite the failure of previous experiences, and then to completely end its opposition work, reflected Turkey's desire to become a supporter, and an “international sponsor” of the SMB , especially after its growing regional role at the

time and its lack of such support after its leadership left Jordan and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2013 as Abd al-Rahman al-Haj[160], contends (2021). This happened gradually as Istanbul, even before the revolution, became a major destination for leaders and members of the group to settle and build their organisational and commercial networks (ibid).

In conclusion, the movement joined the Syrian uprising in 2011 loaded with experience, resources, and institutional organisation that it was able to build and maintain in exile, in parallel with a negative image of being an opportunistic movement as seen by the society and other opposition movements, who themselves had suffered from disintegration, ineffectiveness, and lack of influence. This made the SMB, despite its long absence, remain the most organised Syrian political movement on the doorstep of the Syrian revolution (Ramírez Diaz, 2012; Lefèvre, 2013b).

6.1.3 The Brotherhood after 2011: The Fight for Relevance

The outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 was the moment that the SMB had long awaited and prepared for, financially, organisationally, and politically, for the three previous decades. Any popular change or political reform in Syria would have allowed them to return from exile and reactivate their political role, especially since the Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt showed an early rise of Islamist movements that, perhaps for the first time, were involved within the popular movement for change and under its slogans and programmes (Schwedler, 2013).

[160] Interview with Abd al-Rahman al-Haj, a Turkey-based Syrian Researcher, and specialist in Syrian Islamism, a former minister in the opposition's exile government, 5/9/2021.

Regardless of being the movement with the highest level of organisation, the most resources and institutional and political experience, the conditions of the external political environment carried more threats and obstacles than the “exceptional opportunity” promised. This would prompt the movement, according to PPA's environmental mechanics, to adopt more cautious tactics and strategies, particularly regarding the mobilisation of financial, organisational, and ideological resources (Tilly, 2017). On top of the external environment, threats are “Hama's Memory” and knowledge thereof[161], the repressive Syrian regime and its willingness to use unprecedented violence in order to survive, as well as its strictness in making any political concessions to its opponents that would undermine the distribution of forces within the political system or the state bureaucracy (Ismail 2013). In this context, despite the pressure put on Arab regimes by the revolutions[162], Bashar al-Assad rejected in February 2011 a warning/motivating initiative from the SMB, rendered by Khaled Mashaal, former head of Hamas Political Bureau, calling for political reform and reconciliation (Bishara, 2013). In addition, the Syrian regime was keen in its media propaganda to consider the civil popular movement launched in 2011 as a “continuation” of the Islamist insurgency of the 1980s, which made the movement hesitant and distance itself from the early demonstrations, fearing the uprising would be linked to the SMB (Ismail, 2018; Conduit 2019, p.158) [163]. Another

[161] In January 2011, two months before the uprising broke out, the SMB convened in Istanbul to develop its strategic plan under the supervision of The Office of Planning and Strategic Studies Director ,Molham al-Droubi, on how to respond to the uprising once it broke out. They stressed that they "had no specific plans but would respond to the demands of the people" (al-Ahd, 2013a).

[162]"After the Arab spring began, the group sent a letter to President Bashar al-Assad calling on him to carry out a comprehensive political reform process and a gradual historic settlement, because, according to the movement, Syria was ready for a popular revolution against the regime," Azmi Bishara quoted al-Bayanouni as saying. "The group will not start the revolution, but if it breaks out, it will not stand idly by and will support it" al-Bayanouni added (Bishara, 2013, p.396).

[163] This is exactly what happened later when Bouthaina Shaaban, adviser to the Syrian president, accused the group of being behind the demonstrations just two weeks after they broke out (France 24, 2011).

obstacle is the prevailing negative popular view of the movement being an “opportunistic movement” with shifting positions and alliances. So, the challenge that the SMB faced, and continues to face, is to rebuild its community bases and maintain association with the political and military scene, after being out of it for nearly thirty years (Lefèvre, 2013b).

The most important obstacle was, however, the absence of regional and international positions that explicitly opposed the regime at that time (Bishara, 2013, pp. 369-71) [164]. In light of this reality, any impulse by the SMB to embrace the uprising or its leadership carried great risks, most notably the loss of its regional allies, thereby depriving it of the resources and geographical/spatial dimension necessary for political effectiveness, and the repetition of past mistakes by leading a “protest rebellion” whose nature, social grounds, and leadership frameworks were not clearly clarified (al-Haj, 2021). But this is certainly not to say that the SMB was not involved or did not contribute to the early events of the uprising. Several bodies, institutions, and initiatives[165] such as ‘the National Coalition for the Support of the Syrian Revolution’, which was established in Brussels with the aim of providing financial support for the continuation of anti-regime protests inside Syria, and was headed by Nazir al-Hakim and Haitham Rahma, former members of the SMB[166] (Abazeid, 2018; al-Haj, 2021).

[164] Western countries, including the United States, initially bet on a “reform response” from President Bashar al-Assad. Other than taking explicit and clear positions, the Obama administration did not call for regime change until August 2011. It relied on Arab and regional efforts led by Qatar and Turkey, the MB's most prominent allies at the time, to urge the regime to end violence and begin a reform process that would allow all opposition parties, including the SMB, to participate in governance and political life.

[165] For instance, the founders of the “Syrian Revolution against Bashar al-Assad 2011” Facebook page, which called for the first demonstrations were young members (Al-Ahd, 2013b). Abu al-Hassan Abazied and Bilal Attar, founders of Sham News Network, the leading news network that covered the early events of the revolution, were also descendants of exiled Brotherhood families (Abazeid, 2018).

[166] This applies also to the National Action Group, founded in August 2011 under SMB personalities, most notably Ahmed Ramadan and Obaida Nahhas, close to Al-Bayanouni, and worked in cooperation with Islamic academic figures such as Imad al-Din al-Rashid and Abd al-Rahman al-Hajj, and declared the first attempt to found a “national council”, inspired by the experience of the Libyan National Council (LNC), which received international recognition as an alternative to Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya just weeks after the Libyan revolution (al-Haj, 2021).

There were differing views about the interpretation of previous initiatives, particularly since they had happened without formal decisions or adoption by the movement. According to Conduit, these events reflect the continuous individuality quality of the SMB since its founding, which became more present and effective with the outbreak of the uprising as the movement became a “decentralized network” spread in exile, which means that the movement included dozens of different orientations under its banner, to become more like several “groups” than one (2019, p.160). From Lund's point of view, it represents an “organizational and generational conflict within the movement” between traditional leaders represented by senior members, aspiring leaders represented by the middle generation, and young members who were resentful of the performance of the senior members, their attachment to power, and their marginalisation of the role of young people (Lund, 2013b).

Acknowledging the importance of the individuality quality and the generational factor, after the organisational laxness of the SMB over the past decades, particularly when it comes to the long-term control of the “old” leadership elites without allowing an active role for successive generations aspiring for a political role, it is hard to imagine these bodies could have been founded without a tacit consent or approval by the leadership of the movement, especially considering the founders’ need for financial and logistical support and international sponsorship that were hard to get without utilising the financial support and external relations network of the SMB (Amer, 2021; Orabi, 2021). Accordingly, as a retired SMB member, whose name shall be anonymous, said, the affiliation of these bodies with the SMB is not so much a significant or necessary issue for either party as their focus is on coordinating their political positions on various issues.

This was reflected in practice by the fact that these bodies did not take any political position contrary to the group's official positions. In short, this was an adoption of the movement's "decentralised" approach in political action adopted by the group to ensure active and subtle participation in the public movement (anonymous, 2021). According to the same member, with whom Abd al-Rahman al-Haj agrees, this was the result of "uncertainty" in the external political environment: inside Syria in relation to the course and destiny of the uprising, and outside Syria in relation to the absence of decisive positions. Therefore, the movement was trying to exploit the uprising conditions to re-establish itself at home, after years of break-up, by distancing itself. (ibid.; al-Haj, 2021).

The movement's behaviour was in line with PPA assumptions about the impact of environmental mechanics on social movements, making them follow clandestine tactics and strategies during the founding stages, while focusing instead on mobilising organisational and ideological resources, pending changes in the external political environment. In light of this, the SMB tried during the first months of the uprising to rebuild their relations with the population through relief and financial support and the provision of the necessary instruments for the peaceful protests to continue and be displayed to the outside world in light of the online and media blackout to which they were subjected. The movement used its long experience accumulated over thirty years of networking within Syrian communities in the diaspora. This relief support gradually escalated to reach around $2 million per month in 2012, according to al-Bayanouni (quoited in MacFarquhar, 2012).

Leaning on this support, and the opponents' need inside Syria for this support even if they were against it, and coinciding with changes in the international political

environment, the most important of which was the emergence of a decisive position by the US, the European Union, Turkey, Qatar and KSA explicitly demanding Bashar al-Assad to step down from power, and the opposition to unite in order to organise a "smooth" political transition, the SMB started to show different behaviour and present itself as a player that cannot be ignored (Landis, 2011). This trend was translated by co-founding the Syrian National Council of Syria (NCS) on 2 October 2011 in Istanbul, with the movement constituting nearly a quarter of the membership, as well as some executive positions. For example, Farouk Tayfor, Deputy Supreme Guide of the SMB, became the Vice-President of the NCS (NCS official website, 2012; Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012; Conduit, 2019, p. 164).

The change in international positions, particularly those of Turkey and Qatar, had a profound impact on increasing the movement's financial and material resources and therefore the deployment thereof to gain political influence with opposition institutions abroad and the popular movement at home (Amer, 2021; al-Haj, 2021). Despite the long historical rift between the two countries, which in 1998 reached the brink of a direct military confrontation, Turkey had not exploited or opened channels of communication with the Syrian opposition. Its attempt to mediate between the Syrian regime and the SMB in 2007 was its first involvement in Syrian internal affairs, as has already been shown. The SMB was, therefore, the actor that Turkey ended up investing in and supporting after losing its relations with the regime, given that: first, it is known to Turkey, compared to other opposition movements; second, for being the most organised; and lastly for its ideological identification, as the former Turkish ambassador in Syria, Omar Onhon,[167] explained

[167] Interview with Omar Onhon, the former and last Turkish ambassador in Syria, 19/9/2021.

(2021). Lastly, the Turkish President focused on the “Hama grievance” in the early months of the revolution in an early speech addressing the regime and urging it into reform and reconciliation, which was in line with the SMB’s old ideological frames[168]. This also applied to Qatar, which was generally the main supporter of the Syrian opposition. The SMB, in particular, enjoyed good relations with Qatar based on “cross-interests and mutual trust” within the Qatari direction to support the Arab Spring and affinity with Islamists in general (Williams, 2014). In short, early in the uprising, the movement was unique in guaranteeing international sponsors at a time when opposition figures and forces were still trying to make their way in politics abroad. This made the SMB, according to Yezid Sayigh, the most coherent organisation in the Syrian opposition and the most influential single component of the NCS, the dominant force in the SNC (Sayigh, 2013).

With these political opportunities, and recalling the PPA, the movement tends to build a more moderate ideological frame, that aligns with its environment. In this vein, the SMB issued their official charter that they called “Covenant and Charter” in 2012, pledging “a contemporary and secure national relationship between all the components of Syrian society… A modern civil state, a pluralistic democracy, that is committed to human rights, based on dialogue and participation, respects institutions, and is a state of justice and the rule of law” (The SMB official website, 2012). At that time, the movement's political narrative would describe this document as establishing a “new social contract”, especially since it was the first commitment, at the level of discourse at least, to democracy and

[168] On more than one occasion in 2011, the Turkish president pledged that he would "not allow a second Hama massacre," referring to the 1982 massacre, and his then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was delegated to Syria after the Syrian army stormed Hama in 2011; a visit that resulted in an initiative to withdraw the army from cities, which was eventually not implemented (Bishara, 2013).

pluralism, despite its keenness to link it to the democratic ideology of the founder Mustafa al-Sibai (ibid).

Despite ideological flexibility, the remnants of the past with regard to the movement's "political opportunism", particularly their decision to freeze their opposition work during the 2009 Gaza war, remained an obstacle to building strategic partnerships with the Syrian liberal or secular opposition movements, despite involvement in the NSC. A number of opposition members said they were not certain whether that the SMB would abandon that opposition if they received a good political offer from the Syrian regime, or if they were subject to pressure from international supporters[169], which made the group extremely questionable (Sharrouf, 2014). On the other hand, rebuilding attempts were subject to the same problems that faced the political action, specifically through decentralisation and individual action, which eventually led to the duplication, fragmentation, and competition of regional branches among each other, thereby giving negative impressions about the movement's desired goals in Syria (Lefèvre, 2014b). This would be exacerbated by the impression that the movement was "an elite coming from abroad," summed up by an activist in Damascus: "We won't let people living outside the country come here and tell those of us who made the revolution what to do" (Sly, 2012). As a result, the movement's popular outreach did not translate into a large scale of enrolment, putting them in a great disadvantage as the uprising moved from peaceful protests to armed action.

[169] Accusations against the SMB began early, as they were accused since the early days of the NCS of trying to monopolise power, following their strategy of not revealing their actual size, between official and informal participation and the formation of alliances, which would be repeated later in the NCS, with criticisms summed up by the first president of the NCS, Burhan Ghalioun: "they were a very big political party and had a lot of influence. Now, they feel frustrated and want to be visible. They want to be visible more than they are in reality … [and] they want to redress this frustration by being recognised as a big party" (Conduit, 2019, pp. 165-68).

