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MILITARY-POLITICAL-SOCIAL ROLES OF ISLAMIST OPPOSITION ARMED GROUPS UNDER THE WEAK STATE- THE CASE OF SYRIA

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Acknowledgment

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List of Abbreviations

ACU	Assistance Coordination Unit
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
CBOs	Community Based Organizations
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FAD	The Front for Authenticity and Development
FSA	The Free Syrian Army
HNC	High Negotiation Committee
HTS	Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (formerly known as al-Nusra Front)
ICRC	The International Committee for the Red Cross
IF	The Islamic Front
IHH	Humanitarian Relief Foundation (the abbreviation comes from the Turkish version: İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı)
IRGC	the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp
ISIS	The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham
ISSG	the International Syria Support Group
KIF	Kurdish Islamic Front
LACs	local administration councils
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOC	Military Operations Centers
MOC	Military Operations Command
NDF	Syria National Defense Forces
NSF	The National Salvation Front
SCD	The Syrian Civil Defense
SDF	Syria Democratic Forces
SHAML	Syrian CSOs Coalition
SIF	Syria Islamic Front
SIG	Syria Interim Government
SILF	The Syria Islamic Liberation Front
SMB	The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood
SMC	Supreme Military Council (of the FSA)
SNC	The Syrian National Council

SSG   Syria Salvation Government

TAMAS   Syrian Civil Society Coalition

UJC   The Unified Judiciary Council

YPG   The people protection units (the abbreviation from the Kurdish version: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)

PART ONE— INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1   Introduction: The Subject of the Study

1.1   The Aim of this Study
1.1.1   The Subject of the Study

Succeeding the 2011 uprising, the Syrian civil war[1] has undergone several phases of changing military and geopolitical landscapes, including foreign actors and militias (often on different sides) from dozens of countries, regional governments, and global powers.

Inspired by the Arab uprising, popular demonstrations across the Middle East, peaceful protests rapidly spread across Syria, demanding regime change and the departure of President Bashar al-Asad. However, as the marches increased, the government unleashed its military and security firepower. Consequently, the peaceful movement was overshadowed by an armed insurgency and Syria's descent into civil war.

The emergence of armed groups began in early 2012, when a wave of defectors joined opposition groups to form brigades that were predominately supported by foreign patrons. These evolved and became increasingly organized, with several groups continuing to operate independently under the general label of the Syrian Revolution[2], and others forming what is known as the Free Syrian Army[3]. The rebel groups then managed to seize towns and cities across the northern, eastern, central, and southern regions of the country. Except for the Lebanese Hezbollah's direct intervention on the ground, the support for different fighting parties remained largely indirect at that stage. Nevertheless, with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS, later Islamic State) in 2014, and because ISIS

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[1] The ongoing conflict in Syria is referred to generally as the Syria Civil War despite different phases of the conflict including direct and indirect international interventions, this research maintains the same reference to the Syria Civil War or Syria War in short form.

[2] The Syrian revolution is a self-claimed term by Syrian's part of the civil uprising against the regime of al-Asad. In practical terms the civil uprising actually forms the first phase of the Syrian conflict that turned later to civil war followed by international armed conflict.

[3] The Free Syrian Army (FSA), a rebel umbrella group formed by defectors from the Syrian National Army at the onset of Syria conflict in 2012. The FSA claimed leadership over the armed opposition fighting in Syria, but its authority was largely unrecognized by the local militias which merged into various coalitions and loyalties as the conflict evolved in the following years.

claimed that it controlled roughly one-third of Syrian territories through the establishment of their own governing system, the US-led operation has been initiated in Iraq and Syria.

Meanwhile, various moderate rebel groups fighting the government were increasingly rebranding themselves as "Islamists," to avoid being eclipsed by extremist factions. Shortly after, in 2015 and 2016, Syria witnessed a growing Russian military intervention, especially with its airpower, supporting the regime against moderate rebel factions. This support helped the central government in Damascus regain control over the majority of the country's major cities between 2016–2018, including key border-crossings in the south and northeast.
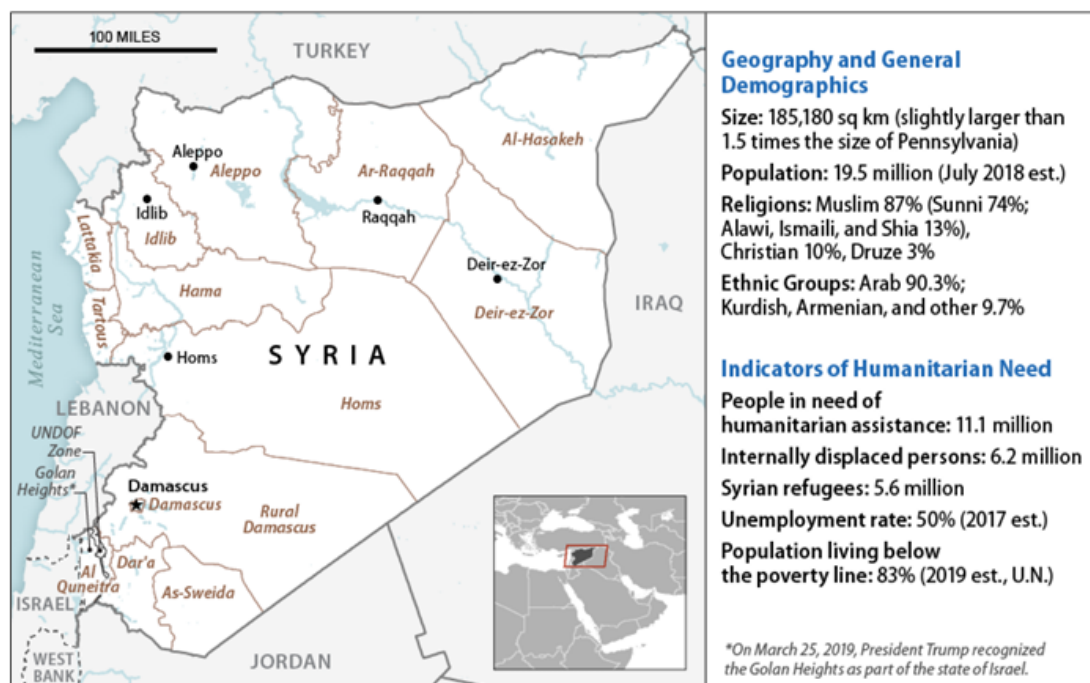
Sources: CRS using data from U.S. State Department; Esri; CIA, *The World Factbook*; and the United Nations.

Map 1-1 Syria Country Map and Basic Data

Source: congressional research service, Armed Conflict in Syria and US Response, RL33487, https://crsreports.congress.gov/ last updated 27 July 2020, last accessed 13 November 2021

This research examines Islamist armed groups' role and their military, political, and social impact in the Syrian conflict since 2011. It focuses on the interaction of militias on two distinct levels: the state—in forms of collaboration, confrontation, or replacement; and the society both as a source of

legitimacy and a challenge to it. This dual analysis of armed groups' behavior—as a sub-state and as a civil society—aims to understand the state-militants-society dynamics during the Syrian conflict.

The research excludes the Kurdish armed groups due to the difference in nature as a national liberation movement with clear self-definition as an autonomous "nation." Despite the majority of the Kurdish people being Muslims, Islam as a religion does not appear to have developed as a primary communal bond among the Kurds, who pursued ethnic identity as the foundation of community-building and the recognition of Kurds' rights to have autonomous administration and self-determination.

Given such criteria and limitations, this research focuses on the groups led and composed by Syrian nationals who pursue political and social objectives on a national level under the framework of "opposition against the regime," as they consider the change of governing system and order as the national interest. However, given such criteria, hundreds of groups and coalitions will fall into the description. Nevertheless, the research focuses on the selected cases which qualify for inclusion, taking physical limitations and difficulty in conducting research on these non-state actors into consideration. Therefore, the main groups covered in this study are Ahrār al-Shām (Free men of Levant), Jaysh Al-Islām (Islam Army), Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al- Islām (The Martyrs of Islam Brigade), al-Jabha al-Janubiyya (The Southern Front), The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood affiliates (such as Faylaq al-Shām), and Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant).

1.1.2 What is the Syrian Civil War

A combination of social, political, and military conflicts has resulted in a complex ongoing crisis in Syria (Hinnebusch, Imady and Zintl 2016). One aspect of the problem is the civil war that has occurred amid broader international and sub-regional dynamics (Phillips 2016). These dynamics derive from political, military, and social consequences which were caused by the conflicts, such as massive, forced displacement of the Syrians, internally or in the form of cross-bordering.

Evolving into a prolonged and complex armed conflict, the Syrian civil war created vicious cycles of violence that have severely impacted civilian life, economic destructions, and losses of resources. The combination of humanitarian, political, and economic implications and the sub-regional

and cross-regional displacement, refugees, and migration movement is often referred to as the Syria crisis.

The Syrian civil war is significant for both the events that have occurred in Syria and the political and civic reactions that refugees and mass forced migration have globally invoked. This has driven the public in those countries that have received refugees to actively engage and stand against such an unprecedented level of violence that ignited the refugees/migrations discussions (Geddes 2016).

Although the Syrian crisis began during a similar period to other political movements in Tunisia and Egypt demanding democratic and human rights (aka Arab Spring or Arab Uprising)[4], the Syria case is different in many ways from the experience in Tunisia or Egypt. The rapid transformation into a multilayered armed conflict resembles the situation in Libya and Yemen, which are sometimes referred to as the Arab Winter[5]. Nevertheless, there are distinct differences related to each country's specific situation, especially in terms of international and regional interests and subsequent involvement. Therefore, within the context of political change in several Arab countries, I examine the Syrian case's specificities and distinctive characteristics rather than commonalities. Furthermore, I argue that the commonalities and time synchronization of certain events in the various Arab States have very little grounds. Hence, differences among these countries require consideration after analyzing a specific country case (such as Syria in this case).

The uprising and peaceful popular demonstrations quickly turned into violent confrontations involving security and military forces as well as armed fractions of the population and defectors from the national army. Consequently, on 14 July 2012, the ICRC[6] declared the internal armed conflict in

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[4] 'The Arab Spring' is a general term used to refer to a series of pro-democracy popular uprisings that enveloped several Arab Middle Eastern countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen. The events in these nations generally began in the spring of 2011. However, the political, social and security impact of these popular uprisings and following military escalations/civil wars remain significant and some are not ended till this date namely in Syria and Yemen.

[5] 'Arab Winter' is a general term used to refer to era following the Arab spring in some Arab countries that is characterized by civil war, armed conflict and economic deterioration and insecurity. For more on that please see (Feldman, 2020).

[6] The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) is mandated for declaration of civil war as per Geneva conventions article 3 relating to non-international armed conflict. The declaration allows the application of International Humanitarian Law, whereby violation to IHL by conflicting parties could amount to war crimes.

Syria as a "civil war," as it matched the criteria of non-international armed conflict where hostilities are limited to certain territories (Nebehay 2012).

The conflict rapidly spread across Syria and involved regional and international state actors with contradicting political interests, be that directly or indirectly through funding and logistic assistance provided to armed militants, shifting the conflict to a "proxy war" of major international powers. In addition, the conflict transformed significantly with the rise of the ISIS and the subsequent western US-led counter-terrorism operation. Furthermore, the US intervention was followed by a scale-up of the Iranian, then Russian interventions at different fronts.

The US missile attack on the Syrian government military base in April 2017 marked the ICRC's announcement of a definitional shift from the civil war to an "international armed conflict," as it included a military operation by a state on the territory of another state without the consent of the other (Nebehay 2017). Such international and regional factors cannot be ignored when analyzing the ongoing Syrian conflict and so, without ignoring the latter, this research proposes a new, more internally focused, perspective through a close examination of the internal factors and elements involved in the Syrian conflict. For the purpose of this research, and in order to account for the conflicting dynamics at military, political, and social levels, the situation in Syria is described as the "Syrian civil war" along with specific reference to events and timeframes throughout the decade preceding 2011.
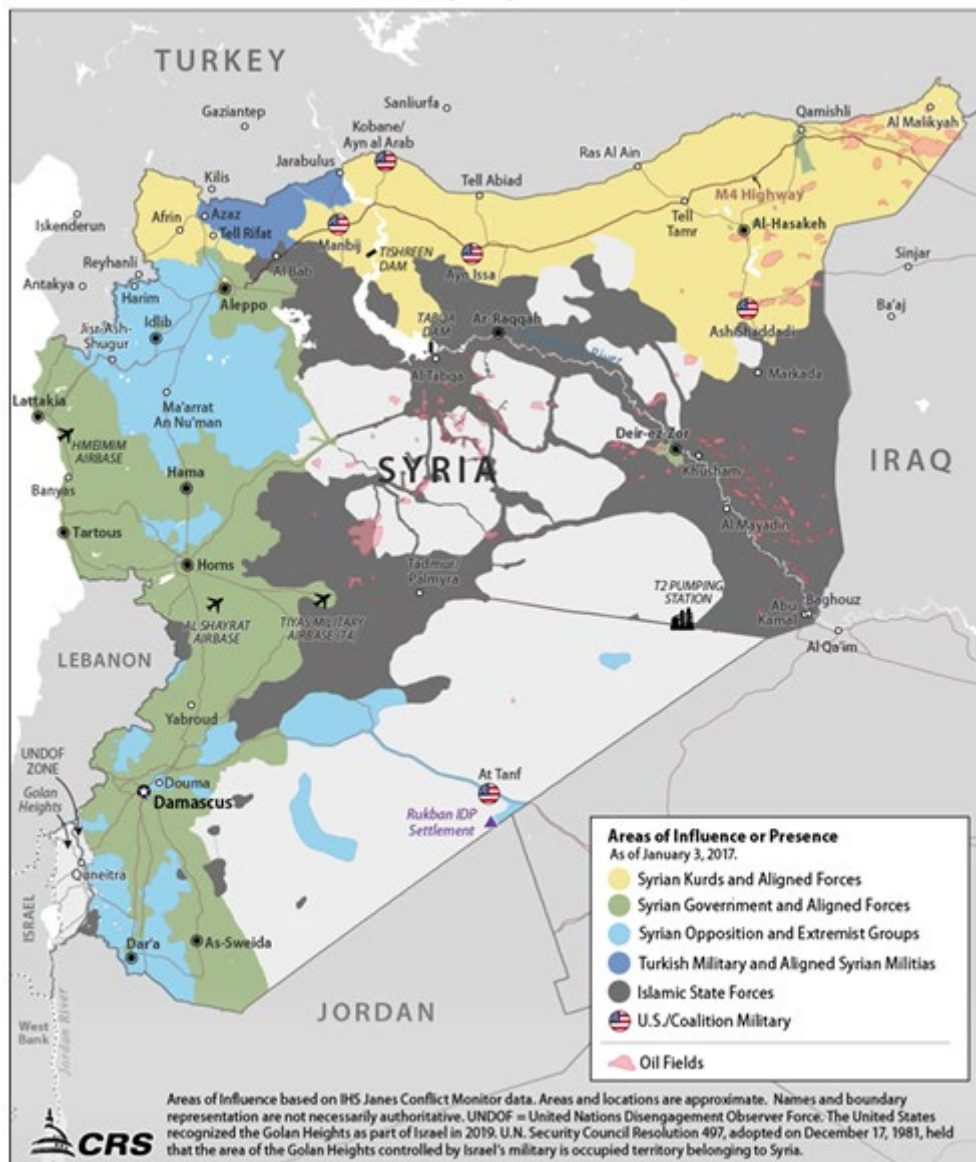
Map 1-2 *Area of Influence in Syria, as of 3 January 2017*

Source: (CRS 2020)

1.1.3   Non-military Role of the Islamist Armed Groups in the Syrian Conflict

Since the initial days of the Syrian civil war, the Islamic armed groups involved in the conflict have perceived the armed struggle as an unavoidable phase of transition.

Before I present the roles of Islamic armed groups in Syria, I will explain my use of the term "Islamic armed groups" in this paper. Here I define the term "Islamist" as a political affiliation to armed groups

adopting Islamic manifestation and branding to represent their participation in the current conflict. This definition covers a variety of groups, including transnational Salafist Jihadists and local moderate Islamist groups. In addition, this term includes armed groups with Muslim Sunni backgrounds, even when Islamic principles are indirectly reflected in their political visions.

The Islamist groups I analyze here are neither institutionally nor ideologically part of the global radical Salafist Jihadi movement[7], such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS. On the one hand, and despite their adoption of slogans and agendas referencing Islam as their ideological foundation, the groups analyzed in this study do not share the same agenda declared by the Salafi-Jihad or radical Islamic groups such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS. Moreover, they have not adopted or announced fellowship to any of the Salafist scholars or theological doctrines. Instead, the self-identified values of these groups continue to echo the values of liberation from regime control and the people's aspiration for human rights. On the other hand, they are predominantly locally formed within the majority of Muslim Sunni communities with the main aspiration for political participation in the transition and future processes in Syria and no stated objectives for further expansion beyond the country's national borders. In thus study, reference to the global Salafist-Jihadist armed groups is made as part of the analysis of external actors in the Syrian conflict, similar to other states' interventions.

Pierret (2017) divides Salafi groups into Jihadi, Salafi lite[8]/Haraki Salafi[9], and the quietists. I view Salafism as an imported phenomenon that has expanded through the Syrian conflict along with the sectarian polarization between the Sunnis and Alawites (recognized as Shi'a). While the embrace of Salafism by many Syrian opposition fighters remains superficial and opportunistic, the conflict among those Salafi groups has profoundly affected the structure of the insurgency.

According to Pierret's (2017) classification, the most important group appear to be the Salafi lite and the quietist as they have the potential for political influence during and after the conflict. Ahrār

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[7] For more detailed explanation and understanding of Salafism and the Global jihad, please refer to Meijer (2009).
[8] 'Salafi lite' is a term made up by Pierret (2017) to refer to Syrian Islamist armed groups newly established at the onset of Syria war 2011- and that adopted and promoted a specific interpretation of Salafism sometimes a lighter version that can be easily mixed with other agendas as the situation evolves.
[9] 'Haraki Salafism' is a term used to refer to Salafi activism, Haraki means active, and it is derived from the Arabic word Haraka or movement in English.

al-Shām, leading member of the Syria Islamic Liberation Front (Jabhat al-Taḥrīr al-Sūriyya al-Islāmiyya (SILF)), is an example of a Salafi lite group.[10] Its members appear to be moderate non-Salafi leaders and maintain close relations with leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) who influenced them to adopt similar approaches to democracy and state. Furthermore, and except for the Islam Brigade in Damascus, the majority of the members of SILF incorporated the national flag as part of each group's individual logo. Ahrār al-Shām was previously aligned with the Turkish/Qatar axis and was a recipient of financial support for humanitarian relief from the Turkish NGO IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation[11] and The Qatar Foundation. However, as the war progressed, the group changed sides and adopted a violent approach, aligning itself with Saudi Wahabi lines of support. In addition, they established the Front for Authenticity and Development that, due to the absence of infrastructure before 2011 in Syria, had to recruit heterogeneous alliances of former jihadis, defectors of the national Syria army, and tribesmen.

Referring to any of the emerging political parties in Syria as "Islamist" is ambiguous since the conflict is ongoing and their goals remain unfulfilled. That said, the indication for political Islam in Syria is difficult to ignore. Therefore, this study also aims to examine the potential of transferring existing armed Islamist action into a political one.

Islamist armed groups are often referred to by mainstream discourse and media as "militias"; however, "militia" is a term used to refer to organized groups of non-professional combatants primarily outside of the state army (Stentiford 2002). Thus, term "militia" has its limitations in explaining the various aspects of the non-state actors in Syria and their role in territorial governance and the negotiation process with state actors. While the majority of the armed groups claim to be fighting for the regime change in Syria, at least in the short-term, several of them have different goals other than fighting against the regime. Hence, they cannot be referred to as opposition in a political sense. For these reasons, the

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[10] A full profile of this group can be found on: Mapping Militant Organizations. "Ahrār al-Shām.." Stanford University. Last modified 5 August 2017. https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523

[11] IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation is a conservative Turkish NGO, whose members are predominantly Turkish Muslims, active in more than 100 countries, the abbreviation IHH is taken from the Turkish name İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı, that translate in English into The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief.

term "armed groups" or "militants" remains the closest reference to the various and fragmented non-state-Islamist and secular armed presence that emerged during the conflict in Syria, be that affiliated with the opposition or the government.

This approach has indicated, to some extent, awareness for a potential role in providing a range of public goods to their communities and the broader Syrian people, beyond military gains.

Islamic armed groups in conflicts

The contentious theory of civil war developed by Adrian Florea (Florea 2017) helps identify two key factors for the outset of the Syrian civil war. These are the regime's crisis of legitimacy and the militarization and radicalization of the political challengers against the regime. Thus, the Syrian civil war is an outcome of political contention expressed primarily by violent interactions between state and non-state actors and among the actors themselves. Furthermore, most importantly, this manifests as part of a more extensive process where actors assume various roles in addition to warfare.

Among other examples, during its control of the entire region of East Ghūṭah, located on the outskirt of Damascus, Jaysh al-Islām has managed the civil administration of approximately half a million people[12]. Jaysh al-Islām governance covered a variety of civil administration and public services after being abandoned by the central authorities. They even managed to instate and run a fully taxed exportation/importation process to import fuel, medicine, and arms from other areas in Syria and the nearby regions such as Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. Of course, this is used to sustain the continuous military gain against the regime, Al-Qaeda and other transnational Salafist-jihadist organizations. Moreover, Jaysh al-Islām managed to engage in international diplomacy with main actors such as Russia and was the first rebel army to sign a ceasefire agreement with Russia mediated by Egypt in July 2017.[13]

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[12] The UNOCHA factsheet on East Ghūṭah: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-factsheet-east-Ghūṭah-8-december-2017-enar. The population estimations here are for people in need of humanitarian assistance estimated at around 400 thousand and therefore it is safe to assume that the total population of the area under Jaysh al-Islām control was at least approximately 500 thousand.

[13] Mapping Militant Organizations. "Jaysh al-Islām." Stanford University. Last modified May 2019. Accessed 2 August 2021. https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/jaysh-al-islam

Similar cases and various examples can be found following the work and profiles of the Ahrār al-Shām Front controlling northern Syria Liwā' Shuhadaᵓ al-Islam in West Ghūṭah and the Southern Front in the southern provinces in Syria.
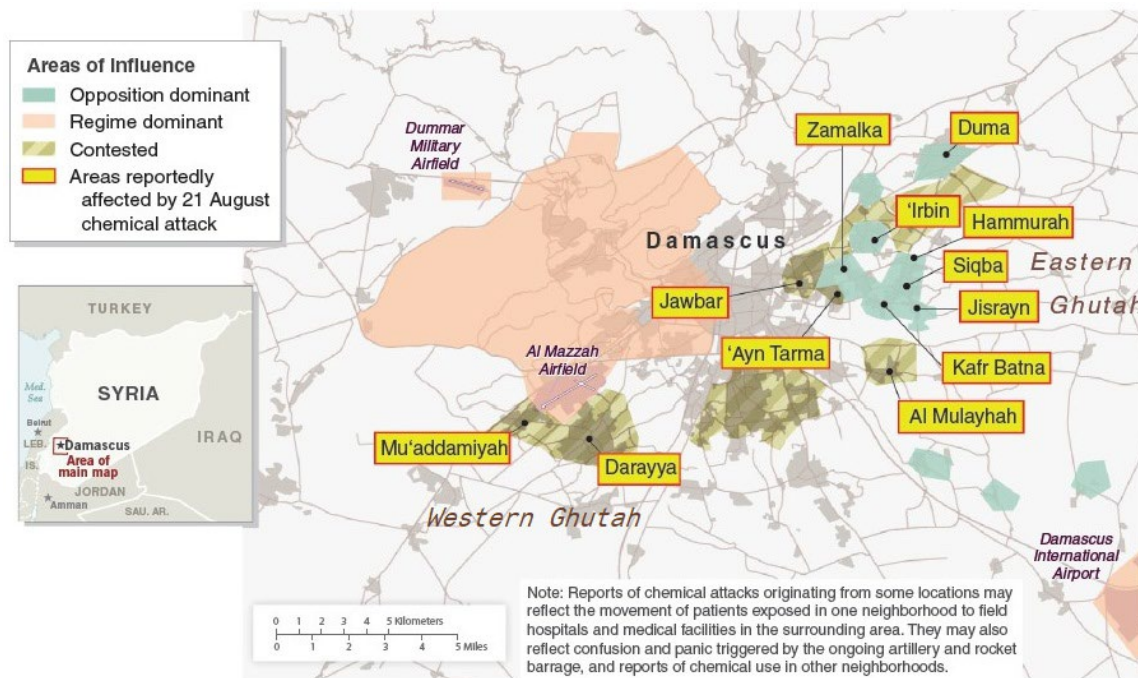
Map 1-3 Damascus region area of influence during the Syrian civil war

Source: obtained by Al Arabiya News from a US government sources (Al Arabyia 2013)

Participation in governance, through providing independent public services to their constituencies, is nothing new to the Islamist fractions in the Middle East. Indeed, similar patterns are evident in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Palestine (Hamas), and Iraq (the Sadr trend) during and after the civil wars.

The proliferation of Islamist armed groups in Syria during the conflict and their control over a considerable number of territories with medium or high population density, combined with the withdrawal of state administration from those areas and suspension of the central state reach, has

resulted in a vacuum in the political and service sectors. This gap created an urge for alternative political leadership and service provision where the state has limited power.

Emerging with different ideologies and ties to foreign states, the armed groups have been unprecedentedly expanding and effectively interfering and disrupting the security, stability, and political process in the region. They have also participated in various local political administration and community management processes.

1.1.4 Key research questions

The aim of this study is to understand the Syrian local Islamist armed groups' political and state-like role within the current dynamics of the Syrian conflict. Thus, the main research question revolves around why and how the Islamist militants have built and maintained an intent relationship with local communities and international and regional powers to grow as important military and political actors within the Syrian conflict. To answer that question, the following sub-questions are considered:

- Are there any significant differences among Islamist armed groups in Syria regarding military strategies and partnerships' policies and local administration and service provision? If yes, in what ways are they different? What are the contributing factors to such differences?
- What impact, if any, do Islamist armed groups' relations with international and regional powers have on their political decision-making in Syria?
- How have the relations between the Islamist armed groups and communities under their control developed, and how do they contribute to the armed groups' power consolidation process?

1.2 Approaches of this Study

1.2.1 Theoretical Framework- Basic Theories for Understanding the Syrian Situation

The Syrian case demonstrates new forms of state actors and non-state actors, whose borderlines are vague and indeterminate. Therefore, it offers a unique perspective in the field of International

Relations beyond state-to-state relations and broadens relational studies[14] between various political powers that account for the state, non-state groups, and community actors.

Noting the complexity and continuity of the Syrian crisis, a comprehensive analysis of the conflict is beyond the scope of this research. Instead, it highlights one crucial aspect of the situation, namely the Islamist military factor and its dynamics during the conflict. Further understanding of the factors that produced such dynamics, which involves states, regional actors, militant armed actors and most importantly, Syrian civilians, requires a multi-disciplinary and multi-layer analysis.

The theoretical framework used for this research includes a combination of failed state theory and various theories on the governance of non-state actors, the argument on the state-society relations, the civil society amid war, the application of concepts of the social movements, and collective action theory.

Failed State Theory and Islamist Armed Groups Attempt to Governance:

State actors fail when they are consumed with internal violence and unable to deliver positive political goods leading the citizens to question the credibility and legitimacy of the state. Furthermore, civil unrest and insurgencies are significant characteristics of failed states with ethnic and religious enmity (Rotberg 2004, 1-5).

This framework is applicable to the case of Syria. First, a weak state usually has different priorities in which maintenance of order and security prevails, followed by political participation, and then the provision of public services, which may be transferred to the private sector (Rotberg 2004). Second, the literature indicates that once non-state actors have a cause and access to arms, halting the failure becomes extremely difficult (Kasfir 2004).

Contemporary civil wars, including the Syrian civil war, appear to have structural roots in the combination of a simple, robust military technology and decolonization, which created an international system numerically dominated by fragile states with limited administrative control of their peripheries

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[14] For more on relational studies on global crisis, please see http://www.shd.chiba-u.jp/glblcrss/index_en.html.

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(Cederman and Girardin 2007, 88). Furthermore, the disruptive effects of a failed state tend to transcend the state territories, causing disruptions of regional and international stability and security. That includes the growth of Jihadist groups and refugee flow that add to the fragility of neighboring countries as well as the trigger of political crises globally (Lynch 2016).

The international attention given to the instability in Syria is evident through the international and regional support channels offered to the different fighting parties in ways that have not generated a final resolution. The international support provided based on political and ideological agendas, combined with preexisting stances of ethnic and religious enmity, have formed foundations of prolonged civil war and a proxy international conflict, which is evidence that the state is losing its monopoly to exercise within its territory (Rotberg 2004).

Furthermore, a state's fragility and failure are perceived to have a direct relation on the expansion of terrorism. The general approach of major international powers, as was proved in post-Saddam Iraq, has been to reinforce the existing states to defeat terrorist organizations, which holds little validity in Syria (Mabon and Royle 2016). In addition, this situation has facilitated the great powers to rely on the Islamist armed groups which are categorized as moderate in a broader sense, in order to defeat transnational terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, although they might presumably pursue a double agenda of fighting the authoritarian regime and combating terrorism simultaneously (Lund 2013).

Other important notions relevant to the Syrian case include the concept of how to understand the characteristics of armed political action groups. Not all Islamic armed groups have a national political agenda or started as a political movement. Despite many groups claiming to fight against the unfairness of a dictatorial regime, they do not necessarily call for democratic change or liberal revolution. Nevertheless, it is relevant to consider a new perspective of Islamist militants as partners to state-building rather than spoilers of the peace process (J. W. Moore 2014, Gaston and Clark 2017).

In the situation of state failure, human rights are often a crucial factor. In particular, it would be under analysis in the relation between armed groups and international order; armed groups'

compliance with the international law and engagement with the international community remains a prerequisite for the international community support to the rebels as a potential alternative ruler of the country. Reports of armed groups committing atrocities and war crimes, including cases of recruitment of children, mass killings of civilians, and the rape and torture of detainees have been reported by human rights activists and have been seriously by their international supporters.

It is considered as problematic as a form of pre-acquired or imposed legitimacy if Syrian oppositions, including Islamist armed groups, are provided with international and regional recognition and support before proving their capability of good governance or ensuring stable control over tangible consolidated territories. This will ultimately threaten the stability of the post-war governance system.

The Argument on The State-Society Relations and the Case of Syria

Another component of the theoretical framework this paper adopts is the state-in-society approach of Joel Migdal (2001). The state-in-society approach is a more developed version of the state-society relations approach, and it offers a new perspective for understanding the peculiar nature of politics occurring in a weak state. While the traditional approach to state-society relations has primarily considered the state and society as parts of one unit with one set of values; recent studies have shown that this static model does not reflect the complete picture, especially in the third world where people are sequestered by the state from the public sphere in a different parallel kind of order that represents an alternative to the order of the state (Migdal 1988). Therefore, Migdal's 'state-in-society' approach presents a new perspective for understanding the peculiar nature of politics against the backdrop of a weak state situation (Migdal 2001).

Heydemann (1999) adopts the socio-political and political economy approaches to explain the state-society relations in Syria prior to and after the Ba'th regime assumed power in 1963. According to him, the populist elite extended the state autonomy and generated a substantive restructuring of Syrian politics, society, and the economy in the 20th century, leading over time to increasing spatial and provincial economic disparities. That was followed by a shift to economic liberalization that started in the 1990s and peaked after Bashar al-Asad assumed power in the 2000s. Notably, the application of the

liberalization policies remained highly selective and biased, favoring the regime supporters from both the Alawite and Sunnis bourgeoisie. Such a change in the economic system constitutes an integral part of what Hinnebusch (2012) described as the 'authoritarian upgrade', where economic and political reforms are introduced sparsely and randomly to serve the ultimate purpose of regime stability and survival. Hence, the popular pressure for democratization and the end of corruption in the state apparatus was distracted by the introduction of free-market policies. In fact, since the early 1990s, Hinnebusch anticipated that the ongoing economic liberation, bound by deeply rooted civil society and ongoing social mobilization, would ultimately generate autonomous social forces that will remain unaccomplished without a real political liberalization process occurring (Hinnebusch 1990, 334). In this sense, Syrian Islamic movements may represent an opposition to corrupt and inefficient regimes and, therefore, should be considered within this framework.

There is a rich literature on the transformation of Syrian politics and economy after the populist Ba'th regime assumed power in 1963 (Hinnebusch 1990), mainly focusing on its authoritarian nature. It covers cases of repression in which the regime resorted to violence such as the Hama 1982 events against the armed revolution by the SMB and cases of diplomacy/appeasement, translated through the allocation of national resources to increase investment in public services, subsidies on major commodities, and public employment.

State-society relations during the armed conflict were also prominent at instances where local and ethnic-social groups had to negotiate their power relations with the central government. Migdal argues that the state-society competition over social control is more often seen in the realities of the weak states emerging in the third world in our modern postcolonial history (Migdal 1988, 14-15) .

Migdal (1988) highlights that in the complicated struggle for social control weak states as desperate, social organizations may either form an alliance around their opposition to the state, or remain fragmented, battling one another (Migdal 1988, 31-33, 141). He argues that we must look beyond the state hegemony that overrules the creation and use of violence and explore the rich interactions in the society across multiple systems of rules. Consequently, we are able to theorize about

arenas of competing sets of rules, including in the case of state failures, or weak states, or even as non-state societies (Migdal 2001, 15).

Migdal's approach reintroduced the state as a form of political organization that is a part of society, not above it, and that state and society constantly influence and reshape one another. Such understanding is critical in the case of weak states or no-state situations, particularly in the third world countries such as in the Middle East, where the social formation of weblike constituencies controlled by strongmen has a strong influence on the outcome of state policies or otherwise revokes state control (Migdal 2001, 214-217).

The contestation of state boundaries is expressed through the central institution of the state, the law. The boundaries are then expressed by the realm and limits of the state's law. In brief, behaving according to nonstate rules of conduct challenges the most fundamental claim of states: the right to make the rules that guide people's lives. In addition, the society may accept new meanings of belonging and redefine new community boundaries within the state because people find essential security that they need for survival in social groupings, weather states, or some other group with different spatial logic (Migdal, 2008).

The Civil Society amid War in Syria

The concept of civil society has multiple definitions, yet most scholars would agree that the term reflects an institutional core composed of a variety of voluntary associations, independent from the state and private sectors, including religious and cultural associations, charities, sports clubs, grass-roots initiatives, and political parties (Habermas 1992, 428-453). The formulation and role of civil society in the structure of the modern western states have been of interest to both researchers and policymakers. Notably, analysis of the US civil society has indicated an alarming correlation between the decline of civil society with that of associational participation (Putnam 2000).

In the developing world, civil society becomes especially visible during the people's struggle against authoritarian regimes. In the MENA region, for instance, there have been calls on the need to support and enhance the existing weak society, or otherwise the need to create one as a necessity for

the formation of modern society. This trend has been part of the western-style development agendas and the wider political project of building and strengthening democracy globally. Nevertheless, the West's support offered in Africa, the MENA, and Asia is believed to be selective and instrumental to political and economic interests (Lewis 2001).

