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Cepoi, Ecaterina

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The Rise of Islamism in Contemporary Syria From Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi-Jihadi Rebels

ECATERINA CEPOI

Started initially in March 2011 as a popular revolt against the exclusive power of the Assad regime, following the protest movement model in other Arab countries, the Syrian Revolution gradually turns into a real civil war, failing into paroxysmal violence and rising militarization, dividing population but also the international community in two opposite camps. What characterizes this approximately two years period is, on one hand, the failure of a solution both military and political to the crisis and, on the other hand, a continuous process of Islamisation of the conflict (based on Sunni-Alawi differences), as a result of both endogenous attitudes and options and influence exerted by the regional environment.

The present research aims to present the growth of political and militant Islam and its main representatives in Syria, starting with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, its temptation to conquer power, and then survive in the face of Ba'ath repressions, continuing with Assad regime's own politics of instrumentalization of a part of Syrian or regional terrorist/Islamist groups for its own benefit. Finally, contesting events from 2011, a majority of rebel groups and brigades who are now fighting against Assad regime's forces assume an identity and an explicit Sunni Islamic activism in multiple versions, ranging from moderate Islamism in the Muslim Brothers style, to the most radical forms of jihadi militancy.

The Islamisation of the Syrian conflict produces a constant global preoccupation, as the widespread rise of groups which claim a political, social, axiological project in dissonance with the Western democratic model contributes all the more to the indecisions of the Western powers regarding the limits and the strategies of involvement in the Syrian problem. Many rebel groups, not only the Islamist ones, dependent on financing and support offered by regional Sunni powers, are often instrumentalized in the rivalries between their protectors (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar), affecting their unity and military efficacy. Likewise, the Damascus regime, although trying to officially stay away from a sectarian approach of the conflict, structurally identifies itself with the interests of the Alawite minority and its clients within other communities, being supported by its Shi'a allies (Iran, Hezbollah, Iraq).

Muslim Brotherhood/Ba'ath Party Rivalry for Power

In Syria, as well as in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the main opposition forces against the new secular regimes installed after the fifth and sixth decade. Advocating the implementation of Muslim values at social, juridical, even political level, an expression *par excellence* of Sunni milieu, the Brotherhood had to face a competing model – the secular nationalism (and pan-Arabism) developed by the Ba'ath party, after taking power in 1963. The Islamic movement was outlawed in 1964

and, after the Assad's clan takeover, in 1970, it was definitively banished¹. Recruiting its political and military elites to a great extent from the Alawite minority, the new regime perceives Brotherhood's values and militancy as the main enemy of its stability and existence; all throughout the seventh decade, political repression was common. As a consequence, the Syrian Brotherhood fractured along two attitudes: a Damascus group, led by the historical ruler Isaam Attar that was open to a moderate attitude, whereas the groups in Aleppo and Hama, led by Abdel Fattah Abu Ghuddah, adopted a radical stand. In fact, there was a traditional rivalry between those two seed-plots of Sunny identity and bastions of traditionalism², and Damascus, dominated by Alawite elites and by a movement of emigration from Alawite region towards Aleppo and Hama. On the backdrop of Brotherhood's inconsistency, a new movement appeared, grafted onto the Hama branch, led by Marwan Hadeed; under the name of Fighting Vanguard (*Talia al-Muqatila*) it promoted a radical solution against the Assad regime. Arrested and killed in prison in 1975, Hadeed had, however, succeeded in setting up a militant trend attractive for young generations – some of them having been trained in Palestinian camps in Lebanon or Jordan and who would participate later to a continuous confrontation with the power in Damascus. Violence spread especially after 1979, when the Fighting Vanguard attacked Ba'ath institutions or leaders: in the next decades, the car-bomb attacks became the hallmarks of the new resistance movements.