6.2 The Syrian Brotherhood's Back to Arms

This section overviews two military experiments, the first being "the Shields of the Revolution Council" (SRC), which has an organisational affiliation with the SMB, and the second, the 'CPC', in which the SMB officially participated in its founding meetings without this resulting in an explicit organisational relationship. The significance of these two experiences stems from the fact that FSH grew organisationally based on their failure and disintegration.

6.2.1 The Shields of the Revolution Council: Establishing an Armed Wing

The transition to armed action posed a new challenge for the SMB. In the three decades leading up to the uprising, it dismantled its armed capacities and sought to produce several documents to improve its image and present itself as a political player capable of contributing to nation-building and participating in its rule (Aljazeera, 2004; CNN Arabic, 2019). Therefore, any armed activity the movement would practice would have meant a reversal of the Hama revisions and backtracking on its pledge to become a "de-radicalized movement" and its behavioural and ideological moderation proposals (Ramírez Diaz, 2017; Amer, 2021). In other words, the militarisation of the uprising has put the SMB in a complex dilemma. The new Islamist movements such as ASH and AoI used the "Hama grievance" and the "Sunni grievance" to justify and interpret their resort to arms. These are the same ideological frames that for decades have formed a "symbolic capital" for the SMB that distinguishes it from the rest of the Syrian opposition groups without being able to evoke it because of the external environmental conditions (Conduit, 2019, pp. 200-202).

In this context, the SMB was unable to formulate an appropriate policy, and its response to the armed uprising fell within two separate tracks: central official decisions taken by the movement's central leadership, and informal and decentralised activities taken by its grassroots, whether officially affiliated with it, or close and linked to it. Officially[170], the SMB's initial decision was not to form any armed groups or provide military support to any of the new factions and to limit itself to logistical and financial support (Nir, 2012; Dadoush, 2013; Conduit, 2019, pp. 211-12). On the other hand, it continued to take a decentralised decision-making approach where it was left to members' individual discretion only to decide whether to participate in such activities or not (Lefèvre, 2015; Amer, 2021).

This ambiguous response reflected the "blurry" situation in the external political environment. As international positions calling for regime change escalated, they were accompanied by firm requests from major international and regional powers, particularly the US, against military intervention to achieve such a change, like the Iraqi and Libyan scenarios. All proposals to arm the opposition or establish a buffer border zone were rejected (Khatib, 2013). By applying the threat/opportunity mechanism, this involved significant "threat" because it made the victory of the "high-capacity undemocratic regime" more likely, a regime that was capable, according to Tilly's description, of imposing a large volume of mass violence on a peaceful protest movement, especially after the regime

[170]Conduit quotes Brotherhood leaders Molham al-Doroubi and Samir Abu Laban as saying that after a meeting in KSA at the end of 2011, the group decided not to form any armed groups, or provide military support such as weapons and ammunition or to purchase or sell the same, and only to provide all other types of support: relief, medical, and logistical such as hospitals, ambulances, communication and photography devices, or political and media training by providing the groups access to the group's relevant past experiences (Conduit,2019, p. 205). (Dadoush, 2013), also quotes the former Supreme Guide as saying that the SMB has shown its willingness to provide financial support based on two criteria: ideological convergence, i.e. being "ideologically moderate", and weight on the ground. According to Hassan, (2014), several groups benefitted from this support, most notably: al-Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo, Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, al-Huda Youth Brigades, Mujahideen Army, and al-Mu'taz Brigade.

rejected all political initiatives, including the two initiatives of the Arab League. Hence the option of moving to armed action was the “political opportunity” for continued collective opposition activity inside the country (al-Haj, 2021). Accordingly, in its desire not to miss this opportunity, the SMB let individuals participate without it having to incur any organisational repercussions if they failed, especially since the movement's political discourse focused on peace, moderation, and democratic transition (Amer, 2021).

This approach by the SMB achieved mixed results varying between success and failure. They were able to expand their presence on the scene inside Syria through groups they provided with support and training. However, this triggered accusations of the SMB “buying loyalties” for money, which reinforced the narrative of its Islamist rivals (scholarly Salafism and Jihadi Salafism in particular) of it being “an elite coming from abroad” (Ignatius, 2014). The latter narrative had a great negative impact, not only on the movement's attempts to revive itself at home, especially in areas that were out of the security control of the Syrian regime, but also on the movement and flow of donations by Syrian expatriate communities and Gulf financiers who, since 2012, preferred to direct their financial and logistical support to other more deeply-rooted local actors such as ASH, Suqour al-Sham, and the AoI (Bazrbashi, 2021; al-Haj, 2021).

As PPA argues, it is difficult to imagine sustained collective action and effective movement without sufficient resources to continue collective action. In Wiktorowicz’s words, “Movements are not seen as irrational outbursts intended to alleviate psychological distress, but rather as organized contention structured through mechanisms of mobilization that provide strategic resources for sustained collective action” (2004, p. 10). In addition to resources and their significance in changing strategies

adopted at the movement level, there were fundamental changes in the external environment during the first half of 2012 after Russia vetoed a draft resolution that laid the gradual foundations for a peaceful political solution in Syria by forming the “Group of Friends of Syria”, which included some 70 countries, recognised the NSC as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people, sought to collect financial and military resources to support the “struggle of the Syrian people” to protect itself and impose a solution to the Syrian crisis outside the Security Council (Bishara, 2013). At that time, the option of armed action became internationally supported or at least non-opposed, with Arab countries such as Qatar and KSA declaring their intention to arm the Syrian opposition[171] to enable the Syrian people to protect themselves (ibid).

The presence of international resources and supporters led to further expansion of armed action, with its conditions and needs beyond the SMB 's capacities. This prompted the SMB to review its decision to rely solely on peaceful tools and to marry the peaceful and armed approaches, with all the ammunition and new ideological frame required by the latter (Conduit, 2019, p. 208). In other words, the movement began to renounce the “de-radicalization” and “moderation” phase and move back to “radicalization”.

In detail, the SMB's leader and spokesman, Molham al-Daroubi, announced in an interview that the SMB had established its own battalions in May 2012, to be part of the FSA, cooperating and coordinating with it (Astih, 2012). This was immediately denied by Zuhair Salem, the movement's other spokesman, and then by the then Supreme Guide

[171]On March 11, 2012, former Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said that "the call to arm the Syrian opposition does not stem from a Saudi hostile attitude towards the Syrian regime, but the need to allow the Syrian people to hold arms to protect themselves from the actions and practices of the regime" (Bishara, 2013).

Riad Al-Shaqfa (Dadoush, 2013). However, it became clear that al-Daroubi was telling the truth, as the SMB had contributed and had already supported the establishment of SRC[172]. As for the official relationship with the Shields, the former Suprem Guide Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh explained, “We advised these battalions and brigades with moderate centrist Islamic thought close to our ideology to form their own assembly, and they therefore created a new body announced in Istanbul under the name of the Shields of the Revolution Council, which is independent and not an armed wing of the SMB” [173] (quoted in Dadoush, 2013).

At the discourse analysis level, the movement's insistence on adding an “ambiguity” element is very clear, through the use of vocabulary that can be interpreted in different ways, which makes an organisational relationship or affiliation hard to confirm, the issue that had a profound impact on their careers (Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2013). In this context, the SRC identified their position in the external environment from day one based on the ideological frames used by the SMB, because the Shields were a group belonging to the FSA with a Brotherhood ideology[174], for instance, presenting themselves

[172] Whether on the educational and political side, as explained by the then-head of the political bureau Hassan al-Hashimi (quoted in Conduit, 2019, p. 209), or by direct communication and symbolic presence, which was reflected in the participation of all the leadership of the SMB , including Riad Al-Shaqfa, Farouk Tayfour and Ali al-Bayanouni in the Conference on the Establishment of the RSC in December 2012, and by the Shields adopting in their logo the cross-swords symbol, like that of the the SMB (Lund, 2013b)

[173] "At that early stage, it was just ‘general instructions’, but they had their own structure and barely coordinated with us. Ideally, however, we would like to have a proper leadership hierarchy and a more centralized decision-making mechanism, but it takes time," one Brotherhood leader said in an interview with (Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2013). According to this leader, one of the biggest factors that slowed this integration process was that brotherhood members are officially represented among the 5,000-7,000 Shield fighters, raising concerns related to several issues of loyalty, lack of education and discipline, and the possibility of radicalistion, among other things, as a result of the group's long absence from Syrian society. "Even if the SMB wants to overcome this problem by organizing willing fighters, this is a difficult and complex process. Candidates should first undergo intensive political, religious, and organizational education," the leader said. "The process of merging the Shields with us has begun, but it has not yet completed, and we have to be very careful. We have learned a lot from our past experience. So, we consider loyalty and education to be of paramount importance to avoid extremism and refrain from revenge when the regime commits a massacre." (ibid).

[174] In their political project, the RSC emphasise that their orientation is a "moderate centrist Islamist", and that they adopt "democratic dialogue with all intellectual, social, political, and religious currents as a means of achieving goals", seeking to achieve a state of "pluralistic, representative, institutional, legal, and deliberative democracy", in a semi-literal repetition of the Covenant and Charter issued by the SMB in 2012 (RSC official website, 2013). The Shields clearly frame themselves within the FSA, asserting that the SNC is "the broadest umbrella that exists representing the

as a member of the current uprising but their ideological arsenal is based on the "Brotherhood grievance" and its intersections with the Sunni grievance since 1963 (Amer, 2021). In this sense, it is an old/new group rooted in the Syrian environment ideologically and politically, unlike other new organisations that intellectually present themselves as belonging to cross-border schools of thought such as ASH and AoI (al-Haj, 2021).

The SRC was formed from 43 factions calling themselves "Shields"[175], almost half of them in Idlib, and the rest distributed in opposition-controlled areas, with the exception of Deir ez-Zor. It was led by Brigadier General Sami Hamza, and some of its brigades were led by dissident officers (Lund, 2013b). It possessed quality weapons such as anti-armour, and anti-aircraft Cobra thermal missiles, according to statements by its commander and videos published of its accounts (AlSharief, 2013; Amer, 2013). However, it did not become a major prominent group. Its participation was limited to some sporadic operations in the north, and it did not join any operations rooms or major military alliances (Lefèvre, 2015).

Hypothetically, and based on the fact that the SMB is the most organised opposition movement, and its extensive foreign relations since the pre-uprising period, its

Syrian people," and asserting that they will dissolve themselves once the state is formed. In addition, the Shields show a remarkable awareness of the international community. They dedicate a whole paragraph calling on it to provide all necessary funding, weapons, and air embargoes to topple the Assad regime and build a democratic state. They assert in their first constants of observing, in their armed activities, "the international law, human rights, the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949, and the additional protocols of 1977, governing the treatment of combatants and civilians during periods of international and internal armed conflict" (ibid.).

[175] These factions are: Idlib (20): Hanano Shield Brigade, Al-Jabal Shield Brigade, Al-Sa'iqa Shield Brigade, Khan Sheikhoun Shield Brigade, Idlib Shield Brigade, Sahaba Shield Brigade, Bayrak al-Hurriya Shield Brigade, Freedom Shield Brigade, Revolution Shield Brigade, ASH Shield Brigade, al-Iman Shield Brigade, Saraya Ulama' al-Sham Shield, Fursan al-Haq Shield Brigade, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Shield Brigade, Siham al-Haq Shield Brigade, al-Assi Shield Brigade, March-15 Ahrar Shield Battalion, Thuwwar Idlib Shield Brigade, al-Tawhid Shield Brigade, Al-Jzeera Shield Brigade. Hama (7): al-Haq al-Muqatel Shield Brigade, al-Siddiq Shield Brigade, Hama Shield Brigade, Apamea Shield Brigade, Ikhlas Shield Brigade, al-Haq Shield Brigade, al-Nasr Shield Brigade. Aleppo (3): al-Wafa Shield Brigade, Aleppo al-Shehaba Shield Brigade, al-Raya Shield Brigade. Homs (3): Ahrar Homs Shield Brigade, al-Haq Shield Brigade, al-Hudud Shield Brigade. Damascus and Damascus Countryside (5): Sham Shield Brigade, al-Asima Shield Brigade, al-Faruq Shield Brigade, al-Adala Shield Brigade, Saraya Ulama' al-Sham Shield. Daraa (4): Baba Amr Battalion, Special Task Battalion, Green Battalion, al-Mustafa Battalion. Latakia (1): Al-Haffa Battalion.

adoption of a clear moderate discourse that is supposed to bring it more support, and the strong beginning of the SRC by swallowing a number of smaller groups and possessing effective equipment and weapons, the project was expected to succeed and expand: but the reality was quite the opposite (ibid.). The lack of resources could be attributed to both internal organisation and the external environment. Internally, and as shown above, the SMB was reluctant from the outset to enter the project, whether due to its expense, or fear based on previous experience (Amer, 2021). Therefore, it was not among the movement's priorities of self-support, especially when compared with the political and advocacy strategy of the group. Moreover, decentralisation and the absence of military structure within the SRC resulted in a slowing-down of operations and some transgressions, which troubled some of the leadership on the one hand, and pushed some SRC's factions to defect and join other intellectually and organisationally similar groups (ibid.).

In terms of support, "[the SRC] was one of the least supported groups. No one wanted to support us because they, [the SMB] were close to us", explained Hassan al-Hashimi, head of the SMB's Political Bureau (quoted in Conduit, 2019, p. 211). While this statement may seem contrary to the prevailing logic based on the SMB's relations, it is not without validity. For some reason, the SRC, which was an offshoot group of the SMB, announced from the first day its affiliation with the FSA, which was mainly supported by KSA and the UAE, the countries that vetted their support recipients and ensured as much as they could it did not fall into the hands of Islamic groups, let alone the SMB (Abazeid, 2021). In other words, the conditions of the regional environment were considered hostile under the campaign led by the UAE and KSA against the SMB and all those who belonged

to it. This is despite repeated, yet fruitless, attempts by the SMB for rapprochement with KSA, which eventually designated the group a “terrorist organization” (Ajbaili, 2014).