The civil society in this research is equivalent to the term as described by CIVICUS[15] that covers a broader arena, including all non-governmental organizations, activists, voluntary bodies and networks, protests and social movements, community-based institutions, and faith-based groups. It refers to individuals and groups in the community that manifest the interest and will of local communities independently from the government/state.

While the definition of civil society is difficult to agree upon due to its variety of forms in the West in comparison to the developing world, the relation between the civil and political societies is relevant in every context, and the examination of the moral authority that civil society imposes on the political arena illuminates various aspects of the former's power dynamics and manifestations (Shah 2008).

Two points require consideration when researching civil society in Syria; (a) the difference in the concept and application of civil society between the West and developing countries, and (b) the conflict situation in which the Syrian civil society emerged that does not necessarily relate to the traditional state-market-society dichotomy. Instead, now it is playing a power-balancing role in the condition of a failed or weak state and largely dysfunctional market. The role of civil society during the Syrian conflict cannot be ignored because speaks for the community in the face of the controlling power, supporting citizenship and democracy, and providing services for better governance of community daily life management (De Martino 2017).

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[15] CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organizations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society globally. www.civicus.org.

Social Movements and Collective Action

Within the studies on civil society and collective action, social movement analytical approaches use both socio-political culture and political economy to explain the causes and motivation behind collective action and mobilization for a particular cause or against the state aiming at political and social change. Studies of collective behavior (Tilly 1977, 1985, Doug, McCarthy and Zald 1988, Tarrow 1996) explain why popular movements erupt as a consequence of marginalization and alienation of segments of the population, structural conduciveness that is a prerequisite condition for a collective action to occur, and relative deprivation impacting the well-to-do status of the community. The literature also explains the *how* part of collective actions in the political process model provide a central role to political factors that influence collective grievances, resources, and opportunities (Meyer 1999), facilitating a notion of "cognitive liberation" in which an opportunity is not an objective fact but rather perceived (McAdam 1982).

According to the collective action theory, collective actions are usually organized by like-minded people. However, this negates the common goals shared by groups who do not necessarily align regarding cultural and/or ideological motives. A common grievance is an example of such cases, and it applies to Syria as the common grievances toward the regime created a base for collective action across the country despite communities' differences. In addition, people may mobilize resources and cooperate toward a shared objective for different reasons or desired outcomes. For example, certain sections of Syrian society chose not to participate in the 2011 demonstrations, knowing that, following Olson's notion of rationality, the results, when achieved, would ultimately benefit everyone; that means "free riders" as termed by Olson (1965). Those who decided to participate and later became associated with armed opposition groups had different cost-benefit analyses.

Social movement theory is complemented with various approaches to collective action, such as the role of emotions, culture, framing, and identity in popular collective actions (Marwell and Oliver 1993, Benford and Snow 2000, Goodwin and Jasper 2004). Furthermore, certain broad social processes alter existing power relations, providing an opportunity for action by strengthening the status of the potential activists and raising the costs of their suppression. Such opportunity is perceived through a

transformation of consciousness among challengers or through the "cognitive liberations" as McAdam (1982) describes (McAdam, Cognitive liberation 2013).

Social organization outside the auspices of the state counterweighs the power of the state, dilutes its social control, and articulates and advances various societal interests vis-à-vis the dominant political elites. Nevertheless, there is currently a new form of Islamic civil society that acts as the moderate wing of Islamist armed groups and alternates the role of the state in territories where it fails to deliver. However, such situations bring along the challenge of the politicization of the Islamic civil society by Islamist armed groups and subsequently question the Islamic civil society's capacity as a true representative of the people's interests.

No matter whether there is a formally recognized civil society or not, people's resilience and resistance manifest differently, not least through maintaining everyday activities despite all odds. However, during conflicts, local governance often turns into a battlefield between local actors who seek control and international actors whose interests are compromised by such instability (Bayat 2013). Therefore, various researchers have challenged the tendency to consider the Syrian conflict as a civil war due to the people's alienation from the battle. The people, instead, appear to show agreement by adopting and sustaining the narrative of regime change and liberation (Kaufulu 2017).

1.2.2 The Violence-Governance Triangular Model to Understand the Syria Case

The initial engagement of Islamist armed groups was focused on the battlefront, where direct and indirect international support were necessary. At this stage, the political participation of several Islamic armed groups was limited to a complementary role under the opposition political umbrella, or as part of other political forums related to the peace talk negotiations, primarily as military experts and de facto authorities of control in their territories.

However, Islamist armed groups began gradual involvement with the internal politics within the territories under their control, with both civilian and other military actors. Several of those groups have made progress toward a transformation to institutionalization, expanding the armed action toward local administration and governance.

This evolution of Islamist armed groups and their dynamic relationship with the community on the one hand, and their opposition to the central government, on the other hand, form a triangular relation (the central state/regime, local society/community, and Islamist armed groups/ armed rebels) where two of the actors have interactions involving violence and governance. A classic type of state-Islamist armed groups' relation can be characterized by uneven armed conflict, in which the central government army and its alliances suppress the Islamist struggle for liberation and territorial control. However, the state-armed groups' external interactions also have political aspects through the participation in direct and indirect political negotiations and peace talks urged by an international push and internal pressure from the respective constituencies to reduce or end the armed threat.

The relation between the state and society is well examined, as explained in chapter 4 and 5 with an emphasis on the growing weight of society in relation to social control and governance in the weak state/failed state context. Therefore, it is important for the analytical framework to include non-state actors such as ethnic, cultural, and local groups in the society, as well as state institutions of particular relevance to this study (Migdal 2001). In general, we can identify two-way interactions between the central state and the society; 1) the central state's attempt to control society by the threat of violence while maintaining a monopoly over national coverage of centrally provided state services, and 2) the community-level mobilization against the control of the existing state, and the actions motivated by their perception of the state's (in)efficiency and (de)legitimacy.

The third side of the triangle is the community relations with the Islamist armed militants, which is the primary focus of this study. These often occur in relation to the newly developed relationship between additional actors to the scene, i.e., the Islamist armed groups emerging during the conflict and the hosting community. This relation is being upgraded by many factors to a higher level of interaction, two-way engagement, and complex decision-making processes that change the power relations among actors on the ground, leading to new forms of community-militants as the situation evolves.
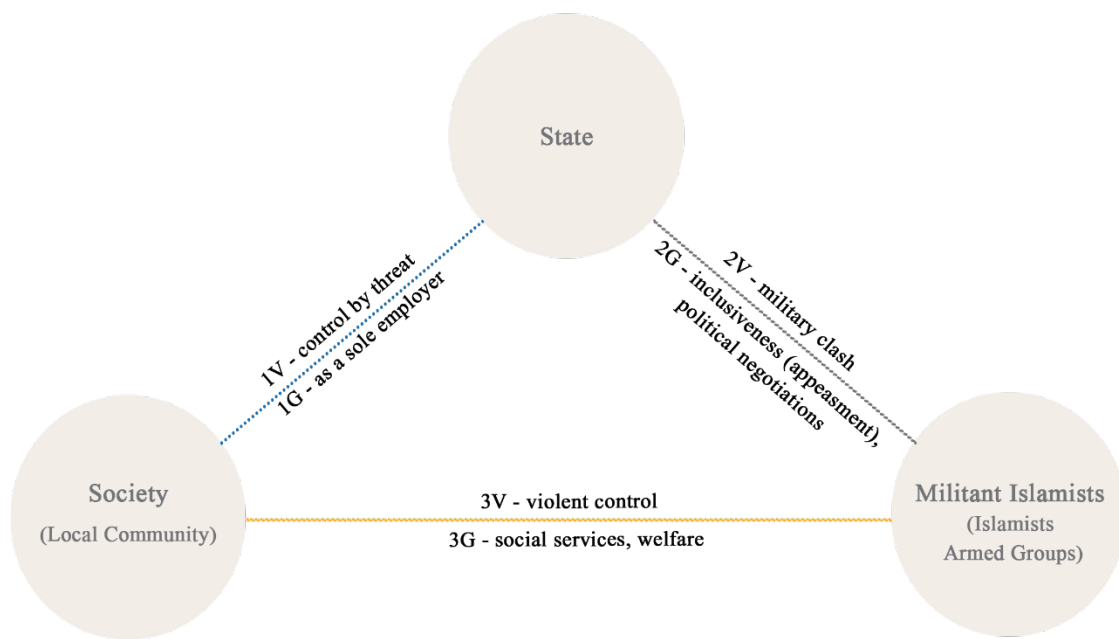
V (violence):
Relation based on violence, oppression and armed action

G (governance):
Interactions concerning social governance, such as social services and welfare management

Figure 1—1 State-society-militant Islamists triangle relations from violence and governance aspects

(Source: created by the Author)

Based on the above understanding of different multilayered forms of violence and actors within the broader Syrian conflict and the subsequent triangulation of state, society, and militant Islamists, this study examines the three aspects of this triangle as follows:

State-Society relations: presented in vector (1v [violence]/1g [governance]) where the state can adopt coercive strategies, through the direct use or threat of violence, or economic control over the production and distribution of national resources and income[16].

 Interestingly, however, the current conflict often creates the conditions for civil society to prosper, benefiting from the cracks in the authoritarian regime control, where the presence of the Islamist armed groups creates room for civil society. This also means that the civil society must deal

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[16] The traditional state-scoiety relations in Syria is briefly covered in this research in chapter 5 as the focus is on the society under non-state actors the main subject of this study. For more on the state-society relations in Syria please see Hinnebusch 1993, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2008 and 2012.

and engage with Islamist armed groups that do not necessarily share the values of "modern" democracy despite their political aspirations. Therefore, civil society in conflict includes community individuals and groups which represent the community voice independently from/against newly merged Islamist armed groups who are attempting to replace the central state.

Furthermore, elements of activated rural civil society, though affected by the (in)security caused and maintained by the state and Islamist armed groups, provide a framework to apply Migdal's state-in-society model to Syria. These community-based groups form new vital politics outside the state's formal institutions and occasionally manage to pressure the government to adopt them. Examples of such dynamics include the creation of the Ministry of State for National Reconciliation to manage negotiations between the regime and the local communities residing in territories close to or under rebel or non-state-actor-held areas.[17] This example highlights the process of adaptation from the state pushed by people's activism on both sides of the frontlines.

State-Islamist militants' relations: presented in vector (2v [violence]/2g [governance]) where the state-Islamist militants relations have a significant characteristic of exchanged violence with occasional appeasement for one another in an attempt to gain a broader supportive base.

This relationship is often examined as part of the security studies that focus on state-militant relations with the assumption that the state has exclusive control over national security when disrupted by armed groups. However, recently, more researchers have started to consider that the Islamist armed groups can act as a contributor to state-security, which is relevant to security studies itself, especially in counterinsurgency operations. Furthermore, the localized groups' internal relations and knowledge could help the state to maintain security in the target areas[18]. This approach has been primarily

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[17] The ministry of state for national reconciliation was established by a presidential decree no. 210 /2012, the minister of national reconciliation carries a broad set of activities including negotiations with community leaders to solve grievances involving state, community involvement in peacebuilding, youth employment and military defection as well as proposing action plans for localized reconciliations. The ministry was later changed to a national commission by presidential decree no.19/2018 with the same mandate.

[18] There is extensive literature on this topic from the Middle East especially on the Afghanistan and Iraq experience. Examples are (Vincent, Weigand and Hakimi 2015) and (Smith 2009).

motivated by the operational necessity for the state counterinsurgency to understand the motivations and moderators of non-state actors.

The literature on state-society relations in the Middle East explains dilemmas of political Islam in relation to its operation within the modern state system and the relationship between political Islam and violence, which seems to differ between cases for the same reasons that political Islam, despite rejecting the state system, continues to be limited to the boundaries of the sovereign state (Akbarzadeh 2012).

Similar aspects are observed at two levels; (a) Islamist militants resorting to armed violence against the ruling regimes to achieve objectives from within the state system itself, and (b) The militants' transnational operations extending to other states' territory where Islamists play a sub-regional role, such as Hezbollah's political and military involvement in support of al-Asad's regime during the Syrian conflict.

In Syria, both episodes have manifested themselves at various stages of the conflict. Indeed, the Islamist armed groups initially presented themselves as the main actors of the armed struggle against the regime aiming at intra-state changes, which is the focus of this study. However, as the conflict progressed, several of these groups were believed to supply fighters to other regional conflicts in different areas outside of Syria and its surroundings[19]. However, the latter pattern is limited and beyond the scope of this study.

Society-Islamist Militants relations, presented in the vector (3v [violence]/3g [governance]) is where armed groups use both military powers to impose their new social order on the local community and soft power, through everyday governance and service provision, to gain local acceptance.

The society-militant relations, although important, are under-researched. Relevant studies have often found that essential elements of non-state actors' decision-making are associated with the underlying religious tones and cultural values. In that sense, in their efforts to remain relevant in the conflict and the daily life of the community, the armed groups are often pressured to respond based on

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[19] Examples of Syrian fighters caught in Libya, transferred and funded by the Turkish regime in 2019–2020.

the perceived socio-cultural environment, and they tend to enforce those rules to maintain local support (J. W. Moore 2014).

An essential aspect of this relation is the armed groups' struggle for local and international legitimacy. This is evident through their efforts to be recognized as a representative party in political negotiation forums. This aspect of legitimacy is often underestimated, although it is believed to influence the armed group behavior at all levels considering the use of violent means and their moral and material support are based on beliefs of legitimacy, let alone the continuous pressure to address local and international stakeholders (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015). This corresponds explicitly to the 3g relation between armed groups and the local community, as shown above in Figure (1–1). The vector reflecting the violent side of this relation (3v) is combining violent control and armed oppression. However, there is a major gap in analyzing the governance aspect, including social services provision and welfare management, as a significant point of engagement between both sides.

A locally-driven (bottom-up) analysis is helpful, as several Syrian community groups have maximized the use of public space, the regime's control loosened, and Islamist armed groups took over. Despite not being completely organized into civil society associations, local communities seem to support the political stances of the ruling Islamist armed groups and collaborate with them to increase the representation of people's best interests in the public sphere.

In contrast, the Islamist armed groups seem to have initially assumed a tolerant role toward community actors for either being busy at the frontlines or being unaware or interested enough to consolidate local political power. Nonetheless, there have been reported incidents[20] of force, where Islamist armed groups have oppressed and, in several cases, conducted assassinations against the community members. These incidents raise doubt over the ultimate objective of those groups that claim to lead the fight against the authoritarian regime.

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[20] For example, the Jaysh al-Islām abduction of Human Rights activist Razan Zaytuna from her office in Dūma that was under Jaysh al-Islām solo control. Razan's cases and other cases are described in detail in the following chapters.

The community struggle in pursuit of self-governance and to maintain an independent public space from the political or military actors is worth examining. Therefore, this study addresses that aspect of the society-militant relations and the militants' approach to society (social services-local administration) in Syria post-2011.

1.2.3 Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to undertake a detailed investigation and understanding of the complex intersectional issues around Islamist armed groups' political, military, and social role in Syria. In addition to reviewing relevant literature, qualitative methods were utilized. These include discourse analysis for statements of local Islamist armed groups and government officials as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with Syrian refugees who participated in Islamist armed groups and key experts in the field.

Critical Discourse Analysis: This process involved downloading, archiving, and analyzing a variety of primary documents and statements issued by the Islamist organization. These are available in Arabic from the groups' official websites, Facebook pages, or Twitter accounts. Various materials were collected from videos of statements, media interviews, as well as other media products such as statements, video releases, online reports, and publications produced and disseminated by the official channels of the specific armed groups. This also includes speeches made by the armed group leaders or spokespersons. Moreover, signed and stamped copies of official documents of the local administrations' councils, offices, and courts were used in this study.

Semi-structured Interviews and Focused Group Discussions with Syrians in Jordan: For a detailed analysis of certain aspects of the study, semi-structured interviews were used as a primary source of data. I focused on the Syrian refugees who fled to Jordan since 2012 as part of the Syrian society that has experienced and interacted with Islamist armed groups either as part of their original community or even relate to them through family or tribal relations.

At the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Syrians started fleeing to neighboring countries, namely Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. Subsequently, it was reported that, as the violence escalated, an

average of 2,000 persons crossed the borders from Syria to Jordan, with currently more than 630,000 Syrians residing in Jordan as registered by the United Nations Higher Commissions for Refugees (UNHCR)[21] that manages major refugees camps in Jordan including Zaʿatari and Azraq among others. The majority of Syrian refugees live in the northern governorates of Irbid (20.7% of total Syrian refugees in Jordan), Mafraq (24.6%), and Zarqa (14.4%) with proximity to the Syrian borders as well as in the capital Amman (29.5%).

Furthermore, the majority of Syrian refugees live outside formal camps; 123,210 Syrian refugees live in camps, while the remaining population lives among the host community. The Syrian refugees come predominantly from the southern Syrian governorate of Darʾā, the central region in Syria (Homs, Hama governorates) and the North-East governorates of Deir ez-Zor and ar-Raqqa. This is primarily due to the historical tribal connections between Syrians and Jordanians residing in these regions that provided social networks of support and the established highway and desert smuggling networks that facilitated both formal and informal entry to Jordan.

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[21] For more data please check the UNHCR data portal, Syria page on the following link:
https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations
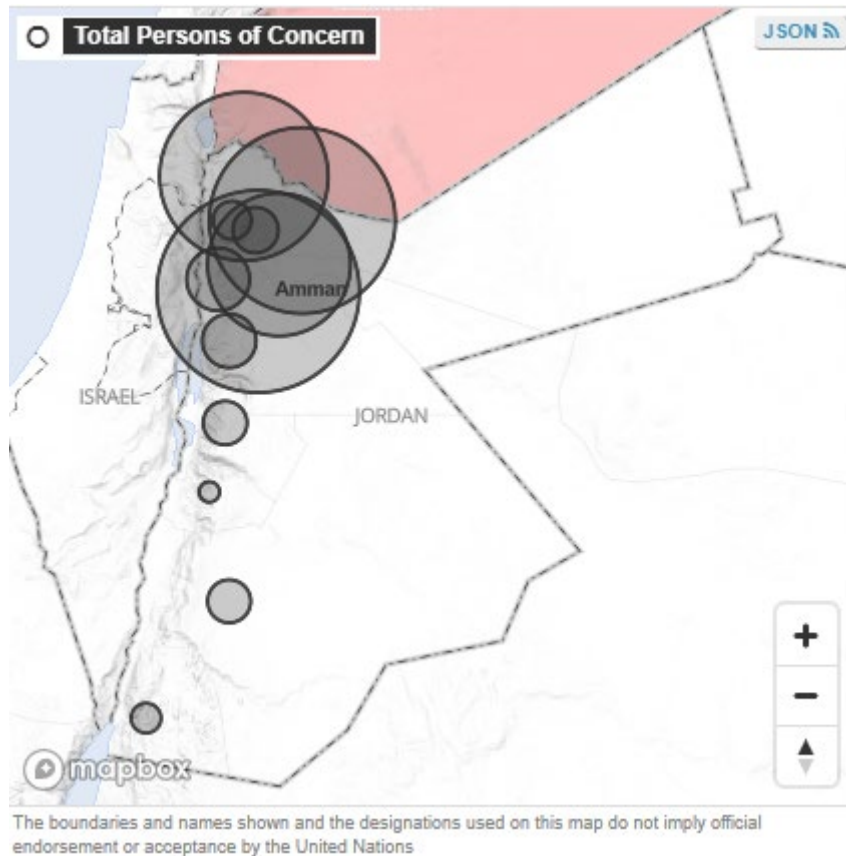
Map 1-4 Syrian Refugees in Jordan, volume per urban location

Source: UNHCR data portal
https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36

Until 2013 Jordan had a flexible policy of cross-border movement of Syrian nationals as no visa was required. However, since 2013, Jordan has applied more restrictive measures on Syrian entry to Jordan, especially following the expansion of ISIS. However, the government of Jordan, including its Armed Forces, have continued to provide support and facilitation of movement for the humanitarian operation from Jordan to Syria and the evacuation of medical cases, injured civilians, and military personnel from Syria to Jordan. In addition, the Syrian community in Jordan was permitted to establish and expand activities related to the collection of donations and provision of relief to Syrian refugees in Jordan and their communities, mainly those under the control of armed opposition groups, inside Syria.

This situation facilitated continuous exchange and connectivity between Syrian refugees and their hometowns in Syria, which can be considered as part of the Syrian society that shared the

experience of war from the other side of the border as well as managed to cross between Syria and Jordan frequently. It is important to note that the Syrian refugee communities are not static but have been evolving over the past ten years after every military and security incident.

Two qualitative methods were conducted with the Syrian refugees residing in Jordan

(A) **Individual interviews**[22] were held with 15 Syrian men and women between September 2018–January 2019 in Amman, Madaba, and Irbid in Jordan. The questions and interviews explored the relation between Islamist armed groups and local people through people's and defectors' perceptions and anticipation of Islamist armed groups' current and future role in the conflict.

(B) **Focus Group Discussions (mainly focusing on youth)** were conducted with 19 young men and women (20–32 years old) once in October 2018 in Amman, Jordan, with the aim to provide special attention to this demographic and observe the discussion dynamics among them on the subject matter.

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[22] All interviews have an informed consent code. Some of them were performed anonymously with no personal information recorded as per the requests of the interviewee. The purpose of the interview was explained beforehand, and consent was obtained and confirmed before performing the interviews. In addition, the participants were made aware of their right to withdraw or change their minds at any time during the interview.

PART TWO—ISLAMIST ARMED GROUPS IN SYRIA PRIOR TO AND AFTER 2011

Chapter 2   Background of the Emergence of the Islamist Armed Groups in Syria

2.1   Introduction

Understanding the current Islamist armed activism in Syria requires a historical knowledge of the Islamist movements under the Ba'th regime since it seized power in 1963. The Islamist ideology that has developed in the midst of contentious dynamics between the regime and Islamist groups has created the context, formation, and trajectory of both the Ba'th party and Islamist groups.

While the Islamist movement in Syria originated in the first decade of the 20th century, its armed activities only begun in 1976–1982 when an Islamists organization could sustain a few years of loosely organized small-scale armed attacks against the regime. Such armed activists appeared to have gone dormant until the recent events of Syria's 2011 uprising. Although there are various contextual differences in the scale and volume of their armed action, several similarities are evident in the Islamist usage of violence.

This chapter begins with a brief history of the Islamist movements in Syria prior to 2011. Subsequently, it provides an analysis of the divergent factors behind the rise of Islamist armed action within the Syrian conflict. Finally, it introduces the profiles of major militant groups involved in the Syrian civil war since 2011, introducing their main characteristics related to affiliation, scale, and area of control.

2.2 History of Islamist Movements in Syria before 2011: Birth of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the emergence of the Ba'th Party

The history of Islamist political armed movements in the modern history of Syria since its independence in 1946[23] is limited to the attempt made by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) in the late 70s against the Ba'th regime that continues to rule Syria.

The socialist ideology claimed by the Syrian regional branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party (Hizb al-Ba'th al-'Arabi al-Ishtiraki, hereafter Ba'th party) that assumed power in 1963 has negatively impacted Syria's traditional Sunni urban elites[24], including the SMB movement which was banned in 1964 by Ba'th Party which seized power in Syria (Lund 2013a). While the official discourse by the leadership of the SMB indicated the adoption of non-violence policy in its opposition to the secular political leaders, it had little effect in reality as a segment of the SMB pursued armed action against the regime. A combined resentment toward Ba'th policies and unsatisfactory action by the SMB leadership led a new group to emerge under the name of "Mohammed Battalion," also known later as the "Fighting Vanguards," and continue armed attacks, including assassinations against the state public institutions and figures.

The importance of the SMB can be derived from the fact that it is the founding party of the Islamist movement in Syria and the first Islamist armed insurgency against the Ba'thist authoritarian regime. Therefore, it is important to include a historical review of this movement before outlining the current Islamist armed action in Syria in the following Section 2.3.

(b) **Establishment and Political Participation:** Having its inception in 1942, the SMB is considered the oldest Islamic movement in the post-independence Syria state. It started as a combination of four different charity organizations that focused mainly on promoting

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[23] Syria gained de-jure independence as a parliamentary republic on 24 October 1945, when the Republic of Syria became a founding member of the United Nations, an act which legally ended the former French Mandate—although French troops did not leave the country until 17 April 1946.

[24] The Ba'th party assumed power in 1963 introducing a full range of socialist reform including agrarian policies, nationalization of most of the economy and the financial and industrial sectors (which deprived the urban elite), majority then Sunni, from their capital benefits. The agrarian reforms benefiting poor rural Muslims guaranteed the latter's acceptance of the new regime and passiveness towards any opposition action (Pierret 2013).

education and health services in Ḥoms, Ḥama, Deir ez-Zor, and Aleppo cities (Khatib 2011,

44-45). The SMB was initially established by Mustafa al-Sibāʾi, a Syrian politician and

activist who studied with the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; Hassan al-

Banna.[25] Al-Sibāʾi joined the Muslim Brotherhood during his studies in Egypt in 1930. He

then returned to Syria and taught at Damascus University until he was appointed as the Dean

of Islamic Jurisprudence and the School of Law between 1941 and 1961. His affiliation to

the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood became clear with his establishment of the Shabab

Muhammad (Muhammad Youth), a religious paramilitary group, in 1941. Shabab

Muhammad allied itself with the National Bloc in resisting the French mandate. Furthermore,

in 1946, al-Sibāʾi founded a Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and became its first

Supreme Guide, leading it through several parliamentary campaigns until 1961 (Moubayed

2006).

Despite al-Banna and al-Sibāʾi's friendship and both movements' similar ideological

foundations as an Islamic political movement with social welfare agendas, each of them was established

and developed in a different context and faced different challenges. The Syrian MB remains

independent in terms of decision-making with a loose connection to Egypt MB (Abd-Allah 1983)

After independence in 1946, the SMB embraced the country's post-independent democratic

experience[26] and acquired significant support within the urban Sunni middle class. Subsequently, the

SMB was able to maintain political representation as they had several seats in the parliament between

1946 and 1963. Simultaneously, the rural-urban divide in the Syrian society in the 50s[27] was vast, with

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[25] Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949) an Egyptian political and religious leader who established a new religious society, the Muslim Brotherhood, and played a central role in Egyptian political and social affairs.

[26] Although rapid economic development followed the declaration of independence in 1946, the early years of independence were marked by political instability both internally and externally. The Syrian Army was heavily occupied defending the boarders against the newly established State of Israel 1948. In March 1949, Syria's first national government was overthrown by a military coup d'état. Between 1946 and 1956, Syria had 20 different cabinets and drafted four separate constitutions. The 1954 coup was significant as it brought Arab nationalist and socialist elements to power.

Post independent Syria has many political parties with various left and right affiliations including nationalists, Arab socialists, communist. Presidency and cabinet were responsive to the public demands and pressure. And the newly establishment parliament was actively representing all political segments. The SMB participated actively in the parliament elections 1949 to 1963 (except during the union with Egypt 1958–1961 as Syria become part of the United Arab Republic). (Hall 2013).

[27] As for the social structure in the 50s in Syria, see Batatu (1999); Hinnebusch (1990).

the cities traditionally holding all power (Hinnebusch 1990). Hence, the SMB's reliance on the urban elites and continuous support for private property and enterprise put it at a distance from both the struggle of the rural poor and the middle class. Ultimately, the SMB was nearly absent from the impoverished rural areas (Batatu 1999).

The parliamentary political system in the newly independent Syria underwent a series of coups d'état, as the army was essentially controlled by leftist officers from rural and minority communities, who supported the Ba'th party's takeover of the state in 1963. The Ba'th party was established in 1947 by Michel Aflaq (a Christian), Salāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār (a Sunni Muslim), and Zaki al-Arsūzi (an Alawite) as a pan-Arab nationalist, populist, and socialist party aiming at the unity and freedom of the Arab nation within its homeland (Roberts 1987).

After a series of coups d'état and a short-lived unity with Egypt 1959–1961, the Ba'th party seized power in Syria in 1963 when a military wing of the Ba'th party overthrew Syria's feudal oligarchy. The Ba'th party supported the nationalization of major industries, the unionization of workers, land reform, and the expansion of education which benefited sections of the Syrian population, especially rural communities that had suffered from alienation and exclusion from public resources and services (Hinnebusch 2000, 128-129). The Ba'th proclaimed socialist agenda and policies that were against the interest of traditional Sunni urban elites in Syria in general, including the SMB, as it limited their economic and social privileges. The Ba'thist socialist policies were adopted in favor of rural communities and the middle class, while it upset the interests of Sunni urban traders. Hinnebusch (Hinnebusch 1990, 276-300) has noted that the rural-based Ba'thist regime damaged the interests of the previously existing urban-rural order and the SMB Islamist movement that had naturally embodied the urban society.

The Ba'thi strict socialist policies were slightly modified after the Corrective Movement (al-Haraka al-Tashihiyya) that Hafiz al-Asad led in November 1970. Furthermore, a coup d'état within the Ba'th party resulted in Hafiz al-Asad, the then Minister of Defense, becoming the president who pursued a project of rapid institution-building, reopened parliament, and adopted a permanent constitution for the country. Al-Asad also sought to modify his predecessor's radical socialist economic policies,

gradually encouraged several wealthy urban families to increase their activities in the private sector, and allowed limited foreign investment from Arab Gulf countries (Melhem 1997)

(2) Violent Clashes with the Regime (1972–1982): The first Islamists' insurgent movement against the Ba'th regime was formed in 1972 and led by Marwan Hadid[28], Marwan was against the SMB leadership official position. He called for a "Sunni" armed struggle against the regime (Lia 2016). The insurgency adopted a sectarian narrative assuming the legitimacy of Jihad against the non-Muslim (it considered the Alawite as non-Muslim) rule over the Muslim-majority country, depending on a fatwa by the medieval Syrian scholar Ibn Taymiyya who considered Alawite as a heretical group that forms a threat to Muslim society (R. Lefèvre 2013b, 137).

Hadid and his followers emphasized the importance of armed struggle and their duty to revolt against the regime, describing their struggle as an Islamic revolution. The Muhammad's Battalions, that quickly renamed itself as the Fighting Vanguards (al-Ṭalīʿa al-Muqātila) Islamic guerilla group, attempted 29 days of an armed uprising in February 1982 but failed to tangibly threaten the Ba'th regime (Khatib 2010, 55-56). This split in the SMB position toward the regime could be explained by its originally non-homogenous nature, as the SMB was established from various groups—Jamiat (an Islamic term referring to a political party or other organization) that developed around the country during the 1920s and 1930s (R. Lefèvre 2013b, 65). Traditionally, the northern branches (Aleppo, Hama) did not always agree with Damascus leadership that was closer to the central government and maintained different perceptions.

Consequently, in retaliation to their armed action, president Hafiz Al-Asad (1971–2000) issued decree no.49/1980 that punished membership of the SMB with the death penalty (Abd-Allah 1983). The vanguards' violent attacks targeting the regime's assets and officials continued between 1976 and

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[28] Born in 1934 in Hama within an urban merchant family, Hadid was a member of Ba'th party and a socialist activist working for social justice until Hasan Al Banna's death in Egypt that shifted his work towards Islamic activism. In 1956, Hadid moved to Egypt to start his degree and joined the Muslim Brotherhood there. He became active during his stay in Egypt and was arrested many times by the Egyptian authorities. In 1964, Hadid returned to Syria to establish the Fighting Vanguard. Hadid was arrested several times by the regime and died in prison in Damascus in 1976 (Lia 2016).

1982 when the government's infamous operation in Hama[29] that caused substantial civilian causalities (R. Lefèvre 2013b, 160). Following the Hama incidents, many of the SMB members fled the country to re-start in a new form of underground political activism and to manage it remotely.

(3) Failure of Reconciliation: the President Bashar Al-Asad Era (2000–2011): High expectations for political and economic reforms accompanied Bashar al-Asad's ascendancy in 2000. Indeed, he began by introducing a socialist market economy, reminiscent of the Chinese experience of reform. Together with his first lady (Asma al-Akhras), he also invested in the NGO sector and encouraged society/community groups.

Moreover, to manage and minimize the sectarian animosity, al-Asad adopted a tolerant policy toward moderate Sunni Muslim groups during the 90s and 2000s as part of his strategy to soothe any sectarian animosity that had resulted between the Alawites-led regime and the majority Muslim Sunni population. Consequently, Islamic schools and charities increased, Islamic intellectuals (*ulama*) and businesspersons were co-opted to join the parliament, and a female-led movement, known as Al-Qubaysiyat[30], was recognized to preach Islam among the upper-class Damascene women (Hinnebusch 2012). The significance of the latter, the role of female religious leaders, was in their ability to secure private education services for the middle and high-income Sunni communities in exchange for their loyalty and support for the regime.

Although hundreds of SMB members were released from detention upon the inauguration of President Bashar al-Asad in 2000, the SMB negotiation attempts over the return of its members in exile and the lifting of the ban on its political activities inside the country were denied. Consequently, the return of the SMB members to Syria remained conditional to abandoning political activism.

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[29] The massacre of Hama occurred in 1982 when the Syrian Army besieged the city of Hama for a month to end the uprising of Sunni Muslim groups led by Muslim Brotherhood against the Ba'th government. The uprising started in 1976 and ended in 1982 with unconfirmed reports of 10–40 thousand civilians reportedly being killed, and extensive sections of the old city of Hama being destroyed during the military operation (Lefèvre 2013b).

[30] Named after its founder Munira Qubaysi, Al-Qubaysiyat sisterhood (The Qubaysi women) had been established in 1970, in Syria, and supported by the Syria grand mufti Ahmad Kuftaru. The association focuses on Islamic religious teaching for women and girls.

Among the key documents presented and issued by the SMB during this period are; the 2001 "Project of a National Charter of Honor for Political Action in Syria" (Mashrūʿ Mīthāq Sharaf Watanī Li al-ʿAmal al-Sīyāsī fī Sūrīya) which reiterates the movement committed to the national dialog and democratic political tools, as well as its rejection for violent actions; and the 2003 "Political Project for Future Syria" (al-Mashrūʿ al-Sīyāsī li Sūrīya al-Mustaqbal)[31], a detailed 127-page document explains its vision of state-building and institutional setting, source of legislations, national challenges, and political and economic reform.

The Syrian opposition's activities in exile in the Arab Gulf states, Europe, and Turkey were accelerated after the 2000s presidential changes in Syria, and Bashar al-Asad's early actions toward more political opening and tolerance generated hope. Moreover, opposition inside the country became increasingly active and vocal during this period, utilizing the tolerant environment. The opposition activities inside and outside intensified and consolidated powers; they also became more regular, public, and organized. This period of intense opposition activities came to be known as the "Damascus Spring," when the "Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change" was drafted by numerous Syrian opposition groups and individuals with a variety of religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds based inside and outside Syria, demanding a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy that guaranteed the equality of all citizens in a secular and sovereign Syria. This significant and varied group of opposition figures referred to as the "Damascus Declaration National Council," is considered the first Syrian secular umbrella opposition coalition in the 21st century, and it later became a founding member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the core body of the current Syria opposition government.