In 1981, the various factions of the Brotherhood reconciled and endorsed, with the Fighting Vanguard as their effective instrument, a concrete fighting strategy for eliminating the Assad regime. But, once again, disputes, rivalries and suspicions fractured this temporary alignment: the new leader of the Fighting Vanguard, Adnan Uqlah, opposed the idea of building a political front by co-opting non-Islamic opposition movements as well. The Brotherhood split again along the traditional cleavage between Damascus and Aleppo-Hama³. In February 1982, members of the Hama's Brotherhood joined the militants of the Fighting Vanguard in their attempt to start a rebellion intended to overthrow the regime. The insurrection was violently repressed by the Syrian military and security forces, especially by shelling the Hama neighborhoods controlled by rebels. A black stain on the Brotherhood's history and of Islamic movement in general, as the Hama massacre led to the killing of over 10.000 people; although the insurrection was led by the Fighting Vanguard and not by the Brotherhood, it remained linked to the latter's name. Subsequent repression affected both the Fighting Squad (which was destroyed entirely by Syrian intelligence services – but its image remained a hallmark of militancy, its name being taken by one of the Islamic brigades⁴) and the Brotherhood's capacity to assume an efficient

¹ Olivier CARRE, Gérard MICHAUD (Michel SEURAT), *Les Frères Musulmans (1928-1982)*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001, pp. 123-203; Raymond HINNEBUSCH, *Syria. Revolution from Above*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 89-98; Radwan ZIADEH, *Power and Policy in Syria. The Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2011, pp. 129-156.

² Itzchak WEISMANN, "The Politics of Popular Religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim Brothers in 20th-Century Hamah", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2005, pp. 39-58.

³ Hanna BATATU, "Syria's Moslem Brethen", *MERIP Report*, no. 110, 1982, pp. 12-20.

⁴ Nora BENKORICH, "La tentation de la lutte armée contre le pouvoir baasiste en Syrie. Passé (1976-1982) et présent", *Le Débat*, vol. 1, no. 168, 2011, pp. 155-167.

militancy inside Syria. A large part of its leaders and staff who have escaped the Ba'athist repressions fled the country, along with their traditional rivalries. The lack of unity and common strategy remained the common figure and contributed to the heterogeneity and inconsistency of the current Syrian National Council (replaced by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces – or Syrian National Coalition, since November 2012).

Assad's Politics on Terrorism and political Islam

Like many of the regimes in the Middle East, Ba'athist Syria has instrumented a series of radical movements throughout decades, for various political interests, at an international or regional scale¹. If in the 70s and 80s, these were especially radical factions within the Palestinian movement, with a secular orientation (Abu Nidal, *al-Saiqa*, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command, etc.), in the 1990s, Damascus tried to rally and use new Islamic movements and groups dominant in the region as a result of the ongoing Islamisation. This process started in the 1980s, when Syria offered constant political and military support to Hezbollah, in Lebanon, in competition and sometimes rivalry with Iran, the other protector of Lebanese Shiite movement. Hezbollah, as well as the Palestinian groups faithful to Damascus, were used as proxies for implementing Syria's politics in Levant, to the extent that Lebanon became not only a traditional geopolitical obsession for the Syrian leaders, but also a source of an almost permanent conflict with the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine and Israel. In this geostrategic context, the Assad regime offered support both to the new Palestinian Islamist groups, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, and provided assistance (by harboring training camps for example) to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and/or to the Iraqi Kurd parties. Controlled especially by the numerous Syrian intelligence services, the relations with the terrorist or opposition groups became a mark of Damascus, permanently accompanying its official politics and representing an instrument of pressure, blackmail, repression of dissidents in exile or of regional and international rivals².

The label of a state supporting terrorism that the US officially stuck to Damascus in 1979, was partially softened after the first Gulf War, when Syria's participation in the anti-Saddam coalition temporarily improved the Western perception and nurtured the illusion of a change. In reality, even after the generation turnover, with Bashar al-Assad taking power in 2000, the old routines endured. The partnerships with the radical movements persisted, especially in the framework of deep regional changes and an increased role of the US in the Middle East. Consequently, the Syrian official diplomacy became more balanced and, correlatively, more eager to use non-state actors as instruments for implementing its strategies. Lebanon remained the playground *par excellence* for the rivalry or competition between Syria and other

¹ Boaz GANOR, "Syria and Terrorism", *Survey of Arab Affairs*, vol. 28, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 15 November 1991, pp. 1-8, <http://jcpa.org/article/syria-and-terrorism-2/> (accessed: 12 August 2013)

² Reuven ERLICH, "State-Sponsored Terrorism: Terrorism as a Preferred Instrument of Syrian Policy", *International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, vol. 10, October 2001, http://212.150.54.123/inter_ter/st_terror/syrian_terror.htm (accessed: 12 August 2013).

regional (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel) or international powers (US, France) and only the massive reaction after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, in 2005, forced the Syrian military to retreat from Lebanon.