On the other hand, The SRC’s tendency towards framing itself ideologically within the national structure only led to negative results due to the Syrian “Islamization of conflict” and the dominance of Salafi movements such as ASH and the AoI, as the adoption of Brotherhood ideology or a relationship with the SMB became an accusation in itself, even within these groups, says Ali al-Omar, former of head of ASH (al-Omar, 2021). In this vein, the negative attitude towards the SRC was reinforced by public suspicion caused by the failure of the SMB in the eighties, which caused mistrust of the group which was present throughout the Shields’ journey. This was reflected in the fact that the SRC was not invited to join any of the many operations rooms and alliances taking place at the time, such as the IF and others (Lefèvre, 2015). As a result, it was excluded by supporters, whether states, associations, or individuals, especially in the Gulf region (Pierret, 2018).

In short, the SRC did not last long as a result of the interaction of environmental, relational, and framing/ideological structures that played against it in varying degrees. The SRC declared its last operation at the end of 2014, which was a declaration of the failure of the official military action of the SMB. This had organisational implications for the SMB during the 2014 elections when new names were introduced, led by the current Supreme Guide, Mohammad Waleed (Zaman al-Wasl, 2015).

6.2.2 The Civilians Protection Committee: The Role of Informal Networks

During its short career between 2012 and 2014, the Civilians Protection Committee (CPC) was known among Syrian activists as the “alternative body” of the SMB (Asharq AlArabi, 2011; Aljazeera, 2013c). This impression continued to circulate despite repeated denial by its leaders such as Haitham Rahma and Nazir al-Hakim, who said that ‘the Islamic background of its leadership and their intellectual affiliation to the SMB, or the “Hassan al-Banna”, school of thought , caused this confusion’ [176] (quoted in Almustafa, 2021).

Haitham Rahma[177] does not deny the SMB’s participation in the founding meetings and his efforts to persuade the movement to support the CPC confirms the SMB's refusal to continue with it or support it and its preoccupation with other projects (2021). He presents the CPC as a development or organisational extension of the Conference of the ‘National Coalition for the Support of the Syrian Revolution’ (known as the Brussels Conference) held in early June 2011, with the participation of various opposition figures and currents, including the SMB [178], with the aim of “supporting the youth revolution in Syria” and not representing it. According to Rahma himself, the ‘announcement of this body came out of the belief of an old conviction that a high-capacity regime such as the Syrian regime cannot be brought down peacefully, and this conviction has taken root as protesters moved to armed action’ (2021). Important as this conviction is, the external environment mechanism, according to Rahma, played a key role as regional and

[176]This confusion is due to the SMB 's participation in the Brussels conference as mentioned earlier, and the ambiguity of the links of founding figures within the group, particularly Nazir al-Hakim, who is known to have "joined the Islamic political movement in Syria since his youth" (Syrian Coalition, 2017) and Haitham Rahma, who served as Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Scholars Association (see Islam Syria, 2011).

[177] Interview with Haitham Rahma, the founder of FSH and the former of general coordinator of the CPC (he is also the current secretary general of the SNC), 27/9/2021.

[178]A video report of the conference shows figures such as Ali Sadr al-Deen al-Bayanouni, Obaida Nahhas, and Idris al-Ra'ad, a former director of the "Syrian Revolution against Bashar al-Assad" Facebook page and spokesman for the CPC and later FSH (Aljazeera, 2011).

international positions changed, particularly that of the US, towards accepting armed action under the justification or slogan of “protection of civilians,” the name adopted for the new rising body (ibid.). By applying the threat/opportunity mechanism, armed action no longer carried the risk of classification on terrorism lists, but an opportunity to acquire new resources and play a more active role in an environment in which “mass violence” became the choice of all parties.

With regard to resources and as mentioned above, RMT advocates emphasise the major role of informal networks in resource and mobilising structures especially in Arab and Islamic countries.

As a result, Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and mosques came under intense research scrutiny, as Islamist movements used these meso-level organisations to build their grassroots movements within local communities (Wiktorowicz, 2004, pp. 10-11; Pierret, 2012).

Haitham Rahma's networking efforts in Europe before the war played were important during the first phase of the establishment of the CPC. Rahma presents himself and his pre-revolutionary activity in this role[179], where he was active in several Islamic associations in Europe that were interested in humanitarian charity and Islamic advocacy. In addition to Rahma and his extensive international relations, there is the influence of a

[179] Haitham Rahma, the Founder of FSH, was born in Qusayr, Homs province, in 1960. He studied there to high school, then received a scholarship to study in Romania. Rahma presents himself intellectually as a "former Baathist", and that his membership in the Baath Party helped him to travel to Romania, where he began to lean towards the Baath Party of Iraq. He later joined the party and became an active opponent of the Assad regime since 1984, when he first met with the SMB He was arrested in Romania on charges of planning to assassinate former President Hafez al-Assad during his visit to Romania. He was imprisoned there for several years before being released and moving out of the country. He pursued his postgraduate studies and received his doctorate degree in "3D Measurement Accuracy" from Latvia, where he was active in Islamic charity work. He then moved to Sweden and obtained citizenship. He was the imam of the Stockholm Grand Mosque and president of the European Organization of Imams, an organization active in several humanitarian issues and raised donations from several countries. Rahma is a founding member of the National Council before becoming a member of the SNC, where he held several positions, the most recent of which was the Secretary-General. He was the General Coordinator of the Commission for Civilians Protection (CPC) and the Political Leader of FSH until 2016.

mysterious figure, the Homsi merchant Salah al-Hakimi (Abu Abdo). Little is known about al-Hakimi except that he owns 80 per cent of the stone and alabaster trade sector in the Arabian Gulf. He transferred his investments to Turkey during a downturn in the country's economy, which strengthened his relations with senior officials of the CPC (Almousa, 2020).

Recalling Tilly's contribution about the significance of "the political entrepreneurs" (2017), it can be said that the role of al-Hakimi for the CPC is very similar to that of Adnan al-Arour for the AoI, with al-Hakimi's lack of international or organisation support at the beginning, in addition to his focus on the regional dimension by supporting the groups of his province of Homs (AlFaris 2015, pp. 189-191). In the words of Rahma, the CPC was launched to unite the Homs Brigades in preparation for lifting the siege from the city in what was known as the "Save Homs City" unifying project[180], before it expanded to the north (2021). The CPC was formed from 17 brigades and battalions distributed in various provinces, mostly in Homs[181]. It included dissident officers, possessed anti-armour missiles, most notably the Konkurs, and was also active in the relief and humanitarian fields, and field hospital support (Zaman al-Wasl, 2013; CPC official website, 2014).

Regardless of how important pre-war networks were in providing short-cuts across phases for armed social movements in their establishment phase, those in charge

[180]Abdullah almousa quotes a military leader, who worked within the Commission and then moved to the Failaq al-Sham, that al-Hakimi is the most important leader and sole decision-maker of the CPC and that, since February 2013, he tried to secure huge deals for weapons and ammunition on the black market for the "Homs Liberation" Movement. To achieve that, he launched the "Qadimon battle (We are Coming) at the end of September of the same year. The battle failed, however, and could not achieve its goals (Almousa, 2020).

[181]According to a copy reserved for the official website of the Commission and a statement by one of its leaders, these groups are: Homs (10): Suyouf al-Haq Brigade, Usoud Al-Islam Brigade, Moawiya Bin Abi Sufyan Brigade, Karama Brigade, al-Nasr Brigade, Baba Amr Martyrs Brigade, Tal Kalkh Martyrs Brigade, al-Ansar Brigade (Houla), al-Walid Brigade, Khalid Bin al-Walid Brigade; Damascus: Alwaleed Bin Abdul Malik Battalion; Damascus Countryside: al-Nasr Brigade (Qalamoun); Idlib and Hama (2): Thiab al-Ghab Brigade, Hettin Brigade; Aleppo and its countryside (2): al-Ansar Brigade, Ansar al-Khilafa Brigade; Latakia and the Coast: Abna al-Qadisiyya Assembly (Zaman al-Wasl, 2013; CPC , 2014).

recognised their need for international or regional support, particularly after the SMB formally refrained from adopting the CPC while allowing its members to participate in an individual capacity, in continuation of its decentralised approach. They experienced an early crisis in finding an international sponsor. Haitham Rahma tried to announce the founding statement of the CPC in Qatar or KSA, but was rejected outright, which forced him to go to Cairo, where the margin for Islamic activity and freedom increased with the arrival of President Mohamed Morsi in power (Rahma, 2021).

According to PPA arguments about the mutual interaction between resource mobilisation and ideological framing, the search for an international sponsor, after regional doors were shut, prompted the CPC's leaders to adopt ideological frameworks and distinctions (or boundaries) different from those prevailing during 2012 (i.e. The Sunni/Alawite binary). In other words, shortly after its establishment, the CPC tried to distinguish itself from Islamic groups while highlighting a revolutionary identity focused on the "inclusive" national dimension of the Syrian uprising and its slogans of freedom and dignity, and the "democratic state" (Amer 2021). It also framed its political and military work as being a "national establishment independent and neutral towards politics and parties" operating under the umbrella of the SNC and its military councils. Despite their Islamic intellectual reference, its leaders were careful to avoid the religious ideology that began to dominate armed action at the time. Moreover, compared to other groups, they took a bold stand against Jihadist movements that included "non-Syrian fighters," calling for their expulsion, and for fighting IS and its "tails", in a direct reference to NF (Lund 2013; Bello, 2014).

Although some researchers such as Lefèvre (2015) and Conduit (2019), view the aforementioned discourse as an extension of Brotherhood thought, its distinctions and ideological frames, especially with regard to the assertion of the “civil state”, “state of law” and “democracy” that were present in the SMB 's basic intellectual documents, such as the “National Charter of Honor” and then the “Political Project of The Future Syria”, and the “Covenant and Charter”, the relational interpretation may provide a clearer picture, especially since this discourse would change completely after 2014. Amer and al-Haj describe it as a pragmatic response aimed at: first, avoiding the classification of the SMB, thereby denying it the support of regional actors and financiers such as KSA and the UAE, which at that time tried to invest in the formation of “military councils” in provinces to prevent Islamist dominance on armed action; and secondly, to obtain Western support, particularly American (2021).

What gives the resources interpretation significance is that the CPC, despite the Islamic background of its leaders, took a clear, almost solo, position early on against foreign fighters, Jihadists, and NF. This was contrary to most political and military forces in Syria, including the SNC and the SMB[182], who rejected the 2012 US decision to classify NF on terrorist lists (Salem, 2012). In short, in conjunction with efforts to arm the Syrian opposition led by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the CPC tried to present itself as a future partner with “moderate Islamic orientations” that could be invested in to confront Salafists or Jihadists. Anyhow, previous efforts were not successful, forcing the CPC's

[182]The then-head of the National Coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, called on the US to review its decision, and in a statement, the movement called the US decision "hasty, wrong, and reprehensible" (Aljazeera, 2012). It did not stop at Islamist figures such as the SMB spokesman Zuhair Salem, who classified Al-Nusra as a revolutionary force (Salem, 2012), but also Christian opposition figures such as Michel Kilo and George Sabra considered NF a national group with religious orientations rather than a Jihadist movement.

leaders to choose new ideological frames that define the Syrian conflict from an Islamic perspective, as will be seen in detail later when FSH is established.

On the ground, the ambiguous relationship between the SMB and the CPC contributed to the mistrust felt by many groups, especially as “affiliation or allegiance” was required to obtain support and resources (Almustafa, 2021). This made some groups express their anger publicly and forced them to withdraw, and reinforced suspicion of the SMB or those suspected of being affiliated with it, and caused the SMB to resort to its popular incubator, particularly following the rise of Salafist movements that dominated large areas of Syria, especially in rural areas, benefiting from financial, military, and non-governmental Gulf support (Lund, 2013c; Pierret, 2018).

Like the RSC, the three mechanisms (external environment, resources, ideological framing) seemingly interacted against the CPC's path, prompting its politically ambitious leaders[183] to reintroduce it (rebranding) quite differently from its first origin.

6.3 Rebranding: from the Sham Legion to the ‘National Front for Liberation’

This section reviews the emergence of Failaq al-Sham (FSH) in the context of the failure of two armed groups (RSC and CPC), and the emergence of a new movement with new ideological orientations, new organisational structure, and different international relations that were instrumental in making FSH, especially after the establishment of the National

[183]Despite the successive change of leaders and currents in the presidency of opposition institutions over ten years, Haitham Rahma and Nazir al-Hakim succeeded in maintaining their leadership positions within these institutions, as they were founders of the SNC and continue to hold their positions in the Coalition (the SNC official website, 2013; the SNC official website, 2017).

Front for Liberation (NFL), the most important brand in the armed opposition landscape after both ASH and the AoI weakened[184].

6.3.1 On the Ruins of the Two groups: Turkey is Looking for a Field Partner

On 10 March 2014 in the city of Aleppo, the formation of FSH was announced as the alternative name for the CPC along with three brigades that had split from the RSC, namely, Fatiheen Brigade, al-Eman Brigade, and Siham al-Haq Brigade, (Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2014). At that time, such a transformation assumed no significant importance, as it was described by several Syrian activists as no more than a "marketing change" (Conduit, 2019, p. 216), and FSH's emergence came within the creation of new mergers and new military formations that were common during the same period, such as the IF and Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), as its commanders stated then (Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2014).