According to George Sabra[32], the reason for the regime's tolerance toward such increasing activities derives from its synchronization with the US-led invasion of Iraq, the recent Kurdish incident

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[31] The full document is available only in Arabic on the SMB's the official site: https://bit.ly/2GJXHv2, last accessed 6 April 2018.

[32] George Sabra was born in 1947 to a Christian family in Qatana city of rural Damascus governorate, graduated with a geography degree and worked as a schoolteacher. He has been politically active as a leftist, pro-Arab, secular opposition since the 70s when he joined the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) and was later elected to its Central Committee in 1985. Sabra was a co-founder of the Damascus Declaration opposition coalition in 2005, and in the same year, the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) changed its name to the Syrian Democratic People's Party. At the start of the Syria uprising 2011, Sabra was arrested twice in April and

in Qamishli in 2004[33], and the 2005 assassination of the Lebanese PM Rafiq al-Hariri (that set off the Lebanese Cedar Revolution demanding immediate withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon). The regime, thereby, was obliged to maintain a non-violent approach toward the growing oppositional power. However, the National Security Bureau under the regime called upon members of the opposition inside Syria for interrogations, warning them of the redlines, and detained and tortured several prominent figures for months. Nevertheless, the opposition had succeeded in organizing its first Damascus Declaration Council in December 2007 (also Bashar al-Asad's second term of the presidency), followed by the first conference for diaspora opposition organizations in Brussels November 2010 (Sabra 2019).

The 2005 Damascus Declaration of Democratic Change was signed by political opposition leaders, such as Islamists, Arab nationalists, Kurdish, leftists and it was a significant move to include the SMB in aiming at unifying the fractured Syrian oppositions[34]. However, the SMB was alienated from the Damascus Declaration after joining the National Salvation Front (Jabhat al-Khalāṣ al-Waṭani)[35] led by the former vice president, Abdul Halim Khaddam, following his defection in 2006 (Carnegie 2012). The SMB soon withdrew due to its disagreement with Khaddam over the stance of the SMB which pursued negotiation with the regime for its potential return into the country. Its negotiation efforts were mediated by the welfare party of Turkey, an Islamist conservative party close

July 2011. He left Syria in January 2012 to join the Paris-based Syrian National Council. Sabra filled in as the acting president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces during April-July 2013 (Carnegie, n.a).

[33] The Kurdish Incident in Qamishli city, Northern Syria in 2004, the regime responded on 12 March 2004 with violence, killing 39 people and leaving 200 wounded. In addition, more than 2000 were arrested in a wide security campaign.

[34] Signed on 16 October 2005, Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change was a unified statement by the Syrian opposition. The initiative started as a response to popular discontent over Syria's involvement in Lebanon and its conflict with the US over Iraq and Palestine. Signatories included historical opposition movements such as the National Democratic Rally and the Muslim Brotherhood, minority groups such as Kurdish and Assyrian parties, and prominent dissidents from the Damascus Spring movement such as Michel Kilu and Riyād Sayf.

[35] The National Salvation Front (NSF) established in Brussels in March 2006 aimed to present a consolidated Syrian opposition against Bashar al-Asad regime. The front is led by defector vice president Khaddam who fled the country in 2006 upon the increasing pressure of the regime after the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri and Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. During this period, the NSF was Syria's largest opposition party in exile.

in ideology to the brotherhood network[36], aiming at resolving the long-term animosity. Ultimately, the mediation failed as the regime refused to lift the ban on the SMB and President Bashar al-Asad maintained the stance against the formalization of religious political parties.

2.3   Mapping of Major Non-State-Armed Groups Fighting in the Syrian Conflict from 2011 to date

Before I analyze the major non-state opposition armed groups in Syria, I will clarify the definition and usage of the terms relating to Islamist groups. The term 'Islamist armed groups' is used here to suit the purpose of this research design and refers to armed groups that (a) adopt Islamist ideology, narrative, and self-branding, and (b) have a certain level of armed capacity and enough fighters to operate on significantly wide territory inside Syria. Therefore, the term 'Islamist armed groups' in Syria refers to a variety of groups, including Ahrār al-Shām, Jaysh al-Islām, Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām, and Jaysh al-Fātih, which are introduced in further detail in Section 2.5. In addition, it includes smaller brigades and battalions which do not necessarily adopt the same level of conservative ideology but rather a mixed narrative with nationalist or liberation slogans, especially in their approach to communities under their control.

Since 2011, the influence of Islamic armed groups was not limited to the military fronts but rather expanded to reach both the local and international hosting communities. The Islamist armed groups made efforts to strengthen relations with their local communities through the provision of services and public goods, and externally, through political diplomacy with the international community that showed strong interest in the Syrian war. This research introduces a dual dimensional analysis for the political and militant formation and transformation from armed groups to political actors. Furthermore, it contextualizes changes in the Islamist armed groups' discourse and tactics within the conflict dynamics

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[36] The Welfare Party in Turkey is an Islamic party established in 1983 and was banned in 1998 by the Constitutional Court due to violation of separation of state and religion as mandated by the constitution. The incumbent president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was a former member of the party. After being banned from politics for a period, he left this Islamist group and founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Abdullah Gül, the former President of Turkey, was the deputy leader of the Welfare Party until its dissolution.

from 2011 to 2018, in order to trace the development of their various roles as they started to gain power over territories and populations.

I argue that this transformation of a non-state-armed group into a political actor, as it appears, transcends the role of the conventional non-state actors and rather plays a similar role to any regional quasi-state actors or supra-state actors like regional alliances. Moreover, this research analyzes the Syrian people's reactions, interactions, and responses throughout the transformation process of these groups. It indicates the potential political role of the militants in future Syria, since the militants might require successful mobilization of people and support for their agenda in their specific geographic locations or at the national level.

This study focuses on the Islamist opposition armed groups, including various Islamist branded militants that resisted the Syrian regime as part of the Syria uprising of 2011.[37] This research does not cover the so-called extremist Islamist militants, such as Al-Qaeda and its offspring, or ISIS, due to their transnational nature and subsequent exclusion from any form of political process around the future of the country as a nation-state. These groups are also known to be led and dominated by (non-Syrian) foreigners with insignificant local bases of support. The transnational radical Islamist armed groups excluded from this study due to their listing as terrorist organizations under the United Nations Security Council resolution include ISIS and the al-Nusra Front. The distinction between transnational and Syrian local opposition groups is evident in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2249 (2015) and 2368 (2017), which condemned these two groups as terrorist groups and designated sanctions against them[38].

In addition, this study also excludes the involvement of foreign Shiite militants in Syria, which are primarily involved in the sub-regional Shiite struggle supported by Iran and have access Syria from either Iraq or Lebanon. This is because they are self-declared as "foreign" entities, do not relate to the

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[37] Please see chapter 2 section 5 for major armed groups involved in the Syrian conflict.
[38] The full text of the resolutions and related documents can be found on the Security Council webpage, Syria Sanctions Committee documents. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/sanctions-committee-documents/?ctype=Syria&cbtype=syria

communities in Syria, and cannot be part of domestic politics except through proxies. They will be only mentioned in order to understand the broader picture relevant to the militant groups under study.

The following map highlights the status of control across the country as of August 2014; this point is taken as a median between 2011 and 2018 to reflect various categories of non-state actors and their expansion, especially in urban and rural population centers.
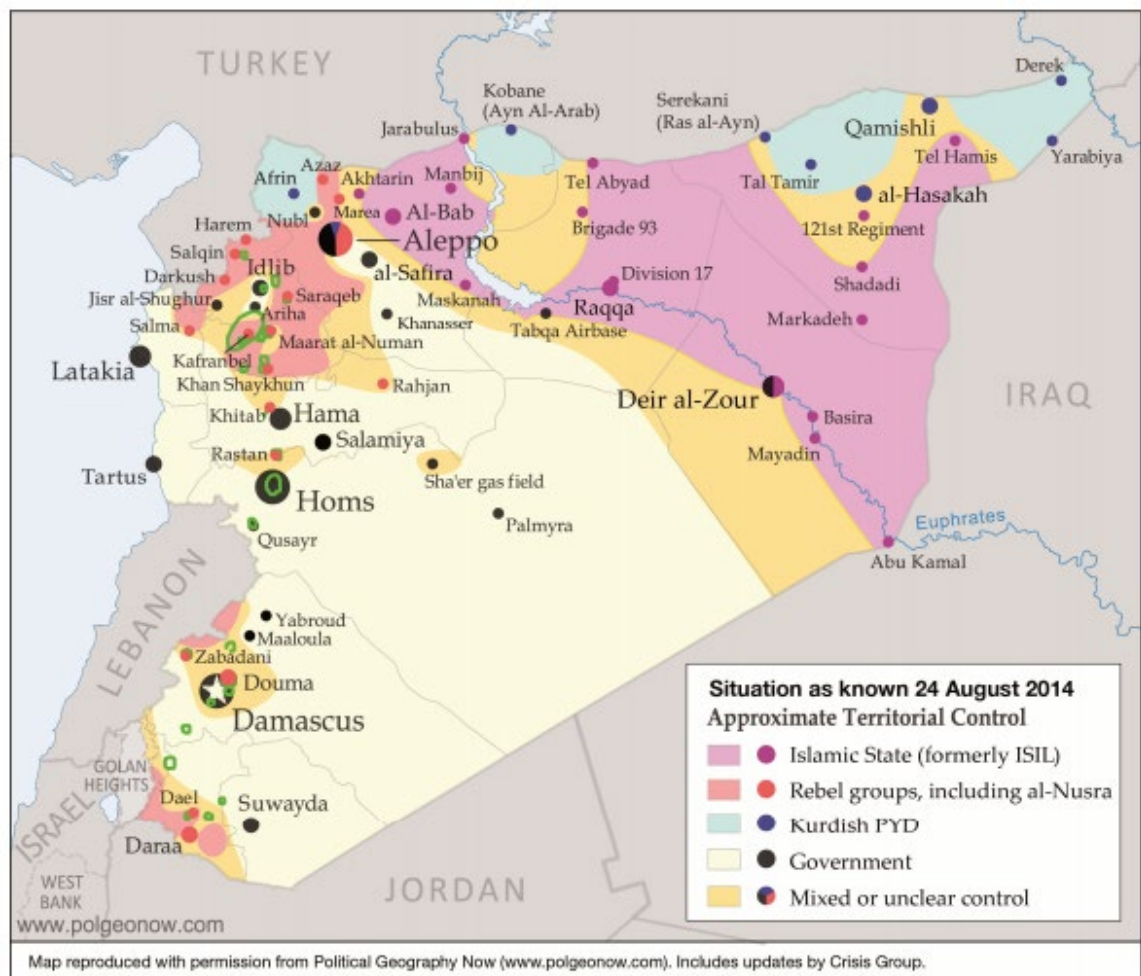
Map 2-1 Area of Control Situation in Syria as of 24 August 2014
Source (International Crisis Group 2014)

It is believed that, by 2013, there were more than a thousand militant groups in Syria, commanding over 100,000 fighters, the majority of which have adopted an Islamist branding and affiliation (Sinjab 2013). In general, the non-state actors in Syria, can be categorized into five major groups:

The Free Syria Army (al-Jaish as-Sūrī al-Ḥurr, FSA hereafter) was formed by defected officials from the Syrian National Army, which prevents its definition as a conventional "militia". It started as an organized national army and developed into an umbrella organization for a diverse range of local militant groups with similar objectives (Phillips 2013). The FSA was initially assumed to be secular and of a nationalist leadership; however, its secular discourse was never explicit, and it has increasingly embraced Islamist militant group (Phillips 2016).

Different armed militants and soldiers who defected from the incumbent national army joined the FSA in the initial months of the conflict (Landis 2011). However, the lack of institutional structure and leadership facilitated local armed groups without military backgrounds, whose primary objective was to protect their local communities, and to declare membership and loyalty to FSA in order to receive funds and arms. Despite its fragmented command and complex structure, the FSA continued to flourish until mid-2012, when they launched attacks in Aleppo and Damascus and claimed responsibility for the assassination of four top officials of the Damascus Crisis Management cell.[39] Nevertheless, such momentum was brief. The persistent operational fragmentation had allowed space for the formation of more Islamist groups such as Liwā' al-Tawhīd, a combination of Muslim Brotherhood followers and FSA fighters who united to maximize their military resources (Lund 2013b). Although the FSA had moved toward reform through its reestablishment within the Supreme Military Council (SMC), the FSA-SMC failed to attract international support (Phillips 2016) and eventually became marginalized with the rise of radical movements such as Ahrār al-Shām and the al-Nusra Front (Banco 2015).

Islamist Syrian Opposition: This includes Jaysh Al-Fatih, Ahrār al-Shām, and Jaysh al-Islām; each is composed of alliances of numbers of smaller brigades and battalions. Although these groups are often referred to by the media and western politicians as "moderate," not "radical," groups, this understanding can be challenged by an analysis of their ideologies and a survey of public perception.

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[39] The Damascus bombing 12 July 2012 targeted a meeting of the national crisis cell at the National Security Headquarter in Damascus resulting in the death of General Dawud Rajiha (Defense Minister), General Asif Shawkat (president Bashar al-Asad's brother-in-law and Deputy Defense Minister), General Hasan Turkmani (assistant to the Vice President Faruk al-Shara'a and former Defense Minister), and General Hisham Ikhtiyar (Director of the National Security Bureau). (Al Jazeera 2012).

Similar to the FSA, these groups had sought a legitimate representation in the Syrian opposition but failed to fit within the political opposition structures such as the SNC and on the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Panikoff 2013, Douglas, et al. 2014). In 2012, Liwā' al-Tawhīd (FSA) expanded its structure in order to merge with Liwā' al-Haqq and form the Islamic Front. A year later, this Islamic Front had again expanded its organization in order to include Jaysh al-Islām and continue to maintain an independent structure from the FSA (Stanford University 2017). Currently, the Islamic Front and Ahrār al-Shām constitute the most prominent armed groups in Syria in terms of military arsenal, manpower, and controlled territories.

In his paper, Pierret (2017) presents an important historical record of events covering the formation and transformation of leading military powers to radicalized Islamic ideology during the early years of the Syrian civil war 2011–2014. Ahrār al-Shām is particularly important for this study because of its support of the SMB during the insurgency of 1979–82; nonetheless, Ahrār al-Shām has no record of any political activity between 1982 and 2011.

When analyzing the activities and political stance of Syrian Islamic groups, their relations with the Saudi government and/or Saudi Islamist movements is vital. The establishment of the Islamic Front led by Ahrār al-Shām was praised by prominent figures of the Sahwa movement[40], a major political opposition group to the Saudi government. Therefore, the Saudi government did not entirely accept the Islamic Front, and rather focused its support on one member: Jaysh al-Islām. Simultaneously, the dominant force in the group— Ahrār al-Shām —remained affiliated with Qatar and Turkey and was not accepted in Riyadh.

Except for the Farouq Battalions, which disintegrated due to intra-leadership rivalries, the Syria Islamic Front then merged with the Syria Islamic Liberation Front to form the Islamic Front in November 2013. Subsequently, the Syrian flag disappeared from the logos, reflecting a process of

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[40] The Sahwa movement (Awakening movement) or Al-Sahwa Al-Islāmiyya (Islamic awakening) is a politically active faction of Saudi Salafism. In Saudi Arabia, the Sahwa movement has been involved in peaceful political reform which led them to conflict with the Saudi regime notably in the 90s because Sahwa opposed the presence of US troops on the Arabian Peninsula. Since then, the Saudi regime is working to eliminate the Sahwa role in Saudi Arabia (Kamrava 2020).

radicalization in which the subsequent narrative by leaders indicated a rejection of democracy and secularism. Simultaneously, the FSA was weakening as Saudi Arabia took over the SNC in July. On 20 January 2014, Qatar supported the Islamic Front to sign the Honor Charter (Miṯāq Šārāf), a document in which the Syrian rebel factions expressed their rejection of foreign fighters and transnational jihad, and called for a state of justice, law, and liberties, rather than for the establishment of an Islamic State (Pierret 2017, 148-149).

Ultimately, the moderate Islamist armed groups have managed to create clear areas of control, to maintain their frontlines with the regime and other military groups, and to distinguish themselves from Jihadists like the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front (Phillips 2016).

Transnational Jihadist Groups: These include the Islamic State (IS, previously known as ISIS); Al-Qaeda, and Hayʾat Taḥrīr al-Shām (HTS, formerly known as al-Nusra Front) (Sharp and Blanchard 2013, Lister 2014, Lister 2016b). Having no interest in international recognition and aiming at establishing the "Khalifate state," these groups have acted on multi-frontlines fighting over territories and the control of both the government forces and the opposition armed groups that refused to join the Jihadi movement.

Notably, al-Nusra Front had undertaken major attacks against government targets at the heart of the capital Damascus and bombed the headquarters of Syria's political opposition in southern Turkey (Lister 2014, Lister 2015a). Such Jihadi Salafism remains something imported, as these groups received foreign support that facilitated their military power in an unbalanced way for the social structure of the areas they controlled. Hence, the embracement of Salafism by opposition groups is believed to be superficial and opportunistic. Overall, the Syria crisis has brought unprecedented competition among Salafi support networks of conflicting political orientations which has subsequently affected the structure of the insurgency as a whole (Pierret 2017, 138). Radical Sunni militant group such as ISIS propose the "Khalifate state" as an alternative to the current nation-state structure, which is considered a product of western colonialism.

Shiite Militants and Affiliates Active inside Syria: These include Hezbollah from Lebanon,

ʿAṣa'ib Ahl al-Haqq[41], Faylaq Badr[42] and Liwā' Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas brigdade[43], and other militants

from Iraq, the Wālī al-Amr Legion[44] from Iran, the Afghan Fatemiyun brigade, and the Pakistani

Zaynabyun brigade[45], etc. They are predominantly foreign fighting groups that operate only at high-

level coordination with implied approval from the Syrian government. The national correspondent to

the Shiite militant group could possibly be the National Defense Forces (NDF)[46], and that is widely

perceived as sectarian and has been gradually taking over positions of Syrian army (Landis 2012,

Knights 2013, The Carter Center 2013).

The Shiite militant group, like the Lebanese Hezbollah, tend to incorporate within the Lebanese

national system and use the state welfare and public system to meet their agenda. They integrate into

the state system while simultaneously establishing their parallel governing system based on Islamist

ideology. This has also been the case in Syria with the newly emerged semi-militia/semi-military

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[41] ʿAṣa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (League of the Righteous) is a radical Iraqi Shiʿa political party and paramilitary group founded in 2006 and active in the Iraqi insurgency and Syrian Civil War. During the Iraq War it was known as Iraq's largest Iran-backed Shiʿa paramilitaries in Iraq and is now part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a group of Shiʿite militants that are close to Iran. In Syria, ʿAṣa'ib Ahl al-Haqq initially fought under the banner of al-Abbas Brigade (a mixed Syrian, Iraqi, and Lebanese Shiʿa organization), but split in 2014 following a dispute with al-Abbas's native Syrian fighters. Like other Iraqi Shiʿa paramilitaries in Syria, they fight in defense of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine (Al-Tamimi 2014).

[42] Faylaq Badr was the military wing of SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, established in 1982 in Iran). It was renamed to Munazzama al-Badr after 2003, when the previous regime was toppled by a US military attack on Iraq.

[43] Liwā' Abu al-Fādhl al-Abbas Forces is a Twelver Shiʿa Muslim militant group operating throughout Syria. It is named after the nickname of Al-Abbas ibn Ali, son of Imam Ali. The group was formed in late 2012 to defend the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque and other Shiʿa holy sites in Syria. It rose in prominence in reaction to the desecration of various shrines, heritage sites, and places of worship by Syrian rebels during the Syrian civil war, and subsequently collaborated with the Syrian Army. Its fighters include Shiʿa Damascenes, Damascus-based Shiʿa Iraqi refugees, and foreign Shiʿa volunteers, mostly from Iraq. It fights primarily around Damascus but has fought in Aleppo and Southern Syria as well in support of government troops (Al-Jazeera, 2015)

[44] The Wālī al-Amr legion, also known as the Ansār al-Mahdi battalions, is an Iranian special military unit trained under the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and deployed to Syria to participate in the conflict, among their mission objectives is to protect high-value personnel, i.e., Iranian high-ranking military commanders deployed to Syria to support regime forces in field combat (Al-Jazeera, 2015).

[45] The Fatimiyun brigade and Zaynabiyun brigades were established with support from the Iranian government to fight in Syria. As reported by the Iranian opposition sources, the Fatimiyun brigade is composed of previous Afghan detainees in Iran who were released under the condition to fight in Syria while the Zaynabiyun brigade is composed of Pakistani Shiʿa living in Iran (Al Jazeera, 2015).

[46] Syria National Defense forces (NDF) is a pro-government militiancy, that was formed on 1 November 2012 and organized by the Syrian government during the Syrian Civil War as a part-time volunteer reserve component of the Syrian Armed Forces.

structures such as the NDF that combines military command and control copied from the national Syria army with militia type recruitment of the pro-regime population in the regime's strongly held territories. However, it is questionable whether the NDF will reintegrate in the reconciled national army, or rather follow the example of Hezbollah in Lebanon to secure the interest of its minority agenda.

The Kurdish Forces[47]: the Kurds are the biggest ethnic minority in Syria, consisting of 10% of the total population, and concentrating/locating in the north and northeast of the country. Since early 2011, the Kurdish communities established localized military forces called the people protection units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, Kurdish Protection Unit: YPG hereafter) to protect their communities from attacks by different parties, including later ISIS and Turkey. The local Kurdish authorities continued to coordinate with the central government, and it gradually established a parallel administrative system under the so-called autonomous administration of the Rojava region. Between 2013–2017, the Rojava region was surrounded heavily by ISIS, where YPG fighters struggled to keep ISIS from approaching their villages and towns.

The YPG later became the major component of the Syrian Democratic Forces jointly with the Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, and Armenians in Syria who fought against ISIS and other Islamist armed groups. The YPG and SDF are supported by the US and EU to maintain security and order in North-Eastern Syria (otherwise known as the Rojava region).

2.4 Divergent Factors behind the Rise of Islamist Armed Groups in Syria

2.4.1 Background of the Emergence of Islamist Groups in Syria

Various factors had synergized to create the opportunity for Islamist activism to expand across Syria in 2011. First, following the suppression of Islamic political and social activism of the SMB (Hilu Pinto 2017), the regime, led by Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad during the 90s and 2000, aimed to reduce the ensued tension through cautious tolerance of moderate Sunni Muslims. Consequently, Islamic schools and charities increased, and Islamist intellectuals and businesspersons were co-opted into the parliament.

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[47] Although I have mentioned that Kurdish groups are excluded from the analysis in this thesis, I briefly discuss their non-state actors in this is section which covers all non-state actors and provides the overall picture before listing the groups categories.

Furthermore, a female-led movement known as Al-Qubaysiyat has been recognized to preach Islam among upper-class Damascene women (Hinnebusch 2012). However, despite this flexibility from the regime, the regime conditioned the activities of Islamist groups and movements to abandon their political activism.

Second, the government's failure to complete the "authoritarian upgrade" or change the repressive legacy of the Ba'th regime, despite the gradual introduction of neoliberal policies to pursue economic liberalization and privatization, have deepened the preexisting economic and social vulnerabilities in Syria, facilitating the inevitable collapse of the regime (Hinnebusch 2012).

Third, there appeared to be a growing local dissatisfaction with the regime's international policy and how it disadvantageously positioned Syria with the West and within the region. For instance, the Iran-Saudi (Shiite/Sunni) power struggle in the region and Russia's critical involvement to maintain its geopolitical interest in the Mediterranean Sea (Sayigh 2014). Finally, the outdated Pan-Arabism and nationalist discourse failed to attract regional solidarity while the Arab-Israeli conflict and pro-Palestinians' rights sentiment[48] were used to mobilize people and resources for military and defense (Wieland 2012).

Hinnebusch (2012) perceives the concentration of power in the Syrian presidency as an obstacle to reform, and it contributed to weakening the clientele networks that incorporated key segments of Sunni society into the regime and made it increasingly dependent on the family/sect for support. This partly explains the early 2011 uprising in rural peripheries, suburbs, and medium-sized cities with medium and small-size traders and manufacturers. As victims of trade liberalization and the corrupted business sector, those appear to have been the primary anti-regime force in the smaller urban centers. However, despite the strong grounds for the uprisings, the majority of people had chosen to stay neutral or to adhere to the regime for fear of civil war, and indeed, these fears eventually manifested. Both the regime and the opposition fueled the escalation of sectarian violence to mobilize people's support. This

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[48] In this thesis neither the issues of the Arab-Israeli conflicts and pro-Palestinian rights falls within the scope of this study.

has been clearly reflected in the discourse through public exchange of accusations of sectarian discrimination and victimhood.

To an extent, we may understand the Islamist group's violent operations that have resulted in the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants, considering them as Islamists' rational response to various opportunities and constraints. Violence becomes the appropriate tactic, according to Wiktorowicz, when three conditions accompany the political opportunity structure: (1) state repression creates a political environment of bifurcation and brutality; (2) insurgents create exclusive organizations to shield themselves from repression; and (3) armed groups promote anti-system frames, in which the regime is framed as fundamentally corrupt, to motivate collective action to overthrow agents of repression. These radical organizations become further radicalized through a growing belief in total war (Wiktorowicz 2004).

Consequently, the sectarian violence in Syria is neither an inevitable result of religious antagonism nor an externally produced outcome with no basis in the preexisting social reality. In the case of Syria, sectarianization as a process of constructing political "others" along religious lines has emerged twice, in 1978 and 2011, as a result of the government's failure to achieve the equal and fair distribution of rights and resources (Hilu Pinto 2017). Moreover, Hashemi (2016) emphasized the fact that religious identity in Middle Eastern society is a survival tactic used by the state to maintain internal or sub-regional fractions and to weaken any opposition to the authoritarian regime. Hence, the authoritarian regime's short-term policies to mitigate any risk of opposition lead to a long-term negative impact on social cohesion at both the country or regional level and internationally (Hashemi 2016).

2.4.2 Motivation, Objective, and Scale of the Islamist Groups in Syria

In early 2011, the locally organized Friday popular demonstrations embraced slogans that called for freedom and dignity. Starting in Darʿā, southern Syria, the protests objected the detention of school children by security apparatus, for drawing anti-regime slogans on the school wall. The rage escalated when one of the children, Hamza Al-Khatib, was declared dead under torture with no official apology issued by the authorities. Subsequently, the story was repeatedly exposed by the locals and the media. In addition, similar incidents of detention of civilian protestors had also occurred sporadically in Homs,

and towns in rural Damascus governorate like Dārayyā, Dūma, and Zamalka, etc. Many of those were broadcasted live on social media and videos of the torture of detainees were regularly leaked, encouraging more people to participate in the demonstrations.

In Syria, public gatherings have been forbidden since the 80s. Monitored closely by the secret police, Friday prayers were permitted and were therefore an excellent (if not only) opportunity for hundreds of demonstrators to use as a pretext for gathering prior to the actual protests. The choice of time to gather for Friday prayers was initially a consequence of logistical necessity rather than evidence for a religious agenda. Nonetheless, several media campaigns have focused on the grievances of the 1982 incidents in Hama with the intention of reviving the vengeance and mobilization for demonstrations. Participating in the protests, members of the SMBs influenced the design of the slogan and banners for each Friday gathering, depending on the locality.[49]

Incidents of exchange of fire were reported from the initial days of the conflicts. The security forces were detaining, torturing, and opening live fire at the protestors, and the protestors, to a lesser extent, responded with light weapons. While this study is unable to verify what happened, it is increasingly evident that violence and arms existed from the initial months of the Syrian uprising in 2011, and the escalation seems to have been unavoidable.

Social movement theory indicates that violent contention, as an adopted way of protesting, is more context-related in the case of a lack of democracy, repressive environment, and the absence of other alternatives (Della Porta 2008, Tilly and Tarrow 2015). The Ba'th hegemony over all political parties in Syria, including the SMB, encouraged a section of the Islamist supporters to respond violently. This contradicted the non-violent movements that the SMB and other Islamists had previously established (Khatib 2010). Similarly, the increasing military involvement of civilians or political actors can be explained as partly a spell-over effect of violence fueled by international and regional interventions and partly as a tactical action to present their military expansion under the necessity to

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[49] Depending on the location, banners and themes of the demonstrations were also composed by individual non-religious activists such as activist Raid Faris and artist Ahmad Jalal in Kafr Nubul of Idlib while the SMB effect is more visible in the central region of Homs, Hama and occasionally in rural Damascus (Kafranbel Banners 2012).

protect civilians from the state's violent repression and indiscriminate killings (Quintan 2004, 21). However, an opportunity to gain legitimacy could not have been possible for the SMB without the framing introduced by the situation post-2011.

In addition, videos of individual and group defections from the national army were podcasted on social media and shortly announced the establishment of the Free Syrian Army—the first organized fighting groups against the al-Asad regime. [50] The newly established army has quickly attracted trained defectors like army personnel and thousands of volunteers motivated by a desire to defend their towns against the military campaigns of the regime, or merely derived by ideological opposition to the authoritarian rule of al-Asad.

The non-violence and peaceful approach to the uprising then began to shift due to contextual necessity imposed by both the increasing oppression by the state, resource availability, and international support for the FSA in July 2011 (Landis 2011). Consequently, the increasing violence resulted in the increasing Islamization of the uprising, and the acceleration of the exit of non-Islamist participants, for fear of Islamists' extremism. This benefited the regime in claiming their being "protector of minorities." Subsequently, the Syrian Interim Government, formed by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, was also concerned with (re)presenting the ethnic and religious diversity of Syrian society through a diverse cabinet formation from Muslims, Christians, Kurds, and Female Ministers. However, the armed rebellions predominantly remained a collaboration of Sunni Arabs from low medium and low-income rural areas.

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[50] The first defection was of Walīd Al-Qasha'amy of the presidential guards' unit on 23 April 2019 who declared the reason of defection as rejecting the orders to open fire on the demonstrators in Harasta town of the rural Damascus governorate (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6U1o7a2Y5-Q). In addition, Lieutenant colonel Husayn Harmūsh defected on 9 June 2011 upon a government military campaign on Jisr al-Shugūr town of the Idlib governorate stating the reason to be the unjustified killing of unarmed demonstrators by the regime forces. Harmūsh established the Free Officers Battalion asking other commanders in the government army to defect (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9z7nO8FiMEA). However, he was subsequently arrested by the government security forces endo in August of the same year. Then colonel Riyād al-Asad defected on 31 July 2011 together with groups of officers and established the Free Syrian Army intending to change the al-Asad regime and protect the people uprising (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UouYaUi19k4). The defection was not limited to the army but also to government officials including the prime minister Riyād Hijab in August 2012 in addition to a number of Syrian ambassadors and diplomats globally.

The mission of the FSA (as a formal umbrella for the armed oppositions) has been to confront the government army and to provide protection for the local community. To achieve this mission, smaller armed groups were established and assigned to protect the community. Among the first groups to be established were the Liwā' al-Haqq in Homs governorate (August 2011), Ahrār al-Shām in Idlib governorate (December 2011), and Liwā' al-Islām in East Ghūṭah of rural Damascus governorate (September 2011).

These armed groups played dual roles, as they responded to community-level interaction while accommodating ideological variations of more conservative and Islamist types. The majority of these groups declared a regime change and the protection of civilians but also the establishment of an IS based on shariʿa as their objectives. They also refused to join the FSA because of its secular agenda and because of the base of the Syria Coalition and the leadership of the FSA being in exile. However, they maintained coordination with both the FSA and with designated groups, namely al-Nusra Front, out of necessity of the war.

These Islamist groups were eventually unified under the SILF which was established in September 2012. The SILF's declared objectives were ask follows; to terminate all components of the al-Asad regime; protect the Syrian people regardless of their religion or ethnicity as well as protecting the public and private property; control arms; maintain security after the collapse of the regime; and emphasize the unity and the sovereignty of Syria and its independence. The SILF also claimed that Islamic shariʿa should be considered the doctrine.[51]

During this period, in December 2012, the SMB made progress in establishing the shields of the Revolution Council (Hay'at Durūʿal-Thawra, shields hereafter)[52] through mobilizing a variety of Sunni population. Supported by the FSA itself, the SMB announced the establishment of the shields as an evolving necessity as follows;

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[51] The complete establishment declaration is available in Arabic only on Youtube dated 21 September 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0i6RsPLwQA
[52] Revolutionary Shield Committees established in September 2012 and officially launched in Istanbul on December 2012 in a ceremony attended by the leader of SMB and the Free Syrian Army. The primary mission is the protection of the peaceful popular movement against the violent attacks by the regime (Carnegie 2012).

"in order to unify brigades and battalions that have moderate thinking, which is the faith of SMB as well, we called them for a meeting in Istanbul, and it resulted in the establishment of the shields which is an independent committee of an Islamic ideology similar to ours; however, this is not an official military wing to the SMB […] We all know that militants on the ground are so desperate for support and will affiliate with anyone who provides fund and arms" (Alghudawai 2013).

The shields' discourse reflects the SMB's claimed ideology; moderate Islamic thought, complemented with a logo featuring a peace pigeon, instead of the Quran, above two crossed swords, referring to the peaceful demonstrations (see Figure 2–1). [53]

    (a) The Shields of Revolution Council emblem   (b) The Syria Muslim Brotherhood emblem

***Figure 2—1 the emblem of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood versus the emblem
of the Shields of Revolution Council.***
Source: Obtained from the official webpages of the mentioned groups

In December 2012, SILF changed its name to the Syria Islamic Front (SIF) and shortly after to the Islamic Front (IF), as more groups joined and some regional countries, especially the Gulf countries and mostly Saudi Arabia, started to provide more resources in order to limit the expansion of al-Nusra Front in Syria.

However, the Islamic Front became dysfunctional as of early 2015, where the primary large groups Ahrār al-Shām and Jaysh al-Islām, were mostly operating independently. In 2015, the members of the IF joined Ahrār al-Shām, that once again dominated most of the Islamist groups operating in the north, and planned, led, and achieved major success against the regime.

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[53] The official twitter account of the Shields is: https://twitter.com/revoshields?lang=en

Official Name	Syria Islamic Liberation Front (SILF)	Syria Islamic Front (SIF)	Islamic Front (IF)
Active	Sep. 12–Nov. 13	Dec. 2012–Nov. 2013	Nov. 2013–Mar. 2015
Personnel	30,000–40,000 fighters	13,000–25,000 fighters	40,000–70,000 fighters
Ideology	Sunni Islam	Sunni Islam	Sunni Islam–Salafism
Logo			

Table 2—1 The Evolvement of Islamist Front in Syria between 2011 and 2015

The violence directed from the regime to the popular demonstrations triggered spirals of escalation as protestors took up arms in self-defense and obtained support by external actors, including regional powers and transnational jihadis networks. This external support could only help the continuity and survival of the insurgency but was not enough to achieve a regime change (Lynch 2016).