Although it appealed to a communal type of loyalty (*asabiyya* – clan solidarity), the one provided by the Alawite identity, the Assad regime was structurally characterized by pragmatism, ideological flexibility, and the tendency to use all resources and partners available for pursuing its political or strategic interests¹. This explains the support Damascus offered to Islamist movements, even those of Sunni filiation²; the Palestinian Jihad group *Fatah al-Islam*, formed in Lebanon in 2006³ is an exemplary case in this respect. In May 2007, it waged a true war with Lebanese regulated forces, in order to control the refugee camp *Nahr al-Bared* in Tripoli⁴. *Fatah al-Islam* militants, as well as its founding leader, Shakir al-Abassi, have maintained private connections with the Syrian intelligence services, leading to a general image of the movement as being an instrument of Damascus. After 2008, however, a part of the group resolutely disowned Syrian leaders and even initiated several violent actions against them, anticipating the confrontations that started in 2011. Finally, the complicities between the Syrian regime and the jihadist networks became visible especially after 2003, when radical Sunni militants freely transited Syria to Iraq in order to fight against Western forces or the new post-Saddam Iraqi authorities. With the beginning of the conflict in Syria, in March 2011, the relations between Damascus and its former terrorist and Islamist clients became less and less clear. It is however obvious that the regime succeeded in maintaining an influence and in controlling part of the networks, especially the clandestine ones. Damascus used them either to infiltrate the large field of the opposition movements, or to orchestrate violent operations, especially in the public space, in order to validate the official version of the terrorist character of the rebellion. The release in 2012 of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri – one of the ideologues and militants of al-Qaida, who was in detention in Syria after arrest by the United States, in 2006⁵ – and, along with him, of other tens of jihadist militants, mainly former combatants in Iraq, was notorious. In the same time, a certain distance or a change in the attitude of several terrorist groups and networks previously controlled by the Syrian intelligence services is visible. On the backdrop of civil conflict, their members have joined the resistance movements, most of them Islamist, and fought against the former protectors whose logistic capacities and intelligence resources they knew well. The Hamas headquarters in Damascus, which preferred to take its distance from a regime fighting now against a predominantly Islamist and Sunni opposition and to move to Qatar is probably the most noticeable case of desistance. Likewise, an

¹ Eberhard KIENLE, "Entre jama'a et classe. Le pouvoir politique en Syrie contemporaine", *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1991, pp. 211-239.

² Amir KULICK, Yoram SCHWEITZER, "Syria and the Global Jihad: A Dangerous Double Game", *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2009, pp. 65-75; Ethan CORBIN, "Lessons From the Interior: Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Syria", *al-Nakhlah*, Spring 2007.

³ Gary GAMBILL, "The Rise of Fatah al-Islam", *Global Politician*, October 7, 2007, <http://www.globalpolitician.com/default.asp?23075-lebanon> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁴ Adam RAMADAN, "Destroying Nahr el-Bared: Sovereignty and Urbicide in the Space of Exception", *Political Geography*, vol. 28, 2009, pp. 153-163.

⁵ Murad Batal AL-SHISHANI, "Syria's Surprising Release of Jihadi Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 10, issue 3, February 10, 2012, pp. 5-6, February 10, 2012, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_010_Issue03.pdf (accessed: 12 August 2013).

important number of *Fatah al-Islam* members found themselves among the ranks of rebel combatants after 2012.

At the same time, after 2011, the power in Damascus doubled the official actions of the army, intelligence and security services against the protest movements and the contesting groups, by resorting to popular militias formed by militants that are unconditionally faithful to the regime¹. Called *shabiha* ("ghosts"), they gained a dark public notoriety as a result of the excesses and pathological violence they manifested against the civilians in Sunni localities (the most known being in Houla – May 25, 2012, and al-Qubair – June 6, 2012). In fact, *shabiha* are formed exclusively by Alawites, recruited among the traditional networks of smuggling and traffickers in the seaside region (Latakia, Banias, Tartous), protected by the regime, but also among the young generation, who found here not just the opportunity for earning more money, but also a way to acquire prestige and the possibility to exert violence in full impunity and in the name of the state². Finally, under cover members of the intelligence service infiltrated the ranks of *shabiha* militias. They became a semi-clandestine instrument of the regime in order to destroy or induce fear in those groups having rallied the anti-ba'athist revolt. In 2012, *shabiha* groups were integrated in a new structure, the *Jaysh al-Sha'bi*; a significant support was given by the Iranian militia Bassidj and the Lebanese Hezbollah³. Exhibiting an indefectible attachment to the Alawite identity and practicing the confessional cleansing of Sunni localities in Northern regions (the Alawite country), *shabiha* has largely contributed to the sectarian division of the Syrian conflict, thus stirring the radical anti-Shiite attitudes of the Salafi-jihadi movement.

