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Syria's Uneasy Bedfellows

Perpetuation of Conflict Serves Radicals, Prospect for Compromise Increases Moderation

Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Heiko Wimmen

The siege of Aleppo and the mounting losses of opposition districts throws a central dilemma for the Syrian rebels into sharp relief: if they hope to hold out against the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian backers, they cannot forego the support of extremist Jihadi groups. Yet it is the prominent role of these same extremists that provides the justification for the Russian intervention and the excuse for Western powers to withhold support for the rebellion. Events in recent months have shown that the prospect of starting a political process furthers the position of moderate and non-Jihadi Islamists and helps isolate the extremists. Germany and its European allies should insist on committing Russia to the diplomatic process and encourage supporters of the Syrian opposition to work towards consolidating actors compatible with a potential transition process.

In mid-August 2016, the al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat Fath al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of the Levant, JFS) claimed most of the credit for the rebel offensive south of Aleppo that temporarily broke the Assad regime's siege of the city. Arab media aligned with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, particularly the Qatari channel al-Jazeera, hailed the short-lived success of the group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front, JN). Even moderate opposition groups and Islamists with little sympathy for the Jihadi ideology of JN/JFS had to acknowledge its value as a military ally.

This underlines a central dilemma for the Syrian opposition and its external supporters: while there is little love for the Jihadists, their military power makes them indispensable in the fight against the Assad regime. But their internal cohesion has been shaky and the relationship with other rebel brigades has been marked by distrust. On the local level, support for JN among the Sunni population in rebel areas has been tempered by discontent with the group's rule and a drive by a new generation of moderate – but still anti-Assad – clerics to counter the group's propaganda on social media. The Sunni population have already endured indiscriminate Russian bombing justified as "eradicating terrorism" but mostly targeting less hardline groups with local roots standing as a bulwark against a total takeover of JN in rebel-held Syria.

Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Heiko Wimmen are fellows in the project "Local, regional and international dynamics in the Syria conflict" realized by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) and funded by the German Foreign Office

Hardline Allies Riddled with Contradictions

In early 2015, Turkish and Saudi mediation had already helped engineer a loose alliance of Islamist groups under the name "Army of Conquest" (Jaish al-Fath). Beside JN, the second mainstay of the alliance was Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafist group strongly connected to Turkish intelligence. Ahrar al-Sham is comprised of a patchwork of local brigades with a significant degree of autonomy and a less rigid hierarchy than JN/JFS. The group has been plagued by internal struggles between commanders who lean towards the transnational Jihadism of al-Qaeda and others who prioritize the national struggle against Assad and want to keep lines of communication open with Western powers. For example, Labib al-Nahhas, the group's external relations official, cuts a sleek, Westernized figure compared to his long-bearded brother Kinan who is also a member of the group's political leadership tier. However, the military commanders, who overwhelmingly belong to the more ideological faction, wield decisive influence over the overall orientation of the group. In September 2014, a group of leaders around co-founder Hassan Abboud, who was allegedly aiming to steer the group away from militant Islamism towards a more Syrian-nationalist posture, were killed in an attack on their headquarters in Idlib that some blamed on the so-called Islamic State. Prominent Western observers, such as the former US ambassador to Syria Robert S. Ford, have advocated opening channels with Ahrar al-Sham, arguing that the group is fundamentally different from JN and, despite its Islamist composition, might be nudged into accepting a pluralist future for Syria.

Most importantly, however, unlike JN, Ahrar al-Sham is not considered a "terrorist" organization by external actors and international institutions. Hence, bringing the two together in early 2015, along with a number of smaller groups, allowed Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to ramp up support for a formation that included and benefitted from the power of JN without being compromised by giving open support to "terrorists". Such support and coordination allowed the joint forces to capture most of Idlib province from the regime in May 2015. Subsequent advances in the area between Hama and Latakia threatened to split the regime-held area in two and cut off Assad's seat of power in Damascus from the coast. It was at this point that Russia intervened in September 2015 and turned the military balance once more.