However, the sudden emergence of FSH in the context of the Syrian conflict and its success, along with other Islamist and Jihadist movements within the alliance of the AoC in controlling Idlib City in March 2015, shed light on FSH both media- and research-wise. The common description that it was "SMB aligned" was no longer providing enough or detailed answers[185] (Lister, 2015, p. 216; Alking, 2018b; Barish, 2020; Ali, 2020).

[184] This classification is only true if we leave out HTS which is still internationally known and designated as a Jihadist movement linked to al-Qaeda and listed on the list of foreign terrorist organisations.

[185] Despite outright official denial of any organisational link to the SMB (Rahma, 2021), questions were still raised regarding the organisational link between both sides. In this context, Ali al-Bayanouni admitted that some of the FSH founders were affiliated with the SMB (in Conduit, 2019, p. 216); Molham al-Droubi confirmed that the SMB stipulated that those joining FSH should give up their membership of the SMB, denying any link between the two entities, despite describing them as "good", as he put it (in Conduit, 2019, p. 217).

Former director of the SMB 's media office, Omar Mushaweh[186], partially links that to the failure of the SMB 's armed experience or the RSC saying, "True that FSH was an extension for CPC, but it is a reflection of the failure of the experience of the SMB 's mismanagement of the armed action file in the revolution which prompted other components from the RSC to join other organizational frameworks which were closer to them intellectually such as the CPC " (2021). Haitham Rahma agrees with Mushaweh that the failure of the SMB 's approach prompted some factions from the SRC to join the CPC, but he places the establishment of FSH within the framework of the developments of the Syrian conflict, especially after the regime took full control of Homs, where the majority of the CPC factions used to operate, and because the military operations were mainly concentrated in the north of Syria (2021). Thus, there should be a more dynamic and efficient organisation that responds to the transformations in the political environment, especially after the emergence of IS which presented a serious challenge to the moderate Islamist movements[187], as Rahma puts it (2021).

There is no doubt that the aforementioned factors are important in the context of FSH's establishment; however, they do not answer the questions of military efficiency and its sudden emergence in a geographical location that contains the largest number of fighting groups and where the two strongest armed movements, NF and ASH, are active, considering that these two define themselves as being ideologically different from the

[186] Interview with Omar Mushaweh, the former director of the SMB 's media office, 25/10/2021.

[187] Rahma says, "At the time when ideologized Islamist movements were highly competing among each other and trying to impose their experiments, thoughts, or ideologies on the Syrian revolution, the revolutionary groups, or the groups of the FSA were witnessing a state of collapse and defragmentation, which made them prone to quick collapse against the first obstacle they face. At that time, it was a must that the efforts of the groups who adopt moderate Islamic, national, and revolutionary thought should be concerted to remain within one entity and organization that would preserve its survival and existence and maintain its strength, weapons, and presence in each of the liberated areas. This is what has been achieved, and FSH was able to keep it and secure, and was able to reach what we are now" (2021).

SMB and the other groups. In the view of this study, the contextual changes in the Syrian conflict and its transition, after the involvement of Hezbollah and the Iran-backed militias, to a form that is close to a proxy war, prompted Turkey to look for its own proxies inside Syria, and not limit itself to the role of “facilitator” or “mediator” that it used to play between the Syrian groups and foreign backers.

Within this context, Turkey was the “magic word” in the rise of FSH, which is what Haitham Rahma confirmed by saying, “our understanding of the Turkish policy and its objectives, our knowledge of Turkey’s goodwill towards us, and our recognition of the common goals and cooperation between us to achieve what our Syrian people aspire to, led to consolidating our relation with the Turk brothers and increased trust and cooperation between us with much credibility and transparency. This is the main reason for the strong relationships between us” (2021). However, other perspectives provide a more convincing explanation of Turkey’s motives for adopting FSH. In other words, this Turkish move could be placed within three paths, the first of which is the inefficiency of continuing to investment in the SMB as a result of the failure of its armed action and other organisational factors. According to Mushaweh, the reluctance of the SMB and its slow decision-making process, especially in terms of armed action—fearing a repeat of the Hama experience— prompted Turkey to look for other options after the failure of the RSC experience and the reactivation of the SMB’s activity inside Syria. Mushaweh adds reasons related to the mechanisms of the SMB operation. He stated that ‘despite of its unique relations with Ankara, the SMB was not able to go along with Turkey’s decisions without having minimum consensus within the movement or voting for a decision within the Shura Council’ (Mushaweh, 2021). Abd al-Rahman al-Haj agrees with Mushaweh on

Turkey's need for a more pragmatic and more flexible partner than an organisationally loose group such as the SMB. He adds that 'Ankara discovered the limitedness of its direct influence on the map of armed action in Syria. That is, there was no military group that was affiliated or aligned with Turkey that would achieve its goals and go along with it in some political moves' (2021). Within this context, Ahmad Abazeid sees that Turkey's inability to convince the Islamist movements, especially ASH, to attend the Geneva Conference or not to oppose it, is indicative that its control over the passage of aid and weapon convoys was not enough to have to an active influence, especially with the growing number of armed actors that oppose Turkey such the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and IS (2021).

In light of the above, and applying the threat/opportunity mechanism, these conditions served as an opportunity for the leaders of the CPC, such as Haitham Rahma, and those who aspired to play a future political role and were looking for an international sponsor to present themselves as trusted parties according to Turkish standards and criteria, within a political approach that could be summed up in a tactical statement by Haitham Rahma, when he said, 'the relationship between Turkey and the Syrian revolution is like the relationship between a mother and a baby. If we were to lose the baby [the revolution], we must not sacrifice the mother [Turkey]' (Hussein, 2019).

What increased that opportunity was the aggressive approach led by KSA towards political Islam movements and the SMB in particular, which forced its Syrian branch to step back, fearing being designated as a terrorist organisation, freezing of its assets, or arresting many active figures and networks inside the KSA (Lefèvre, 2014a). That is why the AKP's government needed an armed group that was ideologically close to it, politically

and militarily flexible, and, at the same time, able to bypass organisational affiliation with the SMB to keep a good relationship with KSA in that period. These characteristics were found in the commanders of FSH, especially al-Hakimi who was living in KSA and had close relations with decision-makers there because of his sizeable trade in KSA and the Gulf (Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2014).

One of the best proofs of such flexibility and the ideological, political and military efficiency was FSH's active involvement in different military operations rooms. Such rooms started, from 2014, to be established through a decision by the regional and international actors active in the Syria conflict, reflecting their agreements, differences and competition. The founding of the AoC in early 2015 and the participation of FSH in it, was the biggest example of regional and international foreign actors' dominance over the dynamics of the conflict in Syria. It reflected, for the first time, a Turkish, KSA, and Qatari consensus on weakening the Iranian role in Syria and defeating Iran's tools through supporting the fighting groups with their different orientations, including NF, which was viewed as linked to al-Qaeda then (Todman, 2016). That consensus could be largely attributed to the Saudi discontent, especially after King Salman came to power in 2015[188], of the US' withdrawal approach to the Middle East within what was known as the "Obama Doctrine" and turning a blind eye to the Iranian influence to finalize the "nuclear agreement", which the Obama administration presented as its most important achievement on the foreign policy level (Goldberg, 2016).

[188] King Salman then started a more "interventionist" phase in KSA's foreign policy, looking, along with Washington's other allies, for other ways to protect its interests from Iran, which was the most aggressive and expansive, and trying to fill the US strategic void by competing with other regional powers. This was done by launching Operation Decisive Storm against Iran's allies, the Houthies in Yemen, and was reflected in Syria with cooperation between KSA and Qatar (Todman, 2016).

According to (Amer, 2021) the existence of a political opportunity, prompted FSH's command to change their negative attitude towards cooperation with Jihadist movements used at the time of the CPC, and they participated, on 24 March 2015, in the AoC military alliance that was dominated and led by Jihadist and Islamist movements, at the top of which were NF, ASH, and Jund al-Aqsa, the closest to IS. One of the military commanders in FSH, who asked not to be identified, justified working with Jihadists and Jihadist movements as a pragmatic response to the surrounding environmental conditions. It is "on the one hand an opportunity to get KSA's support after its stance towards Turkey and Islamists has changed to rebalance the scale after Iran had intervened". He goes on, "We cannot be moderate in a closed environment that is full of Salafist groups which are against our thoughts and propositions and consider us as ideological indecisive people … We had to go along with them then and back down, especially that their Salafist discourse was more able to mobilize fighters." (Anonymous, 2021)[189].

Nevertheless, that represented a major shift from "moderation" to "radicalisation", not only on the behavioural level but also at the level of FSH's command giving up the national discourse, the expressions of freedom and democracy, and the flag of the Syrian revolution to adopt Islamic symbols and a discourse that went along with the Salafist, Jihadist groups (Amer, 2021). In spite of the fact that this transformation was temporary and pragmatic, as it turned out later after FSH withdrew from the AoC in 2016 and re-formed alliances with the FSA factions within an operations room that was then named "Fatah Aleppo", what happened earlier was proof of the possibility of turning back from ideological and behavioural moderation and moving towards radicalisation as long as the

[189] A member of the movement since its inception until 2018.

external environment does not allow large manoeuvring margins, which is what PPA assumes.

Based on that, the command of FSH was hand-tied, according to the conditions of the external environment which became very aggressive after the Russian intervention at the end of 2015 and the Gulf Crisis in 2017, which produced a cold regional conflict in which KSA and the UAE withdrew from Syria and turned towards Qatar and the allied Turkey, under loose phrases such as fighting political Islam and drying up the sources of terrorism (Ghadban, 2020).

Facing this reality and fearing a similar fate to that of ASH, which opposed Ankara's choices in the Astana path in 2017, FSH chose an appeasing and conforming approach by taking part in the political process defined by the Astana path of peace, and becoming involved in the military operations launched by Ankara in Syria such as the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Spring of Peace (Şaban et al., 2018). This provided FSH with implicit protection against the eradication campaign launched by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) against the Islamist movements in Idlib between 2017-2019. It also granted it permanent representation in the political landscape, as being "Turkey's favorite group" (Al-Aswad and Soylu, 2019). In other words, FSH had turned into a political and military destination for all fighting groups that were starting to dwindle owing to decreasing resources and support, and because of HTS strikes (Orient Net, 2019).

Within this context, the establishment of NFL in May 2018 could be understood (Enab Baladi, 2018c) as being designed to assimilate the remaining group and re-merge them into an organisational framework whose backbone was constituted by FSH and its political and military commands (Enab Baladi, 2019e). NFL, which from 2019 became

part of the SNA, is viewed as the most organised and most professional force within the Syrian opposition[190]. It is presented to Russia[191] and Iran as the strongest party adhering to the field and political truces (Enab Baladi, 2018b). It is also presented to western countries and the US as a moderate formation that could form a "military equalizer" to HTS, which is still on the list of terrorist organisations, despite its endeavours to show behavioural and organisational changes that might take it off the list. In Turkey, NFL is introduced as a back-up force tasked with accompanying Turkish military convoys and observation points in Idlib (AlMousa, 2020). It is also introduced as a field ally to the Turkish troops outside Syria, especially after the involvement of its fighters as mercenaries or hired fighters in regional arenas such as Libya and Azerbaijan (Fahim et al., 2020, Fahim and Zakaria, 2020; Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2020).

6.3.2 International Sponsors: a "Professional" Military Organisation

PPA and RMT place significant importance on the role of international sponsors in internal conflicts and collective violence. A collective activity cannot be effective without sufficient resources, and these cannot necessarily be secured by pre-war networks or diaspora donations (Hafez, 2003). As mentioned earlier, the founders of the CPC, using lessons learnt from the 1980s, knocked on different doors seeking support but all doors were closed during the foundation period (Rahma, 2021). However, as the regional

[190] The Syrian regime launched, with broad Russian support, operation "Fajr Idlib1" at the end of April, 2019, which prompted NFL to launch operations "Dar' al-Odwan" and "al-Fatah al-Mubeen", which they turned into a military cover similar to AoC under which the groups coordinate without direct merging. Both NFL and HTS fought together only to stop the fighting with a fragile ceasefire agreement following the regime's control over large swathes of land in rural Hama (al-Khatib, 2019; Enab Baladi, 2020b; Reuters, 2019). This ceasefire gave some room to the opposition forces to reorganise by merging NFL within the SNA, containing four FSH groups commanded by Fadhlallah al-Hajji, in a step that was fully a Turkish decision, and neither NFL nor the SNA knew about (Al-Aswad and Soylu, 2019).

[191] Russian aircraft directly targeted a training camp for FSH at the end of October, 2020, killing 36 fighters (Syria TV, 2020c), in a warning message to Turkey, which led Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to personally respond, accusing Russia of working against the settlement agreement, which FSH takes part in protecting (Syria TV, 2020d).

circumstances changed and Turkey adopted it as a trusted partner on the ground, the regional environment became more welcoming, particularly after the relative rapprochement between Turkey and KSA at the time (Almousa, 2020).

In order to maximise resources, FSH pursued a pragmatic policy, unprecedented among armed opposition groups, in an attempt to satisfy all international actors in Syria, while avoiding upsetting Turkey. According to Abd al-Rahman al-Haj, the main goal of this striking pragmatism was to eliminate the SMB stigma, which was a major obstacle to them (2021). Over time, FSH's leaders have provided numerous examples of pragmatic political steps and decisions aimed at mobilising resources, most notably voting for KSA's candidate Ahmad al-Jarba to head the SNC against Riyadh Hijab, the former prime minister who was supported by Qatar, which KSA describes as an ally of political Islam (al-Jarba, 2021; Hijab, 2021). In a similar context, during the short period in which KSA strongly supported the Syrian armed groups, FSH announced in a remarkable statement in 2015 that it was preparing 2,000 fighters "to be under the command of king Salman bin Abdul Aziz, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" (FSH official website, 2015).