Islamisation of Syrian Resistance

Increased militarization and an ever more salient religious character define the conflict between the Assad regime and the opposition groups, transforming it into a sectarian war⁴. Several factors explain the continuous Islamisation of the Syrian crisis: endogenous attitudes the rebels' attachment to values, behaviors, Muslim identity brands; the influence of foreign powers like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, first and foremost; the impact of different ideologues and Islamist militants or international networks⁵. It is both an identity reorientation, on the background of dissolution of state landmarks and entities, and an existential reorientation, as turning towards religious norms may provide a meaning and comfort in a time of widespread and unleashed violence⁶.

¹ Joseph HOLLIDAY, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, Middle East Security Report 8, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013.

² Yassin al-Haj SALIH, "Syrian Shabiha and Their State", Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung – Middle East Office, April, 2012.

³ Karen DEYOUNG, Joby WARRICK, "Iran and Hezbollah Build Militia Network in Syria, Officials Say", *Guardian Weekly*, 12 February 2013.

⁴ Joseph HOLLIDAY, *Syria's Maturing Insurgency*, Middle East Security Report 5, Institute for the Study of War, June 2012.

⁵ David SANGER, "Rebel Arms Flow Is Said to Benefit Jihadists in Syria", *The New York Times*, October 14, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁶ "The growing prominence of Islamist imagery is perhaps more due to its usefulness in Sunni identity politics, than to the ideology itself. Religion is not the driving force of the

Thus, the Islamisation affects both civilians and the rebels, especially in the regions where the Sunni traditional conservatism is strong, such as Homs, Idlib, and Aleppo. In this extremely complex and heterogeneous setup of the Syrian resistance, made of hundreds of military brigades and groups at all levels, from the national level to the grassroots of neighborhoods or villages, a few major tendencies can be identified¹.

First, there are militants and groups that may be called nationalist-religious; although they endorse an Islamic identity, they pursue secular goals (the overthrow of the Assad regime) and they embrace modern political values (i.e. nationalism, democracy, free elections, etc.). This category includes the largest part of the brigades of the Free Syrian Army (*al-jaish al-souri al-hurr*, FSA)² and several autonomous groups, which recognize the authority of the FSA³. However, even though the FSA forms the majority of the Syrian military opposition, the political supremacy is disputed among the leaders in the country and those exiled abroad (Turkey). The permanent interference of rival foreign powers, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, has weakened the efficiency of the FSA and has affected its image. Thus, in various provinces (in FSA strategy, Syrian territory is divided into five zones, for a better coordination) the FSA brigades often end up taking part in common operations with the Islamist or even jihadist groups, the identity differences being far less important here than the pragmatic imperatives against the forces of the regime. In fact, the FSA label is often a simple hallmark, showing the attachment to a set of values and bringing some material advantages in money or equipment, rather than the effective integration into a military structure. In reality, the FSA is an umbrella for numerous groups (of more than 60.000 combatants) disseminated all over the Syrian territory, enjoying a large autonomy and following with their own commandants (the only ones which are respected and followed by the rebels), which are coordinated by different instances bringing together leaders in exile and the ones on the battle-field (Joint Command for the Revolution's Military Council – in September 2012, replaced by the Supreme Military Command – after December 7, 2012)⁴.

However, a large number of Syrian brigades and combatants claim an explicit Islamic identity and moreover, advocate an Islamist project combining the social values of Islam with the political categories of state, nation or even democracy. Democracy is validated by an Islamist reading where the traditional principles of *Shura*, collective deliberation, are seen as the Muslim version of the elective principle in Western democracies⁵. Even though the classical vocabulary and imagery of the Sunni Islamist movements (Jihad, the necessity of imposing the Shari'a, dress codes

rebellion, but it is the insurgent movement's most important common denominator. For Syria's revolutionaries, Islam functions both as a ready-to-use ideological prism, a sectarian identity marker, and an effective mobilization tool in Sunni Muslim areas – and, of course, as a source of spiritual comfort in wartime", Aron LUND, *Syrian Jihadism*, UI brief, no 13, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 14 September, 2012, p. 11.