As the United States and its Western allies became ever more preoccupied with fighting the Islamic State and "terrorism", the foreign backers of Islamist brigades found themselves in a quandary. By November 2015, Turkey and Qatar felt compelled to sign up to the Vienna statement as members of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) which set defeating the Islamic State and the JN as an international goal. Thus, salvaging as much as possible of what is a major force in the opposition camp became a priority. Pressure mounted on the more ideological wing of al-Nusra to tone down its Jihadist rhetoric and rebrand.

The Many Faces of JN/JFS

In late July 2016, JN officially severed its ties to al-Qaeda and changed its name. Whether this decision reflected a genuine change in the group's ideological orientation remains doubtful. Leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani explained in a message that the move was mainly geared to deprive external powers such as the US or Russia of a pretext for attacks. Qatar, the external actor best connected with JN, is said to have prompted the group to rebrand itself to become more palatable for Western actors and ease pressure on countries that support it. This rebranding was received positively by the Saudi, Qatari and pro-government Turkish media. But it did not help soften the position of the United States which intensified its drone warfare against JN's commanders after the move.

Main Rebel Groups

Ahrar al-Sham: Rebuilt itself with the help of Turkey after its top leadership were wiped out in an explosion in 2014. Speculation over who perpetrated the attack has ranged from foreign powers to Jihadist rivals. The group has an estimated 20,000 fighters and, along with Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS), has a heavy presence in Idlib province on the Turkish border and is fighting the regime in the Hama and Homs countryside.

Jabhat Fath al-Sham JFS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, (JN) has a similar geographical spread to Ahrar al-Sham with an estimated half the number of fighters. Many of its commanders retain links to the Islamic State although the Islamic State expelled the group from Eastern Syria in 2014. JFS boasts about its independence and self-sufficiency, especially after breaking from al-Qaeda in 2016. But it has communication channels with Qatar whose al-Jazeera channel has been sympathetic to the group.

Jaish al-Islam: tied to Saudi Arabia through Salafist clerics close to the kingdom's Wahhabi establishment. Active mainly in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus and in the Qalamoun mountain region between Lebanon and Syria

Free Syrian Army (FSA): Led mostly by defectors from the Assad military. Overall strength estimated at 35,000 active fighters in fragmented brigades. Apart from southern Syria, FSA brigades are active in Aleppo and suburbs on the eastern outskirts of Damascus.

However, while there are good reasons to doubt the sincerity of the manoeuvre, it is still worth noting that JFS is comprised of different contingents with varying local loyalties and commitment to ideology. This implies that those factions who have had second thoughts about its close links to al-Qaeda, may move closer to the more moderate Islamist mainstream.

These "pragmatist" factions argue in favour of winning over local communities and building a popular base, rather than relying on the imposition of rigid ideological prescriptions. They are also utterly hostile to the Islamic State, while commanders from the ideological camp are known to not shy away from tactical cooperation with the Islamic State. Among the most prominent pragmatists is Iraqi Jihadist Abu Marya al-Qahtani who was demoted from the group's upper echelon in 2014 and has kept a low profile since, but re-emerged on social media after the rebranding. Abu Marya has often warned of Islamic State sleeper cells within JN/JFS and Ahrar al-Sham. He vowed to go after Islamic State commanders accusing the organization of being run by former Saddam henchmen who were "doing the bidding of the Assad regime". Another important rift within JFS concerns its cooperation with Western-backed brigades of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Abu Marya and other pragmatists oppose JFS's practice of branding such groups as "apostates", an accusation that would appear to rule out even tactical cooperation. In the areas under JFS's control, the pragmatists, some of whom are military commanders with broad discretionary authority, have a reputation for being more lenient with the local populations, and for being willing to cooperate with local clerics and leaders and reject extreme interpretations of religion.

Conversely, foreign fighters who consider Syria a transient battlefield in a global struggle are more likely to adopt extremist positions. They also appear to have been the most recalcitrant opponents of the rebranding effort, despite reassurances that the central tenets of al-Qaeda's ideology still stand (which partly defeated the purpose of the whole manoeuvre). The challenge to keep them in line was aptly illustrated by the video that announced its disassociation from al-Qaeda in which the prominent Egyptian commander Abu Faraj al-Masri

(since killed in a US drone strike) was seated next to JFS's leader al-Golani despite Masri's known opposition to the step.