In short, this pragmatic policy proved successful and helped secure the resources and political support needed for the rapid rise. FSH was able to dance to every tune and was almost the only movement that was able to cooperate with contradictory parties at the same time. It had alliances with Jihadists and Islamist movements, most notably NF, on the one hand, and the FSA on the other. It also maintained good relations and gained support from Qatar and Turkey, which the founders of FSH describe as the "Loyalty Alliance" (Rahma, 2021), as well as KSA. In addition, it maintained the status of "vetted" by the CIA, which qualified FSH to obtain TOW anti-tank missiles (Lister, 2016). FSH's

position among international supporters led to a more professional organisational experience (al-Faris, 2015, p. 189; Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2014). Dissident officers built a "disciplined" military along the lines of regular armies; they focused on the quality of fighters rather than numbers, provided fighters with sophisticated weapons, formed a sharia office to prepare them ideologically and motivate them, organised them into light-moving battalions, and formed a "central force," similar to special forces in armies[192], that could easily be deployed as needed (Almousa, 2020).

As for decision-making and the relationship between the military and political components, the political component of FSH, unlike other movements, leads the military component[193]. The team of three, Haitham Rahma, Nazir al-Hakim, and Munther Sarras, had set the guidelines of the organisation since its formation, and were able to obtain great support from various countries, as mentioned above. FSH was almost the only movement capable of receiving support from KSA, and then from the "Joint International Coordination Rooms," the US-backed MOM and MOC, from which it obtained anti-tank TOW missiles, as seen in many clips published by FSH (Almustafa, 2021). Since 2019, FSH has mainly received support from Turkey, which gives it the lion's share of the

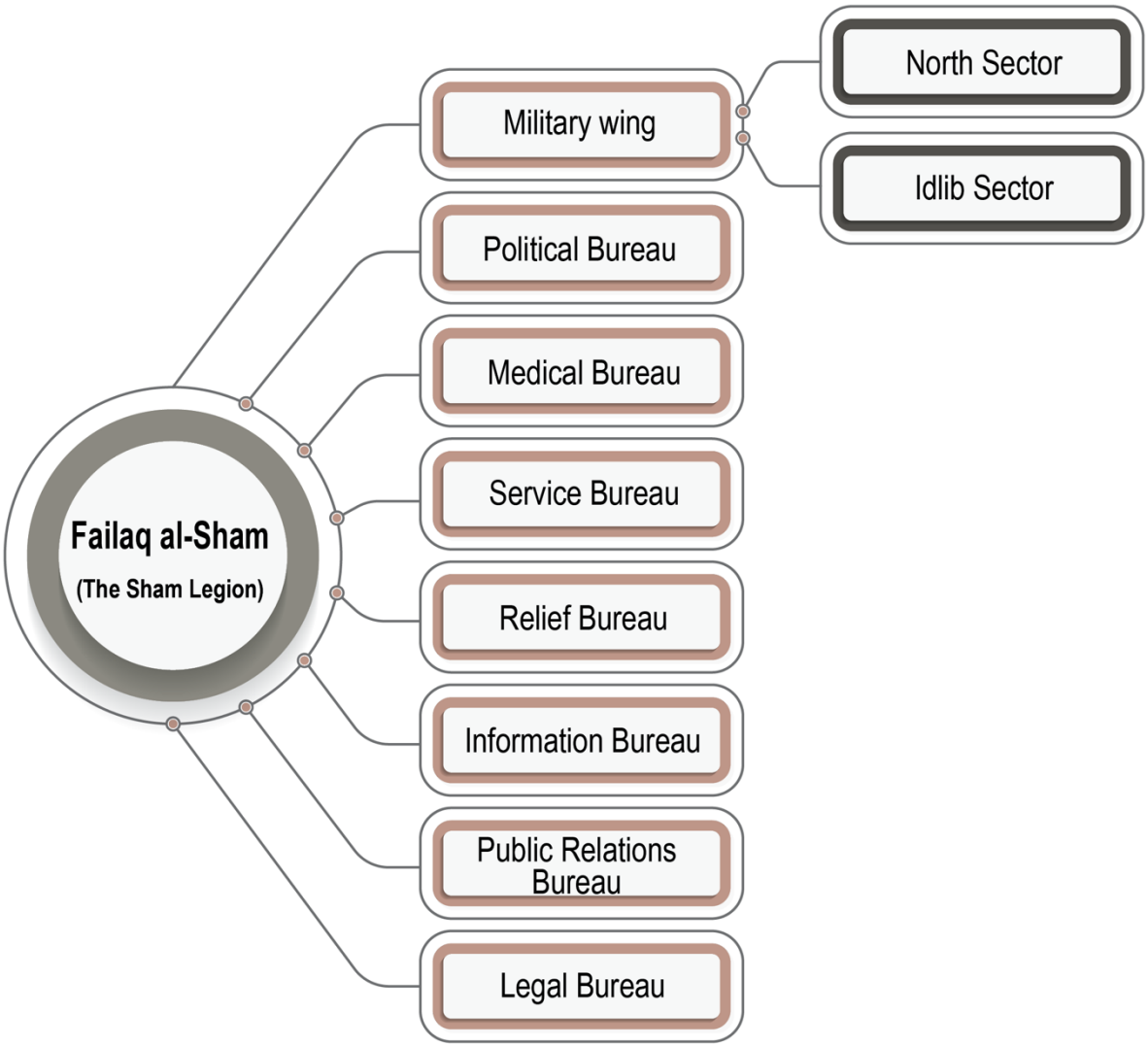
[192] FSH was made up of 19 brigades in Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, Hama and rural Damascus (Sheikh Youssef, 2014). The formal political leader of FSH was Munther Sarras, Abu Obada, who was the representative of both the RSC and the CPC in besieged Homs and a member of the Homs Military Council. Other prominent leaders include the following: Marwan Nahas, Abu Sobhi, who was a leader in the AoC and coordinated with the rest of the groups and is now the head of the Political Office of the NLF; Omar Huzaifa, the general Sharia Official of FSH, who oversaw the agreements of cessation of fighting between the HTS and other groups (alMousa, 2020); Idris al-Ra'ad, member of the Political Office and External Relations Officer (Asharq al-Awsat, 2017); his brother Saif al-Ra'ad, Abu Omar, head of the Media Office of FSH (Ali, 2018). Behind the scenes, there are Haitham Rahma and Mohammed Nazir al-Hakim, as well as Abu Abdo Hakimi, whose influence started to decline as from 2018 (Mushaweh, 2021).

[193] FSH is known for its ambiguity and secrecy with regard to its military leadership, but some prominent commanders (dissident officers) are known. Fadlallah Al-Hajji, Abu Yamen, an officer who defected from the regime army at the end of 2012, joined the RSC, became the RSC's deputy commander. He then became the commander of the Idlib Operations Room (Enab Baladi, 2017a) and the Chief of Staff of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) (Enab Baladi, 2017c). He became the FSH's commander when he joined it and he took over leadership of the NLF. Another prominent military commander is Major Yasser Abdul Rahim, who led the Aleppo Army Operations Room, but was dismissed in early 2018 for no known reason (Enab Baladi, 2018a). Another commander is Haj Mohammed Horan, Abu Osaid, Commander of Idlib Sector in FSH, who was a member of the Tripartite Military Council in Idlib, along with Captain Abu al-Munther of ASH and Abu al-Hassan 600 of HTS (Almousa, 2020).

support it provides to Syrian groups, especially after it joined the NLF, which it has led militarily and politically. As a result, FSH has possessed heavy weapons (tanks and personnel carriers), medium weapons (e.g. Grad missiles) and light weapons. It also has a large number of fighters estimated at 18,000 (Smisim and Amin, 2018), deployed in various opposition areas in north-western Syria. Following the opposition's retreat from the governorates of Homs and Hama, the fighters are now concentrated on FSH's two main sectors: the northern sector, in areas controlled by the Turkish-backed SNA, and the HTS-controlled Idlib sector.

At the administrative level, FSH is divided into six main offices: the Sharia, Political, Media, Relief, Medical and Service Offices (FSH official website, 2014) as well as a Public Relations Office, as seen in the figure below (see Chart 3). Thus, it shifted from a military group (CPC) to a social movement that has Charles Tilly's four characteristics: campaign, repertoire, public display and worthiness; unity; numbers; and commitment to themselves and/or to their popular base (Tilly and Wood, 2013) and stands at the intersection of what he calls the "political adventurer" and "violent specialists", represented here by defected officers (Tilly and wood, 2013, p. 36) who are led by the political wing, which is also in line with the classic definition of war as seen by Carl von Clausewitz (Clausewitz 2006, p. 7).

Chart 3: Organisational Structure of FSH



(Source: FSH's Official Website)

On this basis, FSH has been the backbone of the majority of the armed entities that Turkey sponsors or seeks to create[194], as it is the most organised movement and the

[194] Ankara became almost the only sponsor of Syrian groups after the battle of Aleppo. It thus became the main actor in the Syrian scene and worked to rearrange it through its attempts to impose mergers and restructuring of the groups.

one present in both Aleppo and Idlib, unlike the SNA's groups found only in the countryside of Aleppo or ASH, which operates in a narrow space in Idlib (Smisim and Amin, 2018). FSH's leaders are counting on the NLF to integrate the remnants of the Islamic movement into a single organisational body that will serve as the counterpart of HTS, with a total of approximately 100,000 fighters, which will provide them with a key role in any potential political settlement (al-Mohammad, 2022; Anadolu Agency, 2018).

6.3.3 Compound Identity under the Umbrella of the Islamic Council

In order to perform its fundamental function in creating and maintaining meaning for the targeted audience, the framing process involves three core tasks: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. While diagnostic framing generally involves identifying problems in order to attribute blame and offer solutions, prognostic framing emphasises the articulation of suggested solutions to cope with the problematic situation as well as determining the best way of implementing the proposed strategies, tactics and targets. Motivational framing, in turn, illustrates how collective action can be rationalised by providing suitable terms for 'engaging in a social movement and moves beyond the identification of problems and solutions to actions' (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 202; Hervieux and Voltan, 2016, p. 284; Westphal, 2018, p. 20).

As mentioned earlier, the CPC adopted at the time of its foundation revolutionary ideological frames that define the conflict with the regime based on the democratic/authoritarian dichotomy and was associated with subjective, organisational,

It was in this context that the NFL was formed in Idlib, and the SNA was formed in Aleppo, with attempts to integrate the two in some way, especially after the Russian military operations.

and ideological motives. These frames reflected at that time the intellectual and political revisions made by Islamists after the “Hama experience” in terms of accepting peaceful political action and democratic mechanisms and values. At the same time, they were a pragmatic response to internal and external contexts. According to Amer, the “revolutionary” public mood was not prepared to accept the dominance of armed Islamist groups at a time when a revolutionary armed umbrella existed that was represented by the FSA led by Colonel Riad al-Asaad and the Supreme Military Council led by Brigadier General Mustafa Al-Sheikh (2021). However, the escalating repression, coupled with sectarian massacres and with new actors helping the Syrian regime, led to a positive radical change in the popular perception of Islamist groups which bore the brunt of the confrontation with Iraqi and Iranian militias and Hezbollah forces (ibid). In addition, the lack of international intervention against the regime, particularly after the chemical weapons massacre in eastern and western Ghouta in August 2013 when the red lines set by the Obama administration were crossed, gave the Islamist movements popular momentum as the events “endorsed” their rhetoric on the futility of pinning hopes on Western countries, particularly the US, to help get rid of the regime (Lister, 2015).

In other words, the national ideological frames were unable to perform their three previous tasks (diagnostic, prognostic, motivational), which prompted the CPC to seek another path outside its “revolutionary” line and to highlight an “Islamic” identity with a new name: hence the name “FSH”. Accordingly, the foundation of FSH was one manifestation of the one-upmanship in the Islamist and Jihadist environment during 2013 and 2014, and the “dominance of the utmost discourse”, (Abazeid, 2015a; Ghadban, 2020). The decline in the FSA's presence and the predominance of the Islamic character

over armed action were among the factors that prompted the leadership of the CPC to abandon its “revolutionary” identity and replace it with an “Islamic” one, which led to FSH’s alliances and relations that enabled it to join the Jihadist-controlled AoC (al-Haj, 2021).

From a semiotic viewpoint, the use of the word “Sham,” the Islamic term used in the Prophet’s texts instead of the modern name “Syria”, was an imitation of Salafist groups such as ASH, Jabhat al-Nusra for the People of al-Sham (NF) and Suqour al-Sham Brigades. To reinforce its Islamic identity and form, FSH abandoned the flag of the revolution years after it was adopted by the CPC and used a white Islamic banner with the “Tawhid statement” in black. FSH also issued its own statements separately from other FSA groups and adorned them with much Islamic vocabulary and Qur'anic verses (Almustafa, 2021).

The adoption of this Islamic identity at the level of discourse and practice was not as fundamental as it was pragmatic, aimed at purely functional, interest-driven goals, namely the need to find common ground with Salafist movements to work together in accordance with the regional transformations mentioned earlier. It did achieve its goals of strengthening the FSH and expanding its support and active areas. These transformations once again demonstrated the distinctive features of the Syrian brotherhoods and their circles; pragmatism, or even opportunism, intersected with individualistic endeavours and ideological flexibility; not to maintain survival as was the case when they lived for decades in an authoritarian environment and in exile (Conduit, 2019), but this time to maximise FSH’s gains, which explains their speed and “immaturity”, as it were.