¹ Fabrice BALANCHE, "Géographie de la révolte syrienne", *Outre Terre*, no. 29, 2011, pp. 437-458.

² <http://www.free-syrian-army.com/> (accessed: 12 August 2013)

³ Elizabeth O'BAGY, *The Free Syrian Army*, Middle East Security Report 9, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013.

⁴ Joseph HOLLIDAY, *Syria's Armed Opposition*, Middle East Security Report 3, Institute for the Study of War, March 2012.

⁵ Nir ROSEN, "Islamism and the Syrian Uprising", *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2012.

and specific behaviors, etc.) are used, they are not integrated in the transnational Salafi-jihadist current; they do not cultivate the idea of a sectarian conflict and manifest preoccupation for the social welfare. This approximates the traditional vision of the Muslim Brothers, reinterpreted in multiple forms, following the political perspectives and culture of the numerous Islamist groups currently active in Syria. Some recognize and even take part in the FSA operations while rejecting the FSA secular project and even criticizing the subservience to a leadership in exile, subject to foreign influences and Western interests. The most significant examples of brigades assuming a moderate Islamic identity, devoid of the ideological and practical excesses of Salafi-jihadism, are *Liwa Suqour al-Sham* (over 6000 combatants, in Idlib, but influent in the entire Northern province, and even in Aleppo)¹, *Farouk Battalion* (Homs), *Liwa Islam*, *Deirez-Zour Revolutionary Council*, *Tawhid Brigade* (Aleppo), *Jund Allah Battalion* (Homs), *Ansar al-Islam* (Damascus, a coalition of seven groups that were originally part of the FSA, forming the main military opposition force in the capital's region)², etc. In September 2012, *Liwa Suqour al-Sham* and other Islamic groups founded a coalition, the Syrian Liberation Front³, led by Sheikh Ahmed Issa, the leader of *Suqour al-Sham*. Becoming aware of the urgency to build a united front against the Damascus regime, the SLF has maintained close relations with the FSA. Moreover, a part of its leaders are at the same time members of the new FSA coordination structure, the Supreme Military Command.

One of the most important Islamic rebel groups is *Liwa al-Umma*, active in the Idlib province, but also in Homs and Aleppo⁴. Counting more than 3.000 combatants, the group is led by Mahdi al-Harati, an Irish-Libyan Islamist who was one of the most important leaders of anti-Qaddafi militias in Tripoli, in 2011. He crossed the border to Syria together with other combatants, setting up one of the most efficient and successful brigades in the anti-Assad coalition. Benefitting from the essential support of Qatar, *Liwa al-Umma* includes a series of specialists in heavy artillery, communications and logistics. Without adhering to the Salafite ideology (although al-Harati has asserted his preference for an Islamic government in a post-Assad Syria), the movement attracts an important number of foreign fighters⁵.

Finally, there is a nebula of Islamic movements which can be covered by the generic term of Salafi-jihadists: tens of brigades and groups, some of them strictly local, others with a regional and even national dimension, and attached, in various degrees, to the transnational networks and movements. Here too, there is a multiplicity of ideological positions and loyalties as well as a variety of strategic and military options. The militarization of the conflict, the increased sectarian dimension (Sunnis vs. Alawites), but also of the influence of foreign radical Islamist milieu, which finds in the Syrian conflict a fertile ground for recruiting, mobilizing, financing and

¹ <http://www.shamfalcons.net/> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

² "Ansar al-Islam Joins Forces with FSA", October 9, 2012, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=d55_1349824408 (accessed: 12 August 2013).

³ <http://syrialiberationfront.com/> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/user/Liwaalummah?feature=watch>; <https://www.facebook.com/alommah.brigade> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁵ Mary FITZGERALD, "The Syrian Rebels' Libyan Weapon", *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/09/the_syrian_rebels_libyan_weapon (accessed: 12 August 2013).

implementing its projects¹ made the Jihadist motives and the Salafi identity more and more salient. From an ideological perspective, the Salafi-jihadi movements share a common set of theological and political visions: the centrality of Jihad as the best way for building a new Islamic order, purified of illegitimate values and powers; the contestation of cultural, social, political, democratic normativity, in the name of an Islamic supremacy; the ideal of the resurrection of an Islamic caliphate, at the scale of the entire *'Umma*, erasing national separations (cleavages?), etc².