The Politics of Truce

Despite such efforts, JN/JFS remains unpopular throughout most rebel areas. The rapid setbacks that occurred after the offensive in Aleppo drew further scorn. Yet, faced with the onslaught of the regime and its foreign backers, many still see it as a necessary evil.

Events during the short-lived ceasefire in September 2016 indicate that support for JN/JFS may indeed quickly evaporate once the immediate military threat has been withdrawn and a political process has begun. The ceasefire agreement struck between the US and Russia was supposed to lead to close cooperation between the two powers, even including a joint operation room, in the fight against the Islamic State and JN/JFS. As part of this process, Moscow and Washington were supposed to agree on a delineation of areas where Syrian rebels *not* classified internationally as terrorists were to be spared, with Russia expected to commit the Syrian regime to compliance with these terms. Events on the ground during the few days that the truce actually held indicate that this approach could have worked to isolate JN/JFS and strengthen more moderate groups instead. Residents of rebel towns were anxious not to retain the group in their midst as that would have likely exposed them to internationally sanctioned bombings by Russia and the US-led coalition. A few months earlier, demonstrations in the rebel town of Maarat al-Numaan in Idlib province had already forced the Front to scale down its presence there. The reason for the popular rage was the death of some 50 prisoners, most of which the Front was holding for peacefully resisting its arbitrary rule, when an airstrike hit a court building. The partial pullout of JN allowed an FSA (Free Syrian Army) unit called Brigade 13 to regain a foothold in Maarat al-Numaan. Several rebel groups made it clear that allowing JN/JFS to operate amongst them would amount to operational suicide. Some voices in the opposition argued that, given the international focus on anti-terrorism, the group should find a way to expel commanders seen as ideologically inflexible, disband and merge into other brigades rather than taking the remaining rebels down with it.

Other political actors also scrambled to get on the right side of the Moscow-Washington deal. For instance, on 11 September 2016 the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood issued a declaration that renounced 'terrorism' and emphasized that the Syrian revolt only militarized in self-defence against the regime's crackdown on the peaceful protest movement. The intention appeared to be to protect brigades close to the Brotherhood such as Failaq al-Sham which had cooperated with FN/JFS in the Army of Conquest.

Another public statement, signed separately by FSA brigades and Ahrar al-Sham, came close to endorsing the ceasefire while objecting to the targeting of JN/JFS as long as Shi'ite pro-Assad militias were left unscathed. For its part, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (Etilaf) in Istanbul, which represents the mainstream opposition, said that the FSA would deal 'positively' with the ceasefire. While the Etilaf exerts little formal control over the FSA, let alone more hard-line Islamist groups, it remains an important conduit to the rebel brigades and wields influence by virtue of personal and kinship ties between its members and rebel commanders on the ground.

Thriving in War

The swift collapse of the September ceasefire, however, threw JN/JFS a lifeline. Disputes with other rebels, local discontent and tension in the relationship with Turkey and Qatar receded into the background. The renewed fighting preserved its position as an indispensable partner for Ahrar al-Sham and the FSA on the battlefield. The

rebels generally lack the pinpoint attack and storming capability of JN/JFS which specializes in the use of suicide bombers to break forward defences. During the 2015 advances by the Army of Conquest, the successes of those FSA units who were equipped with state-of-the-art anti-tank weapons showed there are alternatives to these techniques if foreign backers are willing to supply non-Jihadi rebels with better equipment. Yet the precarious situation in Aleppo drove FSA units to partner once again with JN/JFS even though they feared the group would try to exploit possible successes by expanding into Aleppo at their expense. According to UN envoy Staffan de Mistura, by late 2016 some 900 JN/JFS fighters out of a maximum of 8,000 rebels were besieged in Aleppo. In October 2016, de Mistura offered to escort them out of Aleppo but the group refused. As aerial bombing continued and in the absence of any guarantees for the rebel-held parts of Aleppo, many in the opposition supported this position despite Turkish pressure to the contrary. Instead, they joined an attempt by JN/JFS to relieve the pressure with a new attack on regime-held West Aleppo, which also failed. Ankara had, in fact, joined the Russian demand for an exit of JN/JFS from the city by mid-October to deprive Russia of an excuse to continue levelling the city. While Ankara continues to support the rebels by keeping supply lines through Turkey generally open, it considers Aleppo an essential part of its own cultural heritage and has become increasingly wary of drawing Russian ire. Moscow, in turn, resumed its indiscriminate bombing of Aleppo by mid-November without drawing any reaction from US president-elect Donald Trump who had spoken with Vladimir Putin just hours before. This allowed the Assad regime and its Shi'ite militia allies to capture large parts of the Eastern sector of the city.