This is confirmed by the fact that the CPC did not go through “intellectual or ideological revisions,” did not to attack its core figures for their former affiliation with the SMB and did not attack and the FSA groups or reject their symbols, including the flag of the revolution. While FSH adopted an Islamic identity, it did not engage in intellectual and ideological battles to prohibit or criminalise the “flag of the revolution” like other jihadist groups that it was fighting alongside in Idlib, such as NF and Jund Al-Aqsa[195]. Moreover, once the AoC achieved its objectives, FSH was quick to withdraw from it and join the Aleppo Conquest operations room, which comprised mostly national groups.[196] In addition, FSH has not rejected the entire political process or the political actors; rather, its founders have been leading members in the process and it has been directly involved in Geneva, Astana and Sochi (Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2014; al-Haj, 2021).

In short, during its early years, FSH adopted compound ideological frames that blend the national and Islamic dimensions so as not to show a clear identity and ideology and so that the Islamic distinctive aspect (Sunni/Alawi) is highlighted within alliances and operations rooms with Islamic and Jihadist groups, and the revolutionary aspect (democratic/authoritarian) is highlighted during participation in the political process. This identity, along with FSH’s power on the ground and its close relation with Turkey, has made it the only movement[197] capable of communicating with the SNA on the one hand,

[195] According to Haitham Rahma, "The FSH did not change its vision, basic principles, approach or revolutionary national discourse, neither before, during, nor after the AoC. The withdrawal from AoC was because of major disagreements among its Islamic groups that caused its collapse" (2021).

[196] Following the success of the AoC, the Aleppo Conquest Operations Room was formed along its lines, and, unlike AoC, comprised predominantly FSA groups. It was led by Yasser Abdul Rahim, a leader in FSH at the time. (Khitto, 2015). The only two groups that participated in both rooms were ASH, which was more active in Idlib than in Aleppo, and FSH, which was active in both, until it withdrew from the AoC in early 2016, giving "priority to supporting the rebels in Aleppo" (Enab Baladi, 2016a) which was under Syrian military attack with heavy Russian air cover, and was eventually taken by the regime at the end of the same year.

[197] There was no military confrontation between FSH and HTS, except in simple skirmishes, as happened when HTS stormed the city of Ma'arat al-Numan and took control of FSH’s checkpoints and positions, but quickly returned them without escalation (Abdullatif, 2017). This was unlike other cases in which HTS began prolonged fighting with ASH,

and HTS, on the other. It allowed it to communicate, to varying degrees, with most sponsors, and showed how “customers manipulate sponsors as they show an “ideological shift” in order to get support (Ladwig, 2017).

In fact, this compound identity is based on the intellectual foundations, statements, and fatwas of the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC). FSH was one of the first Syrian groups to recognise the SIC as an intellectual point of reference (Khitto, 2015). Abdullah Almousa[198] goes further to consider FSH as a military extension of the SIC and vice versa, as the two were established at about the same time in 2014, they both enjoy official Turkish support, and they have almost the same objective. The SIC seeks to bring the Islamists under a single intellectual umbrella while FSH leaders are working to make the movement a military point of reference for the remnants of Islamic groups. In this context, according to Almousa, it be can understandable that the emergence of NFL, with FSH at its core, which was established on the initiative of the SIC to accommodate Islamist fighters instead of them joining HTS, especially after the latter began a systematic campaign in 2017, aimed at dismantling Islamic groups in Idlib to seize their resources and attract their fighters (2021). The SIC's rapid response in 2017 to HTS’ attack, or *baghi*, on FSH’s checkpoints provides evidence of that, especially given that HTS received direct Turkish warnings at the time against targeting FSH, this did not happen during HTS’ war against ASH. In addition, one of the most prominent sharia officials in the FSH, Sheikh Abdul Alim Abdullah, moved to be on the Board of Trustees of the SIC, and Sheikh Omar Huzaifa, the general sharia official of FSH, was assigned as head of the National Reconciliation

Noureddine Zenki Movement and others; FSH mostly committed itself to passive neutrality while trying to mediate without sides (e.g. Enab Baladi, 2017e).

[198] Interview with Abdullah Almousa, an ex-Commander in the FSA, 25/9/2021.

Committee, sponsored by the SIC, to resolve disagreements between the groups (Almousa, 2021). In this vein, as shown in the previous chapter, the SIC, particularly in the last two years, has used ideological frames within a new dichotomy (Islamic/secular) and positioned itself alongside the Islamist movements in the face of those who jeopardize the “Islamic identity” of Syria, including seculars and liberals both in the opposition and the regime.

The Concluding Chapter:

Determinants and Mechanisms of Transformations within Armed Islamist Movements in Syria: A Comparative Framework

The central theme of this study is an attempt to understand the nature, determinants, and mechanisms of the transformations in Syrian Islamist movements between 2011 and 2021. To that end, three case studies embodying three Islamist ideologies were selected, namely nationalist-Jihadi Salafism, scholarly Salafism, and the Muslim Brotherhood. However, this study undertaking was not without its scientific and methodological risks.

For one, those transformations, be they behavioural, organisational, or ideological, are still ongoing even if their main features have been crystalised. Second, the historical and social toolsets used to retrace and analyse social movements are usually employed at the commencement of a new stage, in which case researchers are more comfortable in their choice of theorical frameworks as they build new narratives and contexts (Della Porta and Keating, 2008). Third, the uncertain extent to which the mainstream paradigm commonly used to study MENA Islamist movements, particularly de-radicalisation and moderation, can be applied to Syrian Islamist movements.

A good argument can be made that the three largest movements created under those conditions were the ones tackled in this study, namely the Ahrar al-Sham (ASH), the Army of Islam (AoI), and the Sham Legion (FSH). Within their changing structures, the three movements incorporated hundreds of sub-groups and minor factions, as they enjoyed

better funding networks and political support, especially from the Arab Gulf (Pierret, 2018).

Even though the cases being studied are extensions of well-established currents and schools of thought, they have portrayed themselves as part of the Syrian uprising's body, which presented a unique facet to those cases. Those movements found themselves compelled to redefine their structural and ideological identity to incorporate themselves into the body of the 'Syrian revolution' and adopt, even in part, the goals of the Syrian uprising, namely a democratic transition (Bishara, 2013; Van Dam, 2017; Hinnebusch, 2019).

Accordingly, studying the emergence and transformation of armed Islamist movements in Syria between 2011 and 2021 presents a pertinent notion of the Syrian uprising, its internal and external dynamics, its actors, and change mechanisms. As such, this study draws upon PPA as a framework, which allows for the use of relational variables and mechanisms in the course of studying the transformation of social movements during revolutions, insurgency, invasions, liberations, and collective violence.

Regarding the subject matter of this study, this allows one to study Islamist groups as social movements grounded in reality and whose behaviour, views, and structure are subject to change, rather than being otherworldly, static actors—namely the conventional portrayal of such actors in cultural and identarian approaches.

In this way, this study draws upon general hypotheses touching upon the three mechanisms of change—external environment, resources, and ideological framing. Nonetheless, it is not the aim of this study to prove or disprove said hypotheses, but to use them as general guidelines, through which one can interact, test, and even critique

more specific conclusions in the same field, namely the transformation of Islamist movements in Syria and other Arab countries. Those include political learning, charismatic and historical leadership, political entrepreneurs, critical juncture, permissive and productive conductions, moderation through inclusion or exclusion, etc.… From an alternative perspective, studying the Syrian case is interesting for its contribution to the field of armed Islamist movements: with particular reference to this study, comparatively examining the transformations of the three case studies and the realties and mechanisms that served as a catalyst for those transformations.

7.1 How Can Transformations within Syrian Islamist Movements be Described?

As mentioned earlier, drawing an accurate picture of the trajectory of the transformations Islamist movements in Syria have gone through is a complex task. In their upholding of violence as an ideology, methodology, and a sole means not towards changing the political regime but to bring about a more radical change like establishing an Islamic state, they are fulfilling a procedural and practical definition of the term radicalisation. This definition can be projected onto all the case studies to a great extent, especially the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), compared to ASH and the AoI. The SMB was directly responsible for founding the Shields of the Revolution Council (SRC) and had an indirect involvement in founding the Civilian Protection Committee (CPC) that paved the way for the establishment of FSH in 2014 (Booysen, 2018).

The SMB underwent a gradual and prolonged revision process that involved dismantling its military wing, which can be seen as a form of behavioural de-radicalisation.

This process more-or-less involved a recognition of responsibility for its choice of violence in the 1980s' conflict (Lefèvre, 2013a).

In short, the SMB, as well as other ideologically close groups, and their involvement in the Syrian uprising could be seen as a practical contribution to studying the paradigm of 'de-moderation' both at the levels of terminology and process. Notably, there exists a rapidly growing trend within the field of Islamist movements to describe other movements as undergoing a process of de-moderation, such as Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), that reached advanced stages of ideological moderation before devolving into paths of authoritarian populism or semi-authoritarianism (Çınar, 2018; Yilmaz et al., 2020; Musil, 2021).

As new groups, relative to the SMB that had an armed chapter in its history, the ASH's and AoI's radicalisation trajectory was expected or, rather, natural in light of similar scenarios in which central state authority had regressed. Indeed, the shift to arms at the end of 2011 was an opportunity through which the leaders of those two movements tried to translate their ideals into a reality. However, when examined separately and more carefully, one finds that their different paths and transformations cannot be accurately described as "radicalization".

To ASH, the Saydnaya and Iraq years were hard-learnt lessons that any and all ties with global Jihadi Salafism and its offshoots, such as IS or al-Qaeda, must be severed. Instead, ASH founders envisioned their movement as a state-oriented/state-focused organisation. In doing so, they have explicitly acknowledged the model of the nation-state, which to other Jihadi groups is a modernist, western, imperialist concept which Muslims must do away with to revive the Caliphate, Emirate, or the Sultanate, all

of which are old Islamic governance models. Thanks to this conceptualisation, ASH had no problems calling itself part of 'the Syrian revolution' without concerning itself with the confusing dialogue around the term "revolution" in Jihadi Salafist thought (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed, 2019). Moreover, all of this paved the way for the group to strike out the term "Kataeb" or brigades, which has a clear military/combative connotation, from its official name to officially unveil itself on 31 December 2013 as a "political reformist movement"; a move that was considered by many researchers as a statement of intent of engaging with politics and the political process (ibid.).

On the surface, the AoI's radicalisation path is almost identical to ASH's. After all, the process of AoI's founding involved new positions and transformations hitherto unprecedented in scholarly Salafism thought, which produced the overwhelming majority of AoI's leaders. In other words, participating in the Syrian uprising and taking arms was in bold defiance to the literature of scholarly Salafism that has a very adverse stance on political engagement or dissident action, which is forbidden on most accounts (Arab Centre, 2015; Hawa, 2021). This provided an opportunity for wider engagement and created larger common grounds with competing Islamist and secular movements, insofar as entering countrywide military and political alliances such as the Syrian Islamic Liberation front (SILF), which was founded in September 2012 as an umbrella for most Islamist groups save for Jihadi Salafism such as ASH (Lund, 2016a; Orabi, 2021). The newly established front later became part of the General Staff of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is affiliated with the National Syrian Council (NSC) and ultimately the Syrian National Coalition (SNC).

In short, examining the founding phase of the three selected cases will lead us to the first finding of this study which is concerned with the transformations of Islamist movements with respect to their interactions with the centre, namely the state, during times of revolution, insurgencies, and armed conflicts. However, this makes for a broad picture of radicalisation that fails to highlight some important details (Alimi et al, 2015; Drevon, 2021). The Syrian conflict is a clear case of how counter-movements come into play during transformations. In the case of ASH, the past experiences of al-Qaeda and the position of its affiliates during the Saydnaya crisis pushed the would-be ASH leaders, who at that point were part of al-Qaeda, to shed themselves of Jihadi Salafism. On the other hand, the notable success of competing groups, such as Sufism and Jihadi Salafism, set the stage for the emergence of a counter-current within scholarly Salafism that abandoned its historical anti-politics position and worked to establish a political armed movement that moved past its Hanbali areas of influence, namely Douma. Further, a similar trajectory can be seen with the SMB. The emergence of new Islamist groups such as ASH impeded their aspirations to revive the MB's thought and activity in Syria at the start of the uprising. Consequently, the hardliner current gained power within the movement, culminating in dropping its revised approaches and readopting radicalisation.

A key term, when speaking about counter-movements, is 'opposition'. In this context, opposition is not limited to inter-relations within the same group, but extends, especially during armed conflicts, to wider intellectual and structural engagement with multiple groups (Mayer and Bert, 2017).

In Syria, the emergence of Islamic State (IS) in 2013 can be seen as the birth of a counter-movement in relation to other armed Islamist movements, irrespective of their inclinations.

Indeed, IS established broad common goals such as building an Islamic state and actively working on resurrecting the Caliphate. The emergence of IS was a major development to the three movements since IS was able to attract considerable portions of their fighters who opted to work with a movement that was working on translating its ideals into reality, instead of treating it as a matter for the future (al-Haj, 2021; al-Qadri, 2021). The IS question was further compounded by inner voices within those movements that refused to let their respective groups go through any process of revision or transformation, be it ideologically or behaviourally. In that light, one can better understand, in the cases of ASH and the AoI, the establishment of the Islamic Front (IF) and the "Ummah Project" that were both an ultimate manifestation of an ideological radicalism compared with the founding statements of those two movements (Arab Center, 2013; Shabbo, 2016).

The same can be said about the CPC and its moderate national-Islamist discourse that lost out to the bolder intellectual/ideological discourses that dominated the scene in 2014. Ultimately, the CPC leadership found itself forced to rebrand the group with a more Islamic name: Failaq al-Sham (Abazeid, 2021). Consequently, the movement entered into military and political alliances with explicitly Jihadi movements, such as al-Nusra Front (NF) and Jund al-Aqsa, previously considered a threat to the Syrian uprising. FSH was also part of the Army of Conquest (AoC).