2.5 Characteristics of the Major Islamist Armed Groups Covered in this Study

The Islamist armed groups covered in this study fall in part or full under the second category of the Islamist Syrian Opposition. The research examines five major groups including Ahrār al-Shām Jaysh al-Islām, Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām, the Southern Front, and Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām. Three out of the five groups covered under this study (Ahrār al-Shām, Jaysh al-Islām, and Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām) are entirely local Islamist groups. However, the other two groups, the Southern Front and Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (HTS- former al-Nusra Front), have several aspects of the descriptions in different stages of their developments. The Southern Front was officially part of FSA and the HTS started as transnational Al-Qaeda affiliate. Nevertheless, the Southern Front, officially affiliated with the FSA, is included in this study, considering its transformation and merging with the Islamist armed groups. As for the HTS, it is included in this study due to its drastic transformation from an Al-Qaeda affiliate into a localized structure in 2017 and the formation of its affiliated government, the National Salvation Government.
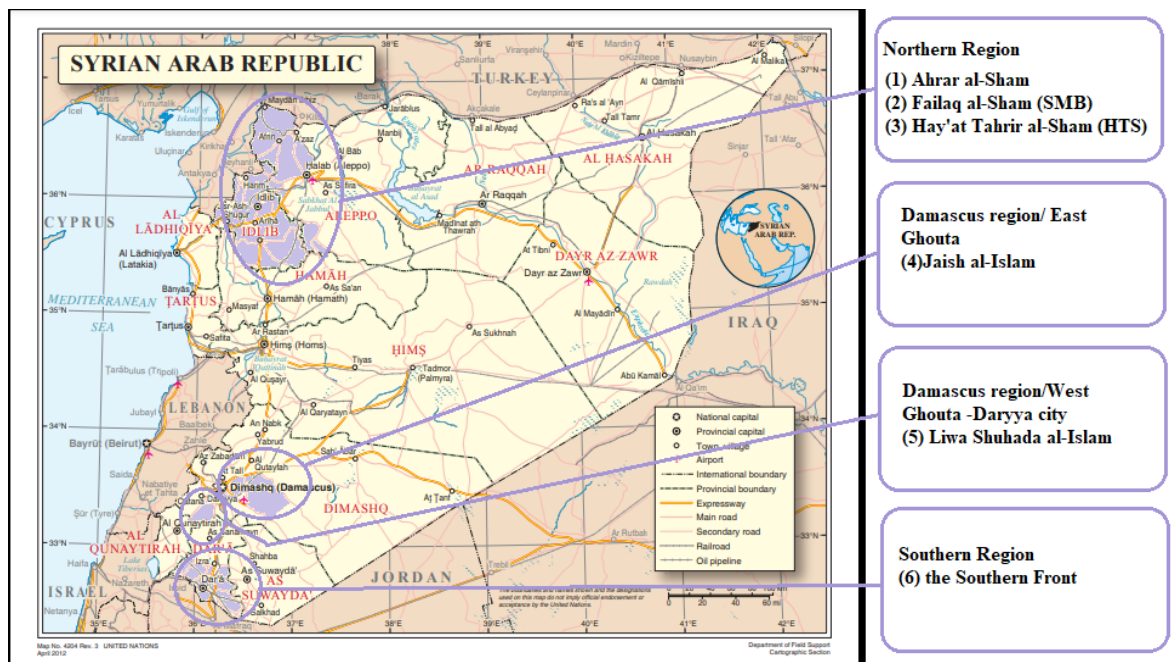
Map 2-2 Areas under Major Islamist Armed Groups in Syria

Source: developed by the author, based on plain Syrian map by the UN
https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/syria.pdf

2.5.1 Ahrār al-Shām

Ahrār al-Shām, also known as Harakat Ahrār al-Shām al-Islāmiyya (the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant), is a Sunni Salafist militant group established in late 2011 with the aim of replacing the existing regime with an Islamic government that implements shariʿa law. The group operates across Syria but concentrates its attacks in the north and West of the country since it managed to sustain a strong hold in Idlib province and parts of the Aleppo governorate.

Ahrār al-Shām formed its first umbrella organization, the SIF, in December 2012, in order to unite Syrian Islamic opposition forces. While the SIF refused to submit to FSA-SMC command, it regularly coordinated military maneuvers with SMC-affiliated brigades.

In December 2013, Ahrār al-Shām dissolved the SIF and co-founded the Islamic Front, the largest alliance of Syrian opposition forces that has existed in the Syrian civil war, with six other militant groups (Suquor al-Sham, the al-Tawhid Brigade of Aleppo, Jaysh al-Islām, the al-Haqq Brigade of Homs, the Kurdish Islamic Front [KIF], and Ansar al-Sham). The Islamic Front, with 40,000–70,000 fighters at its peak, sought to replace the Assad regime with an Islamic government. Ahrār al-Shām led

the Islamic Front's shariʿa and Political Offices and remained one of the organization's most influential members, until the Islamic Front separated in mid-2014 due to disagreements between Ahrār al-Shām and Jaysh al-Islām.

Following the collapse of the Islamic Front, Ahrār al-Shām absorbed the al-Haqq Brigade of Homs and the KIF in Eastern Aleppo. Furthermore, Ahrār al-Shām had clashes with the YPG, which is supported by the US and struggles for autonomous Kurdish administration in northeast Syria.

Ahrār al-Shām	
2011	Foundation
Dec. 2012	Became a member of SIF
Dec. 2013	Became a member of Islamic Front (IF)
2011–late 2013	Cooperated with ISIS
July 2014	Established Jaysh al-Fatih
2014–2015	Joint operation with HTS against ISIS, both joined Jaysh al-Fatih umbrella and performed coordinated attacks against the Syrian army
2015	Participated in the negotiation of a ceasefire with the government of Syria
Feb 2016	Become a member in Jaysh Halab (Army of Aleppo)
2017–2018	Joining the Syrian Liberation Front

Table 2—2 Ahrār al-Shām group: A chronology

Source: Table is created based on information from the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC); a research center at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies of Stanford University:

http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523

From its inception in 2011 until late 2013, Ahrār al-Shām military activities, taking the same direction of ISIS, launched a successful campaign to remove the Syrian army from ar-Raqqa governorate. However, Ahrār al-Shām and HTS, turned against ISIS after it killed an Ahrār al-Shām member in January 2014. Furthermore, from 2014 through 2015, Ahrār al-Shām strengthened its alliance with al-Nusra by coordinating attacks and creating the Jaysh al-Fatih [54] umbrella group to

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[54] Jaysh al-Fatih , literally translated as the Army of Conquest, is an umbrella organization that was formed in 2015 as an alliance of Islamic militants (Fatih al-Shām, Ahrār al-Shām, Faylaq al-Shām, Jaysh al-Sunnah, al-Haqq Brigade, and Jund al-Aqsa) active in the Idlib governorate bordering Turkey and several areas of the Latakia and Hama governorates. The umbrella organization peaked after taking control of the Idlib governorate from the al-Asad Regime in March 2015. The alliance is supported by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and present their shared interest in Syria (Singupta 2015).

remove the Syrian army from Idlib province in 2015. Jaysh al-Fatih took control over Idlib in June 2015 and since then it has remained a prominent umbrella organization and has expanded its operations to other regions in Syria, such as Aleppo.

In August 2015, Ahrār al-Shām participated in one round of ceasefire negotiations with the Syrian government on behalf of the Sunni militant groups in Idlib.

In addition to Jaysh al-Fatih, Ahrār al-Shām became part of Jaysh Halab (Army of Aleppo), an umbrella organization that was created by former Ahrār al-Shām leader Shaykh Hashim al-Shaykh in February 2016. The group includes five FSA factions (the 101st Division, the 16th Division, the First Regiment, the Mountain Falcons Brigade and the Sultan Murad Division) as well as the Harakat Nūr al-Dīn al-Zanki and it excludes the Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām.

In 2018, Ahrār al-Shām joined the Syrian Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrīr Suriyya), [55] demonstrating a more skewing trend toward more inclusive nationalist ideology.

2.5.2 Jaysh al-Islām

Established in 2013, Jaysh al-Islām (The Islamic Army) has been one of the largest military alliances in the history of the Syrian conflict with 43 brigades and battalions fighting in the Damascus region under the leadership of former Liwa' al-Islām's commander Zahran Allūsh during 2011–2013 (Zaman Alwasl 2013). The group formation was motivated by generous funding from Saudi Arabia, motivated by the need to create a stronger army that can fight the IS and, ultimately, the regime (The Guardian 2013).

With East Ghūṭah's critical and strategic location in the proximity Damascus[56], the group managed to attain one of few materialized opposition strongholds during the Syria war. The rebel forces enjoyed a few years of stable control over which they established a localized public administration and civil and court systems. Jaysh al-Islām ideology is a mix of Salafism and Syrian nationalism. They have openly denounced the Jihadists' brutal tactics and mistreatment of civilian supporters of the opposition

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[55] This differs from the Syria Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) mentioned previously. The Syria Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrīr Sūriyya) was established in February 2018 with more nationalist manifestation.
[56] Please refer to Map 6 in section 2.5

and continued to fight ISIS, preventing them from entering the East Ghūṭah region in Damascus (Tsurkov 2016). It first ousted ISIS from Eastern Ghūṭah in July 2014 and sustained a strong territorial defense against its attacks. The fierce fighting between ISIS and rebels' groups was described as brutal, and resulted in thousands of deaths. In a video released by Jaysh al-Islām in 2015, 18 alleged ISIS militants were shown being executed by Jaysh al-Islām members. The video described the executions as revenge for the recent beheading of three Jaysh al-Islām fighters, and utilized orange for the beheaders' costumes as a symbolic representation of the power reversal (BBC 2015).

Jaysh al-Islām	
2013	Establishment
2013–2014	part of the Islamic Front
2014	Battles against ISIS
2014–2015	Part of the Unified Military Command of East Ghūṭah
2016	Jaysh al-Islām leader participates in Geneva III peace talks
2017	intra-opposition fight erupted in East Ghūṭah and Government forces advances
2018	Jaysh al-Islām defeated, and fighters were relocated to Idlib
2019	Jaysh al-Islām leaders active in supporting refugees in southern Turkey

Table 2—3 Jaysh al-Islām group: A chronology

Source: Table is created based on information gathered from various sources as referenced in the text.

By 2015, members of Jaysh al-Islām had reached 25,000 fighters (Tsurkov 2016) in addition to heavy military equipment and tanks; with a total of 24 officers and 64 battalions (Mayadeen 2015). As military power and intelligence of Jaysh al-Islām grew stronger, it was later able to contribute to military operations in various governorates besides Damascus, including Homs, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Darʾā, and Qunietra governorates.

The armed groups' forces in East Ghūṭah had established a judiciary system called the Unified Judiciary Council, which was considered to be one of the few cases of successful governance by armed groups, where all armed groups collectively ceded the control over legal affairs to a committee composed of Islamic law scholars (Lund 2016).

The tense relationship between Jaysh al-Islām and former Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatih al-Shām, formerly known as al-Nusra Front, led to al-Nusra's rejection of the authority of Jaysh al-Islām's Unified Judiciary Council court system. Subsequently, through late 2015 and early 2016, Jaysh al-Islām together with Faylaq al-Rahman and Ahrār al-Shām, formed the Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghūṭah, which was functional until the death of Zahran Allūsh in December 2015. Thereafter, intra-opposition conflict escalated between Jaysh al-Islām and Faylaq al-Rahman and ended by the two groups signing peace agreement on 24 May 2016, agreeing on ceasing hostilities, exchanging prisoners, and opening routes in intra-opposition-held territories with the Eastern Ghūṭah region of Damascus (Lister 2016a). However, the agreement was short-lived, and conflict erupted again in April 2017.

The internal conflict among opposition groups has weakened the opposition structure and enabled the Syrian government army to gain military advances into the East Ghūṭah region. The government military operation ended in April 2018, when the government army took over Eastern Ghūṭah and imposed a surrender deal with Jaysh al-Islām that ensured the evacuation of thousands of fighters and their families from Eastern Ghūṭah to Idlib province in northern Syria.

2.5.3   Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām

Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām (the Martyrs of Islam Brigade) was formed in March 2013 as a combination of smaller armed opposition groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army in Dārayyā, a town in the western Ghūṭah region of Damascus (Enab Baladi 2013). Their primary collective operations in Dārayyā city occurred between 2011–2016. The brigade acted as the military division of the Local Council of Dārayyā city that was established in October 2012, with following ten divisions: Public Relations, Services, Neighborhood councils, Finance, Health, Media, Relief, Legal, Civil Action, and Military (Dārayyā Local Council 2014).

In February 2014, the group joined the Southern Front, an alliance of over 50 armed groups unified to maximize military powers against the government forces in the southern part of the country, including in Dārayyā city of rural Damascus and Darʾā governorate. In August 2015, the regime forces enforced a military encirclement on Dārayyā, preventing supplies into the city including food and medications which put the sieged population under severe humanitarian conditions.

Despite the siege, Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām was able to acquire supplies and military equipment, including US-made anti-tank missiles, that helped them survive under the siege for years (Mustafa 2015). As the months of besiegement extended, the smuggling of supplies and military equipment became increasingly difficult and the Liwa fell into isolation within Dārayyā town. Consequently, the leaders of Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islam blamed the Southern Front for providing no support from the south to break the siege and took a unilateral decision to separate from any collaboration with the Southern Front and announce their military independence (de fact solo operation) inside the besieged city.

Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām	
2013	establishment
2014	joined the Southern Front
2015	Announcing military independence from the Southern Front
2016	relocated to Idlib province
2017	participation in Astana talks
2018	joined the National Front for Liberation

Table 2—4 Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām group: A chronology

*Source: Table is created based on information gathered from various sources
as referenced in the text.*

After four years of military encirclement and severely deteriorated humanitarian conditions and with the lack of further military support, the Liwā' as part of Dārayyā Council signed a surrender deal with the Syrian government and the town fell back into the regime's control (Ibrahim, Leestma and Wilcox 2016). While hundreds of fighters of Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām were killed in the process, the remaining 700 fighters were evacuated with their families and relocated to Idlib in northern Syria in September 2016 (UN news 2016).

Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām is famous for its fighters' high military skills proven by their survival through four years of military encirclement by the government army. However, upon arrival in Idlib, as

per the evacuation and relocation deal with the Syrian regime, they were targeted by HTS, and many were arrested in the HTS strategy to dominate Idlib province in northern Syria.[57]

Although Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām is still officially in Idlib, it seems to have lost purpose after its relocation from Dārayyā to Idlib. In May 2018, and in attempt to revive their activities, Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām along with ten other rebel groups in northwestern Syria, joined the National Front for Liberation. The NFL was officially announced in May 28 (Syria Call 2018).

2.5.4   Southern Front – The Combination Alliance

The Southern Front (al-Jabha al-Janūbiyya) made alliances, formally or informally, and cooperated with Al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (Lund 2014). This hybrid and transformative nature of alliances between a variety of members made its nature unique. In addition, other aspects of uniqueness involve the Southern Front's strategic geographic positioning in the southern region of Syria in close proximity to the capital Damascus, in bordering or with possible connections to Jordan and Iraq, as well as in their direct western support from the US, the UK, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia due to geostrategic military interests (Ghattas 2014).

Notwithstanding, since its formation in 2014, the Southern Front has always included a consistent component of Islamic armed groups, including previous FSA factions that had inclined to the Islamist tendency shortly following merge. Simultaneously, the coordination and collaboration with Al-Qaeda affiliated groups proved to be due to necessity of military strategy, rather than ideology-driven, as the two had a rivalry relation with various episodes of direct conflicts.

The Southern Front military alliance constitutes of 49 Syrian opposition factions covering southern Syria, namely Darʾā, Qunietra, and Southern Damascus governorates (Naylor 2015). In its early years, the Southern Front was mainly supported by member countries of the "Friends of Syria" [58] group, namely the US, the UK, and Jordan. Following the failure of the Geneva II round of

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[57] Upon participating in Astana peace talks in January 2017, the leader of Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām was arrested by HTS and appeared in a videotape handcuffed and being investigated on his participation (SyriaTV 2018).

[58] Friends of Syria was initiated by then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy, with the purpose to solve the Syrian conflict, after Russia and China had vetoed a 4 February 2012 UN Security Council resolution. Its first meeting

negotiations, the "Friends of Syria" decided to invest more into training and equipment to the direct segments of the Syrian armed opposition. This initiative was implemented through the northern and southern Military Operations Centers (MOC), which operates under the supervision of several regional and international powers active in Syria, and its headquarters was located in Amman and a sister operations center in Turkey knows as (MOM) as per the Turkish initials (Sadaki 2016). The Southern MOC proved very successful in the south, as the north constantly suffers the interference of ISIS and al-Nusra Front (the Carter Center 2015).

The Southern Front began as a union of moderate Islamist groups and was constantly pressured by the MOC and by the Jordanian authorities, to remain politically low-key and to refrain from the ideological narrative. Their self-declared objective was to "overthrow the al-Asad regime and work toward a better future for Syria" (All4Syria 2014).

Members of the Southern Front militant groups range from independent moderate-aligned groups, such as Harakat Bayan, to borderline Jihadi groups, such as Ajnad al-Shām. Several of these groups have absorbed FSA Brigades, such as Nūr al-Dīn al-Zanki and Al-Rahman Corps. These factions often utilized the Syrian Independence flag—although inconsistently and not exclusively (Roche 2016).

Despite their greater coordination and improved collective political action, though, the members of the Southern Front could not exist in isolation from the local and international dynamics, and repeatedly criticized the MOC's lack of support in the humanitarian and institutional fields. The Southern Front members aimed at developing the group further to create a unified court system and a humanitarian bureau.

In late 2015, the support from MOC to the Southern Front began to decline due to the absence of the US leadership, as well as Russia intervention in Syria, and because of parallel coordination with Jordan where the latter prioritized the protection of Jordan northern borders. At the mercy of such dynamics, the Southern Front rebel groups have shifted from fighting against the regime to in-group

occurred on 24 February 2012 in Tunisia. Followed by a regular conference in Istanbul, Paris, Marrakesh, Rome, and London throughout 2012 and 2013. The primary members of the group are France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Albania, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the US and Canada (Danin, 2012).

fighting and engaged in battles against one another. By the end of 2016, only four of the largest groups with close connections to MOC continued to receive support. However, others have offered support to Jordan to protect the borders from terrorist elements or to fight other groups not complying in accordance with Russia's reconciliation policy and tactics in the province (Sadaki 2016).

By June 2018, the government month-long and major military offense "Operation Basalt" in Darʾā and Qunietra concluded with the defeat of the Southern Front forces. The fighters agreed to either accept the reconciliation deals with the government and remain in their hometowns, or to relocate their activities to Idlib in case of rejection of the deal terms.

An important element to consider when analyzing southern Syria is its proximity to Israel. This also explains MOC (mainly the US and UK) and Jordan collaborations to intervene operationally at such close proximity to the battle ground.

2.5.5 The SMB affiliates– Faylaq al-Shām

Faylaq al-Shām (The Levant Legion) is an alliance of 19 smaller fractions, formed in 2014. The majority of these factions were previously part of the revolutionary shields group affiliated with the SMB (Syria360 2014).

Amid the cases of Islamist armed groups alliances in Syria, Faylaq al-Shām presents a unique case of an armed group funded by an opposition political party, the Syria Muslim Brotherhood. Despite not having a joint structure of the two, the Legion's primary financial and human resources came from the SMB. In addition, the SMB members assumed leading positions that led the Legion's strategies on the ground, which distinguished its strategies and tactics from other military groups[59].

Although small in scale in comparison to other major fronts and alliances, the SMB military involvement is characterized by its tactical and strategic positioning both on the battlefields and amid various factions of armed militants. An example of this is Tarīf al-Sayyid Issa, who is an SMB member and a field commander of the SMB affiliated Faylaq al-Shām, reflecting the intertwined relation

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[59] For instance, Faylaq al-Shām was able to play an instrumental role in mediating the recent dispute and ceasefire in Idlib, February 2018, between the Hayʾat Tahrir al-Shām —HTS and SLF (Enab Baladi 2018).

between the SMB and Islamic militants. Originally from Idlib governorate, Issa has previously been a member of the SNC and joined armed activities upon the mobilization for the retake of Idlib from the government control (Lund 2015). Such a dual experience of SMB fighters, who were initially more politically active before they seized the chance to fight against the regime within the armed opposition groups, has also contributed to their instrumental role in mediating and brokering negotiations among other opposition groups.

In 2015, Faylaq al-Shām joined Jaysh al-Fatih in a new alliance that aimed at strengthening the opposition military coordination. Subsequently, the group started distancing itself publicly from the SMB in fear of a negative reaction from Saudi Arabia and thus a reduction in its financial support.

2.5.6 Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (HTS)

Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (Levant Liberation Committee, abbreviated as HTS) is an active Jihadist militant group formed in January 2017, as a result of a merger among Jabhat Fatih al-Shām (formerly al-Nusra Front), the Ansar al-Din Front, Jaish al-Sunna, Liwā' al-Haqq, and the Nūr al-Dīn al-Zanki Movement.

While this study does not cover transnational Jihadi organizations, the HTS has been included in the scope of this study for two reasons; (a) it mixes and merges with Syrian Islamic groups and publicly denounces following other outsider organizations including Al-Qaeda (b) the strategic shift of the HTS toward holistic governance combines military, political cabinet, and public service through the establishment of the Syria Salvation Government (SSG)[60] that itself adopts a national state structure with national objectives.

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[60] The Syrian Salvation Government is a de-facto alternative government of the Syrian opposition in Idlib Governorate, formed in early November 2017. There followed weeks of conflict between the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), with reports of the HTS unilaterally disbanding several SIG-supported local councils across northwestern Syria. The SSG is led by a prime minister elected by a legislative body named the General Shura Council, which is headed by a president. (Nassar, Rahal and Clark 2017)

The original group, the al-Nusra Front, was created in January 2012 as an offspring of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)[61] and shortly after it was designated by the United States Department of State as a terrorist organization (US Department of State 2012). The group was considered the strongest armed militants on the ground. It began as an Al-Qaeda affiliate, refused to join the IS, and subsequently maintained an independent command.

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, later the leader of ISIS, announced the expansion of Al-Qaeda operations in Iraq and Syria, he dispatched Abu Muhammad al-Jūlāni to Syria to establish a group to operate there. Al-Jūlāni, however, rejected this announcement and affirmed the group's allegiance to Al-Qaeda and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Subsequently, al-Nusra split, with particularly foreign fighters following Baghdadi's edict and joining ISIS, while others remained loyal to al-Jūlāni or left to join other Islamist brigades (Spencer 2013).

During the successful Syrian opposition offenses in the northern Idlib governorate from March until May 2015, Al-Nusra effectively coordinated its operations with the FSA, moderate and conservative Syrian Islamists, and several independent Jihadist factions (Lister 2015a).

In early 2015, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri instructed the al-Nusra Front leader Julani to strive for better integration of his movement within the Syrian revolution and its people; to coordinate more closely with all Islamic groups on the ground, to contribute toward the establishment of a Syria-wide shariʿa judicial court system, and to use strategic areas of the country to build a sustainable Al-Qaeda power base (Lister 2015b).

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[61] The Islamic State (in Arabic ad-Dawla al-Islāmiya; IS) Emerged from the remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a local offshoot of al Qaeda was founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2004 following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by Western forces. The group changed its name to ISIS in 2013. ISIS launched an offensive on Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014. On June 29, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced a caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq and renamed the group the Islamic State. By December 2015, it held an area extending from western Iraq to eastern Syria, about a third of Syria and 40% of Iraq, containing an estimated eight to twelve million people. (Cederman and Girardin 2007, Celso 2015)

Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām	
2012 (January)	Foundation of Jabhat al-Nusra
2012 (December)	designation as a terrorist organization/Alias of AQI
2015	coordination and integration with Syrian opposition forces
2016 (July)	Jabhat Fatih al-Shām
2017	Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām, the establishment of Syria Salvation Gov.

Table 2—5 Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām: A chronology

*Source- Table is created based on information gathered from various sources
as referenced in the text.*

As the Syrian opposition weakened and with the failure of peace negotiations, the al-Nusra Front started an intensive recruitment of members from the increasingly disenfranchised opposition communities in Aleppo and Idlib in early 2016, exploiting widespread and seething perceptions of their abandonment by the international community (Lister 2016b). By July 2016, the al-Nusra Front merged with Jaysh al-Fatih and formed the so-called Jabhat Fatih al-Shām that expanded again in 2017 to include other groups and formed HTS with Abu Mohammad al-Jūlāni who remained as the commander in charge.

Following the announcement of HTS's foundation, new groups and individuals joined, increasing its base to over 31,000 fighters. HTS has officially denied being part of Al-Qaeda, however, due to the inherited al-Nusra Front elements in its composition and given many of the senior group figures held similarly extreme views, HTS has been accused of working as Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch. Furthermore, many groups and individuals defected from Ahrār al-Shām, representing their more conservative and Salafist elements, and joined HTS in 2017. Only few months after, Ansar al-Din Front and Nūr al-Dīn al-Zanki Movement split off from HTS, claiming that HTS shares the same goal as the al-Nusra Front to transform Syria into an Islamic emirate run by Al-Qaeda.

HTS does not recognize the authority of the official opposition leadership, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, nor the Syrian Interim Government in exile. However, with the HTS removing itself from the day-to-day governance of territories it held, the civil administration was undertaken co-operatively by the local councils.

Throughout 2017, HTS had been engaged in particularly intense armed conflict with rival rebel groups seeking full control of Idlib province. That same year, a major shift in HTS strategic focus was made toward governance, civil administrations, and government formation. In addition, in September 2017, the SSG was established in Idlib province which created conflict with the SIG, the only opposition government since 2013. Reports indicate that the HTS unilaterally disbanded several SIG-supported local councils across northwestern Syria, leading several local councils to close and others to challenge its authority (Nasser, Rahal and Clark 2017).

The General Syrian conference, held in September 2017, was a continuation of the Civil Administration Initiative in opposition-controlled areas in Idlib. The conference formed a constituent body named the General Shura Council, headed by President Bassam al-Sahyūni, and appointed a prime minister. In early November 2017, the conference formed the Syrian Salvation Government, followed by weeks of conflict between this newly formed opposition government and the SIG. Participants in the conference agreed upon "Islamic law as the only source of legislation," "the need to preserve the identity of the Muslim people in Syria," and "the overthrow of the illegal regime with all its symbols and pillars and holding it accountable for its committed crimes, as well as liberating the Syrian territory from all the occupying forces, extending security and spreading justice in the liberated areas" (Enab Baladi 2017).

2.6   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined a brief history and the political background of the Islamist movements in Syria before 2011 and the various factors that facilitated their extensive degradation into armed groups and their roles in the ongoing conflict. The chapter also included mapping of major armed groups fighting in Syria since 2011, either Islamist, nationalist, or minority ethnic. However, individual profiling covered only major Islamist armed groups as they are the focus of this research (Figure 2-6).

This background is necessary for understanding the shift of presence and scale of Islamist armed groups in Syria within the overall complexity of the current situation, including an inconsistent paradigm of fluid foreign support and shifting international and sub-regional political interests.

This chapter focuses on the contextualization of the Syrian uprising, taking its militarization and Islamization into consideration, which facilitated opportunities for Islamist armed groups to acquire human and military resources and managed to control land and people at scale. Consequently, this facilitated the confrontation of both the central state and the international community.
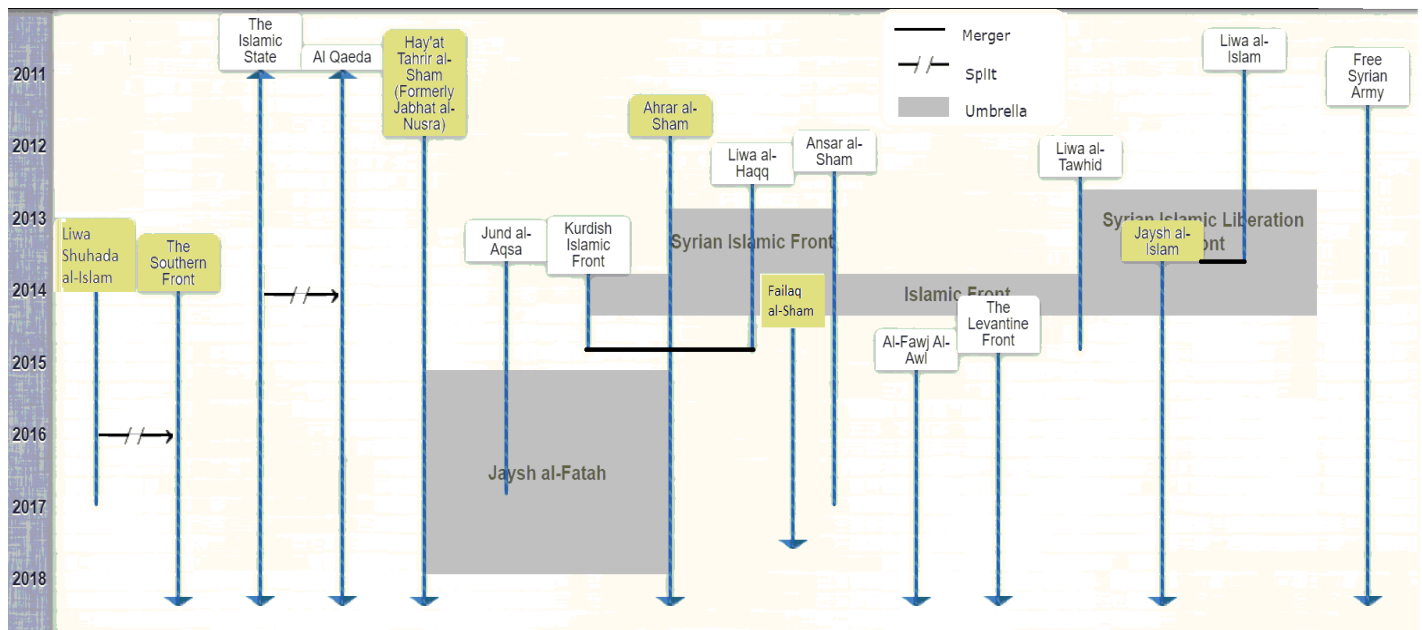
Figure 2—2 mapping armed groups active in Syria civil war with focus on six groups subject of this study (in yellow highlight)

Source: https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants, modified by the author

In the following chapter of the thesis, the role of Islamist armed groups as violent challengers to the Ba'th regime, but simultaneously, violent oppressors of the population under their control, is examined. The focus is on the shifts in the stance of these groups over the past eight years toward the central government, other non-Islamist armed groups, as well as toward the political opposition to the regime, and finally, the local community under their control.

Chapter 3   The Military–Political Role of Islamist Armed Groups at the National and International Levels

3.1   Introduction

As presented in Chapter II, the historical presence of Islamic movements in Syria was marked by clashes with the Baʿth ruling party since its inception. The 1976–1982 Hama incidents created a crucial moment of development, when a small-scale armed conflict occurred and resulted in the suppression and expulsion of members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) from Syria. At the time, SMB adopted a narrative to justify its use of violence as self-defense, which introduced notions of Jihad against the Baʿthist socialist state system.

Similarly, Islamist armed groups have developed their agenda since the 2011 uprising by claiming multiple objectives from the protection of peaceful demonstrators who demanded freedom and dignity to working toward a regime change to achieve an inclusive society under Islamist values. Moreover, others have endorsed the aspiration for a shariʿa ruled state, such as an Islamist state.

In contrast to the 1982 incidents, which were limited in terms of geographic scope, the most recent waves of violence in Syria since 2011 have reached unprecedented levels in terms of geographic and population coverage as well the number of actors involved. The two major features of the recent episodes of violence are (a) the state's oppression of opposition forces and the armed resistance/response of such forces and (b) the newly emerging nonstate intra opposition or intra insurgency conflicts.

Ultimately, as the conflict advanced and various attempts for negotiating a ceasefire between the regime and opposition were taken, moderate Islamist armed groups appeared as a part of the conflict and its resolution at the same time. Parallel to negotiations and ceasefire by state vis-à-vis Islamist armed groups, different Islamist armed groups negotiated ways to consolidate power and to create a solid unified front against the regime.

This chapter explores the political and armed activities of Islamist armed groups. On one hand, it examines the use of violence by Islamist armed groups against the state, non-Islamist opposition, and

local communities in areas under their control. On the other hand, it presents the transformation of the political role of these groups and their interactions with the opposition political structure as well as internationally sponsored peace talks. These two elements correspond to the 2v and 2g vectors in Figure (1-1), where 2v (violence) corresponds to the violent interaction between the central state and Islamist armed groups, and 2g (governance) demonstrates the relationship between their negotiations and attempts for reconciliation with the central state.

3.2 Battles and Territorial Gains of Islamist Armed Groups

This part corresponds to the 2v/2g vectors in Figure (1-1) in the chapter I. The 2v side (state–Islamist relationship with violence) represents the military engagement between the state and Islamist armed groups over contested territories to maintain armed and political control. Conversely, 2g (state–Islamist relationship on governance) indicates political interactions through indirect negotiations with the regime under the bigger political umbrella of the Syrian opposition in exile, namely, the Syrian Coalition. The 2v and 2g factors are presented from the perspective of Islamic armed groups toward the central state and not vice versa.

(1) Justification of the Use of Armed Violence for the Protection of Civilians: The early formulation of Islamist armed groups at the beginning of the 2011 uprising by Syria was justified in public with the intent of ensuring regime change and protecting civilians against the brutality of the regime. A scrutiny of their definition of 'protection of civilians', however, indicates a lack of clear meaning or structure. Instead, the term implies their reactionary use of arms for the campaigns of violence by the regime against protestors. Research data extracted from semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan suggest that the actions for the protection of civilians conducted by Islamist armed groups can be classified into three types. The first is the supply of information during demonstrations among civilians, especially in relation to the safety and security of meeting points. This aspect includes updating the information about the deployment and presence of government security, police, or military forces in the vicinity of the location and plans for the evacuation and counter-attacks of demonstrators in the case of the use of violence of the state. The second pertains to attacking the security arrangement established by the regime, which controls and inspects daily life in the living

sphere of civilians. Such an arrangement includes Islamist attacks on buildings of the Ba'th Party, security apparatus, checkpoints, and police stations. The last one refers to securing the safe passage of civilians through frontlines and borders by deploying communication devices and intelligence and counter-attacks to impede the advance of the regime forces. This type enabled Islamist armed groups to establish a partial or full ground for civilian mobilization and evacuation operation.

Islamist armed groups played the abovementioned roles for civilians as early as the first year of the uprising before the situation transformed into an open armed conflict with a declining space for the demonstrations of civilians. Notably, however, the deployment of government military and security forces was initially justified for the civilians as a measure for protecting local communities against the presence of Islamist armed groups. The discourse of the state about fighting Islamists led a few local communities to perceive the presence of Islamist armed groups as a threat, which hinted that this perception may increase the possibility of being targeted by the regime. As the reactions of the regime were frequently lethal, which include the use of aerial bombardment and heavy weaponry, local communities were extremely hesitant to host or support armed groups. Instead, they opted to flee the location, which led to a massive displacement across the country and, subsequently, a change in the demographics of the constituencies of both sides.

(2) Direct Armed Attacks Against the Regime: The second claim for the use of violence by the Islamists apart from the pretext of the protection of civilians is to topple the 'unjust regime'. The attacks targeted military and security locations, including military bases and military airports. An increase in defection from regular army forces frequently facilitated takeovers by armed groups together with delays of backups and support from the main body of the regime's army. In addition, these operations were supported by advanced intelligence information and supplies by foreign states to the armed groups.