The Public Sphere of Jihad

With events on the ground alternating between prospects of a truce and further deterioration, fissures between but also within rebel groups became more visible. Hard-line and more moderate factions vied for dominance over what may be called the public sphere of Jihad: virtual networks that maintain the often fickle loyalty of fighters within Syria and form the opinion of supporters abroad, including wealthy private donors for the cause, mostly in the Gulf States.

Officially, many of the clerics weighing in to these debates do not belong to any specific group which allows them to lend credence and (Jihadi) legitimacy to some actions and positions rather than others and occasionally also to mediate between groups. Their relevance became apparent in October 2016 when fighting broke out between Ahrar al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa, a Jihadist faction where JN/JFS had offloaded many of its foreign, more extremist operatives. Reportedly, it also uses the group as enforcers to assassinate FSA officers and other figures seen as obstacles to its control over local communities. Jund al-Aqsa is also suspected of cooperating with the Islamic State, in particular arranging the transfer of recruits to the Islamic State from rebel areas such as Idlib through the Hama region to Islamic State territory in eastern Syria.

Other rebel brigades quickly declared their backing for Ahrar al-Sham against Jund al-Aqsa. They included Jaish al-Islam, a Salafi group that has Saudi backing. Although concentrated in the Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, Jaish al-Islam is also present in the central province of Homs. Despite differences and sometimes deadly confrontations with Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam and the other brigades saw Jund al-Aqsa as a lethal fifth-column of the Islamic State that had to be destroyed while it remained a relatively small force. But the campaign against the group was condemned online by a number of clerics. Perhaps the most prominent of them, Abdallah al-Muhaysini from Saudi Arabia, proposed solving the dispute by having Jund al-Aqsa disband and its members join JFS. Wary of being blamed for causing rebel fratricide that Assad's

forces could exploit, Ahrar al-Sham acquiesced and stopped the attacks. Thus, with little more than a few Twitter messages, these clerics had stopped several of the major rebel groups in their tracks. Muhaysini in particular has become a star to many Salafist Jihadis fighting in Syria on the strength of his oratory skills, his physical presence on the battlefield and his unabashed militancy. Some of Muhaysini's propaganda footage aimed at recruiting fighters shows him making speeches standing on the bodies of dead regime soldiers. In another, Muhaysini bids goodbye to a suicide bomber before he sets off on a mission. He also addresses rebel child soldiers while they practice with assault rifles. Hailing from Saudi-Arabia and endowed with private funding from his home region of al-Qassim, Muhaysini, whose discourse doubles down on the al-Qaeda-inspired creed and the need for unity, has emerged as a regular arbiter between JFS and Ahrar al-Sham.