Syrian Salafi-jihadi conglomerate is extremely heterogeneous. Often, using this identity stirs from the bare necessity to give an identifiable status in the vast field of the Syrian opposition groups. Many lack the capacity or the will to implement effectively a Salafi program and adopt only the external signs and symbols (black flag with white inscriptions, long beard, ethical and social conservatism, etc.)³. Likewise, one can distinguish between the "nationalist" Salafists and the "internationalist" ones. Although the latter adhere to the Salafist doctrine and ethos, they have a strategic projection at the national level, anchored in the local specificities and advocating for an Islamic Syria. Those groups, like the *Ahrar al-Sham* movement, are often formed by radicalized young Sunni, lacking a solid theological-juridical culture, living in areas destroyed by the armed conflict and ready to identify in the Salafi conservatism and in Jihad a model to follow.

On the other hand, there are brigades and groups which willingly endorse the label *Salafiya-jihadiya* and strive to extend the Syrian conflict to the whole Muslim space, considering the fight against the Assad regime as an element in a more generic battle against the apostate, illegitimate regimes and against the Western powers. Those groups recruit Syrian Islamist militants who have gained military experience in various external conflicts (in Iraq or Afghanistan) and, also, co-opt and integrate foreign jihadists for whom Syria is the new cause to fight for, after Iraq's model between 2003 and 2007. Foreign volunteers represent just a small fraction of the entire Syrian opposition (between 800 and 2000 people). However, their military experience in terrorist operations, their commitment to Salafi-jihadi values and the financial and logistic support they enjoy from different Muslim networks, especially in the Gulf, makes them particularly important⁴. Extremely visible and present in the media, author of a large number of spectacular operations against the Assad regime, including terrorist attacks, causing numerous civilian victims, they are less interested in the local motivations of the anti-Ba'ath revolution, and often pursue their own agenda. The Syrian crisis is perceived only as a new opportunity for the Jihad which is the very central reason of their organizational and activist identity. Moreover, as an echo of a larger regional trend, they induce a sectarian dimension within the Syrian crisis, contesting not just the dominance of the Alawite elites in power, but also their Islamic legitimacy, in the name of traditionalist Sunnism, Hanbalite manner. Profiting

¹ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report No. 131, 12 October 2012, pp. 4-6.

² Thomas HEGGHAMMER, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism", in Roel MEIJEL (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, pp. 244-266.

³ Elizabeth O'BAGY, *Jihad in Syria*, Middle East Security Report 6, Institute for the Study of War, September 2012.

⁴ Aaron ZELIN, "Foreign Fighters Trickle into the Syrian Rebellion", *Policy Watch 1950*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 11, 2012.

from the porosity of the frontier, foreign jihadists enter especially from Northern Lebanon (the privileged route for the traffic of arms, provisions, resources), Southern Turkey (Antalya became the epicenter of volunteers heading towards Syrian territory) and Iraq, where the old Islamist networks now facilitate a reverse process of militants migration. Statistically, the majorities of the militants are Lebanese, Tunisians, Saudis, and Kuwaitis or even from Caucasus, Central Asia, or Europe¹. However, from an operational point of view, the collaborative configuration of various operations transcends the ideological differences. Often, the jihadist brigades and militias participate in common actions with the FSA or the classical Islamic groups. In fact, the realities of the conflict impose the pragmatic solidarity of the rebels, without erasing the rivalries and the dissonances among them; they are, however, a lot less motivated by doctrinal disputes, and more by the imperatives multiple particular problems induced by concrete management of daily life and military actions in a generalized and violent war.

Following a more general trend of reorganization within the Syrian military opposition, on December 21st 2012, a part of the Salafi-jihadi brigades announced the formation of a Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)², in reply to the new Islamist structure of the Syrian Liberation Front. The SIF advocates the creation of a theocratic Syrian state, ruled by the *Shari'a*, led not by a caliphate, but by a Shura Council. More pragmatic than fundamentalist, the new Islamist front is aware of the necessity of a military cooperation with the rest of the opposition forces, which explains its availability to maintain the contacts and the collaboration with the Supreme Military Council and the Syrian Liberation Front. The SIF assembles thousands of experienced and well-motivated rebels and militants, which makes it an unstoppable actor on the Syrian scene. Moreover, it breeds constant anxieties and worries, especially at the international level, regarding the increasing importance of the Jihad brigades in the Syrian conflict and the part they would play in a post-Assad Syria³. Among numerous groups which have been integrated in the SIF, one can evoke especially *Ahrar al-Sham*⁴, which rallies the largest part of foreign Jihadists, active in the Northern part of Syria – especially Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, promoting a relatively moderated Salafism with national tendencies, with close relations to the ground units of the FSA, with whom they occupied the Taftanaz airbase in January 2013⁵; *Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya*,

¹ Noman BENOTMAN, Emad NASERALDIN, *The Jihadist Network in the Syrian Revolution. A Strategic Briefing*, Quilliam Foundation, 2012, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-jihadist-network-in-the-syrian-revolution.pdf> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

² <https://www.facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front> (accessed: 12 August 2013); Aron LUND, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front*, UI Occasional Papers 17, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, March 2013.