In the year 2012, especially in July, a major attack that intended to weaken the regime was launched by Liwā al-Islam (later known as Jaysh al-Islām) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The attack occurred during a meeting of the Crisis Management Cell in the National Security building in the center of Damascus, which led to the demise of prominent figures during the regime, such as Minister of

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Defense Dawud Rajiha, his deputy Asif Shawkat (head of national security), Hisham Bikhtyar, and

Hasan Turkmani (head of the Crisis Management Cell). Moreover, the attack left Minister of Interior

Muhammed al-Sha'ar injured.
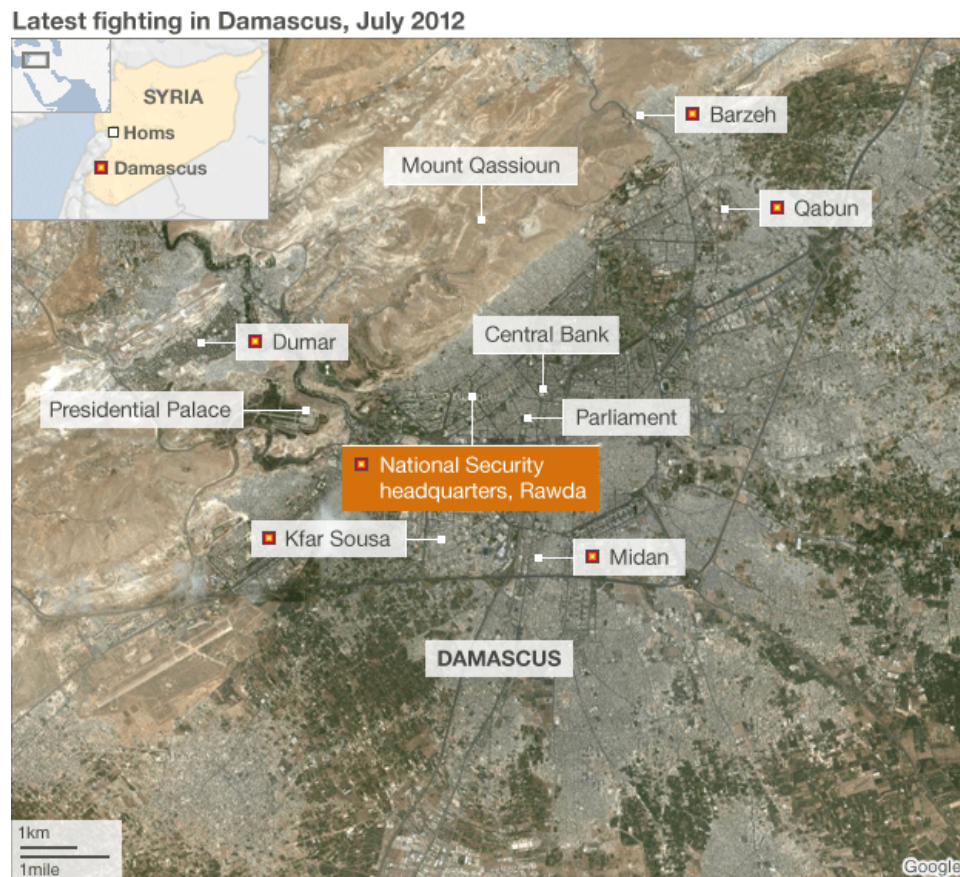
***Map 3-1 Armed Opposition Groups Fighting with the Regime in and around
Damascus***

*Source: Images from the British Broadcasting Corporation
(http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/61659000/jpg/_61659318_6519d5d2-
3b38-4ef7-b168-b2140ad0a4d2.jpg)*

At the same time, major attacks that targeted the state facilities, which were also claimed by al-

Qaeda/al-Nusra Front, have resulted in not only losses and damage to the regime but also massive

casualties to civilians. [62] Such attacks raised concerns for internal security as well as among the

international community, which considered it as the initial signs of the potential proliferation of

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[62] An example is the Damascus explosions on May 10, 2012, at the building of Intelligence Department of the
Ministry of Interior Affairs that were executed using two vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED)
each loaded with 1,000 kg of explosives, leading to the complete destruction of the 10-storey building, killing 55
and injuring more than 400 people.

transnational jihadist groups, such as the al-Qaeda, that use the security gaps caused by the Syrian conflict (BBC 2012).

(3) **Use of Arms (or Violence) to Control Territories and Border Crossings**: Another objective of the early military activity of Islamist armed groups was to take over the territories and border crossings of opposition-friendly countries, especially Turkey and Jordan. This initiative provided Islamist armed groups with a strategic geographic position and placed them in direct contact with sponsoring foreign states that facilitated training and supplies and served as a source of financial revenues through formal and informal exportations.
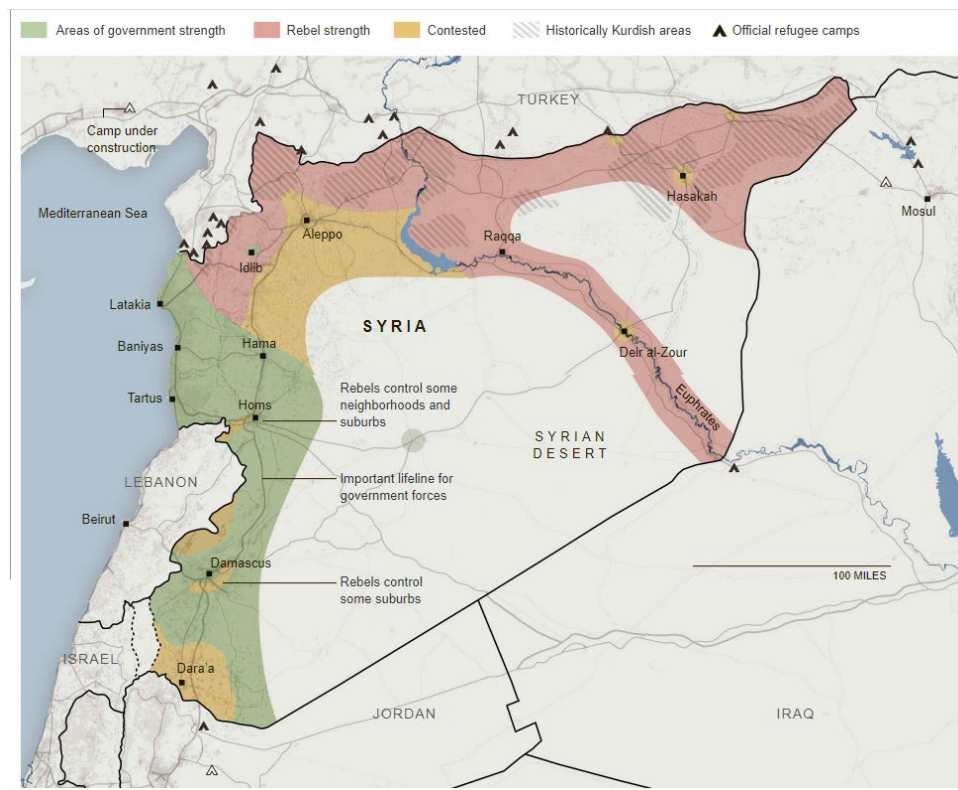
Map 3-2 Map of The Dispute in Syria as of March 2013

Source: New York Times (2013)

The regime responded with a military encirclement of opposition-controlled areas within the Syrian territories, whereas its use of air forces led to a comparative advantage.

From the military perspective, the situation became increasingly complicated with the proliferation of Islamist and jihadist groups. By September 2015, the United States and the United Kingdom officially started a coalition operation against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in

Syria. In December 2015, the United Security Council issued a resolution designating ISIS and the al-Nusra Front as transnational terrorist organizations (The United Nations Security Council 2015). This development suggested that Islamist armed groups are now requested by their sponsoring states to cooperate with the United States policy to combat terrorism policy, harmonize with the *war on ISIS*, and continue to fight against the regime at the same time.
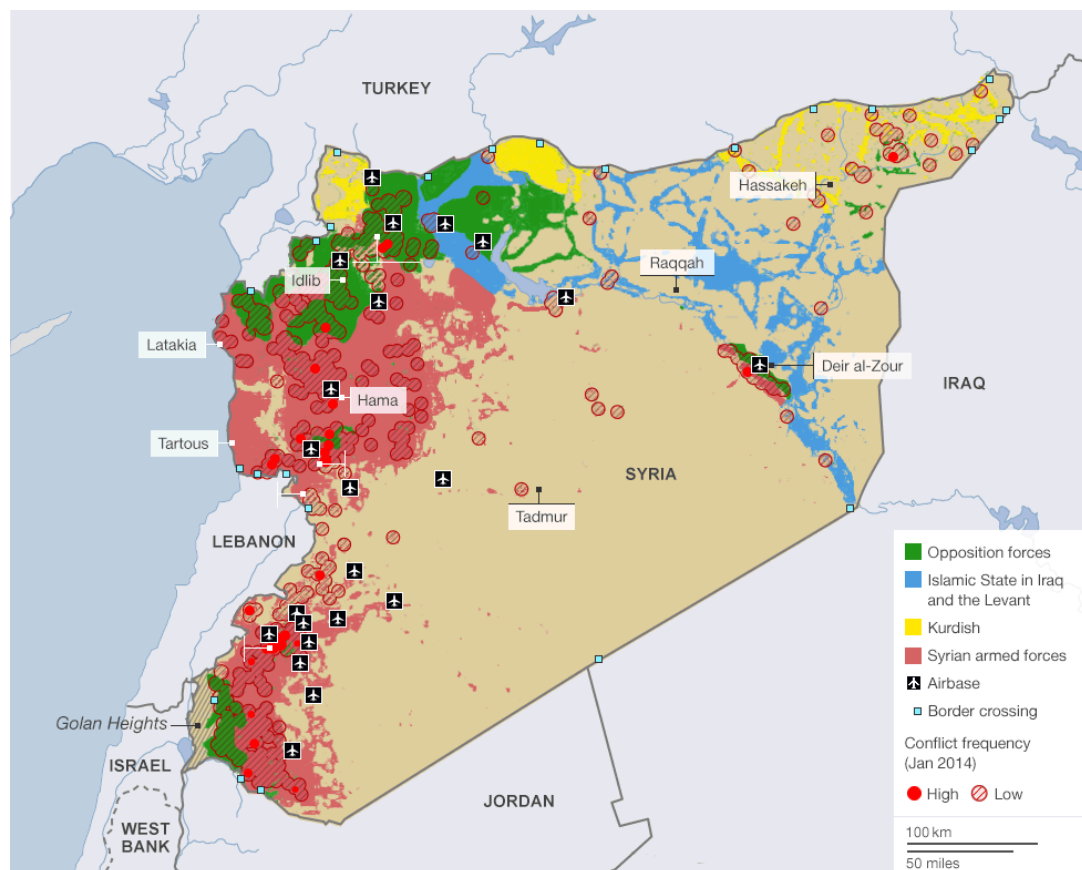
***Map 3-3 Area of Control and Conflict Frequency in Syria After the
Expansion of the Islamic State***

Source: (BBC 2014)

Map 3-3 presents a complete picture of the subregional aspect of the conflict and demonstrates the actual situation of the conflict, such as the close proximity to borders where northeast Syria fell under the ISIS, which was expanded from Iraq; the Kurdish axis of cooperation and coordination, which operates against the Turkish interest in the north; and the changing dynamics of Iran and Israel. The division of territorial control among various military powers is mainly attributed to access to the regional networks of support and supplies provided to each party of the conflict and the intertwining dynamics among them.
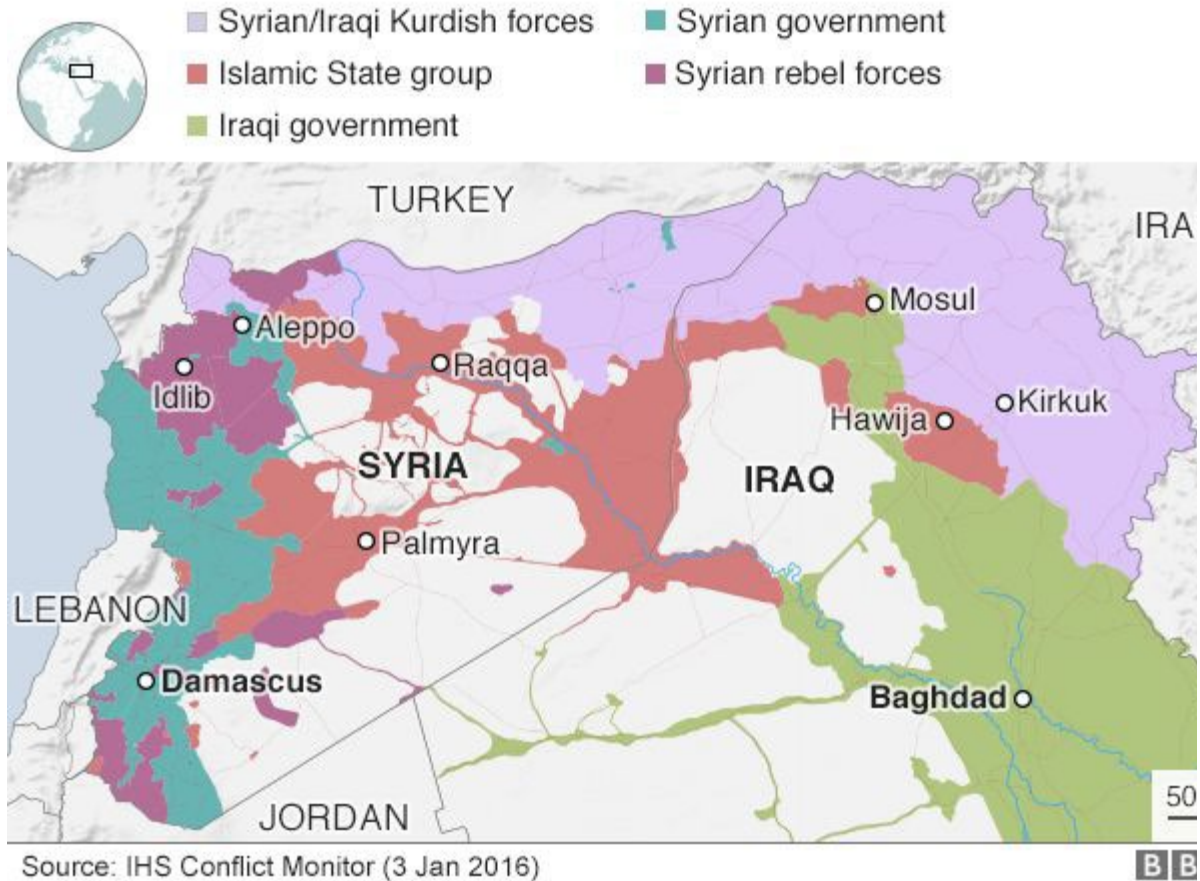
Map 3-4 Areas under the control of Syria as of January 2016

Source: BBC (2017)

3.3 Relation of Islamist Armed Groups with the Political Umbrella Organization of Oppositions

3.3.1 Development of the Syria Political Opposition into an Umbrella Organization

With regard to the relationship of Islamist armed groups with broader opposition organizations, elucidating the structure of the Syrian opposition against the al-Asad regime, which has developed and been formulated since 2011, is crucial. The political bodies of the oppositions were assembled nearly immediately after the start of the popular demonstrations within Syria. The first conference was held in Istanbul in as early as April 2011 followed by a series of conferences and meetings that led to the inception of the Syria National Council (SNC) in August 2011 as an umbrella body of the Syria opposition.

As the United States did not favor the power of the SMB over the SNC, it supported the inception of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (hereafter referred to as the Syrian Coalition) toward the end of 2012.

The Syrian Coalition was led and headed by a prominent Islamic scholar named Mu'az Al-Khatīb[63] between November 2012 and April 2013. He called for national unity, announced readiness for negotiation with the regime, and condemned the radicalization of Syrian opposition fighters. However, the absence of support from western governments obliged him to quit and be replaced by George Sabra.[64]

The Syrian Coalition continued to be the widest umbrella under Syria's political opposition in exile. In 2013, the Syrian Coalition formed the Syrian Interim Government, which was composed of 10–12 ministers, including a Defense Minister appointed by the FSA. The United States and European countries recognized the SIG as the sole legitimate opposition government and received funding mainly from the United States to operate civil services, cover wages, and support institutional expenses in areas under the control of the opposition (Agence France Presse 2015).

Although the political umbrella of the Syrian opposition was viewed as the result of the positive coordination and collaboration among opposition groups, the armed front of the conflict was much fragmented and changing according to the realities on the ground, which was primarily impacted by the intense interventions of international and regional powers. A few armed groups were even perceived as counter-revolutionary and moved toward the opposite direction of the political umbrella of the Syrian opposition.

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[63] Ahmed Muāz al-Khatib al-Hasani, born in 1960, comes from a well-known Sunni Muslim Damascene family. His father was a prominent Islamic scholar and preacher. al-Khatib originally studied Applied Geophysics and worked for six years as a geologist before becoming a dedicate Islamic preacher and the imam of the historic Umayyad Mosque in Damascus early 90s, following the footsteps of his father. After he was banned from preaching during the rule of Hafiz al-Asad, al-Khatib began to operate underground. He was imprisoned several times for his criticism of the government during the 2011 uprising before he fled the country and settled in Cairo. al-Khatib is not allied to any political party and is known as a moderate who has called for political pluralism and strongly opposes sectarian divisions among Syrians (BBC 2013).

[64] George Sabra, see 31.

The most prominent group in the Syrian armed opposition is the FSA, which was founded in 2011 by Riyād al-Asad, a defected colonel in Turkey, to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Asad. In the interaction between Islamist militant groups and the FSA, the FSA relationship with non-Islamist armed opposition can be well observed. The reason for this notion is that the FSA is the first and, possibly the only, armed opposition with a nationalist (i.e., non-Islamist) discourse founded by defected members of the national army.

Following the foundation of the FSA, many within inside Syria announced their formation as part of the FSA and joined the fight against the army stations of the regime. As the defection of the soldiers from the national army increased throughout 2012, the FSA grew in number and advanced in Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. As such, a few FSA-affiliated militants overtly identified themselves as Islamists to appeal to foreign support due to increased conflict and the significant flow of financial support to Islamist groups. At the same time, the decentralized/localized nature of the FSA enabled further deviation from the command of Colonel Asaad, which provided space for the emergence of Salafist Jihadists (Phillips 2013). Initially, the FSA was reluctant to support the formation of independent Islamist armed groups, even if in fear, internally, that these groups would eventually overtake the national framework of the FSA. For example, Mustafa Al-Shaykh, the founder and head of the FSA Higher Military Council in 2012, publicly criticized the militarization of SMB and opposed its operation modality. Al-Shaykh was being cautious about their commitment toward a civil state due to the notion that the SMB "supported and funded the civilian protection units [in reference to the revolutionary shields]" instead of supporting the FSA (Etani 2013). Al-Shaykh considered "such activity from SMB side (…) a partitioning factor hinders the consolidation of the armed forces of the Syrian opposition" (Etani 2013). The support of SMB for Islamic groups over FSA has been considered to weaken the structure of a unified opposition army and negatively reflect the secular nature of the Syrian uprising, which led to the emergence of Jihadists (Alhamadi 2017).

Against this background, the FSA realized the limitations of its troops on the ground and the need to continue to focus on its objective to overthrow the regime. Thus, it expanded the scope of its allies in 2013 with moderate Islamist militants, including the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, whose

name indicates that it is an umbrella of a group of Islamist militants that fight against the regime. In addition, it has declared support to the SNC and the FSA Supreme Military Council (SMC) command, although it does not necessarily follow the direct orders of the SMC (Phillips 2013).

To establish command of their area of activities, the Syrian Coalition coordinated not only with the FSA but also with Jaysh al-Islām, Aḥrār al-Shām, and the Southern Front through the Minister of Defense in the SIG. The Southern Front for instance as accepted the umbrella of the SIG despite the possibility that the smaller groups within these alliances may have adopted Islamist branding and narrative.

Year	Opposition political umbrella	Corresponding armed group
2011	Establishment of SNC	N/A
2012	Establishment of the Syrian Coalition	Free Syrian Army—Minister of Defense
2015	Establishment of the Syrian Interim Government (under the Syrian Coalition)	FSA and Coordination with Nationalist/Islamist Armed Groups

Table 3—1 Structure of Syrian Political and Armed Opposition Since 2011

However, a persistent issue remains in which Islamist armed opposition groups in Syria disapprove the opposition umbrella in exile (i.e., the Syria Coalition) as the political leadership of the Syrian opposition. This reaction stems from various layers of reasons, as explained by Hasan Abud, leader of Aḥrār al-Shām, as follows: (a) the mismatching agendas of the Islamic theocracy adopted by Islamist armed groups versus a national democratic state based on the rule of law advocated for by the western-supported opposition; (b) the perceived alienation of the opposition in exile from the popular base and from the daily experiences of people on the ground throughout the conflict; and (c) the exclusion of Islamist opposition armed groups from the structures of the opposition political umbrella due to their late emergence in the political stage.[65]

Interestingly, the latter point contradicts with the narratives of major Islamist groups, which confirm their presence and participation during the initial stages of the formation of opposition in exile. For example, the abovementioned Hasan Abud emphasizes the fact that Aḥrār al-Shām existed since

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[65] Interview with Hassan Aboud by al Jazeera TV https://bit.ly/2nI2tVm broadcasted on June 11, 2013, last accessed September 30, 2019.

2012 and became a political–military movement when it transformed from the Aḥrār al-Shām brigades (purely military establishments) to Aḥrār al-Shām, which includes the aspects of political and civil administration into its structure.[66] Despite such a development, the movement did not seek to be part of the Syria political umbrella in exile due to the adherence of the movement to Islamic law for the governance of state formation and due to its rejection of the secular state, western democracy, and the parliamentary system (Syria Islamic Front 2013, 6).

3.3.2   International Initiative for Peace Negotiations and the Legitimacy Struggle

The strong interest of the international community in peace talks and negotiations provided the opposition forces, including Islamist armed groups, an opportunity to strengthen the political umbrella organization.

Syrian peace processes were initiated by as early as November 2011, when the Arab League facilitated a ceasefire between the government and armed groups and deployed a monitoring mission for this purpose. The Russian peace deal initiative then occurred in 2012[67] followed by several initiatives by France (Friends of Syria Group 2012–2013),[68] Saudi Arabia[69], and several United Nations (UN) special envoy missions to Syria.[70]

Although the main objective of these initiatives was to cease the active conflict and pursue political negotiations between the conflicting parties, the official contact with and recognition of the armed groups were realized at a later stage, which continued through political bodies, such as the SNC and the Syrian Coalition, which eventually became increasingly inclusive through the umbrella of the High Negotiation Committee (HNC).[71]

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[66] Ibid.

[67] In February 2012, Russia proposed to the G5 a peace deal that includes al-Asad stepping down and initiating a political negotiation between Syrian government and opposition (Borger and Inzaurralde 2015).

[68] Friends of Syria; please see footnote no.57

[69] Beside its significant influence in the Arab League, Saudi Arabia hosted various forums to organize and unify Syrian opposition against the regime during the period 2015–2017.

[70] The United Nations Secretary General appointed four Special Envoys to Syria so far: Kofi Annan (2012), Lakhdar Brahimi (2012–2014), Staffan de Mistura (2014–2018), and Geir Otto Pedersen (2018 to date). For more information on those missions, please see https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/ .

[71] The High Negotiations Committee for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (HNC) is an umbrella body founded in December 2015 at a conference held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which was attended by approximately

The first round of international peace talks, that is, Geneva I (2012), was concluded without significant outcomes. Moreover, another two years of failed trials was required to initiate the Geneva II peace talks for Syria, which also concluded without progress. The political negotiations became effective and tangible only after the elucidation of the military power balance regarding the boundaries of the controlled areas of each of government and opposition. Thus, the year 2015 marked the first inclusive and operational meeting that produced partial but practical proposals, where representation from the military wings was proved essential.

In the same year, the Astana process was initiated. The first Astana conference was held in May 25–27, 2015, where a number of Syrian opposition groups convened in Astana, Kazakhstan. The al-Asad regime opted not to attend. A second conference was held in Astana on October 2–4, 2015; the assembled opposition groups adopted a declaration that called for the parliamentary election, which is scheduled for 2016, to be held under the supervision of the international community.

On October 30, 2015, the first round of Syrian peace talks in Vienna was held with foreign ministers from 20 participating countries, such as the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany. The ministers agreed on the need for the Syrian government and the opposition to initiate political talks. The second round of the Vienna talks, which were held in mid-November, reached a consensus on the need to convene the Syrian government and opposition representatives in formal negotiations under the auspices of the UN with a target date of January 1, 2016. On December 10, one day after a meeting held in Riyadh among anti-government factions, including Aḥrār al-Shām, a statement of principles to guide peace talks with the Syrian government was issued (Lund 2015). Bashar al-Asad stated he would not negotiate with 'foreign terrorists', whereas Russia rejected the outcome of the meeting in Riyadh, because it lacked representation and included terrorist groups.

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100 delegates. The HNC was formed to appoint an opposition delegation and act as a reference point for negotiators with the representatives of the Syrian regime on behalf of the participants. The HNC headquarters is in Riyadh and it is led by Riyād Farīd Hijāb, who was Prime Minister of Syria from June to August 2012 (Lund 2015b).

However, the Russian position slightly changed after the United States Secretary of State John Kerry visited Moscow in December 15 and met his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov, as well as Vladimir Putin. They discussed the way forward with regard to the Syrian peace process ahead of the UN Security Council meeting on the same topic. Three days after this meeting, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2254 (December 18, 2015), which endorsed the transitional plan of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG that set out),[72] which established a timetable for formal talks and a united government within six months. The resolution placed UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura in charge of the organization of Syrian talks (The Security Council 2015b).

The Vienna process and the Riyadh conference in 2015 helped to set the scene for Geneva Talks III in January–February 2016, which culminated in the agreement on the cessation of hostilities[73] in February 2016, where the ISSG was designated to monitor and report on compliance (The United States Department of State 2016).

The political negotiations were influenced by military development on the ground. Thus, political parties, such as the SMB, frequently invited Islamist armed groups to utilize military gains on the ground to support their political position. In August 2016, Jaysh al-Fatih (including Faylaq al-Shām[74]) launched a major offensive to retake the military college in Aleppo. The operation was named after Ibrahim Al Yousuf, a member of the Fighting Vanguards who participant in a similar attack in the 1980s, where tens of mostly Alawites military cadets were executed as a retaliation against the Ba'th regime (Halab Today TV 2016).[75] Notably, the earlier position of the SMB during the 1980s was to

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[72] The International Syria Support Group (ISSG) was a group of 20 countries and international organizations who came together for the first time in Vienna, Austria, in October 2015 at the level of foreign ministers to resolve the conflict in Syria after unsuccessful previous Syrian peace initiatives. Russia and the United States cochair the ISSG with the membership of China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Arab League, the European Union, and the United Nations.

[73] Cessation of Hostilities was a temporary agreement to cease combating activities between the government army and rebel groups that arrived on February 26, 2016. The agreement was mostly propelled by the severe deterioration in the humanitarian situation of the population around and across frontlines.

[74] Faylaq al-Shām, literally translated as Levant Legion, is an alliance formed of 19 smaller fractions in 2014 most of them were previously part of the revolutionary shields affiliated with SMB (Syria360 2014). In 2015, Faylaq al-Shām joined Jaysh al-Fatih in new alliance.

[75] The extreme right-wing Sunni did not consider Alawites as Muslim, and the Syrian Muslim brotherhood insisted to have it stated in the Syrian constitution that the religion of the president of the Syrian state should be Muslim. In that sense some of them considered the country is ruled by non-Muslim as a reason for Jihad.

disclaim responsibility for the attack on the artillery college and to deny Ibrahim Al-Yusuf with membership to the SMB. Their stance seemingly changed in 2016 when the SMB announced its on-ground support for armed activities against the regime to disrupt the encirclement of government military forces in east Aleppo in October 2016.[76] Therefore, the SMB rapidly issued a statement that celebrated the achievement and called for the following:

> … this victory to be invested at political and civil levels, to ensure the military–political complementarities, as well as to manage the liberated territories to serve the revolution hosting community at civil level. We also plea to the international community and our Arabs and Muslim brothers to support humanitarian and relief efforts in Aleppo and finally work together to save the unity of Syria land and people.[77]

This development fortified the legitimacy or, at the least, the recognition of armed militants as de facto authorities of control in their territories, which also led a few of them to become increasingly aware of the necessity of the institutionalization of their organization. The first formation of the HNC occurred in a conference for the Syrian opposition in Riyadh in 2015. The committee was composed of 25 persons, 6 of which represented the militants. In addition, Aḥrār al-Shām, among other opposition forces and armed groups, signed the final declaration of the conference (Russia Today 2015). In 2017, the HNC was revisited to include a wider representation, whereas membership increased to 50 members, 10 of which are representative of armed militants (AlSouria Net 2017). The HNC has been the body that represented the Syrian opposition against the regimes during the Syrian peace talks, which were facilitated by the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria or by member states, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia (the Higher Negotiation Committee 2015).

This increase in political effort and the inclusion of a wider spectrum of foreign and Syrian stakeholders in the negotiations helped to achieve partial agreement for the cessation of hostilities[78]. In February 22, 2016, the members of the ISSG reached an agreement, whose terms and conditions were

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[76] For four years (2012–2016), the struggle for Aleppo raged, with the city divided into government-controlled west Aleppo and opposition-controlled east Aleppo. The supply channels to both sides were a serious issue for both sides. After a series of military crimes by the government army, which was backed up by Russian air forces, the city was eventually taken over by the regime in December 2016 (Mroue 2016).

[77] Full text of the statement in available on Asharq Alarabi Center for Strategic and Civilization Studies, London, published on 8 August 2016, https://bit.ly/2SGw00j, last accessed on February 18, 2019.

[78] See footnote no.71.

declared in a joint statement by the co-chairs, namely, Russia and the United States. The terms of the cessation of hostilities indicated a nationwide cessation of hostilities that is applicable to all parties currently engaged in military or paramilitary hostilities against parties, apart from the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, or other terrorist organizations designated by the UN Security Council. The terms also clarified the responsibilities of the Syrian armed opposition and, equally, the responsibilities of the Armed Forces of the Syrian Arab Republic and all forces supporting or being associated with the Armed Forces of the Syrian Arab Republic. At the same time, the terms mandated the ISSG Ceasefire Taskforce to monitor and report the compliance of parties against such terms (US Department of State 2016).

The responsibilities of the armed groups were stated in the following joint statement:

To take part in the cessation of hostilities, armed opposition groups[79] will confirm – to the United States of America or the Russian Federation, who will attest such confirmations to one another as co-chairs of the ISSG by no later than 12:00 (Damascus time) on 26 February 2016 – their commitment to and acceptance of the following terms:

1. To full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254,[80] adopted unanimously on December 18, 2015, — including the readiness to <u>participate in the UN-facilitated political negotiation</u> process;

2. To <u>cease attacks</u> with any weapons, including rockets, mortars, and anti-tank guided missiles, against Armed Forces of the Syrian Arab Republic and any associated forces;

3. To refrain from acquiring or <u>seeking to acquire territory from other parties</u> to the ceasefire;

4. To allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe, unhindered, and sustained access through Ghūṭah areas under their operational control and <u>allow immediate humanitarian assistance to reach all people</u> in need;

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[79] By February 2016, major opposition groups fighting against the regime were Islamist or moderate Islamist as called by the US; however, the ISSG addressed the groups as *armed opposition groups* as a general umbrella term to include any group fighting against the regime, including the remaining FSA fractions and other smaller groups.
[80] The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 was unanimously adopted on December 18, 2015. It calls for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria. The resolution demands that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilian targets; it urges all Member States to support efforts to achieve a ceasefire and requests the UN to convene the parties to engage in formal negotiations in early January 2016 (The Security Council 2015b).

5. To <u>proportionate use of force</u> (i.e., no greater than required to address an immediate threat) if and when responding in self-defense.

The abovementioned segment indicates the evident recognition of the international community of Islamist opposition armed groups as equivalent to state actors in terms of their capability to challenge the state actor and to threaten its authority through attacks and to acquire territories, which is similar to a regular state army. In addition, it admits the possibility of these armed groups in preventing humanitarian aid to certain sections of the population and the proportionate use of armament. Consequently, terms 4 and 5 hold armed groups accountable at the same level as state actors and demand them to comply with the basic notions of the International Humanitarian Law,[81] as explained in the Geneva conventions.[82]

The involvement of Islamist opposition armed groups in the peace negotiation for Syria developed further during 2016 to take an increasingly formalized participation directly at the negotiation table instead of proxy agreements, such as the abovementioned Cessation of Hostility Agreement. On December 28, 2016, Turkey and Russia agreed on a nationwide ceasefire plan for Syria to go into effect at 00:00 on December 30, 2016,[83] and invited Islamist opposition armed groups to peace talks for Syria. Among the invited groups were the Aḥrār al-Shām, Jaysh al-Islām, and Sham legions.

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[81] International humanitarian law is a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects persons who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. International humanitarian law is also known as the law of war or the law of armed conflict. International humanitarian law is part of the international law, which is the body of rules governing relations between States. International law is contained in agreements between States—treaties or conventions—in customary rules, which consist of State practice considered by them as legally binding, and in general principles. International humanitarian law applies to armed conflicts. It does not regulate whether a State may use force; this is governed by an important, but distinct, part of the international law set out in the United Nations Charter (ICRC 2010).

[82] The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols are international treaties that contain the most important rules limiting the barbarity of war. They aim to protect people who do not take part in conflict (civilians, medics, aid workers) and those who can no longer fight (wounded, sick and shipwrecked troops, prisoners of war) (ICRC 2010).

[83] The ceasefire plan and initiative of peace talks was communicated to the Security Council by a Letter dated December 29, 2016, by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations and the Chargé d'Affaires of the Permanent Mission of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (United Nations 2016). The initiative was immediately endorsed by the Security Council Resolution 2236 adopted on December 31, 2016 (Security Council 2016).

The first round of the Astana talks was held on January 2324, 2017, with the participation of the government of Syria and Syrian opposition delegations in addition to representatives for Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the UN. The Syria opposition delegation included representatives of 14 armed opposition groups, namely, Faylaq al-Shām, Jaysh al-Izza, Jaysh al-Islām, Suqūr al-Shām, Idlib FSA, Jaysh al-Nasr, Liwā Shuhada al-Islām, the first coast brigade, Levantine Front, Fastaqim group, Sultan Murad Division, and the Southern Front. The delegation was led by Muhammad Alush of Jaysh al-Islām, where all of them, except for the Free Syria Army brigades, are Islamist groups (CNN 2017).

Against this background, the Astana talks led to a significant shift in the course of the development and transformation of Islamist armed opposition groups. On the one hand, Islamist armed groups are currently considered an important member of the negotiation delegation that represented the Syrian opposition against the delegation of the regime. In contrast, previous negotiations (i.e., Geneva talks) mainly included the political umbrella of the Syrian opposition coalition. For the first time, a direct peace negotiation for Syria was conducted with secularists and Islamists; delegations sat on the same table face to face; which gave more weight for Islamist armed opposition groups if the historical reluctance of the regime toward Islamists is considered. The reason for this notion is that the Syrian regime refrained from meeting Islamists face to face and refused to address Islamists similarly to the Syrian Coalition despite the fact that Islamists received international support.