Indeed, the Syrian conflict sheds a clearer light on the mechanisms and tools used to measure the transformation of Islamist movements and how they can be understood with static terms that can be applied to different cases. Besides the conceptual and theoretical critique of the concept of 'moderation', the terms 'participation' and 'inclusion' are also problematic. Questioning the 'participation' aspect of the thesis, Nathan J. Brown

noticed that most Islamist movements in the Arab world, prior to the 'Arab spring', tended to participate in elections even when 'victory was not an option', aiming to lose rather than win in order to avoid political constraints (2012, pp. 4-6). With regard to 'inclusion', the main criticism is that 'inclusion' is not simply a matter of involvement in elections but can manifest in many different forms such as being involved in negotiations, resolving armed conflicts, and engaging in pacts during democratic transition (ibid.).

In the Syrian context, the Syrian regime, its supporters and popular base, and its international allies such as Iran and Russia lumped together all armed groups, especially Islamist, considering them terror groups that must be eradicated regardless of any intellectual or ideological differences. The other camp was certainly more nuanced in their approach. That forced researchers and observers to measure the transformation of the Syrian armed Islamist movements by using more-or-less three criteria – 1. their position on the flag of revolution; 2. engagement with the political and negotiation process with its two paths (Geneva and Astana); 3. their position on the representative bodies of the opposition, especially those that gained international recognition such as the SNC and the HNC. The positive/negative engagement with those three indicators determines whether or not any given movement is "revolutionary". In this context, "revolutionary" is an equivalent of "moderate" (Abazeid, 2015a; Lund 2016). As such, the use of violence in and of itself was not the measurement, as much as the form and nature of that violence. It was paramount to distinguish between political violence carried out by the resistance movements which was potentially legitimate or justifiable, even at an international level, and other types of social, sectarian, or Jihadi violence (Bishara, 2013; Drevon, 2017; Pierret, 2017). This distinction did not receive due examination in the field of the

transformation of Islamist movements, where violence, regardless of its type, was sufficient to brand a movement as radical. Indeed, determining the type of violence, and distinguishing political violence from other types of violence during revolutions or domestic insurrections, is of conceptual and theoretical importance in the field of the transformation of Islamist movements. In fact, this was one of the main findings of this study.

Another noteworthy point about measurement tools is the importance of contextualisation. The apparent behavioural moderation displayed by some actors in their relationships with other opposition groups could result from pragmatic reasons necessitated by the conditions at hand, rather than a genuine belief. On the other hand, adopting the flag of revolution was considered a sign of ideological moderation that had no bearing on pragmatic calculations. It was afforded such stature and symbolism because it was targeted by all of those who were considered enemies, from the regime to Salafi movements (Abazeid, 2021; Almustafa, 2021). One can understand the decision of FSH to drop the flag of revolution and adopt another white Islamic flag in that context, even if the movement retracted that decision after joining the AoC in 2015. This was a culmination of the pragmatic trajectory of radicalisation that was initiated with the CPC in late 2013 for its rapprochement with Salafi movements and ended with FSH withdrawing from the AoC. The movement subsequently readopted the flag of revolution in 2016.

The flag issue was by no means a minor one. ASH waited until 2017 to adopt it after an uneven series of revisions and rebranding that started with the movement signing the ‘Honour Revolutionary Charter’ in May 2014. The signing was a complete reversal of the “Ummah Project” that the IF adopted (Sinjab, 2015; al-Omar, 2021). That document

was also a significant shift for the broader Islamist landscape on a political and intellectual level. The document established a realistic political vision, both in its language and content, that would take the form of a pluralistic state the politics of which should be decided by the Syrian people (Ali, 2014; Shabbo, 2016). The outcome of this shift was certainly evident in ASH's actions, not the least of which was its decision to take part in the Riyadh Conference that established the High Negotiations Committee HNC (Desina, 2016).

More importantly, adoption of the flag by ASH, a decision that came during the reign of its fourth commander Ali al-Omar, followed major divisions that led to the ousting of the hardliner current with the founding of Jaysh al-Ahrar. The hardliners joined the NF. On a related note, adopting the flag completely shut the door on any potential reproachment between ASH and NF. Not only did that put an end to the multiple merger attempts, but it also ended all military coordination and collaboration. And more significantly, put the two on a collision course that culminated in an armed confrontation that ASH lost to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Measuring AoI's "moderation" using the same metric, i.e., adopting the independence flag, gives a similar picture. The AoI did not adopt the independence flag until March 2017 following a protracted trajectory of transformation that started with a more realistic political approach. Said approach was necessitated by opening channels of communication with the US and managing to gain limited support from Washington and other Western countries to fight IS. Domestically, the AoI demonstrated a more open mindset towards the other opposition components, both politically and militarily, as well as both friends and foes within the opposition (MacDonald, 2015). The AoI subsequently

took part in the Riyadh conference and officially joined the HNC, which was founded in December 2015. The AoI gained further influence within the opposition, as Mohammad Alloush, head of the AoI political office, assumed the position of senior negotiator at HNC between 2016 and 2018, and headed the opposition delegation in a number of Astana rounds (Abd al-Rahman, 2021).

A fourth metric can be added to measure the degree of behavioural and structural transformations together: joining the Syrian National Army (SNA). Even though the SNA was founded to fulfil a need for the Turkish side that was looking for a field partner for its military operations in northwestern and northeastern Syria, it became a categorising metric for the three guarantor states, especially Russia. Since the SNA was wholly funded and regulated by Ankara, most importantly with regard to decisions of combat and ceasefire, joining the SNA meant that any group's military decisions were contained. Additionally, the SNA was intended to be a structure that could be further fleshed out and incorporated into a formal armed force, should a political resolution for the Syrian crisis eventuate (Yüksel, 2019; Yetim and Kaşıkcı, 2021; Pierret, 2021).

In short, the SNA was meant to restructure armed groups in a way that prevents them from taking up arms and works towards goals outside of the established understandings. This largely falls within the definition of behavioural de-radicalisation, as put by Ashour—a process the aim of which is to eventually lead to the abandonment of armed methods as a tactic for attaining revolutionary political goals and organisational de-radicalisation that refers to the process leading to dismantlement of an armed group (2011, p. 379-380). However, this does not necessarily lead to a stage of ideological de-

radicalisation, which refers to the de-legitimisation of the use of violent means to achieve political ends (ibid.).

Of the three case studies, FSH was a fundamental pillar for the SNA from its foundation in May 2017, due to the instrumental role Ankara had played in its evolution since 2014. To add to that, FSH was the “preferred model” for Turkey in its relationship with Syrian groups, since it was able to dictate and employ its military strategies as if it were an extension of the Turkish military both in Syria and abroad (Amer, 2021). Further, the FSH leaders were given key political positions in the SNC. For instance, Rahma is the general-secretary of the SNC. The same can be said for the AoI after its withdrawal from Eastern Ghouta in 2018. To the AoI, the SNA was a lifeline without which it would not have been able to survive in northern Syria— a hostile and foreign environment on an intellectual and political level. As such, the SNA reached the advanced stages of de-radicalisation after it was announced that it had fully merged with the Shami Front which is an essential component of the SNA (Abd al-Rahman, 2021).

Unlike the AoI and FSH, ASH’s path to joining the SNA was more complex. This has its roots in the ideas upon which ASH was founded as a group that distinguishes itself, structurally and ideologically, from the FSA and the national opposition even as regards choices of alliances and operations. ASH preferred to side itself exclusively with Salafist groups. It kept using the term *ikhwat al-manhaj* or brothers in methodology which was a procedural alliance with Salafi groups. The term was frequently used to mobilise fighters even after the group went through multiple transformations (Hassan, 2016). On the other hand, ASH leadership was always wary of being a part of any opposition body in which it did not have key influence as the largest and most powerful component.

Instead, ASH opted for a coordination-based relationship through which it could maintain full structural autonomy and a window for an uncostly withdrawal in case it met with backlash from its popular base, which was the case in the Riyadh Conference, joining the HNC, and its involvement in the Astana path (Drevon, 2017). However, ASH lost its “most powerful” card after its costly defeat to the NF. Consequently, the movement started scrambling for military alliances and international and financial support to survive. At first, ASH was not able to join the SNA under the pretext that the majority of its forces are stationed in Idlib, while the SNA mostly operate in Aleppo. In reality, the real obstacle was the sensitivity of the matter and the fear that its fighters would not be able to accept the new reality in which they were fighting under a new flag. In fact, those fears were not exclusive to ASH, as several Idlib-based Islamist groups faced the same issues, such as Nour al-Din al-Zinki Brigades and Suoqur al-Sham (Bazrbashi, 2021). Being keen on incorporating and restructuring Islamist groups after their defeat to the NF, Turkey was made aware of those concerns and quickly moved to found the NLF (Markusen, 2018; Yüksel, 2019).

The NLF was the card that won ASH over: a new alliance with FSH, which is the backbone of this new formation. To ASH, FSH is an Islamist movement and a former ally within the AoC. It was the metaphorical ladder that ASH finally used to climb down from its Jihadi tree and redefine itself as a national formation affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its bodies (Abazeid, 2021). This became a reality in 2019 when the NLF joined the SNA, including ASH, which was facing further fighter migration, as many of its fighters, like the AoI, joined the Shami Front.

Having given a panoramic picture of the transformations the three case studies underwent, it is safe to say that finding an accurate description of those cases against the three concepts used in this study; radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and moderation, is a tricky task. The Syrian case has proven to be unique, with military defeat further complicating matters. The movements examined in this study have been revising and transforming themselves over the course of the conflict; however, those processes accelerated after the military defeat, and the rapid and widespread loss of territory in the Idlib and Aleppo countryside in 2020 to the Syrian regime. As such, it is difficult to test the outcomes of those processes, not to mention determining whether or not they are circumstantial or, in other words, can be reversed under different conditions. Going over those cases leads one to the realisation that there is no one and straightforward trajectory an Islamist movement can undergo from radicalisation, to de-radicalisation and moderation. On the contrary, there exist recoils and sub-trajectories that make the task of describing, predicting, or determining if those transformations can be sustained incredibly tricky.

In any case, what this study infers for certain is that Syrian Islamist movements have moved past the “Islamism” phase after a 10-year-long ideological, behavioural, and organisational transformation. “Islamism”, in this context, refers to a set of characteristics that include the continued use of violent methods as a sole means of establishing an Islamic rule with no plan to dismantle their arsenal, the refusal to legitimise their use of violence, and the refusal to accept democracy and democratic values as a system of government. Rather, Syrian Islamist movements have synthesized a new format that can be described as a middle ground. No longer is their approach based on their ideological

fundamentals, but on the reality of the conflict. Further, they became more open to entering into temporary alliances and trans-ideological bodies that house non-Islamist groups. They took part in negotiations and political paths under international sponsorship, and, subsequently, they became a part of the opposition's political and military bodies with official statements that explicitly mention establishing a "democratic state" for all citizens as a goal. In Drevon's words, the became 'politicalised' movements.

As mentioned earlier, those movements have not renounced or altered their ideological core, but they are trying to marry it with global concepts such as freedom, human rights, democracy, and seeking to find practical and ideological common ground between Islam and these modern concepts. This mindset falls in line with the definition of what has come to be known as "post-Islamism". The cases mentioned have indeed shifted to a more modern portrayal that goes against their original Islamist roots (al-Haj, 2021).

Nonetheless, the three movements have yet to reach a state of complete abandonment of violence; yet, they redefined their practice of violence as a political one within the confines of justifiable or acceptable in the literature on the Syrian conflict, where those forms have become, quite strikingly, a part of the negotiation path recognised by the UN. As such, it is difficult to describe those movements today as violent movements.

7.2 Transformation Mechanisms: Testing Hypotheses

While undeniably important, the focus of this study was not only to examine the nature of the transformations the three case studies have gone through, but rather the motivation

and mechanisms, assuming at the same time a relational interaction between three variables, namely the mechanisms of change.

The changes in the external political environment act as a mechanism of opportunity/threat for social movements. The response to those changes can be determined by three factors: 1. potential margins of action; 2. managing expectations; 3. behaviour of main actors. With regard to the third factor, the main actors are: 1. the state and political environment; 2. security services; 3. their social movement; 4. the public; 5. a countermovement (Drevon, 2021).

In their interactions with their external environment, the three movements had to engage with a set of internal and external actors who influenced each movement's transformation. Those actors are 1. the Syrian regime with its formal forces—army, security apparatuses—and informal forces—Shabiha or the so-called national defense; 2. regional allies, including direct ones like Iran and proxies like Hezbollah and Iraqi and Afghani militias; 3. IS as a counter Islamist project; 4. the PYD after the three movements sided with Ankara; 5. local communities within which those movements operate (Lister, 2015; al-Qadri, 2021).

Judging from the foundational stage and initial structures, it could be argued that the trajectory of ASH and the AoI during their beginnings agree with the study's hypothesis of a hyper hostile environment (hypothesis 1A). Both movements opted for an exclusive organisation that requires a certain ideological requirement and operates in secret within a social incubator. Indeed, ASH was founded as geographically disconnected, territory-based brigades before they were incorporated under a central command at a later stage. The AoI, on the other hand, started as a group of scholarly

Salafists in Douma city. The group came to be as a result of rational calculations revolving around seizing the window of opportunity created by the uprising in the hopes of translating its ideals into a reality on the ground, while taking into account the major threat of a high-capacity undemocratic regime that is the Syrian regime (al-Derani, 2021). In both cases, both movements directly opted for violence stemming from established beliefs in violence and their envisioned project. Additionally, violence was more effective as far as mobilising and attracting new members go. The SMB also falls under the same category. The movement refrained from re-establishing a military formation at the beginning of the uprising, even though it had existed in exile for decades, and opted for supporting scattered military groups in different areas with close ideological inclinations. The SMB's decision came as a result of its past experiences with the Syrian regime and a fear of being held accountable politically and morally should the uprising fail, as was the case back in the eighties (al-Haj, 2021; Amer, 2021).