³ Aaron ZELIN, "The Syrian Islamic Front: A New Extremist Force", *Policy Watch 2031*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 4, 2013.

⁴ <http://www.ahraralsham.com/> (accessed: 12 August 2013); Chris ZAMBELIS, "Ahrar al-Sham: A Profile of Northern Syria's al-Qaeda Surrogate", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 11, issue 7, April 4, 2013, pp. 4-5, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_011_Issue07_02.pdf (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁵ Andrew TABLER, Jeffrey WHITE, Aaron ZELIN, "Fallout from the Fall of Taftanaz", *Policy Watch 2015*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 14, 2013.

active in Aleppo and its region¹; *Liwa al-Haqq* from Homs, the second movement in importance in the SIF whose ideological leader is the renowned Salafi cleric Sheikh Abu Ratib, who constantly pleads for the creation of an Islamic state in Syria²; *al-Iman Combat Brigades* in Damascus and *Suqour al-Islam* in the province of Damascus, *Ansar al-Sham Brigades* in the province of Latakia; *Jeish al-Tawhid* in Deirez-Zour province, etc. Additionally, one can mention a series of radical factions, often led by foreign jihadists, who operate in a violent manner, without being integrated in the larger cooperation structures initiated by the great Islamist brigades: *Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin*, a small extremist group from province of Aleppo, formed especially by foreign jihadists and Syrian expats, contested even by the rest of Islamic or rebel movements for its radical attitude³; *Jund al-Sham*, led by Lebanese jihadists, acting at the Northern border with Lebanon⁴; *Kataeb al-Muhajerin* in the Aleppo region, an association of several jihadist groups formed by foreign combatants; or *Kataeb al-Ansar* from Homs.

Finally, the most controversial Salafi-jihadi group in Syria and the one who received the largest media cover is *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham* (Support Front for the People of Syria) or in brief *Jabhat al-Nusra*(JN)⁵. Created in January 2012, the movement, which fights for a global Islamic caliphate ruled by the Shari'a, shares several major points of the al-Qaida classical ideology⁶. Led by Abu Muhammad al-Golani, JN initially acted in the region of Damascus, and later extended to Aleppo, Deirez-Zour and Ar-Raqqah. In one year, it carried out more than 600 attacks on Syrian territory, among which 40 were suicide attacks. Its rapid emergence, its clandestine character, the access it enjoys to information and the vital objectives of the regime, its capacity to initiate sophisticated operations with a large destructive potential, have raised suspicion concerning the real nature of the JN, seen by some as a creature of the Assad intelligence services in order to comfort the official version about the terrorist character of the Syrian rebellion⁷. It is certain that the initial JN nucleus built around al-Golani in the proximity of Homs counted numerous former members of groups active in Iraq and Lebanon and financed or controlled by the Syrian power. After March-April 2012, it co-opted militants from the Palestinian (*Fatah al-Islam*) and Lebanese Jihadist groups, connected with the Syrian authorities and al-Qaida networks, as well as with former members of the Iraqi Abu Musab al-Zarkawi network. Later, as the operational field extended towards the East, in Deirez-Zour province, JN rallied various Islamist circles in the area, former combatants in Iraq or

¹ Jeffrey BOLLING, *Rebel Groups in Northern Aleppo Province*, Institute for the Study of War, August 29, 2012.