Moreover, the Astana talks were a political opportunity for armed groups to participate in discussions about the future of Syria beyond the ongoing armed conflict. In the process of reaching this phase, participation in Astana talks introduced another transformation in the role of Islamist opposition armed groups, from that of a 'spoiler' of peace and security in Syria to a 'contributor' toward conflict resolution. The role as a spoiler indicates that armed actors engaged in inter-group conflict and perceived the peace process as a threat to the interests of the groups. Hence, they undermine the peace process by resorting to armed violence (Stedman 1997, 5). Conversely, their role as a contributor suggests that the armed actors realize the limits of their political ambition. Therefore, they demonstrate a willingness to share political power and work toward peace in the long run, although they occasionally resort to violence (A. Moore 2013, 58). In general, such a transformation in political role toward the

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peace process is a difficult endeavor, which typically requires a certain level of capacity building in terms of group leadership and representation with regard to the approach of the negotiations process itself, engagement with sponsoring states, confrontation with government delegations, and maneuvering toward political objectives. In changing their roles, each Islamist armed opposition group is also required to engage with its respective constituency and explain this change in group position, that is, from direct military engagement that intend to oust the regime to the adoption and endorsement of political negotiations.

Notably, the Astana talks with the involvement of armed opposition groups did not replace the Geneva talks, which involved a secularist-led Syria political opposition represented by the HNC. However, although the Astana talks were more operational and mainly concerned about the compliance of the parties to the ceasefire according to security council resolutions, the Geneva talks addressed the more difficult question, that is, the overall peace agreement of Syria. Therefore, the Geneva talks faced more challenges with nearly no progress toward an agreement. To demonstrate the difference between the two forums, the Astana talks in January 2017 produced a few agreed actionable points, such as (a) the parties agreed that the solution to the Syrian crisis is political instead of military; (b) the parties agreed to collectively fight against the ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other designated terrorist organizations; lastly, (c) the parties agreed to maintain the ceasefire agreement according to the UNSC resolutions (Guardian 2017). On the contrary, Geneva talks IV, which occurred in February to March 2017, ended without agreements, because the regime delegation focused on combating terrorism, whereas the opposition delegation was interested in the political transition process (Reuters 2017).

Afterward, the Astana talks repeatedly convened in March, July, September, October, and December 2017, and March 2018, in the unprecedented frequency of peace talks for Syria in one year. The third round of the Astana talks, which were held in March 2017, yielded further commitment from all parties toward the agreed ceasefire and produced a proposal for establishing de-escalation zones across Syria (The Astana Times 2017). Moreover, the Astana talks that followed in May 2017 resulted in the addition of Iran as a guarantor state after Russia and Turkey, where the three countries signed a

memorandum of understanding regarding the establishment of the de-escalation zones (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017).[84]
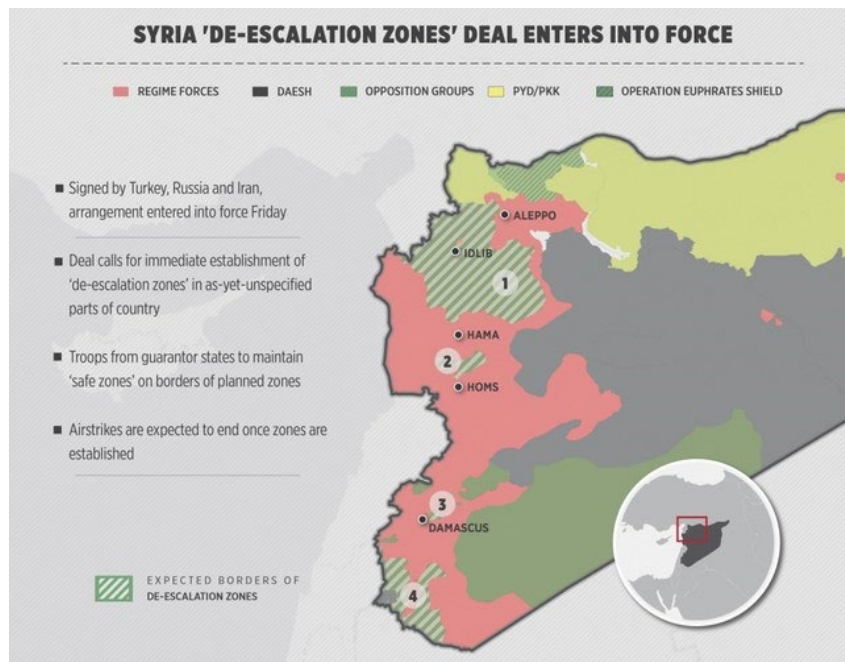
Map 3-5 Four De-Escalation Zones in Syria

Source: Daily Sabah (2017)

The fact that neither of the government of Syria nor the opposition armed groups signed the deal indicated that the regime is free of commitment and has the ability to launch attacks against the armed Islamist opposition, which ultimately contributed to the disadvantage and further fragmentation and marginalization of opposition forces after the deal was signed and implemented by the three states.

In addition to the participation of various political representatives in a collective manner, a few Islamist armed groups obtained opportunities to individually engage with other states in the region. For example, Zahran Alush, the leader of Jaysh al-Islām, visited Istanbul to participate in meetings

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[84] The three counties agreed to establish four de-escalation zones in Syria. The largest one of those included the Idlib Governorate and adjoining districts of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia Governorates; the other three zones were set up in the northern rebel-controlled parts of the Homs Governorate, the rebel-controlled eastern Ghūṭah, and along the Jordan–Syria border. In those areas, combat operations would be halted as of May 6, 2017; it also envisaged suspension of flights of military aircraft in those areas, as well as the creation of conditions for humanitarian access, medical assistance, return of displaced civilians to their homes, and restoration of damaged infrastructure. The memorandum was concluded for six months and could be extended automatically. A full text of the de-escalation zones agreement is published on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website in English. http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041

coordinated by Turkey and Saudi Arabia with regard to their future support for Jaysh al-Islām activities against the regime (Orient News 2015). The main objective of these meetings was to acquire financial and military support from Turkey and Saudi Arabia to build on the military advancement that Jaysh al-Islām made not only against the regime but also against the Jabhat al-Nusra Front. For Turkey, the strategic position of Jaysh al-Islām, which is located near the capital (Damascus), was one of few strong points that Islamist armed groups can use to initiate a direct threat to the regime. Alternatively, Saudi Arabia was willing to fund Jaysh al-Islām as a part of their fight against the IS and al-Qaeda to combat terrorism in Syria.

Eventually, in 2017, Jaysh al-Islām approached Russia through an Egyptian mediation to broker a deal with the Syrian regime to enable the evacuation of the wounded from Eastern Ghūṭah and to enable the flow of lifesaving supplies into the territory. Through this deal, Jaysh al-Islām sought to alleviate the suffering of civilians under the Jaysh al-Islām control and, therefore, regime military besiegement and to lift the spirits of the fighters by offering medical treatment for those injured. Indeed, a deal was reached in July 2017, which was considered a political victory for Jaysh al-Islām at the external and internal levels.

3.4   Conclusion

Islamic opposition armed groups played military and political roles during the Syrian conflict. The role of militants was more evident during the early days of the Syrian uprising, when these groups used popular demonstrations to call for the protection of the demonstrators against the brutality of the regime security and military forces. The cause of the 'protection of civilian demonstrators' was translated into a 'positive' action, which was accompanied by direct attacks on the institution of the state and state army personnel and positions not only in the battlefields but also in urban centers, including the capital city, Damascus.

Although the militant action of Islamic opposition armed groups was very clear and directed toward the regime, they faced major challenges due to the presence of transnational jihadi groups, namely, the IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, which competed with the regime. The fight with Jihadists consumed

an important part of the military and human resources of these groups, which distracted their power as well as reduced their controlled territories.

On the political front, Islamist opposition armed groups increasingly became involved in international diplomacy and political negotiations as a correlation with their advance on the military front and as a proof of their capability to maintain the boundaries of territories under their control, where a large number of populations live under their protection/control. The Islamist opposition armed groups continued to coordinate with the political umbrella of the Syrian opposition, where representatives of their groups became members of the HNC. In the 2017 Astana talks, the representatives of Islamist armed opposition groups led the opposition delegation with the increase in their political and diplomatic recognition to a certain level, such that they were considered a contributor to the political solution of the Syrian conflict and as a part of the framework of the solution.

The international diplomacy of Islamist opposition armed groups also encouraged the bilateral engagement among state actors in the region to support their internal position and to offer cooperation in exchange for sponsorship with military and political support.

Importantly, however, the transformation of the role of Islamist opposition armed groups from purely militant actors to political actors required high levels of competencies in terms of constituency politics and the introduction of the changing policies of the groups to their respective communities.

In other words, the relationship between state actors and Islamist armed groups began violently; the regime oppressed Islamists through its large-scale armed forces, whereas Islamist armed forces reacted with guerrilla attacks against the forces of the regime (2v). At the same time, Islamist armed groups remained open to join inter-state peace conferences and succeeded in making international society recognize them as a part of peace negotiations (2g).

The subsequent chapter focuses on the role of the emerging Islamist armed opposition groups in the daily life of the community and examines their ideological, communal, and political outreach methods in the context of the current Syrian conflict. The robustness of various governance structures introduced by Islamist opposition armed groups, the aspects of social and civil services covered through

these groups, and the effectiveness and sustainability of these structures are especially addressed within the framework of this thesis.

PART THREE — COMMUNITY-LEVEL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN ISLAMIST ARMED GROUPS AND SOCIETY

Chapter 4   The Social–Political Role of Islamist Armed Groups in the Daily Life of the Local Community

The weakened state of Syria provided Islamist armed groups with the opportunity to play a role in governance by, first and foremost, taking responsibility in maintaining order and security in territories under their control and breaking the state monopoly on this function. Second, the endeavor to create or contribute to the installation of local administration systems presented various models of the civil administration for the management of daily life issues in communities. These structures, which can be an alternative to state administration, varied across groups and locations.

This chapter covers the various factors that enabled or hindered the involvement of Islamist armed opposition groups in the daily life of the community; the dynamics that created such an opportunity; and the motivation of Islamist armed opposition groups to grab such an opportunity.

This part corresponds to the 3g (governance) vector on the third line of the triangular module (Figure (1-1) in Chapter 1) and explains the relationship between Islamist armed opposition groups and local communities in areas under their control, where the two interacting issues related to governance in the form of social services, welfare, and civil administration.

4.1   Weakened State, Alternative Governance Bodies, and Islamist Armed Opposition Groups

Building on Migdal's argument (1988), in the contemporary world, the state is the sole accepted model of political order and post-colonization; middle eastern countries, including Syria, adopted the state as the way to pursue social and economic development, and ultimately, the state is widely seen as the solution of all social problems. However, as the state is weakened and therefore unable to accumulate the necessary authority to close the gap and other social authorities try to fill in, and by doing that, it stymies the central state's efforts.

Migdal's theory presents a model where state and society interact and influence each another. He also presents society as a mix of social organizations that do not necessarily present one uniform entity (Migdal 1988, 28). On the other hand, the state is a social organization governed by the same rules as the society but operates at a greater scale. Like social associations, the state seeks social control by having the people incorporate its rules into their survival strategies or even by monopolizing individual survival strategies. "State social control involves the successful subordination of people's inclinations of social behavior or behavior sought by other social organizations in favor of the behavior prescribed by state rulers" (Migdal 1988, 22). A weak state, then, is a state that cannot insert itself into the survival strategies of its citizens.

The reason for the weakness of these states, Migdal then theorizes, lies in the particular structure of their societies. He characterizes most Third World societies as being decentralized collections of social units without an overarching system of symbols or values. Instead, it forms a weblike society controlled by strongmen. The strongman is a holder of the local authority in the framework of a social organization. Migdal emphasized that in a weblike society, people are governed; however, the allocation of values, however, is not centralized. Numerous systems of justice operate simultaneously (Migdal 1988, 38-39). Reflecting this on Syria, as the central state weakened, the weblike community groups resurfaced, presenting themselves through localized controls and introducing a new system of governance.

Additionally, a major reason for weakened central state in Syria is the ongoing civil war magnified by sub-regional and international interference. In modern times, civil wars have structural roots through the combination of a simple, robust military technology and decolonization, which rendered the world dominated by several fragile states with limited capacities of control in the peripheries of state territories (Cederman, Girardin 2007:88). Furthermore, the failed state displayed disruptive effects that exceeded the state territories and led to disruptions to regional or international stability and security, such as the growth of jihadist groups and the flow of refugees, which added to the fragility of the neighboring countries and triggered a political crisis across Europe (Lynch 2016).

The instability in Syria immediately attracted the attention of the international community and major international and regional actors, which fueled selective support for the fighting parties without contributing to the final solution. The resources provided based on political and ideological agendas, together with existing stances of ethnic and religious enmity, have prepared the root causes of a prolonged civil war and a proxy international conflict. Furthermore, it provided evidence that the state has been losing its monopoly to execute its power within its territory (Rotberg 2004).

As violence continued to spread and to intensify across Syrian territories, further depletion affected state resources and disrupted economic activities and the flow of national revenues. The latest reports indicated that more than 570,000 were killed on Syrian territories[85]; the majority of these deaths (more than 85%) are attributed to violence, and the rest was derived as an indirect result of the war, such as the collapse of healthcare infrastructure, lack of access to medical care and medicine, poor access to water and sanitation, the spread of communicable diseases, decreased vaccination rates, food scarcity, and malnutrition (Nasser, et al. 2016) Moreover, approximately 13 million Syrians were displaced from their homes within Syria, whereas 5.65 million refugees crossed the borders to other countries (UNHCR 2019). The interruption of economic, agricultural, and industrial activities and the loss of property and income as an indirect impact of the armed conflict led to a situation where more than 83% of the Syrian population are living below the poverty line (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2019).

The central government has been struggling to maintain its monopoly in the provision of public services to the people apart from only order and security, which are not only the most crucial but also economic and social services, to compensate for the economic loss and increased poverty due to war. Once the institutions of the government ceased to function in widely populated areas, a few alternative modalities were created to fill this gap in civil administration, order and security, judicial services, and others. Among such modalities were the local administration councils (LACs). Formed one after the

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[85] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported 570,000 deaths between March 2011 and March 2019, out of which the observatory documented the cases of 371,222 people killed on Syrian territory during the same period, while the remaining cases were reported to the observatory but could not be documented due to extreme secrecy by the fighting parties and difficulties related to security and access to those cases (Syrian Observatory of Human Rights 2019).

other since 2012 and under the political opposition umbrella presented by the SNC and, eventually, the Syria Coalition as grassroots public administrations, the councils intended to maintain or restore basic public services and to provide humanitarian aid after the withdrawal of the government. The formation of the LACs is an example of an alternative local governance as part of the desired political change in the country. The work toward or for political change through replacement was evident in cases where the SNC had established the LACs and appointed their board members before their actual formation on the ground (Ali 2015).

The LACs were established mainly to replace the existing municipality offices that were previously under the supervision of the governorate council and the Ministry of Local Administration in the central government. In the same manner, LACs are supposed to report to the Ministry of Local Administration, Relief, and Refugees in the interim opposition government. Moreover, they are supposed to be elected bodies by the community that resembles a bottom-up approach to local governance. However, a few instances of a top-down approach were observed in the establishment of the LACs, as the opposition umbrella mainly contributed to the creation of the LACs in certain locations, which was urged by political pressure to meet demands at the local level to replace or fill the gap of service provision after the withdrawal of the government. In addition, the LACs should be independent from military and police forces in principle. However, this ideal is inconsistent across opposition-controlled territories in Syria. As such, the level of independency varies according to the dynamics of the interference and power relations among various nonstate actors (Ziadah 2014). The official website of the Syria Coalition descried the establishment and relations between LACs and the military sector as follows:

> The local councils are completely connected with the opposition groups, whether revolutionary or military. They play an important role in providing civil services to these groups, which gives them a reason to continue their work. Most of the time, city councils are formed from the revolutionary councils and in some cases formed from the military councils.[86]

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[86] From the Syria Coalition official page: http://en.etilaf.org/syrian-local-councils/establishment-of-local-councils.html, last accessed October 2, 2019.
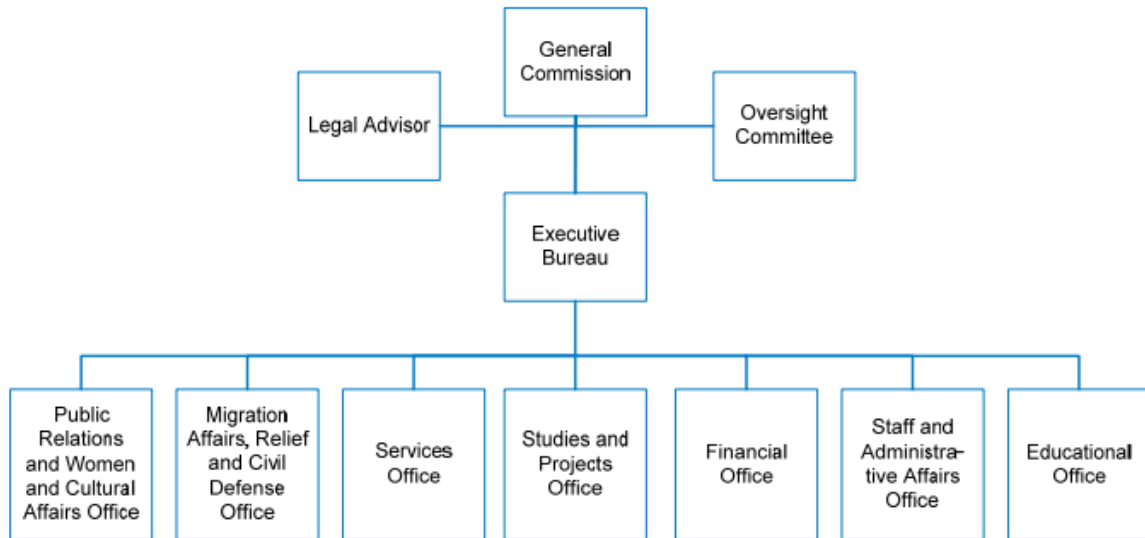
Figure 4—1 Example of the structure of a local administration council from Zamalka town in East Ghūṭah (rural Damascus region)

Source: Gharibah, et al. (2017)

The other body that contributed to the provision of services and relief in opposition-controlled territories is the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). In its self-introduction, ACU (2011) described itself as a "non-governmental coordination body aiming at maximizing the impact of assistance delivered to the Syrian people by coordinating the efforts of donors, implementing agencies, and community representatives" (ACU 2011). The ACU headquarter is based in Istanbul and is responsible for channeling international donations into liberated Syrian territories through the LACs and NGOs. To date, the ACU reported the coordination of more US$250 million to opposition-controlled territories in Syria since 2011 (ACU 2011).

At this juncture, the study conducts an in-depth examination of how the community departed from a state-controlled local administration and shifted to an alternative mechanism. As the uprising became increasingly armed and as the conflict became increasingly violent, Islamist armed opposition groups found themselves under pressure to fulfill the demands of the local people. Such demands include filling a persistent gap in social services necessary for the daily life of the community and providing relief to individuals affected by the armed conflict. Furthermore, these groups found

themselves in a situation where they needed to consider cooperation or competition with other modalities of service provision.

Between 2011 and 2018, the governance of Islamist armed opposition groups covered three main fields, namely, the maintenance of internal security and order and provision of related judicial services; provision of public services such as health, education, water supply, and other community services; and c) the provision and facilitation of lifesaving relief assistance, especially for the segment of the population directly impacted by the armed conflict in the form of displacement, loss of income, and direct injuries.

As the central government withdrew from territories under the control of insurgents, these areas formed a range of ungoverned spaces in the sense that territorial state control is ceded or shared with other actors apart from those officially recognized by the sovereign government. Hence, the term *failed state* in this context does not refer to the absolute absence of governance, because new types of governance were recreated by local communities (Clunan and Trinkunas 2010). The failure to resolve the conflict in a peaceful manner did not end governance, and war did not prevent the local communities within the controlled territories of armed opposition groups from administering basic public goods and delivering services. Instead of falling into the complete status of anarchy, these territories witnessed the emergence of a range of alternative structures based on formal and informal agreements among nonstate actors, armed groups, and community leaders.

Such alternative informal structures provided armed groups, businessmen, community leaders, youth, and others with opportunity to participate in varying degrees in the local decision-making process, especially in terms of the regulation of access to resources. Such a situation introduced competition among various institutions over resources and legitimacy. The LACs competed not only with one another[87] but also with Islamist armed opposition groups in their respective regions and provinces. In East Ghūṭah, for example, the presence of armed groups cannot be ignored as a contestation between

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[87] Such as the competition between the unified administration council of East Ghūṭah and the Local Council for Rural Damascus (Angelova 2014).

civilians and military components over the formation of local governance structures, which was a significant and constant aspect of the political landscape in Damascus (Angelova 2014).

As previously discussed, the 'state-in-society' approach of Migdal (2001) recognizes that the state only represents the land, people, and sovereignty and holds the right to monopolize the violent apparatus, although many other forces struggle to obtain and maintain dominance over the legitimate use of force. This view is further complemented with the research on governance in the developing world, such as Asian and African countries, where governance by the central state is difficult due to the complex agricultural and social geopolitics or armed conflicts and protracted crises (Van de Walle and Scott 2010, Risse 2013). Recent research calls for a renewed sociology of governance in non-western contexts, which depart from the normative, state-centrist notion of (good) governance and state reconstruction. These views have dominated academic and policy debates in a significant manner (Raeymaekers, Menkhaus and Vlassenroot 2008). The weak state and the emergence of less governed territories create opportunities for other actors, such as armed groups or the population itself, to act and contribute to the governance of these territories. The perception that such multilayered contribution to governance by various actors, instead of state monopoly, is complex and difficult to map is also realistic.

The Syria situation of weakened state control over territories, the society regrouped and adjusted to the none state actors taking over the power of the state as a means of survival (Migdal 2001). The none state actors are now playing the role of the state by imposing rules that control people's daily life as well as defying the central state's control of territories by imposing new boundaries. The term "boundaries" here does not necessarily indicate borders as territorial borders only; boundaries signify the point at which something becomes something else (an Islamist armed group becomes a liberator, a terrorist becomes a martyr, the regime becomes the enemy), and so many other definitions no longer apply (Migdal 2008). That is the social dimension associated with the weakened state or none state situation. In addition, the Islamic identity is introduced to serve as an alternative means for connectedness and social formation, and religion is now part of the construction of collective identity under such new circumstances.

Numerous studies recently intended to account for alternative governance structures in territories outside of the control of the central government during the ongoing conflict in Syria (Angelova 2014, Ali 2015, Gharibah, et al. 2017). Such studies used the terms 'less governed spaces and opposition Syria' when referring to territories outside the reach and control of the central government. Moreover, they used the term 'rebel governance or civilian authorities' to refer to systems created in an alternation of the absence of governance from the central state. Noably, the short time frame of the Syrian conflict since 2011 with the even shorter timeframe for such an alternative governance mechanism does not enable the study to assess its efficiency, effectiveness, or impact in any level. Instead, an important focus of analysis is the elements of each structure and characteristics in terms of inclusion and participatory levels, decision-making process, community engagement, and military influence.

As another side of the experience of governance in opposition-held territories, this study shed light on how Islamist armed opposition groups in Syria strive for legitimacy and recognition using the alternative governance structures at various levels to achieve this target. The first denotes the interaction between the national level opposition system of the LACs under the umbrella of the Syria Coalition and the ACU. Specifically, western donors financially supported the ACU not only for the purpose of humanitarian relief in opposition-controlled territories but also to support the institutionalization and formalization of community-level governance. The second pertains to their direct relationship with foreign donors of funding for these structures and the acquisition of the required technical knowledge as applicable. The last aspect pertains to the engagement with local communities through alternative governance structures as a means of acquiring acceptance from the community and managing their demands at the same time.

According to Mampilly (2012), insurgents should meet four main conditions for governance to function effectively. First, a force capable of policing the local population should be developed. Second, a broader dispute resolution mechanism should be established. Third, additional welfare and public goods together with security should be provided.[88] Finally, the civilian population should embrace this

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[88] In his case study, Mampilly focused on health and education services.

governance structure through formal and informal means, including but not limited to representation (Mampilly 2012, 64). Interaction at the national level of the opposition governance structure is especially important, because it presents a complementary relationship, where Islamist opposition armed groups endeavor to complement their success in fulfilling two of the four conditions of Mampilly (i.e., policing and dispute resolution). It includes public services and feedback mechanisms provided by the LACs to ensure a form of effective governance (Gharibah, et al. 2017).

Another crucial aspect of the approach to services by Islamist armed opposition groups is their perception of international human rights law and norms and whether they respect them. In the past eight years, major violations of human rights and international humanitarian laws were documented in relation to Islamist groups in Syria.[89] Thus, providing services to the population is a liability of the governing entity, which is deeply rooted in conventional human rights law, that is, the right of every citizen to safety, shelter, food, and dignified living. Alternatively, international humanitarian laws, despite being a much narrow and specific body of law that governs during wartimes, clearly place accountability on state and nonstate actors to ensure that relief assistance is provided to the population and that a humane treatment is given to wounded fighters and prisoners of war. The sources of the legitimization of service delivery, which was conducted or permitted by Islamist groups in Syria, are diverse and are seemingly derived from various conceptual bodies in accordance with the Islamic law and shariʿa. However, such legislations appear to have discrepancies in the application of the law and in the definition of the eligible population, which permitted these groups to manipulate the service delivery system to control the population.

The role of the local community and the interaction between Islamist opposition armed groups and local communities did not always follow the same patterns. The substitution and provision of services do not automatically grant legitimacy. Instead, they are a means for individuals with the capacity to use violence to acquire legitimacy through the provision of services and ensuring the safety of public spaces, especially through a concrete system of dispute settlement (Baylouny 2010). However,

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[89] For example, the use of prisoners of war from the Syrian government army and civilians, including women and children as human shields by Jaysh al-Islām (Human Rights Watch 2015), reveals a significant ignorance or disregard of the international law as such actions could amount to a war crime.

a form of accountability may be observed in the behavior of Islamic armed opposition groups to the local population, which seemingly acknowledges the political agency of the masses to a certain extent. The adoption of the Syrian Islamic Front of 'gradualism' in the implementation of its agenda can be one of these examples (Pierret 2017, 143–144).

The situation may have also introduced competition into governance, because the central government, according to context and location, also intended to maintain ties with the local community in these locations. For instance, the Homs governorate (regime side) continued to supply FSA-controlled towns in rural Homs with a share of subsidy goods, such as wheat flour and house cooking gas, despite their accusation of all armed rebels, including the FSA, of being a 'terrorist'. In addition, scholars reported that the monthly wages of defected army personnel were being paid throughout the negotiations in preparation for their re-integration in the national army.[90] These scenarios are examples of competition over constituency between the regime and Islamist armed groups, who provide alternative services. Furthermore, they are examples that the central government attempted to protect credibility and legitimacy through the delivery of political goods to avoid the state-failure situation identified by Rotberg (2004).

4.2 Provision of Security, Judicial, and Social Services under Islamic Armed Groups

The following section covers three sectors of services provided in territories controlled by Islamic armed groups, namely, security and order; judicial services; and social services. The role of Islamist armed groups in each sector varies according to context. Occasionally, these groups had to develop a holistic system of maintaining security and order. In other instances, they partially contributed to the existing judicial courts. In a few places, they enabled NGOs to freely provide humanitarian relief and social services to the population, although they received credits for allowing the services.

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[90] Source requested anonymity after speaking with government top employees in charge of the rural Homs profile in 2012.

4.2.1 The Force to control the population and to maintain Security and Order

Maintaining military control requires a high level of security surveillance that covers the internal security of the territory to avoid penetration by enemy elements. At the same time, it requires strengthening the role of law and prevention of criminal acts within the community. The modality of Islamist armed opposition groups to maintain social order seems to adopt the Islamist ideology as the common law of the community at various levels.

In areas such as Dārayyā, Islamist groups did monitor internal security and order and exerted the power to enforce it through an independent court system. A female respondent of Dārayyā origin in an interview conducted by the author in Amman in 2018–2019 explained that:

> In Dārayyā, there has always been one brigade only, that never multiplied or divided: Liwāʾ Shuhadaʾ al-Islām [the Martyrs of Islam Brigade]. They were taking care [of the community]. They sat up a court by themselves and started following up on the cases of those who steal or cases of those who drink alcohol… They would monitor wrongdoings and held judgments [against the perpetrator]. They also caught spies.[91]

In East Ghūṭah, Jaysh al-Islām established a wide security network, as a few reports indicted 21 security branches across towns and villages in East Ghūṭah, which also has three prisons (al-Tawba, al-Baṭūn, and al-Kahf[92]) in addition to detention centers. Prisons were seemingly used for the population found guilty of criminal acts, whereas detention centers were reserved for fighters and civilians affiliated with other conflicting parties including those from other opposition groups (Diob 2018).

The aforementioned cases indicate a situation where one dominant group exercises control. However, in the northern and southern regions of Syria, a mixed control of various Islamist armed groups exists in addition to interference from the security operations of other external states in Syria due to proximity to the borders. For example, in addition to Hayʾat Taḥrīr al-Shām, which is a major controlling group in the Idlib region, other fighting groups, such as the National Liberation Front

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[91] Interview no. 5, Female, 36 years Old from Dārayyā , currently living in Amman.
[92] The names of the prisons indicated Islamic reference; for instance, al-Tawba is the Islamic concept of repenting to God due to performing any sins and misdeeds (The Oxford Dictionary of Islam n.d.).

(Turkish-backed rebel alliance) and smaller groups affiliated with the al-Qaeda (e.g., Hurras al-Din and Turkistan Islamic Party) controlled strategic locations near the borders (Zulfriqar 2020).

Meanwhile, in Dārayyā and East Ghūṭah, the maintenance of security and order was integrated and very well coordinated within the military structure of the armed groups. The militant group could assume different forms according to the type of relationship that the militants maintain with the community, the type of structure they possess or possessed, and the capacity of the militants to overstretch and cover such functions. For example, in the south, the Southern Front co-existed and benefited from the presence of the Free Syria Police and its funding due to the lack of resources of the Southern Front to cover this aspect. Other examples include Aḥrār al-Shām in Idlib and Jaysh al-Islām in East Ghūṭah, who also established their internal security forces and operated prisons with direct management.

4.2.2 Dispute Resolution and Provision of Judicial Services

To reinforce security and order, Islamist armed groups found themselves in need of a complementary judiciary system that can determine the cases raised by the population under their control especially due to the wide spread of arms, which led to the increase in criminal acts in the absence of the conventional police and security administration (Zeidan 2017).

Due to the lack of order and security, the pressure from the local community increased with the drastic increase in disputes between members of the community and armed groups as well as among personnel of different armed fractions. Calls have been issued to establish a court system due to the early examples of fighting armed groups who resorted to law and shariʿa experts within the community to resolve disputes, which became an example to be followed by others. Eventually, this system absorbed several civilian disputes and small-scale disagreements with the development of court system developed at the local level, albeit in a fragmented manner. However, another problem emerged in terms of disagreements among members of Islamist armed groups, that is, the inadequate separation of powers and the lack of independent executive authority (Ekman and Meyer 2021).

When intra-group fighting has depleted much of the military resources, the need emerged for armed groups to work toward the formation of higher courts to establish trusted law and shariʿa -based legal professionals who were trusted by all and held the authority to impose court decisions. Despite partial independence from the influence of Islamist armed groups, the higher court system relatively operated on a power–balance system as the committees employed a fair representation that enhanced transparency (Lebanese Center for Research and Consulting 2016).

The establishment of the courts rendered possible the documentation and approval of the affairs of civilians, such as birth, death and marriage cases, and the provision of solutions to other legal disputes between civilians. A few of the courts played a more important role, that is, to resolve disputes among the armed groups themselves in areas with contested control. The examples examined in this research (see the profiles in the following section) demonstrates a significant advance in the effort invested for the development of a judicial system, where militants themselves agreed to submit to higher courts composed of legal and shariʿa experts for dispute resolution.

One example is Maḥkamat Dār al- 'Adl in Ḥawrān, which was established in January 2014 and was a result of the merging of various localized courts operated by small Islamist fractions. It was quickly endorsed by more than 90 small armed groups (except for the ISIS-affiliated Liwā' al-Yarmūk). The main court in South Dār al-'Adl had reportedly addressed more than 21,000 cases covering main areas of criminal trials, certification and ratification of sales and purchase contracts, marriage contracts, and civil affairs related to the civil register directory (Al-Ahmad 2018).

In contrast to the national judicial system, alternative court systems established under Islamist armed opposition groups were limited to the local level and were effective only in specific regions or provinces. These courts were supported directly by the Islamist armed opposition groups wherever they existed and did not follow the Ministry of Justice of the interim opposition government (Zeidan 2017). This scenario may reflect the original disconnection of the Islamist armed opposition groups from the interim government in exile as well as the localized nature and lack of consistency among these courts. Conversely, the Ministry of Justice of the opposition exerted limited geographic jurisdiction control in

the ground and could not oversee or coordinate with the various judicial systems of Islamist armed groups. Table (4-1) enumerates the various court systems of the major groups.

Group	Aḥrār al-Shām	Jaysh al-Islām	Liwā' Shuhadā'al-Islām	Southern Front
Location	Idlib	East Ghūṭah	Dārayyā	Dar'ā
Court name	Al-Hay'ah Islāmiya lil-Qaḍā' (the Higher Judiciary Commission)	Al-Majles al-Qaḍā' al-'Ȧla fil Ghūṭah al-Sharqīyah (the Higher Judicial Council in East Ghūṭah)	N/A	Maḥkamat Dār al-'Adl in Ḥawrān (the House of Justice Court in Ḥawrān93)
Legislation body	Hay'at al-Shām al-Islāmiya 94 (member of Syria Islamic Council)	N/A	N/A	Member of the Syria Islamic Council
Law reference	Islamic Law, then moved to adopt the Unified Arab Law95 in June 2017	Shariʿa Law then the Unified Arab Law since November 2015	Shariʿa Law	The Unified Arab Law

Table 4—1 Courts Under Major Islamist Armed Opposition Groups in Syria
for 2011–2018

Source: Created by the author

These alternative court systems have been developing and improving over time, which reflects the capacity of Islamist groups in terms of legal scholars, judges, and knowledge of law-making, as well as the political pressure to harmonize with other court systems within the same geographic location.

At the same time, Islamist armed opposition groups resorted to adopting the Unified Arab Law, which is secular, as endorsed by the Arab League. This initiative is motivated by the need to formulate a nation-state judiciary system without copying the central state law, the importance of distinguishing

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[93] Ḥawrān is another term to refer to southern Syria region, specifically Dar'ā governorate and its suburbs. Ḥawrān region spans parts of southern Syria and northern Jordan.
[94] Official twitter account of Hay'at al-Shām al-Islāmiya is: https://twitter.com/judiciaryahrar?lang=en
[95] The Unified Arab Law is a reference law document as agreed by the Arab League after their Sanaa Meeting 1981 aiming at unifying Arab legislation systems. The result was a reference set of law that attempts to harmonize the Islamic law with more modernized and accommodating set of laws in consultation with the law and shariʿa scholars from across the Arab world. The resulting set of reference laws were published by the Arab Center for Law and Judicial Research https://carjj.org/node/237 last accessed on October 1, 2019.

themselves from transnational jihadi groups that adopted the shariʿa Islamic law, and (c) the pressure from the local community and less conservative Syrian population for the modernization of the Islamist law to ensure applicability.