Conversely, hypothesis 1B is not entirely correct even when the main threat, namely the Syrian regime, losing control of wide areas in the countryside created an opportunity for the three movements, especially ASH and AoI, to establish inclusive organisations that do not ask for ideological purity as a membership requirement. In that sense, those movements transformed into political movements with a military wing. This transformation was significant, yet it only extended to their behavioural and structural aspects, while ideology remained intact, save for detaching themselves from global Jihadi movements or establishing cross-border formations. In other words, their main ideals about violence and an Islamic state were preserved, and with them their impracticality. Such a picture leads to another and more detailed finding of this study: it is necessary to

separate the behavioural and structural aspects from the ideological in describing and examining the transformations of Islamist movements in general during revolutions and armed conflicts. This is because those movements tend to take bolder steps on a behavioural and structural level compared with the ideological. The Syrian case provides a number of reasons explaining those tendencies: 1. lack of a centre that guarantees a political opportunity; 2. the intricately interconnected local and regional factors in the armed conflict that give rise to new threats—in the case of Syria, this was the interference of Hezbollah and Iraqi militias that started in 2013, as well as the emergence of IS that drove ASH and the AoI to adopt the “Ummah Project”, which was the most radical of all the founding documents produced by the two movements including their founding statements.

Therefore, the existence of a less hostile environment is a necessary, yet insufficient requirement for a de-radicalising transformation towards forms that are less radical at the behavioural and organisational level. However, transforming away from ideological radicalisation requires catalytic variables, including inhibitions or structural incentives. For instance, ASH abandoned the “Ummah Project” and signed the ‘Honour Revolutionary Charter’ when faced with the threat of being designated as a terror group (Bazrbashi, 2021), while the AoI took similar steps to afford itself material and military support from the West (al-Jarba, 2021). The latter point, which illustrates the weakness of the PPA’s capacity on theoretical generalisation, is a gateway towards testing the second hypothesis vis-à-vis its two elements on resources, their types and collection, and impact.

The cases of RSC and CPC serve as a practical test for hypothesis 2A that is concerned with pre-war networks, and non-state network-based funding not only with regard to strengthening ideological coherence, but also with regard to radicalisation. Both groups tried to justify taking up arms again using a revolutionary discourse, while presenting themselves as “moderate movements” that want to establish a state of freedom and justice through “armed resistance” (Rahma, 2021). Nonetheless, that decision backfired as those groups were excluded from Gulf funding networks for the very moderate discourse they adopted. Gulf donors preferred investing in movements with more Islamist inclinations, which eventually led to the two movements’ extinction, presenting an opportunity for FSH to rise in their wake with a more “Islamist” discourse that it is revolutionary ((Lefèvre and El Yassir, 2013; Almousa, 2021).

The existence of Salafist networks pushed ASH away from joining the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) in 2012, which was meant to be the armed wing of the NSC at the time. At the same time, the significant support those networks secured attracted many of the FSA’s factions, which were not Islamist or Salafist, to join ASH to escape their own scarcity of resources. The same can be said about the AoI which rebranded itself as an “army” in December 2013, with dozens of minor formations joining in the Damascus countryside, and more particularly Eastern Ghouta. The Syrian case gives a theoretical and applied contribution to those studying the role of political entrepreneurs in the transformation of political factions, especially their radicalisation tendencies, by studying real-life cases including Adnan al-Arour and Shafi al-Ajami who both played an instrumental role in funding and revitalising the Salafist movement in Syria.

Nonetheless, the role of Salafist movements was undermined as restrictions were placed on money transfers. With their limited resources, pre-war networks proved incapable of meeting the needs of the armed conflict that spanned the entirety of Syrian soil. In light of such dire circumstances, the three factions had to look for an international sponsor, which played a driving role in de-radicalisation and moderation, contrary to the conventional conflict studies literature, especially on proxies. It is worth noting that this has been an emergent field in Islamic movement studies (Ashour, 2009), a field that undoubtedly is being pushed forward in consideration of the Syrian issue and the case studies it involves. At first, the AoI sought to emulate the Hezbollah structural/military model but with a Sunni identity. To achieve that, the AoI wanted KSA as a sponsor akin to the Tehran-Hezbollah relationship (Abd al-Rahman, 2021). As such, the AoI commanders were keen on depicting the conflict in Syria as an extension of the Saudi/Iranian regional competition. However, the AoI's efforts failed as Saudi decision-makers opted to steer clear of Islamist movements, which compelled the AoI to consider the option of joining the Southern Front in 2015 in the hopes of securing support from the Amman-based MOC, as well as keeping the Qatari option open. Ultimately, the AoI was fully incorporated into the Turkey-funded SNA (Lund, 2016b; al-Jarba, 2021). That decision played an instrumental role in the group's decision to completely abandon scholarly Salafism. ASH underwent a similar scenario, with the notable exception of trying to actualise a full financial and political autonomy from its main regional allies such as Qatar and Turkey (Enawi, 2015). This relationship could, maybe be best, be likened to that of Hamas and Tehran, where the latter offers financial and military support to further its regional influence or support its political position without interfering in the decision-

making, ideological views, or choice of allies of the former beyond a consultancy role. Indeed, ASH was able to maintain that autonomy in its relationship with Qatar and Turkey until 2017 (Bazrbashi, 2021). ASH complied with its allies' wishes in some scenarios, such as signing the Honor Revolutionary Charter and dropping the Ummah Project, taking part in the Riyadh Conference, and the four cities talks with Iran, while at other times it went against the two countries' instructions, which was the case when ASH refused to join the HNC or partake in the Astana path in early 2017 (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed, 2019). However, that decision cost ASH the support of Ankara, which was a crucial development considering the divisions and defection that followed. The NF took advantage of the precarious state of ASH at the time to weaken it. In this context, ASH serves as a theoretical contribution to studying decertification as a mechanism of transformations and the role international actors play in such processes, which potentially lead to de-legitimising the social activities of social movements. This field has yet to receive significant attention (Platt, 2004; McKeever, 2019).

The unsuccessful experiments of CPC and RSC were a poignant lesson to FSH that realised at an early stage the importance of resources in prolonged armed conflicts, and the need for an international sponsor for sustaining armed action (Rahma, 2021). Since its inception, FSH, therefore, has maintained a close relationship with Ankara that operates on subordination (Almousa, 2021). It could be argued that FSH was Turkey's own armed wing within the complex landscape of armed opposition factions, which explains the speedy rise that FSH enjoyed. Since the defeat of ASH and the AoI in 2018, FSH has been the strongest opposition group[199]. This also explains why FSH was the

[199] This would be particularly true if HTS were excluded from the classification.

quickest to abandon radicalism, which was only adopted as a pragmatic option to work with the Salafi movements within the AoC (ibid.). Subsequently, FSH was quick to adopt a national identity and join the NFL and SNA: military bodies labelled “moderate” by Astana guarantor states. The AoI found itself forced to take the same path after Russia’s offensive on Eastern Ghouta and its flight to northern Syria. ASH was no different, as it had to do the same to survive after its military defeats.

Resource- and environment-related mechanisms played an instrumental role in altering the ideological frames of the three movements over the course of 10 years. As an initial finding of this study, a case could be made for the absence of a rigid, discernible ideology that governs the case studies and Islamist movements in Syria in general. Rather, one can sense broad ideological frames at the start that have undergone processes of reframing under different justifications, explanations, distinctions, and limits within a dichotomy of us-them, which is a mainstream paradigm in studying social movements.

According to Tilly, “the mechanism of boundary activation makes appearances time after time in later explanations of collective violence. It consists of a shift in social interactions such that they increasingly (a) organize around a single us–them boundary and (b) differentiate between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions” (2018, p.20). By contrast, “boundary deactivation denotes the opposite shift, toward new or multiple boundaries and toward decreased difference between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions.”(ibid.).

Islamists, in their majority, have consistently framed their struggle with the Syrian regime as a sectarian binary conflict over Sunni-Alawite lines, which was the case in the

eighties. This narrative was further boosted by the regional extensions and the alliances that emerged during the Iraqi-Iranian war (1980–1988). The SMB succeeded in reproducing this narrative as Sunni-Shiite after Hafez al-Assad sided with Iran against Iraq and the other Arab Gulf states. The same narrative was revived in 2003 with the Sunni/Shiite mobilisation amid an increased American presence in the Arab East, as well as a more aggressive Iranian influence. Naturally, the Syrian regime took a similar position . Nonetheless, Islamists failed to resurrect this narrative once again as the Syrian uprising broke out, especially in its peaceful stage, which was dominated by a national discourse within a democratic/authoritarian dichotomy. Those defining boundaries succeeded in crucially weakening the legitimacy of the Syrian regime at the regional and international level, as many called for a political change and the ousting of President Bashar al-Assad. Consequently, the regime, desperate to survive, invested in social-sectarian divisions and polarisations, bringing to the forefront ideological-sectarian frames that were used to explain this new reality (Wimmen, 2017). Under this frame, the sectarian narrative was married with grievances on the basis of centre/peripheral, with the latter manifesting in the rural areas that have been associated with economic and political marginalisation under the Ba'ath rule since it began in 1963 (ibid.).

While it cannot be denied that such narratives were instrumental in mobilisation and recruitment with Gulf-Salafi networks, the sectarian frame, being too simplistic, failed to be a sufficient ideological source for such a complex conflict as the Syrian issue, especially after competition arose between Islamist groups themselves that, in some cases, reached the level of existential war. That competition only exacerbated with the emergence of IS in 2013. Strikingly, this falls in line with hypothesis 3A. As such, Islamist

movements needed sub-boundaries to describe their respective specific identities without contradicting or altering their main boundaries, which was indispensable in light of the Iranian/Hezbollah involvement in the conflict.

Needless to say, new ideological frames came to light. ASH, for example, defined itself against Jihadi Salafism and the FSA, as well as the SMB. This gave rise to new identifiers such as National/Local Salafi Jihadism, corrective/Reformist Jihadism, and Post-Salafi Jihadism (Heller, 2016).

The AoI was a similar, but a more complicated case, because scholarly Salafism scholarship does not address political matters outside of broad governance questions. AoI leaders were forced to revive the "Muslim People" narrative as a separating line from the "activism" embodied by movements such as ASH and the SMB (Orabi, 2021). However, the lack of literature gave AoI leaders greater ideological flexibility, as they coined new terms, both within and across their established boundaries. For instance, the term, "New Safavids" was used to describe Iranian militias, "Khawarij" in their fight against IS, and "corrupters" in their fight against their enemies in the Ghouta (al-Qadri, 2021).

While the SMB—including its members, former members, and supporters—has indeed taken up the narrative of the Syrian uprising and its defining boundaries (democratic/oppressive), they implicitly invested in the rising Sunni grievances, going as far to consider it a Muslim Brotherhood-centred grievance for "they were the ones who paid the most sacrifices". As a result, a cleavage was created along the lines of ideology between the SMB's discourse and SRC's, as well as the factions under the CPC that formulated a founding discourse as democracy facing Salafists and Jihadis. This

discourse led to its failure before it was revived as the FSH, which agreed with the ideological frames of Islamist movements, especially after joining the AoC in 2015.

In any case, the Islamist movements entering the political arena and becoming a part of the negotiations stripped those sectarian framings of their explanatory power, especially after military defeat, thanks to the Russian intervention, and the infighting in places like Eastern Ghouta, as well as the confrontation between the NF and ASH. In other words, Islamist movements' military activism was no longer aimed at taking down the Syrian regime, at least from the beginning of the Astana path, as much as being concerned with survival, which necessitated complying with the Turkish side. Under this new reality, Islamist movements had to deactivate their boundaries and find new ones that separated each group from a multitude of identities, and not only the Syrian regime (Almousa, 2021; al-Qadri, 2021).

This context explains the quick decision to join the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC) by the Islamists, including the three case studies. The SIC presented itself to the Syrian revolution forces as a religious authority that was founded to preserve Syria's Islamic identity (Pierret, 2014; Hussein, 2016a). This afforded those movements new ideological frames rooted in the dichotomy of (Islamist/secularist), instead of sectarian frames. Indeed, the word secularism was cited in the Fiqh conceptualisation of the resistance against the Syrian regime, as well as the PYD. This also included statements made against secularist figures and entities within the opposition, particularly feminist groups whose programmes and activities threatened Syria's "Islamic identity" (SIC, 2015).

In short, as Islamists had to contend with their military defeat and a reality dominated by foreign actors that controlled their fate, the battle to preserve "Islamic

identity" was the framing used by Islamist movements, irrespective of its currents and ideologies or forms, be they armed factions or civilian and charity groups. As such, an Islamist/secularist narrative was pushed, which notably lacked a distinct position as regards the revolution and the regime. Rather, it was an imagined battle for "Syrian identity". Today, this polarisation is the ideological fuel used by the three case studies that joined the SIC.

To conclude, the three movements are trying to move past the armed conflict through which they have long been seen, and reproduce themselves as "conservative" political forces to secure a footing in any future political settlement. As such, this spelt the end of the armed variation of Islamism that had shaped a part of Syria's modern history over a decade (2011–2021).

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