Yet the Jihadi hegemony over Islamist public opinion does not go uncontested. Non-Jihadist clerics opposed to Assad have started to emulate Muhaysini's use of social media and circulate videos that expose the theological fallacies of the Jihadis. But, as indicated by their Twitter followers and views on YouTube, their viewership is far smaller than that of Muhaysini. Among the most active on social media is Hassan al-Dughaim who hails from a prominent family in the town of Jarjanaz in Idlib province. Dughaim escaped two assassination attempts in his hometown which he blamed on JFS. Dughaim often attacks JFS leader al-Golani on YouTube and Twitter for irrevocably damaging the Syrian revolt and Islam. Dughaim lists activists and rebels killed by the groups and those held and tortured in its prisons as well as details of theft, looting and other transgressions. He points to specific religious prescriptions he says JFS routinely violates and exposes religious claims by its clerics and leaders as vacuous. Also on social media, many citizen journalists who had supported JN/JFS as an effective force against the Assad regime appear to have become disillusioned with the group. For example, the influential activist and citizen journalist Haitham Radoun switched to giving more space in his reports to non-al-Qaeda figures, such as Anas Ayrout. A Salafist cleric from Baniyas, Ayrout led protests against Assad in his home city in 2011 and evaded capture by the regime for months before fleeing to Turkey and becoming a member of the Etilaf. In 2013, Ayrout called for targeting Alawite civilians in retaliation for the indiscriminate regime bombing of Sunni civilians and to drive Assad's supporters to the negotiation table. Seeing the extra credibility that figures such as Muhaysini obtained from their physical presence on the battlefield, Ayrout quit the Etilaf in 2016 and joined Failaq al-Sham inside Syria as a *shar'i* (religious juror). Despite the strong rhetoric, Ayrout is seen as a less militant figure than Muhaysini and has participated in the revolt from day one. He is Syrian himself rather than a foreigner fighting on Syrian soil and has maintained links with the mainstream political opposition.

The Ruralization of Rebels

Muhaysini and other clerics have successfully targeted Sunni victims of displacement as ripe recruits for their brand of al-Qaeda-inspired Jihad. Beaming on his Twitter account, Muhaysini was filmed in Idlib greeting fighters and civilians from the destroyed Damascus suburb of Daraya in September 2016. Around 3,000 people, two thirds of them civilians, were transferred in regime busses to Idlib under the evacuation terms offered by the regime. The fall of Daraya after years of resisting the regime's siege increased Assad's hold on the mostly Sunni suburbs, the Western part of which has now been either subdued or depopulated. Infighting has also weakened rebels holding on to territory to the East of the capital, one of the last main urban regions under their control. If Eastern Aleppo were to fall completely, the rebels would be increasingly squeezed into rural

regions. Endemic corruption, agricultural mismanagement and substandard education, all of which had been amplified by the botched Assad "reform" process in the early 2000s, have provided a fertile ground for extremists like JN/JFS in many of these areas which are controlled by the group's pervasive intelligence apparatus. They are unlikely to leave any space for the more civic-minded elements among rebels evacuated from places like Daraya and will likely absorb many of those evacuated from urban areas into the Jihadi brigades.

The group has been also recruiting a new generation of young fighters, many of whom were orphaned or displaced during the revolt and grew up with no education other than al-Qaeda-inspired teachings and without forming attachments to local communities. On the other side, the countryside has also witnessed the emergence of a civic spirit among its youth long neglected by the center and frustrated by both Baathist and Islamist ideology. Some towns, such as Kfar Nubul in Idlib province, have shown resilience to the rise of JN/JFS and shrewdness in dealing with the group. Hundreds of locally rooted rebel brigades loosely considered part of the FSA also exist in dormant or active form in Idlib and elsewhere. It will not be easy for JN/JFS to swallow them and smother civil structures even if it were to resolve differences with Ahrar al-Sham which has often balanced JN/JFS's dominance on the local level. Yet while local councils and other civic organizations, such as the White Helmets rescue organization, have fared better in rebel areas where JN/JFS is not dominant, the group appears to have realized it cannot manage services on its own. For example, the group has started to allow officials from the opposition's interim government to come in and address local needs in the areas of Idlib province under its control. In other areas, local figures have been employed by aid agencies to act as interlocutors with JN/JFS to allow aid shipments through. The flexibility of JN/JFS has, however, not translated into dialogue or political leverage over the group by the mainstream opposition.

Recurring Patterns, Narrowing Options

Events on the ground in recent months indicate a clear pattern. Every time violence recedes and the silver lining of some sort of political process appears on the horizon, non-Jihadi rebels prepare for participation and popular discontent with the radicals comes to the fore. Once fighting resumes, moderate rebels and the population in opposition-held areas are faced with the same conundrum: as much as they loathe JN/JFS and fear their presence will attract aerial attacks not only from the regime but also from Russia and the US, crucial front lines will not hold without them.