This transformation of Aḥrār al-Shām judicial law to adopt certain references to the secular Unified Arab Law is the first endeavor to unify the juridical system in the opposition-controlled Syrian territory. Afterward, the four main judicial councils, namely, East Ghūṭah, Idlib, Aleppo, and Dar'ā, announced the establishment of the Supreme Judicial Council in Syria in July 2017.[96] This council was the first step toward a national level opposition system and an alternative to the existing system of the regime in the post-conflict transition period. In addition, the secular Unified Arab Law is also the base for the Syrian national law for the regime and the opposition Ministries of Justices. Hence, this law could potentially function as a tool for coordination among the localized and uncoordinated judicial systems.

In addition to criminal disputes and issues in the community, various types of courts were formed to especially address issues of intra-groups disputes. Examples include the dispute between Jaysh al-Islām and Faylaq al-Raḥmān [97] (Diab 2016) and that between Islamist opposition armed groups and groups affiliated with al-Qaeda,[98] such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Dar'ā.

These types of courts have introduced another level of development of the judicial system, where the court was designated a higher authority than that of the armed groups that found and agreed to follow it.

4.2.3   Social services and relief operations

At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, public services offered by territories controlled by the government and nonstate actors remained functioning to a certain extent with different capacities and

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[96] A copy of the declaration of establishment the Supreme Judicial Council in Syria can be found on https://www.nedaa-sy.com/news/715 published July 19, 2017 last accessed on October 1, 2019.
[97] Faylaq al-Raḥmān (al-Rahman Legion) is a Syrian rebel group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army that operated in Eastern Ghūṭah, in the outskirts of Damascus, but also in the eastern Qalamoun Mountains with more than 3,000 fighters. The legion has been described as an "Islamist" or as a non-jihadi/non-Salafi "political Islamist" organization. It describes itself as "a revolutionary military entity aiming for the downfall of the Syrian regime," but does not seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state (Cafarella and Casagrande 2016).
[98] With exception of the Islamic state.

qualities. The opposition created alternative bodies to take over governance and public service management in towns outside of the control of the government, where state institutions ceased to function due to the lack of support from the central government (Gharibah, et al. 2017).

In contested locations, especially in urban areas with mixed contested control between the forces of the regime and armed opposition, the service sector of the state was utilized by the regime to sanction the revolting areas. A participant from one of the well-administered neighborhoods in Dar'ā city described the scarcity of electricity and water resources due to cuts imposed by the regime, which led to an increase in commodity prices to the extent that was no longer affordable by ordinary middle-class citizens. The respondent said that:

> There was rationing supply of electricity, but there was a problem with water because the western villages which are the source of water for Dar'ā city… the regime was besieging the western villages of Dar'ā like Tal Shihab and Mzīrīb villages. The state is the one who stopped the water pumps, so we started buying water.[99]

This interpretation may only be partially accurate, because the sources of water are within territories controlled by armed opposition groups. Accordingly, the water cuts may be a combination of the control of armed groups of the water sources and the suspension of the central state of service delivery support with staff, equipment, and fuel. The incident described by the respondent dates back to 2012. A few years later, the alternative local council publicly condemned the Islamist armed opposition groups for using their authorities to abuse water sources, which led to scarcity in water supply to the city of Dar'ā along with the expansion of opposition control on the majority of the city (Shaam Network 2016).

Restrictions on the physical movement of the people prevented them from seeking services elsewhere, which left them to endure serious adversities due to the lack of public services. The standstill situation, therefore, is considered one of the main factors of deprivation despite the availability of the required services elsewhere.[100] The availability of and access to services become a factor for the

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[99] Interview no.13, 32 years old female from Dar'ā city southern Syria and currently living in Amman, Jordan.
[100] Interview no 14, 36 years old male from Ṣuran town in Hama governorate, currently living in Maadaba, Jordan.

political choice of the people due to discrepancies between the regime and opposition-controlled areas. This case is true especially in the inner land, which is far from the borders and where residents suffered from difficulties in importing supplies and services to provide alternatives to the cut-off from the central government. One respondent concluded that individuals who supported the regime won, whereas those who supported the opposition were left without services.[101] Many have fled the opposition-controlled territories due to extreme violence and lack of services, whereas those who did not want to make such a political decision crossed the borders and sought refuge in neighboring countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

Another respondent[102] highlighted the issue of the status-based right to access public services. The correspondent is a widow of a husband killed as collateral damage to an airstrike by the regime. The correspondent highlighted a few of the benefits/services she obtained under the refugee status in Jordan in comparison to the no-services/support situation in her hometown in Syria, because the husband, a trader of fruits, was not considered a martyr by neither the regime nor the opposition armed groups. Widows of fighters on both sides were issued an identification of their status as such and received a package of services accordingly.

Furthermore, Islamist opposition armed groups have prevented civilians from acquiring services from state institutions and accusing individuals who approach these services as traitors and spies to the regime. Ultimately, they needed to replace these services to justify their decision to prevent people from acquiring such services from the central state. A respondent from Dārayyā described such a situation as follows:

> Safety and security, control of criminals, health services...everything was provided [by Liwā' Shuhadā' al-Islām]. But there are people originally from Dārayyā who were besieged inside the town even if they do not want the opposition, those people also do not mind dealing with the regime [institutions], but they were detained [when they did so]. The Liwā wanted everyone to be by its side and prohibited communication with the other side. They even were able to monitor phone calls and caught those who communicate to the other side.[103]

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[101] Interview no.13, ibid.
[102] Interview no. 2, 41 years old female from Al-Hirak town in rural Darʾā governorate southern Syria, a widow mother of three children and currently living in Amman, Jordan.
[103] Interview no.5, ibid.

Notably, Dārayyā represents a special case of integration between the militants and local council (please see the Chapter 4.3.3 and Figure 4.1 on the local administration structure in Dārayyā). Similarly, in the majority of opposition-controlled territories, such as Aleppo, Idlib, East Ghūṭah, and Dar'ā, reported surfaced that the LACs tackled the role of coordination with Islamist armed opposition groups as part of the overall coordination of military forces out of necessity due to the existing operational and security realities. In fact, FSA representation on councils was common in the early years, especially in areas that suffered protracted conflict and were in proximity to government strongholds, such as the Zabadanī town in rural Damascus (Salmon 2013). However, the LAC election process was held in secret and consisted only of activists and rebel fighters due to the fear of being arrested and possible government attacks on large gatherings. The latter was not allowed to become members of civil councils. However, their consent in the process was required for security and safety reasons. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens were excluded from the formation processes of the LACs and were subsequently denied participation in decisions regarding the provision of essential services (Ali 2015).

In instances when Islamist armed opposition groups were sufficiently powerful, they took action to replace the LACs with their offices. For example, the Jaish al-Islām structure included 26 non-military administrative offices, which were responsible for addressing everyday issues, such as health, education, services, and relief. Such offices were intended to replace the *revolutionary* civil society organizations created after the Syrian uprising in 2011. Individuals in civil society who refused to join the Jaysh al-Islām structure were harassed or threatened (Diob 2018).

On the relief front, Islamist administrative offices were in charge of emergent medical and civil defense, distribution of food and non-food relief items, provision of temporary shelter as well as small-income generation projects for displaced and affected local communities.

The relief funding of the Syria crises has been channeled via the ACU, relief offices of the LACs, charities, community based organizations (CBOs), NGOs, and directly through relief units of opposition armed groups. The military unit contributed to the maintenance of heavy machinery for

water pumping and trucking, network infrastructure, and electricity generation. To this extent, service provision and relief work featured many overlapping areas due to the conflict context and the humanitarian situation of the population.

The management of funds received through the ACU and channeled to the LACs and their respective distribution strategies seemed to lack a system in place for consultations with people on the ground. Instead, fund distributions to LACs were often influenced by international media and political campaigns. Furthermore, the management of the ACU did not seem to monitor its financial resources thoroughly, which presents important implications for individual and community security (Ali 2015). A similar critique was raised against funds received directly through Islamist armed groups, which not only failed to reveal adequate financial reporting but also manipulated the relief assistance to gain legitimacy and acceptance from the communities under their control.

The other important aspect of the relief operations managed by Islamist armed groups is the control of routes and borders. They were reported to have made an illegal profit from relief and commercial supplies entering these territories or from the sales of supplies for higher prices. The profit-seeking behaviors of Islamist opposition armed groups included trades with the regime and al-Qaeda or groups affiliated with the IS (Turkawi 2018).

4.3 Localized Governance Structures Under the Control of Islamist Opposition Armed Groups

The creation of localized governance structures that cover the four cited functions requires a context-sensitive analysis of such structures. The following cases of alternative governance structures cover four geographic opposition-controlled territories, namely, Idlib, East Ghūṭah, Dārayyā, and Darʾā, in correspondence to the analysis on Islamist armed opposition groups in the second chapter of Aḥrār al-Shām, Jaysh al-Islām, Liwāʾ Shuhadāʾ al-Islām, and the Southern Front.

4.3.1 Islamic Commission for Administration in Liberated Territories in Idlib (al-Hay'a al-Islāmiya Li' Idarat al-Manāṭiq al-Muḥararra fi Idlib)

The Islamic Commission for the Administration in Liberated Territories' in Idlib (hereafter called the Commission) was established on the basis of the initiative and agreement by major Islamist armed groups who were active in Idlib province after it was taken/liberated from government control for the second time in 2014 with the powerful participation of Aḥrār al-Shām. The Commission is considered a civil body composed of 10 offices, namely, the commission board, judiciary office, police office, Islamic endowment (Awqaf) office, education office, health office, administration office, civil affairs office, public and external relations office, and the office of supervision and control (Islamic Committee 2014). The committee began its operation with 100 staff in 2015, which reach 1,262 after one year (Eldorar 2015).

The functions of this commission were ultimately limited to judicial and police services due to competing priorities, because resources were diverted to armed activities and due to an increase in attacks on their facilities by the Salafi-jihadist Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām since 2017 (Schwab 2018).
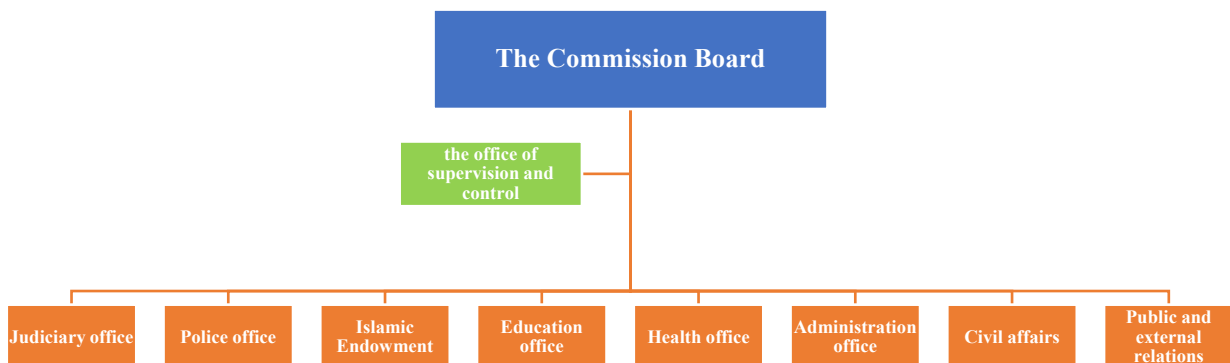

Figure 4—2 Offices of the Islamic Commission for the Administration in Liberated Territories in Idlib
Source: created by the author as per information cited in the text

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4.3.2 The Local Administration Council (al-Majlis al-Maḥalli) and the Unified Judiciary Council of Eastern Ghūṭah (Al-Majlis al-Qadā' al-Muwaḥad fil Ghūṭah al-Sharqīyah)

The administration system in Eastern Ghūṭah began with the local councils and was quickly established in main cities and towns in the enclave. A government-imposed siege and the dominance of Jaysh al-Islām compared with all other militant groups in the region has resulted in the governance of more than a million people under a unipolar system that helped stabilized the types and patterns of governance. All local councils in this region displayed the same basic structure, function, and objectives. However, they also enjoyed the flexibility to add offices, functions, or embodied civil initiatives as per the context of each town (Angelova 2014).

The close proximity of East Ghūṭah to Damascus and being surrounded by the strong military basis of the regime rendered survival nearly impossible without a strong internal administration system. As a result, armed groups who were active inside the enclave were forced to negotiate among themselves and create common administrative bodies to ensure better coordination as well as the efficient use of resources.

The Unified Judiciary Council (UJC) was established as a joint civilian governance body in June 2014, where major Islamist armed groups active within the Eastern Ghūṭah region of the rural Damascus governorate signed an agreement to subordinate themselves to the power of the UJC. The main signatories were Jaysh al-Islām, Aḥrār al-Shām, Al-Itihad al-Islāmi li-Ajnad al-Shām, and the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front. The purpose was to fill the vacuum related to security and order created in the area after the withdrawal of government institutions and to regulate and decide on legal disputes between civilians, among themselves as militant as well as between civilians and military personnel. Hence, the council included prominent Islamic scholars and lawyers as members respected by these militants. For two years, the UJC was among the most successful governance projects of rebels in Syria. It maintained a high degree of coordination among various armed, religious, and political groups, which retained government forces outside East Ghūṭah and sustained control by the militant (Lund 2016).

Ultimately, Jaysh al-Islām gained the upper hand, because it controlled the main city of Dūma, the capital city of East Ghūṭah. As such, it had interfered largely in the administration council and the judiciary systems. Nevertheless, the main spoiler of the governance systems was deemed to be the al-Nusra Front, who gained sufficient military power to challenge the hegemony of Jaysh al-Islām, whereas the latter was obliged to tolerate such challenges after a very fine calculation of military balance (Schwab 2018).

4.3.3   Local council of Dārayyā city (al-Majlis al-'Idarī Li Madīna Dārayyā)

Dārayyā city is an example of an absolute unipolar system, because the city was entirely controlled by homogenous military groups with directed resources to the local administration council to ensure the continuity of minimum services under conflict (Daryya Local Council 2012). Similar to East Ghūṭah, Dārayyā is in proximity to the capital Damascus and was under military siege by government forces for four years (2012–2016). The military composition inside Dārayyā was very homogenous and consisted mainly of locals as well as members of the local council.

According to interviews with refugees in Amman[104], people in the city lacked information about the sources of the financial resources of the local council. The interviewees referred to council and Liwā members as one body, which may indicate that the leadership and membership of the council could have included members of Liwā' Ṣuhadā' al-Islām. Interestingly, the local council homepage included an introduction of Liwā' Shuhadā' al-Islam and their achievement in protecting the city against regime forces. Moreover, the introduction included a chart of decision-making, which exhibited the structure in which the local council and Liwā have shared responsibility and clear division of labor, as depicted by the following chart:

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[104] Interview no. 5, ibid. and interview no.8, 54 years old female from al-Qadam neighborhood of Damascus, currently living in Amman, Jordan.
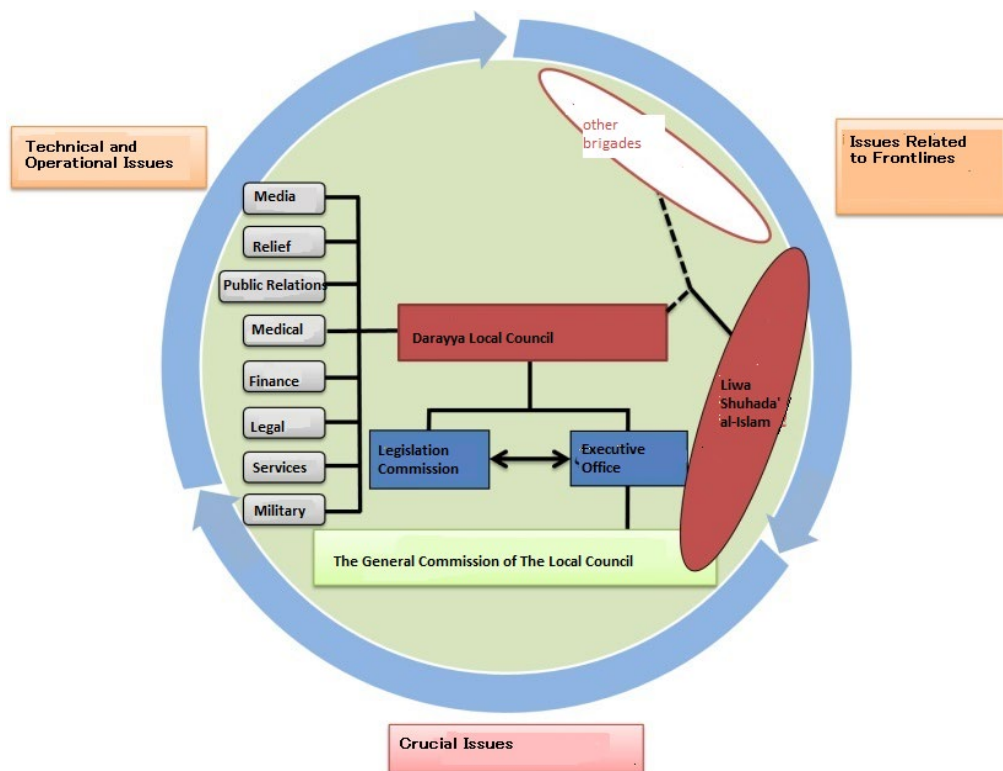
Figure 4—3 Administrate military structure of Dārayyā town in the rural Damascus governorate under the control of Islamist armed opposition groups as of June 29, 2013

Source: (Dārayyā Local Council Homepage n.d.)

Dārayyā presents a unique case where militant force is under the command of the local council because due to the extremely homogenous and relatively small size of the local community. However, such harmony is not replicated elsewhere. Whether it is a full coordination effort or mutual influence between military and civilian administration remains an issue that requires further research and analysis.

The local council conducted all relief assistance work to the population under siege. They have also operated two field hospitals[105] and supported the remaining schools that continue to function in the city. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the population were seemingly forced to accept the services provided only by entities approved by the Liwā', such that any attempt to communicate or seek support

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[105] Information received from a medical staff who worked in Dārayyā city during the control of the Liwa.

from outside Dārayyā city was treated as a betrayal or a spying attempt, which invoked a violent reaction from the Liwā'.

4.3.4   The Higher Administration Committee in the South (al-Hay'a al-'Idaryia al-'Ulia fi al-Janub)

The situation in the south, including that in Dara'a, slightly differed from those of other areas in Syria. In particular, border access to Jordan rendered possible for armed groups to spread control supported by the Military Operations Command (MOC), as previously discussed. However, the support was conditioned to military objectives, that is, to fight extremist elements and the regime as per the agenda of the supporting states, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, and Jordan. The administration in the south was managed by LACs, who were aligned with the overall opposition structure but with minimal standardization across the southern province.

The judiciary front was more unified, because the Court of Justice (Maḥkamat Dār al- 'Adl in Ḥawrān) was the only judiciary body in the southern province. The Court of Justice was established in January 2014 by unifying the main courts in the province, including those operated by the al-Nusra Front, to form one supreme judiciary body that is independent of the influence of militant groups.[106]

Contrary to the stated aspiration, the militants have reportedly interfered with the work of the court, especially because the financial resources of the court were contributions from the Islamist armed groups active in the south. The Court of Justice was independent of other administrative bodies connected to the Syria Coalition and, therefore, worked separately from them. This situation limited the capacity of the court to cover only localized disputes without reaching recognition at the national level in other Syrian territories (Enab Baladi 2015).

On the local administration front, the unified management system was only established in 2017 after the decision of the MOC to dissolve the Southern Front. Major political and social activists announced the establishment of the Higher Administration Commission (al-Hay'a al-'Idaryia al-'Ulia), which took advantage of the de-escalation agreement between Russia and the United States, which lifted

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[106] From an interview with the head of the Court of Justice (Enab Baladi 2015).

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hopes about the possibility of expanding in terms of services and early recovery activities in two governorates, namely, of Dar'ā and Qunietra (Syria Media Committee 2017).

Notably, the different developments of various governance bodies have influenced their performance. For example, the Court of Justice underwent additional pressure to undertake the responsibilities performed by the police due to the weak police apparatus present in the area (Al-Ahmad 2018).

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter surveyed the factors that contributed to the installment and consolidation of governance led by Islamist opposition armed groups as a transitional model of political change in Syria. The escalation of violence drained the central state power and resources previously allocated to serve the population. Furthermore, it led the central state to withdraw from areas taken by Islamist opposition armed groups and created a vacuum as well as an opportunity for other actors to intervene and to contribute to the local governance in terms of maintaining internal security and providing social services and relief assistance to the population affected by the armed conflict.

For their part, Islamist armed opposition groups intended to acquire legitimacy and community acceptance and underwent transformation from purely militant /political actors to social/community actors in charge of the administration and management of daily life in the community. Their role was to establish complex structures for maintaining order and security, including police and security forces and the setup of prisons and detention facilities. Their activities included the establishment of a complementary judiciary system to resolve disputes among the populations and among Islamist armed opposition groups. Last but not least, Islamist armed opposition groups provided social services and conducted the local administration of localities under their control to compensate for the gap created by the withdrawal of the central government.

Nevertheless, the dependency on Islamic law and teaching in setting up such a system, as well as the ultimate willingness to create a future state, based on Islam have induced these groups to confront the secular Syria opposition and forced them to compete among themselves in terms of governance of

the people's life. Moreover, the relationship between the two varied from mere coexistence and concurrent relationship to a rivalry relationship.

Islamist armed groups had the advantage to be closer to the local communities within Syria than the opposition-led interim government in exile in Turkey. Thus, these groups were closer to the situation on the ground. However, their capacity to operate and execute a bureaucratic system remains extremely limited. Conversely, in contrast to the internationally re-engineered interim government in opposition, Islamist armed groups were unable to find a source for their legality, such that they suffer from the inability to and limitation in expanding their influence into territories under their control

Finally, the local communities remained the subject of these dynamics as a direct source of legitimacy for Islamist armed groups. In an endeavor to understand the consequences of the behavior of Islamist armed groups toward the local community through governance or violence, Chapter 5 explores the civil society and political activism in opposition-controlled territories and the underlying bases for the newly merging political spaces in Syria.

Chapter 5 Community Relations in Areas Controlled by the Islamist Groups

The withdrawal of state surveillance of community activities in opposition-controlled territories created a space for collective social action in support of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The initial cracks in state control were not immediately filled by actors from Islamist armed groups. Those groups needed time to consolidate their military domination and to stabilize their territorial control before involving themselves in community affairs. Furthermore, the armed opposition groups fighting the regime continued to use their objective to overthrow al-Asad regime to mobilize resources and communities.

However, as the conflict continued, the political and ideological nature of intra-militants conflict evolved, manifested in armed conflict and increasingly shrinking public space. The public space that once expanded to accommodate citizens, activists, and civil society actors agitating for regime change is now used to criticize the misconduct of militant groups and to demand human rights. Hence, militants came to perceive that space as a threat to their legitimacy and control.

This chapter presents the relationship between the community and the alternative controlling authority in areas under the control of Islamic opposition groups by analyzing the expansion and the work of community-based organizations and collective action since 2011. I place the community at the center of the analysis, offering a different perspective on the subject matter from other chapters. I argue that the conflict-induced massive development of civilian activism, collective action, and community organization is significant and will remain so even if the current context changes. Due to the vacuum of governance and within the cracks of the armed conflict, the community was given an opportunity to grow and develop autonomously. Nevertheless, and most importantly, such a process would result in a collective political maturity that will change the longer-term relationship between society and authority in Syria.

5.1 Community-Based Organizations: From Charity to Political Activism

The 2011 uprising and the alignment between various opposition forces to remove the Asad regime created a tremendous opportunity for the rapid development of fully or semi-organized Syrian

civil society. Organizers of the street rallies, activists occupying media platforms, associational forms of NGOs, activist groups and voluntary groups, made use of the momentum created by the collapse of authoritarian control over society. They shifted from immobilization to a complete domestic activism that played a significant role in connecting events in Syria to the international donor and policymaking community. The role that civil society has played at various levels can be related to the traditional Western concept of "good governance" as well as the objectives of "democracy and development."

Furthermore, civil society is unified by a supportive community that validates its recognition, legitimacy, and claims to moral and material resources. Syrian civil society quickly acquired a loose yet substantial network of Western academic centers, donor states, professional activist organizations, and national opposition groups. Henceforth, Syrian civil society derives its cohesion from a shared world view around a global economic system that has human rights, democracy, and the free market as its core principles (Shah 2008).

Examining civil society and collective action in areas controlled by Islamist armed opposition groups raises two dilemmas. The first such dilemma is the ideological aspect: whether Islamist ideology differs from the idea of civil society, which is perceived as liberal, and Western ideas for democracy, elections, and the role of women. The second such dilemma concerns the capacity of violence to create confusion between authority and society. On the one hand, Islamist armed groups present themselves as part of the community in its struggle against the regime, their demand for freedom and some form of democracy, and maintaining at least a minimal level of respect for human rights. On the other hand, and as time has shown, these groups themselves proved to be oppressive and did not accept the expanding space for communities to engage in civil and political action.

Furthermore, it is hard to explicitly analyze the relationship between Islamic armed opposition groups and the community without referring to interference by the central state. During the conflict, the central state continued to affect life in areas under control of armed groups through direct violence or indirect negotiations. The regime used a combination of direct military offenses and/or military encirclement of these territories, interrupting vital services to the population, followed by intermittent

quiet periods and negotiations around provision of services and supplies in exchange for either military deals or simply strategic goods that were needed in regime-controlled territories.

Sometimes, social movements might resort to armed actions to achieve their political goals; however, it is crucial to recognize that not all armed opposition groups aspire to progressive social change. Therefore, we must be careful to suggest armed opposition as a political means or assume that a social revolution is the end product of the armed action (Deonandan, Close, and Prevost 2007). In the case of Syria, the ideological and structural differences between the nationalist Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the remaining Islamist armed groups created a fear that the latter, in the absence of the common enemy, the regime, might turn into anti-revolutionary forces with a regressive political agenda. The continuous armed struggle is also partially related to identity issues; hence, it is likely that those groups will continue to rely on violence even after the war against the regime ends.

5.1.1 Social Activism Before 2011

In principle, Syria's constitution guarantees fundamental human rights, including freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Articles 42 and 44 of the Constitution articulated the right of each citizen to express his views freely through any means of expression, whether verbally, in writing, or through any other means. It also granted all citizens the right to meet and demonstrate peacefully, in accordance with the law.[107]

However, the Syrian government led by the Ba'th party has used the declaration of emergency law (1963) and its accompanying restrictive legislation[108] to suppress the activities of non-governmental associations and human rights groups. In 1969, Legislative Decree No.244 amended specific provisions in the law giving the authorities additional control over associations. Moreover, the law designated the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MoSAL) to administer it, including exercising the authority to

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[107] The Constitution of the Arab Republic of Syria (adopted 26 February 2012). https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_isn=91436&p_lang=en (accessed August,15,2021), arts. 32,33,42-45.

[108] The Ba'th Party imposed the state of emergency with Military Order No. 2 of March 8, 1963. A law enacted by the government that preceded the Ba'th Party actually authorizes the government to declare a state of emergency. Legislative Decree 51 dated December 22, 1962.

approve the formation of or dissolve groups. Nonetheless, in practice, the decisions and actions of MoSAL were secondary to those of the security authorities.[109]

Subsequently, the successive Ba'thist governments in the 1970s and 1980s promoted the formation of general unions within certain segments of the population (women, youth, and workers). However, the legislation through which these unions were established has ensured their monopoly over the population segments assigned to them, prohibiting the formation of similar associations.[110] To that end, the associations were intended as instruments by the government to shape society in accordance with the goals of the Ba'th regime (Human Rights Watch 2007), rather than as alternatives or opponents to state institutions.

The combination of internal and international pressure on the issue of human rights and political freedom in Syria heightened attention to Syria's social problems years before the Arab Spring occurred in 2010–11. A political crisis occurs when many citizens become progressively dissatisfied with the government's performance and policies.

In addition to the systemic political repression and strict control of media outlets and public opinion, the selective welfare system has been biased toward urban centers and specific communities, leaving most rural populations in poverty. Urban poverty also became very serious due to reduced support for the agricultural sector, combined with years of drought, which led to rural emergencies. All these factors operated simultaneously with the awakening of demand for democratization and freedom in urban centers where development efforts concentrated as the modernized urban population could not continue to accept social immobilization (De Martino 2017).

Damascus Spring (Rabī' Dimaṣq), a period of political, social, and intellectual openness, started soon after Bashar al-Asad assumed the presidency in 2000, when a wide range of politicians and intellectuals actively engaged in social mobilization efforts around demands for political reform. This historical coincidence of the Damascus Spring and the presidential change in Syria a decade ahead of

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[109] Human Rights Watch interview with a CDF member (name withheld), Damascus, November 11, 2006.
[110] For example, Law No. 33 (December 21, 1975), which established the Women's General Union, prohibits the formation of any other women's associations (Article 66).

the Arab Spring is of great significance. On the one hand, it indicated the increasing internal pressure on the regime to respond to long-standing issues of political reform. On the other hand, various strata of the Syrian population, be they religious or secular, appeared to be generally ready to challenge the status quo of the pan-Arabist secular Ba'th Party's hegemony over the government in Syria.

In 2001, the SMB in exile issued the "National Charter of Honor for Political Action in Syria" and presented it during a meeting of the Syrian opposition in London the same year. The declaration following the London conference in 2001 reiterated the movement's commitment to national dialogue and democratic political tools, and it rejected violence.[111] The SMB involvement during the Damascus Spring was described in chapter II of this thesis as an important part of the SMB's attempt to revive activities from within Syria.

Subsequently, the opposition forces issued the *Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change* in 2005, which was signed by political opposition leaders, including Islamists, nationalists, Kurdish activists, and leftists, to unify the Syrian opposition. However, a major challenge was to reconcile the demands of leftist and secular parties with those of Islamists.

Simultaneously, SMB issued its vision of the "Political Project for Future Syria," a detailed 127-page document that explains its vision of state formation and institutions, source of legislation, national challenges, and, finally, political and economic reform. The document also highlights the movement's basic concepts of identity; Islam; the construction of the modern state; and national challenges, including social, economic, and political issues such as the struggle against the Zionist project in Palestine, and Pan-Arabism.[112]

To add to the boiling social frustration, Syria is a young country with 55% of citizens aged under 24 in 2010. Syrian youth face ever fewer job opportunities and slower economic growth, especially in rural areas (De Martino 2017).

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[111]Al-Hayat newspaper, 4th May 2001 issue no. 13928, p.5 https://bit.ly/2GXtbBk, last accessed on 6 April 2018.
[112]The full document is available only in Arabic on the official site of SMB. https://bit.ly/2GJXHv2

5.1.2 Syria Civil Society After 2011

The scope of pre-war civil society activism in Syria was limited to charitable activities. No political activities were permitted. However, since the accession of Bashar al-Asad to the presidency in 2000 and the launch of economic liberation policies, civil society in Syria witnessed an expansion in the role of charities encouraged by the authorities who used the charities and NGOs as an efficient way for the state to offload some of its welfare responsibilities. Although such an attempt to separate civil society from the state did not help to redefine state–civil society relations, given continued state use of coercive measures to impose strict control on NGO registration and activities, it certainly created a space for the growth of the largely formalized NGO sector (Zintl and de Elvira 2012).

At the time, the Syrian government only allowed two types of associations: one was for religious charities, mostly Islamic or Christian, and closely monitored by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The second type was government-supported NGOs (otherwise referred to as "government-based non-government organizations") that are linked to the regime and cover a wide range of activities related to development work, youth, people with disabilities, the environment, etc. Although these associations worked on tackling practical everyday social issues, many of them had both political and social dimensions and were expected to contribute to social justice in the long term. Eventually, such existing experience proved beneficial later to those who joined the new associations in the face of opposition (such as local coordination committees) in acquiring some sort of political and social consciousness through various government NGOs. The scope of the projects in emerging civil society varied. The first such projects involved coordinating protests, gradually evolving to include important functions of governance into a wide range of issues from civil registration to garbage collection (De Martino 2017).

Despite the limited political opportunity before the 2011 uprising, the growth of civil society organizations in Syria, their engagement with the community, and the tireless engagement with the regime to negotiate more operational space have set the basic capabilities needed for action following the uprising. The equilibrium status that was witnessed before 2011 in Syria was never stable, and some groups must have been willing to challenge the limits. Youth participation was a key element in the uprising in Syria, not only the whole series of events started by school child Hamza al-Khatib writing

anti-regime phrases on the school wall in Dar'ā, but also across the youth population aged 15 and above that continued to compose a big part of the civil and politically active population. The literature on collective action suggests that young people are the most prone to action for reasons of availability and because of their ability to sustain the costs that action involves (Della Porta and Diani 2009, 115).

Collective actions are known for being both historically and spatially connected to the same type of opponent actions, including those taken by authorities and counter-movement actors. It is therefore necessary to examine the impact of repression on collective action (Koopmans 2004). The uprising of March 2011 constituted a wave of political contention that had a regular pattern, at least for the first year, with routine large-scale demonstrations organized on Fridays across major cities in Syria. The term "wave" here does not imply the recurrence of such an event; rather, it refers to a period of heightened contention across society. Indeed, the rapid expansion of waves of contention was a result of a combination of three factors identified by Koopmans: political opportunities, diffusion of continuous innovations, and reactive mobilization (Koopmans 2004, 28).

Since 2011, Syrians living inside Syria have struggled to survive or reorganize their lives, despite being under different types of military control. Syrian civil society has expanded significantly since 2011; during the first seven years of the uprising, the number of newly founded Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) exceeded the total number of registered organizations between 1959 and 2011. The conflict led to the lifting of the previous heavy restrictions and limitations on civil society that had been imposed by the regime, as more and more CSOs were founded to respond to actual needs on the ground resulting from an increasingly devastating humanitarian situation (Al-Zouabi 2017, 21–22).