² <http://www.l-al7aq.com/> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

³ <http://jihadology.net/category/other-groups/majlis-shura-al-mujahidin-fi-aknaf-bayt-al-maqdis/> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁴ Radwan MORTADA, "Khaled Mahmoud: A Prisoner in Lebanon Turns Emir in Syria", *Alakhbar English*, January 4, 2013, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/khaled-mahmoud-prisoner-lebanon-turns-emir-syria> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁵ Noman BENOTMAN, Roisin BLAKE, *Jabhat al-Nusra. A Strategic Briefing*, Quilliam Foundation, 2012, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁶ <http://jalnosra.com/vb/> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

⁷ Mohammed ALSHAFFEY, Paula ASTATH, "FSA and Islamists Express Doubts about Al-Nusra Front", *el-Sharq el-Aswat*, March 22, 2012, <http://m.asharq-e.com/content/1332433070978640300/Top%20Stories> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

new Iraqi jihadist militants, some of them former or current members of al-Qaida in Iraq or of its avatar, the Islamic State of Iraq. Beyond this nebulous connection with the Syrian authorities, the activism against the regime has been proven by numerous spectacular attacks (e.g. car bombs) against the state institutions and leaders. Well organized, practicing strict criteria for recruitment and training, well financed, enrolling foreign or local jihadists with significant military experience, with cells and actions in the main centers of the Syrian resistance (the number of its members is estimated at over 5.000, at the beginning of 2013), JN succeeded in attracting the sympathy of both militants and rebels¹. Moreover, JN strove to improve its public image tainted initially by the significant number of civilian victims of its operations, by focusing on military targets and the direct confrontation with the Syrian forces. JN acts almost always independently. However, occasionally, it may have collaborated with other rebel groups in important operations, such as the attack on the Taftanaz airbase near Aleppo. In the overall picture of the Syrian jihadist movements, *Jabhat al-Nusra* succeeded in maintaining a distinct image, playing on the double ambiguity of its relations with the Syrian services and the international terrorist networks, mainly al-Qaida. Therefore, in December 2012, the US put JN on the list of Foreign Terrorist Organization, a controversial decision, criticized by a part of the Syrian opposition groups, who accused Washington of backing up the official story of the Ba'ath regime regarding the terrorist nature of the rebellion². In a statement from April 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq, the brand of the al-Qaida branch from Iraq, has issued a declaration by means of which it designated JN as its branch in Levant; in a statement from April 2013 that disturbed the international community, the Islamic State of Iraq declared JN its branch in Levant; al-Golani has nuanced the statement, which has immediately provoked chills in the international circles, asserting that his group is separated from ISI, but it recognizes the authority of the al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri³.

Conclusions

The evolution of the Syrian conflict and of its actors is difficult to anticipate. In the wave of the Arab revolutions started in 2011, the Syrian trajectory was very special: what started as a pacifist contestation of an autocratic regime and as a request for social and economic equity and for democracy, quickly degenerated into a horrendous war with more than 110.000 victims, massive destructions, 4.25 million people internally displaced, and at least 2 million refugees. Assad's decision to make use of force was the major factor that led to the militarization of the opposition, following a recurrent tendency in the region, especially in conflict areas, that favored the rise of Islamic symbols and references. Without being complete, the continuous Islamisation of the Syrian revolt affects a considerable part of the combatants. It carries along the imagery

¹ Elizabeth O'BAGY, *Jihad in Syria*, cit., pp. 31-37.

² Aaron ZEILIN, "Rally Round the Jihadist", *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 11, 2012.

³ Mushreq ABBAS, "Jabhat al-Nusra Declares Allegiance to al-Qaeda", *al-Monitor*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/al-qaeda-jabhat-al-nusra-merge.htm> (accessed: 12 August 2013).

and the warrior ethos produced by a militant Islam: keeping up with a regime that does not hesitate to use disproportionate violence without any concern for the protection of the civilians, many combatants adopt violence as the only remaining solution: a violence legitimated not only by the imperative of survival, but also upgraded theologically in the form of the armed jihad (*jihad bilsayf*) against an heretic power. The increasing importance of Islamic references, especially the ones of Salafi-jihadi groups is a challenge for the West and for its position toward post-Assad Syria. Therefore, most Western powers expressed their doubts about the opportunity of arming the Syrian military opposition, fearing that those weapons would fall in the hands of radical groups hostile to democracy. Despite their proven efficiency on the ground, pushing away the Ba'ath forces in numerous regions, by their ideology, their number and their strategic multiplicity, the Islamist groups will be one of the main sources for insecurity and political instability. The predicaments in Iraq and Afghanistan may give a glimpse of the future Syria where the war between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition would be replaced by an explosion of internal conflicts opposing various groups and leaders, driven by ideological, economical, power rivalries, in a fragile, or even wrecked state. Militant and political Islam has made a decisive entry into Syria and, although its future remains uncertain, it will be part of any further evolution.