The Russian air campaign has also helped eliminate major foes of JN/JFS, facilitating the spread of the group. Russian forces appear to have primarily targeted FSA units and, to a lesser degree, Ahrar al-Sham. So far, the strategy pursued by the regime and Russia appears to be aimed mostly at destroying any moderate alternative to extremists such as JN/JFS or the Islamic State.

The influence of such groups could be greatly reduced if Syria's Sunnis, who form the bulk of the dead and displaced in the civil war, are offered a serious alternative in the form of a political transition. If a Sunni peace dividend in the form of electoral empowerment and the return of refugees materializes, popular pressure would grow on JN/JFS to disband. Rebel commanders and opposition figures, as well as moderate clerics who have started to challenge JN/JFS on ideological grounds, would be boosted if they were to unite and offer an attractive alternative. This would also require that Saudi Arabia use its significant ideological influence to steer support towards more moderate actors in the "public sphere of Jihad". Such a concerted effort may succeed in prying away at least part of the pragmatist faction of JN/JFS and establishing a lasting divide between radical Jihadis that have

to be fought and Islamist groups that are ready to participate in the political process. In organizations that straddle this divide, such as Ahrar al-Sham, pragmatists like Labib al-Nahhas will be on more solid ground.

But the Assad regime, basking in Russian and Iranian support, has already dismissed the Geneva deal for a political transition as old hat. For his part, John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, has acknowledged the possibility of Assad running for another term under internationally supervised elections. For many Syrians who lived through decades of rigged elections, international supervision offers little comfort as long as Assad retains power and controls the administration, in particular the process of generating the electoral rolls. Judging from his campaign statements, US president-elect Donald Trump may go even further and seek to rehabilitate Assad. This would tie in well with the growing international preoccupation with "fighting terrorism" and the increasing sense that the Middle East cannot be fixed, but only contained. The implication would be that, given the magnitude of the challenge, such containment may require unsavoury means and ruthless characters ready to wield them – such as Bashar al-Assad. By this logic, a continuation of the current at best half-hearted support for the rebels will only increase the violence and fail to dislodge Assad, so better to focus on containing the spill over of refugees and help reconstruct the country even if that means turning a blind eye to the atrocities committed by the regime.

Slipshod Solutions and Their Risk

There is, however, no guarantee that a return to the pre-2011 status quo would help end the suffering and roll back Jihadism. As Assad himself has said, his regime will seek to re-assert its authority over all areas still controlled by the rebels, such as Idlib, and parts of Hama and Deraa province which are inhabited by hundreds of thousands of people who have now lived outside his grip for years. Such attempts will likely prompt the Jihadists to merge and/or change their tactics as they get squeezed into a narrower territory with little room left for the more moderate rebels. Similar to Iraq, Syria may end up having its own hard-to-conquer 'Sunni Triangle' in Idlib and other parts of the north that continue to spawn instability and recruits for the Jihadi cause. The trajectory of the Syrian civil war so far has shown that only a combination of military pressure and Russian prodding could bring the regime to the negotiating table and offer at least some concessions. In the absence of Western willingness to shore up the rebel's military strength and risk an open confrontation with Moscow, one option could be to help rebels hold on to what they already have through more potent weapons and/or a serious threat of intervention if the regime advances, freeing them from the need to depend on the Jihadis. This would require that the three main rebel backers – Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – take direct charge, stop working at cross-purposes, and stop elite members from implementing their own foreign policy. Most likely, this by itself would still not be sufficient to compel the regime to seek compromise. Yet one should not automatically assume that Russian support, on which Assad depends more than ever, is unconditional and open-ended. In the medium term, Moscow may be more interested in consolidating the strategic and political gains it has already achieved and become part of a solution than hold out for an elusive total victory. Therefore, a strategy to consolidate the non-Jihadi rebels should be accompanied by consistent signals to Moscow that the door to a diplomatic process remains open.

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