The necessities of self-governance led to a sharp increase in the number of NGOs and a progressive diversification in their functions and mandate: humanitarian aid, provision of services, political advocacy, and documentation of human rights violations (De Martino 2017). However, except for the opposition-controlled areas and the Kurdish region, only a small percentage of NGOs remained active under the regime. The majority are concentrated in major cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Tartous, Latakia, Hama, Homs, and Swayda. In terms of objectives, Syrian NGOs have been involved

mainly in the fields of humanitarian aid (35.9%), social services (25.6%), and development work (24.8%) (Al-Zouabi 2017, 17–19).(Al-Zouabi 2017, 17–19).
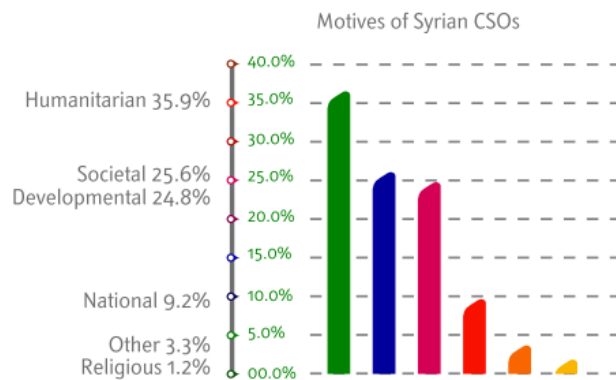
Figure 3: Motives of Syrian CSOs
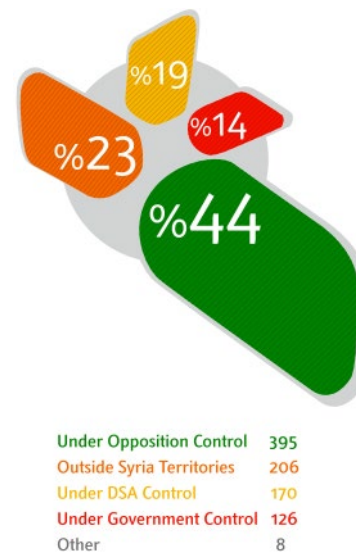
Figure 4: Distribution of CSOs based on geographical Map of Control

Figure 5—1 Motives of Syrian CSOs by Sector and Geographic Distribution

Source: (Al-Zouabi 2017, 18–19)

Considering this post-2011 increase in civil society initiatives in Syria, it was essential to have CSOs represented in various sectors as part of the social development toward collective action and collective identity. An important observation that emerged during the reformation of civil society out of state control concerns identity (re)production. "Identity production" is an essential component of collective action, as trust and relationship building rely on the identification of actors involved in the conflict (Della Porta and Diani 2009, 85–86). Identity production is a social process that happens through the definition of boundaries between "we" and "other." It also corresponds to the emergence of new networks and relationships that redefine the initial identity independently from direct or face-to-face interactions (Ibid., 87–88). The collective identity generated is characterized by liberal thinking: a wide-ranging network of trust was established through popular demands for freedom and democracy, belief in revolution against the regime, and, therefore, shared objectives.

5.1.3 Dynamics and Structure of Syria Civil Society after 2011

After gaining operational space and system and as the conflict context continued to be fluid, the civil society actors in areas outside state control faced two types of challenges: (a) counter mobilization, defined as the mobilization of a different constituency, emerging in response to the initial collective action affecting the distribution of power in society (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996), and (b) competitive mobilization, defined as the attempt by another group or organization to mobilize the same constituency that seeks to capture the mobilization originally activated by the initial collective action group. Such competition can lead to either institutionalization of some groups or the radicalization of others (Tarrow 1996).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the dynamic interactions among the various civil society actors as well as their allies and adversaries, while a single case analysis of collective action identifies explanatory factors (such as grievances, resources, and opportunities) and frames for a particular movement. The most fundamental fact about collective action is that it is connected with similar instances of collective action and with the action of similar claim-makers such as authorities and counter-movements (Koopmans 2004, 21).

Therefore, to counter various challenges and maintain the opportunity structure, Syrian civil society resorted to resource mobilization through organizational restructuring and the creation of alliances. For instance, the Syria NGO Alliance,[113] a group of major Syrian NGOs in areas controlled by armed groups, has taken on the more universal shape of a non-governmental organization influenced by the donors who decide to provide resources, exchange of expertise, and capacity building. The main task of the NGO sector has been to provide humanitarian assistance and relief aid to the war-affected population. However, most of them also tackled projects beyond the relief mandate, including education,

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[113] Syria NGO alliance is a It is a gathering of major Syrian non-governmental organizations working in the humanitarian field and in compliance with international humanitarian standards. It aims to coordinate leadership and advocacy efforts on behalf of the Syrian people to achieve effective participation of Syrians in the management and decision-making of the Syrian humanitarian affairs and to impact on the humanitarian and policies to suit these goals. https://reliefweb.int/organization/syrian-ngo-alliance

early recovery and community work, and, most importantly, advocacy to the United Nations and other forums regarding the humanitarian situation in their area of operations (Syria NGO Alliance n.d.).

Another method for the survival and expansion of civil society actors was the Syrian Civil Defense (SCD), commonly known as the "White Helmets," a volunteer-based organization that was formed in late 2012 and focused primarily on urban search and rescue in response to bombing and medical evacuation. To date, the White Helmets claim to have saved more than 115,000 lives. Moreover, the SCD provides a range of essential services for more than four million civilians across northwest Syria. These include firefighting, removal of unexploded weapons, community safety awareness, electrical and sewage maintenance, and rehabilitation of neighborhoods.[114]

The SCD was initially formed out of various independent volunteer groups who joined efforts to save civilians trapped in the rubble and rescue those injured in battles in areas within their reach. They were initially decentralized, and each province in which they operated had an administrative unit that worked in conjunction with the Syrian local councils and was unconnected to the other directorates (Hanna 2018). Gradually, the SCD became better established and led by a democratically elected leadership council that represented teams across the country, headed by Raid al Salih, formerly the head of the White Helmets in Idlib, northern Syria. The number of volunteers exceeded 3,000 (White Helmets n.d.).

The SCD took additional risks depending on foreign support, assuming a well-defined mandate of civil defense that also gave them access to documentation and first-hand witness status to events in their areas of operations due to the nature of their function. The SCD's public outreach campaign supported by first-hand videos and materials from deep in the field enabled them to mobilize political and financial support as well as gain de-facto recognition by all actors on the ground.

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[114] The Syria Civil Defence homepage, who we are: https://www.syriacivildefence.org/en/who-we-are/an-introduction-to-the-white-helmets/ last accessed 20 August 2021.

To start an organized operation, the SCD used seed funding from James Le Mesurier, a former British Army officer who made his name as a co-founder of the organization.[115] The SCD also claim to be trained and operate in accordance with International Humanitarian Law and the Geneva Conventions. They have clearly stated that they provide rescue and emergency medical services to civilians in territories outside government control who have been injured by the regime's indiscriminate bombardment and airstrikes (White Helmets n.d.). However, their volunteers subsequently suffered a high fatality rate during rescue operations, with 264 killed and more than 500 injured to date. Double-tap airstrikes by the Syrian regime and Russian warplanes have accounted for more than half their deaths. In addition, missiles, barrel bombs, and artillery bombardment have hit the facilities and teams of the White Helmets 238 times in just over 18 months between June 2016 and December 2017 (SCD official website). Russia has designated the SCD as a terrorist group, attacking the White Helmets' operation centers, and simultaneously waging an information war to slander their reputation (Karatas 2021). To that end, it is hard not to associate the White Helmets with collective political action in Syria and so it is hard to describe them as an apolitical organization.

It is quite common for NGOs in the opposition-controlled territories to receive foreign support, operate across borders, and register themselves as NGOs outside Syria. Statistics show that in 2018, 71% of organizations ran offices across Syria, whereas approximately 19% of them have branches in Turkey, and 4% run offices in Iraq and Lebanon. The vast majority of organizations operating in opposition-held territories do so across neighboring countries, Europe, and overseas. In contrast, CSOs that operate in government-controlled areas are only registered in Syria through the central government processes (Al-Zouabi 2017).

In terms of the representation of the social diversity of Syrian society, two issues are to be considered here: representation of ethnic and religious minorities and the representation of women in various organizations and groups. Syrian civil society does not operate in isolation from the conflict. Nevertheless, the conflict has a reverse effect on Syrian civil society, and it is therefore subject to the

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[115] James Le Mesurier died suddenly on 11 November 2019 in Istanbul, his body was found in the street looking as if he fell from his office balcony, however, There were concerns that Le Mesurier had also been murdered by foreign agents, like the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi a year earlier, almost to the day. (Hadjimatheou 2021)

same restrictions on its vision and action as many political powers. That sometimes leads to some members of civil society becoming very localized. There is a tendency to "ethnicize" or "cantonize" through the creation of ethnically or geographically homogenous NGOs that are less connected to the rest of the country.

Furthermore, the security restrictions and the scarcity of funding prevented a broader vision and contributed to the disintegration of the Syrian national social fabric (De Martino 2017). A study conducted between October 2015 and September 2016, sampling 748 Syrian CSOs nationwide, found that 60% did not hire staff from different ethnic or religious backgrounds; in other words, all employees belonged to the same sect. The justification provided was that armed violence had led to a sectarian split in society and that the population had been redistributed geographically into monoethnic communities (Al-Zouabi 2017).

As for women's participation and gender equality aspects, a huge surge was witnessed in women's activism similar to other community-based organizations. That said, since the initial institutionalization of the Syria uprising, men have continued to dominate the public sphere, with a minimal representation of women. Needless to say, such a trend was observed in most of the NGOs working inside Syria, with a smaller representation of women often attributed to the prevailing security situation and violence. Women's representation in LACs declined between 2012 and 2014, the same years that witnessed the proliferation of Islamist armed groups in Syria (Ali 2015). The following table gives an example of women's participation in the Idlib Local Council.

The Local Council of Idlib exemplifies the gradual diminishing of women			
No. of members	No. of women	Percentage	Year
25	5	25%	2012
29	3	10.34%	2013
25	0	-	2014

Table 5—1 Women's membership in the Local council of Idlib 2012–2014

Source: (Kannout 2017, 53)

Throughout the process, Syrian society has gained awareness, especially recently, of the need for more cooperation among various CSOs to participate in negotiations and/or peacebuilding in post-conflict Syria. That has resulted in the creation of various alliances such as the Syrian NGO Alliance, the Syrian Relief Network, the Syrian Civil Society Coalition (TAMAS), the Syrian Civil Society Organizations Union, the General Union of Charities and Aid Groups, and the Syrian CSOs Coalition (SHAML), all of which operate mainly in opposition-controlled territories (Al-Zouabi 2017, 37).

5.2 Dynamics of Community and Islamist armed group relation

5.2.1 Community Acceptance of Islamist Armed Groups

Whether to accept the Islamist armed groups depends overwhelmingly on the community composition itself. First, certain communities have sympathized with Islamist groups over the FSA, reflecting their preference for religiously labeled groups and localized power over national interest. Such a preference has reflected negatively on the nationalist orientation of the Syrian uprising and given space to the rise of the Jihadists, excluding secular parties (NewSyria.net, 2017). This can be explained by the collective action, a series of acts that give individuals the opportunity to engage and to be members of a social network (Della Porta and Diani 2009, 127). Some instances involving Islamist groups could correspond to stronger links with individual contributions and self-realization.

A critical attribute of Syrian society is the solid tribal and familial connections that form the basis of the community, especially in smaller towns and rural villages far from the capital Damascus and major cities. Hence, armed groups who enjoyed kinship relations with communities were able to operate on a basis of trust and become more integrated into the community. However, armed groups without a prior link to local communities found it difficult to establish stable relations in the short term in the context of armed conflict (Haspeslagh and Zahbia 2015). As for the factors of (in)security, active armed conflict affected how the community interacts with the controlling Islamist armed groups. Della Porta (2009) notes that the overlap between organizational ties and family kinship enables members to become involved in high-risk activities, thereby contributing to a social movement through the quick circulation of information that helps inform decisions and activities of the group. Nevertheless, the

group will continue to seek an alliance with other groups because it lacks resources necessary to survive (Della Porta and Diani 2009, 116–126).

Second, the ethnic and religious background of the community contributes to the acceptance of the Islamist armed groups. For instance, communities with a major Sunni population and a tribal social structure and that were located far from the center were more likely to sympathize with Islamist armed groups over a national opposition army. For example, Deir Ez-Zor city was one of the first to support Islamist armed groups over the FSA. This has reflected negatively on the Syrian uprising, leading to the rise of Jihadists and excluding secular parties (NewSyria.net 2017). Deir Ez-Zor was also an example of impressive popular resistance to an ISIS takeover of their neighborhoods from 2013 to 2017.[116]

Finally, the Sunni community that holds hegemony in Syria might initially form the basis for acceptance of Islamist militant groups, given their long-standing hatred of the regime. However, as the conflict proceeded and such armed groups started fighting over resources and territories, the same community stood up to criticize this lack of harmony and fragmentation. At the same time, the Islamist branding became less relevant.

During my interviews with Syrians in Amman, the interviewees' general perception of Islamist armed groups was characterized by their fragmentation and inability to come together around one objective. The situation was best expressed by a female activist, originally from Homs and currently based in Jordan, who was engaged in ongoing volunteering activities to support Syrian communities inside Syria across the borders with Jordan.

> maybe the revolution has not started wisely. Maybe if we started with someone wise to lead us and to whom people would listen, knowing he is good enough, then we would have defended our right in a better way. [...]If it [the revolution] were organized, it would have succeeded. [...] But suddenly, X persons come with his group [Jama'a], suddenly like this they announced Abu Mohammed (anonym) created a jama'a and Abu Zaid (anonym) created another[117]. Everyone has with them

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[116] The battle for Deir Ez-Zor 2014-2017 was a large-scale siege imposed by ISIS against several districts in the city held mainly by the Syria army. The siege lasted from April 2014 to November 2017.
[117] The reference to Abu Muhammad and Abu Zayd above is merely random generic Islamic names.

their friends and tribes and groups. Then the same group would split up into smaller groups.[118]

The correspondent took this reference to mean that opposition unity was in peril, and that the Islamist opposition armed groups lack of focus on the results and their poor performance cannot be compensated by their identity as simply being Islamists, which is the general identity of the community.

5.2.2 Declining Opportunity of the Syrian Civil Society but With a Residual Effect

When the initial demand of the uprising for political change was not answered as quickly as the masses had hoped, and with an increase in combined violence and deterioration of population wellbeing due to destruction and displacement, political activism appeared to decrease or receive less attention. In fact, many of the political activists have fled the country. This context presented a situation of declining political opportunities that almost seemed to come to a closure.

Such a decline in civil society activities does not mean the end of political opportunities that allowed their expansion in the first place. Instead of framing this phase as the end of the wave of contention, Koopmans (2004) suggests conceptualizing the contraction of the protest wave as a "process of re-stabilization, and re-routinization of interaction with the polity," as the relationships among various actors become more defined at a level of equilibrium exceeding the status quo before the start of such a wave of contention. Koopmans explains that "when antagonisms between conflict parties are deep, and a few extra contentious social network links between them exist, a re-stabilization of patterns of interaction may be difficult to achieve […due to...] the distrust resulting from the difference of interests and ideology between parties" (Koopmans 2004, 37–38). Following Koopmans's suggestion, the situation in Syria presents a case in which it is difficult to achieve re-stabilization because the patterns of interactions among all parties are characterized by deep ideological differences and distrust between regime, people, and various armed groups.

Despite the unprecedented levels of violence, local communities in Syria were not passive actors that armed groups simply pressured, nor did the armed groups merely exploit or abuse the

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[118] Interview no.1 dated 19 October 2018.

communities in their areas of operations. On the contrary, communities usually tried to influence the behavior of armed groups, negotiating on matters related to the community's demands for peace and stability as part of their daily life. Such local interaction spaces create an upstream engagement between the community and the armed groups that ultimately contribute to local human security and peacebuilding (Haspeslagh and Zahbia 2015, 6).
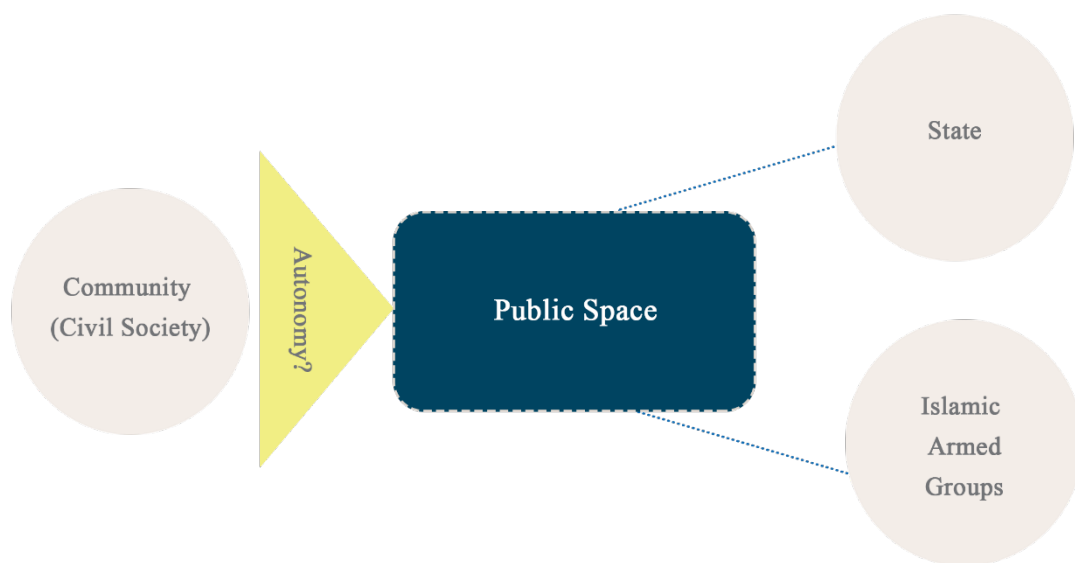
Figure 5—2 community, state, armed militants relations around public space

A critical factor for non-state armed groups by which they can sustain presence and control or not depends on community acceptance, which requires the militant to have some level of understanding of local power dynamics. Hence, legitimacy is not merely a result of military power; it is imperative to account for the community perception of the non-state actors as a legitimate power in control, and vice versa for the militant act based on perceived accountability toward the community. The attempt to create a local governance structure should be understood as one way to prove accountability to the population.

Community tolerance for armed groups increases if communities benefit from services provided or facilitated by alternative actors, namely, Islamist armed groups. The relationship between

the community and armed Islamist groups depended on the extent to which these groups facilitated humanitarian operations and services by CBOs and NGOs, such as the cases identified by Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām in the previous chapter. Similarly, the absence of services and inability to provide to communities was a source of distrust and dispute between the community and the controlling groups. For example, the students at the medical school of Aleppo Free University organized a demonstration objecting to the Salvation Government's plan to delink the university from the Ministry of Higher Education of the Syria Opposition Government. Such a decision would have affected the school's funding, management, and international recognition of its degrees. These demonstrations were the last in a six-month-long battle against another proposal to privatize the university (Sham news, 2017).

While ensuring security and order was one of the most important roles of the authority in East Ghūṭah in the suburb of Damascus, people still had a say on the "how" aspects of this matter. For example, in 2015, Jaysh al-Islām faced a growing protest at Harasta city of East Ghūṭah, denouncing the behavior of their security personnel at checkpoints and the random arrest of civilians of the East Ghūṭah population. The demands were to have pre-agreed protocols to avoid the arrest of civilians as much as possible and to inform the community of any arrests, so they were able to follow up if a member of the community was arrested at one of the Jaysh al-Islām checkpoints.[119]

Furthermore, communities who suffered brutality from armed actors have resented the behavior of the Islamist armed groups and may have contributed in one way or another to loss of military control by the latter. For example, the disappearance of Razan Zaytuna, the human rights lawyer and activist, together with her team, from their office at the Violations Documentation Center[120]in Douma in October 2013, is attributed to her work with the Local Coordination Committee on documentation of human rights violations against civilians (D Press 2013). The incident triggered widespread criticism against Jaysh al-Islām, which controlled East Ghūṭah with its established headquarters in Dūma city. According

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[119] Sham network SNN YouTube channel : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEMYfwFRtSo last accessed 24 August 2021.
[120] The Violation Documentation Center is a network of human rights activists mostly lawyers oh took up a mission to document human rights violations committed by the Syria regime (https://vdc-sy.net/en/).

to media reports, a group of armed men broke into the office and detained the activists, leaving no trace. Jaysh al-Islām did not officially deny their responsibility.

Public opinion inside East Ghūṭah and outside considered for years that Jaysh al-Islām were responsible because they controlled the city, and they should have protected its citizens, especially the likes of the office of the Violations Documentation Center. Interestingly, in March 2021, Jaysh al-Islām decided to issue an official statement[121] declining responsibility for Razan's disappearance, affirming their support for human rights and categorizing the whole incident as a criminal act. This statement was an apparent attempt to end eight years of exchange of accusations and public dispute on Jaysh al-Islām's accountabilities for such an incident.

Another example of the community's takeover of public space is its reaction to the assassination of two activists, Raid Faris and Hammond Junaid, in Idlib in November 2018. Both were known for being anti-regime activists and for criticizing the behaviors of the Islamist militant groups via a radio station established by Raid and used to broadcast across the opposition-controlled province of Idlib (France24 2018). The widespread resentment against Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām in Idlib for the disappearance of these activists was manifested through spontaneous, yet very organized, street demonstrations that placed the streets of Kfar Nubul city under the eyes of the HTS militancy. The demonstrations expanded over the following days into a public protest against the militant presence of HTS altogether, demanding that HTS admit their failure to maintain security and to leave the city (Baitar 2018).

5.3   Conclusion

Since 2011, Syrian civil society has grown massively across Syria, as the conflict ended decades of heavy regime control over social activism in areas controlled by non-state actors. Tens of new CSOs were founded as circumstances required and based on the community's needs and demands.

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[121] A fully copy of the statement is available on Jaysh al-Islam official twitter account. https://twitter.com/jaishalslam/status/1366642340815900672

In the face of complex dynamics of insecurity, political instability, and high social contention, these community-based organizations engaged in counter or competitive mobilization toward the authorities and other actors. Therefore, the newly growing civil society had to experience an accelerated process of learning, adapting, and transformation to maintain the opportunity structure and secure resources, mainly through organizational restructuring and the creation of alliances.

Civil society and collective action in areas controlled by Islamist armed opposition groups had two main elements: 1. The element of Islamist ideology and how far it matched civil society's adaptation to the Western structure of social action, human rights, and democracy; and 2. The element of violence, which created confusion between authority and society, depending on whether the community supported the use of violence by the Islamist armed groups and was prepared to handle the counter-insurgencies by the regime, or perceived Islamist armed groups as an unnecessary source of threat and insecurity.

The community acceptance of the Islamist armed groups depends heavily on the composition of the community itself; specific communities sympathized with Islamist groups, reflecting their community preference for religiously labeled, localized power over the notion of the national interest. However, armed groups without a prior link to local communities found it difficult to establish stable relations in the short term amid an armed conflict situation. In addition, the ethnic and religious background of the community contributes to the acceptance of Islamist armed groups.

With increasing levels of annual violence combined with the deterioration of the population's wellbeing, Syrian civil society faced decreased political opportunities that seemed almost to come to a closure. Nevertheless, the contraction of such collective action should be considered part of the re-stabilization process as the relationship among various actors reaches a new equilibrium exceeding the pre-2011 status quo.

Moreover, communities have learned how to influence the behavior of armed groups, negotiating over matters related to the community's daily life, demanding peace and stability. The Islamic armed groups realized the importance of acceptance and tolerance from the community; in some instances,

community resentment contributed to actual military losses. Therefore, Islamist armed groups had to respond to the community's demands and provide or facilitate services to gain acceptance.

Such unprecedented expansion of Syrian civil society during the intense conflict suggests that Syrian civil society is neither a stable organization nor a permanent movement; however, such experience has been an integral part of the development of Syrian society during these ten years of conflict. As a result, the community and civil society groups in Syria have claimed part of the public space and an autonomous role regarding the issues that matter to the community administration and daily life.

PART FOUR- CONCLUSION

Chapter 6   Conclusion

Scope of Study

This study has explored the non-militant roles of the Islamist armed groups in the ongoing war in Syria. In so doing, it has shown how these groups expanded significantly since 2011 and the dynamics of their expansion, alliance building, survival, and transformation. This examination is critical, given that some of these groups managed to transform their organizations and operations to take on state-like roles such as the provision of social services, judiciary systems, and political negotiations.

Most importantly, the expansion of Islamist armed groups had broken with the way the regime organized state–society relations before 2011, which allowed the CSOs and communities themselves to act and interact in totally new modalities at various layers with authorities, as well as also in competition with other actors. Thus, the research provides critical insight into Syrian collective action. In fact, despite a very tangible Islamist armed action during the Syrian war (which has greatly concerned states and academia alike), there is an evident absence of research on the non-military aspects of their role during this war and, more importantly, on how that role corresponds to and interacts with the collective action of the Syrian people's uprising against the regime.

Syria, as a classic case study of the "Arab Winter," remains a state in crisis led by an authoritarian regime amid the civil war with intense foreign intervention and severe humanitarian consequences. This crisis has been exacerbated by the country's geographic position and regional geopolitics, as well as the disagreement among major international powers over its fate. Nevertheless, opposition activism has continued to develop since 2011, leading to the creation of alternative state-like structures that pose a political and military threat to the regime. Syrian civil society has also flourished rapidly. Despite the pitfalls and challenges it faces, the learning and adaptation process CSOs have experienced has permanently changed political culture, as they realized and exercised collective power through negotiations with armed groups for the community's best interest.

Questions Explored

In its exploration of the role of the local Islamist armed groups in Syria as political and state-like actors, this study has examined the following questions: why and how did the Islamist militant groups build and maintain a relationship of intent with local communities and international and regional powers to grow as important militant and political actors in the context of the Syrian conflict? Do significant differences exist among Islamist armed groups in Syria regarding military strategies and partnership policies and local administration and service provision? If yes, in what ways are they different? Which factors contribute to such differences? And, what impact, if any, do relations between Islamist armed groups and international and regional powers have on their political decision-making in Syria?

To answer these questions, the present study has re-examined the recent (pre-2011) history of Islamist armed action in Syria. It then analyzed the newly emerging Islamist armed groups and the ways in which the Islamist armed groups in Syria have expanded and developed since 2011.

This re-examination was structured as a triangular analysis of the relationship between the state, the Islamist armed groups, and the community in which any two of these actors had a dual relationship combining violence and peaceful interaction.

Theoretical Analysis

The contribution to the scholarship arising from the Syria case study is part of an emerging analytical trend that bridges multi-disciplinary approaches to broaden the boundaries of research into relational studies on global crisis.

The thesis explained how Islamist armed groups shifted away from pure militant action to an expanded role in political affairs and governance. The regime's violent crackdown against the popular demonstrations in 2011 triggered spirals of escalation, as some protestors took up arms in self-defense. Limited in choices, small local armed groups began to accept and seek external support, whether from international, regional, or transnational jihadis networks. Even though the insurgency managed to continue and survive because of the external support, it was hardly enough to achieve a regime change (Lynch 2016). The support, nevertheless, created an opportunity for Islamist armed groups to expand

their militant agency by establishing a strong internal military structure as well as joining bigger alliances among the militants.

The withdrawal of the government from areas taken by the Islamist armed groups left severe gaps in the provision of security, social goods and services, a humanitarian aid system and civil affairs, and a judicial system. The models of civil/social service systems run by the Islamist armed groups varied widely, depending on the pre-existing structures and the technical and financial capacity of the group. Unlike the military structure, the civil administration structure remained fragmented and much harder to measure, especially in terms of their (in)dependency on/from the military authorities. Moreover, various attempts at negotiating a ceasefire/cessation of hostilities agreements between the regime and opposition have paved the way for the presence of the moderate Islamist armed groups to function as part of the solution for peace, rather than as an agency for violence. Some Islamist armed groups used the same opportunity structure to establish a political structure or at least be part of the existing one, seeking international recognition and legitimacy. By identifying the three dimensions of the Islamist armed groups as political, militant, and governance, actors' positions can be summarized using the following matrix, adopting the key notions of political opportunity, mobilization organization, and framing from social movement theory (Della Porta and Diani 2009, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1988).

	Political	**Military**	**Governance**
Political opportunity	The Arab Spring in 2011 offered an opposition get-together, including the reception of foreign support.	The Arab Spring in 2011 changed the military balance between the regime and opposition, allowing more arming of the militants.	Conflict within Syrian territory →State weakened.
Mobilization organization	Participating in the first Syrian Higher Negotiation Committee	Establishment of internal military structure and external structure through military alliances	Creation of an alternative governance structure. (Public space under the control of Islamist armed groups).
Framing	Mobilizing the memory of the Hama Uprising in 1982 Framing as "Opposition against authoritarian regime"	Legitimizing militant activities as "fighting against the regime" or "defending the Muslim population."	Framing based on Islamism, especially in a judicial system based on shariʿa

Table 6—1 The three dimensions of the Islamist armed groups as political,

military, and governance, actors

This research also offered an understanding of the changing role of the Islamist armed groups and their dynamic relationship with the community, on the one hand, and their opposition to the central government, on the other hand, forming a **triangular** (the central state/regime- local society/community- Islamist armed groups/ armed rebels) relationship in which the interactions of two of the actors involve violence and governance.

The relationship between the state and Islamist armed groups was mainly characterized by an exchange of violence through armed conflict with a later shift toward political engagement through direct and indirect peace negotiations with international support. The relationship between state and society, on the other hand, was examined with a focus on the contrast between growing collective action across the country and the weak/failed state situation. Here, I was also able to identify two-way interactions between the central state and society, through violence used by the central state to control

society versus community-level mobilization against the central state for the latter's efficiency and legitimacy.

The third and final side of the triangle concerns the community relations with the Islamist armed militant, the newly developed relationships that have been quickly upgraded by many factors to a higher level of interaction, two-way engagement, and complex decision-making processes that together have changed the power relations among actors on the ground, leading to new forms of dichotomy between community and militants as the situation evolves.

Map of Work

In unpacking these arguments, the first part of this research placed the study within its historical context. Chapter 2 presented a historical background of the Islamist movements in Syria before 2011, with a focus on the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. That was followed by a mapping of major non-state armed groups that have been fighting in the Syrian war since 2011, and by an examination of the divergent factors behind the rise of Islamist armed groups in Syria. Then, it approached the Islamist groups that are the target of this study, their motivations, objectives, and scale of operations, to end with detailed profiling of Ahrār al-Shām, Jaysh al-Islām, Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islam, the Southern Front, Faylaq al-Shām, and Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām.

Chapter 3 explored the dual militant–political role of Islamist armed groups at both national and international levels, arguing that in addition to their focus on gaining territorial control, they had actively invested in domestic and international politics, both opportunistically and strategically depending on the context.

I argued that while coordinating with the Syrian political opposition umbrella in the diaspora did not satisfy the Islamist armed groups inside Syria, they have undergone a transformation to reach a certain level of political competency that has allowed them to participate in peace negotiations as part of the opposition forces to the al-Asad regime. By 2017, during the Astana talks, Islamist opposition armed groups were recognized as contributors to the political solution to the Syria conflict. Many of

these groups had already established bilateral channels with nation-states to support their internal positions and secure military and political support.

The community-level interactions between Islamist armed groups and society were the subject of Part III (chapters 4 and 5) of this work. Chapter 4 surveyed the reasons behind the installment and consolidation of the governance system led by Islamist armed groups, namely, a weakening of the central state and pressing community demands for social services and emergency relief assistance to the affected population. This chapter also demonstrated that in seeking legitimacy and community acceptance, Islamist armed groups made unprecedented efforts to establish social services, administration, and judicial and security systems. Such systems helped to fill the vacuum left by the current weakened state and served as an attempt at future state building, which again requires community support.

The process of state weakening, withdrawal, and takeover by the Islamist armed groups was always infused by the communities of those territories. The unarmed collective civil action, as the origin of the uprising in March 2011, continued to reshape and reframe itself through all those processes of military, civil, and political change.

The Syria situation presents a case involving multiple layers of oppression, among which are state oppression and the newly emerging intra-opposition or intra-rebels' oppression. The latter took place at two levels: (a) relationship of Islamist militant groups to non-Islamist opposition, namely, the FSA, the nationalistic vision of whose leadership most of the militants did not clearly embrace, rather adopting a different ideology that reflected armed conflict on the ground; (b) the Islamist militant groups' relation to the local communities in areas under their control that included significant violent action against civilians in general and political activists in particular.

As a result, in the beginning, the public space for the people's collective action, which was thought to be increasing at the beginning of the Syrian civil war with the increasing armed opposition toward the regime, turned out to be shrinking under increasing control of Islamist armed groups. As a result of the prolonged conflict and increasing violence due to intra-militants fighting, the political

opportunity seemed to be shrinking, and more activists fled opposition-controlled territories in fear of retaliation. Nevertheless, the new culture of political participation and engagement that was created through the experience of the past ten years remains and has not vanished yet, and active fighting can be still witnessed, to preserve part of the public space acquired, as was explained in Chapter 5.

Thus, the survival of the Islamist armed groups in Syria after the conflict ends is believed to reflect those groups' investment in the political and social arena as well as their approach to the community. Also significant is the latter's ability to keep the community space intact from the oppression of state or armed actors.

Contribution

Despite the attention devoted to the expansion of Islamist armed groups in Syria since 2011, none of the works published so far has covered extensively the non-militant roles of these groups and their impact on Syrian communities under their control. Furthermore, the available scholarship does not deal with the considerable social and political impact of the power gap filled by the Islamist groups in areas under the regime's weakened control, nor does it address the ways in which the communities and Syria civil society created their own space amid such dynamics.

My dissertation has attempted to complement existing studies by profiling the new attempt by Syrian Islamist armed groups at political and social contributions as a necessity to gain community acceptance and proof of eligibility for legitimacy.

My findings suggest that some of these groups have managed to develop an administrative and political structure that better places them to govern the community. At the same time, the expanded Syrian civil society has adapted and learned how to negotiate with the Islamist armed groups, leading to the unprecedented situation of a public self-governance space that the community has enjoyed despite the levels of violence and chaos they faced.

Appendix- List of Individual Interviews

No	Gender	Age	Origin	Current Location	years in Jordan	relation to the study
1	F	21	Homs city	Amman	5	initial armed demonstrations, volunteering to support south Syria from Jordan
2	F	41	Al-Harak (Darʾā)	Amman	5	martyr's husband, two brothers fighters (28,32) currently relocated to Idlib
3	F	41	Homs old city	Amman	5	on the way from Syria to Jordan, various armed groups
4	M	30	Homs city	Amman	6	met with various fighters in Jordan, or remote contact by skype
5	F	36	Dārayyā (rural Damascus)	Amman	6	husband is a fighter with Liwā' Shuhadāʾ al-Islām and currently relocated in Idlib
6	M	48	Hama	Ghour	6	initial clashes between rebels and regime in hometown. tribal relative in Jordan
7	F	26	Qadam (Damascus)	Amman	5	as part of the community
8	F	55	Qadam (Damascus)	Amman	4	as part of community and to age she continued to go back and forth across lines of control
9	F	37	al-Hol (Darʾā)	Irbid	5	experienced Damascus Kiswa fights then back to northern Syria
10	F	40	Deir Ez-Zor	Irbid	4	experienced FSA, militants and finally ISIS before leaving to Jordan
11	M	27	Mhardah (Hama)	Maadaba	6	initial clashes, tribal relative in Jordan
12	M	26	Mhardah (Hama)	Maadaba	5	initial clashes between rebels and regime in hometown. tribal relative in Jordan
13	F	32	Kashef (Darʾā)	Amman	3	as part of the community during period 2011-2015, also witnessed foreign fighters
14	M	36	Souran (Hama)	Maadaba	5	first two years of fighting at hometown. Relatives killed
15	M	32	Mhardah (Hama)	Maadaba	6	continued to be in touch with hometown, relative involved in fighting /injured and came after to Jordan

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Interviews/Spokespersons

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