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THE SYRIAN JIHAD

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CHARLES R. LISTER

# The Syrian Jihad

*Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the  
Evolution of an Insurgency*

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FAO People's Book Prize

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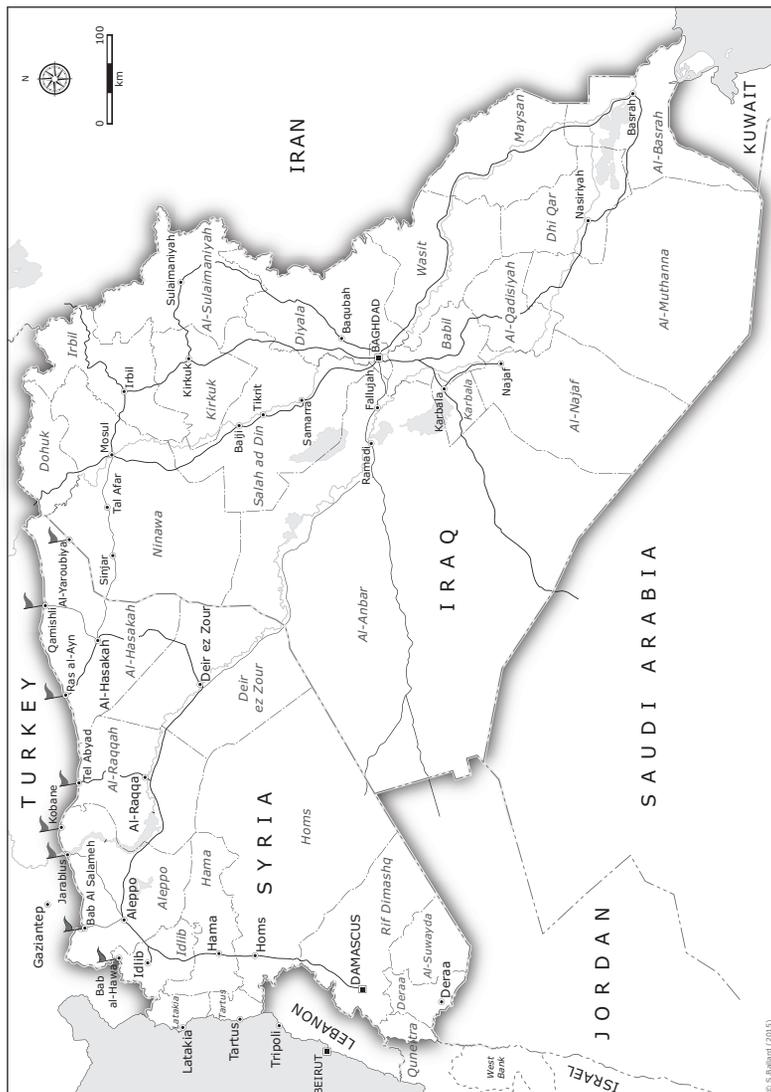
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This book is the result of over four years of research and personal experience of what must be one of the most tragic and deadly revolutions and civil conflicts in modern history. Knowing Syria personally, and having walked its streets, met and got to know its people, and fallen for its natural and architectural beauty and social vibrancy, the violence, hatred and destruction that has swept the country since 2011 is simply heartbreaking. The exponential growth of jihadist militancy is a major source of concern and will continue to be for many years to come. Its emergence, expansion and consolidation is therefore a subject that must be better understood.

Firstly, I'm grateful to the Brookings Doha Center for having hosted me as a roving Visiting Fellow since December 2013. A special thanks in this case must go to Salman Shaikh, for having taken me on and provided me with the intellectual space and scholarly independence that has allowed me to gain so much insight on Syria in recent years. The centre's broader research and administrative staff have also been a great support.

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## PREFACE

In the future, historians will look back on 2011 as having been a truly remarkable year for the Middle East and North Africa. In what is still heralded as the Arab Spring, ordinary citizens of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen took to the streets and confronted their corrupt and dictatorial leaders, sparking profound social and political change. Long-held institutional norms of keeping political dissent, and often frustration, within the confines of one's own home were shattered.

Although the Assad regime had clearly demonstrated in previous years its lack of interest in—or outright refusal to—reform in order to bring Syria into a new era, many still thought the country would escape the Arab Spring unscathed. However, when small protests began erupting in early 2011, Syrian security forces were unforgiving. Many ordinary Syrians who had taken to the streets in support of political freedom and self-representation, or in protest against the detention and torture of children in the southern city of Deraa, were threatened, arrested, and attacked with teargas and live ammunition. A total refusal by both local and national government to allow for open dissent directly encouraged the escalation of protest and the birth of a revolution.

In its early stages the Syrian revolution mobilised around issues of liberty, freedom, anti-corruption and democratic governance. The protests themselves were peaceful, with husbands, wives, children and grandparents all contributing towards a mass movement for positive change. However, a concerted security campaign aimed at suppressing this expanding revolution not only consolidated opposition to the Assad regime, but encouraged the mobilisation of local self-protection militias, which by the summer of 2011 had given rise to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and a fledgling anti-government insurgency.

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Well over four years later, Syria has become home to the largest, most complex and arguably the most powerful collection of Sunni jihadist movements in modern history. By September 2015, at least 30,000 foreign fighters, including as many as 6,000 from Europe,<sup>1</sup> had travelled into Syria to fight jihad—on a scale totally unprecedented for many decades. But it has not only been men who have travelled to join the Syrian Jihad. Several thousand women and children have also left for Syria, primarily to join what they perceive to be a fledgling ‘Islamic state’.

Syria’s unique status in Islamic prophecies relating to its central role as the source of battles that will precede the end of the world has been a major attraction for jihadist recruits from over 100 countries. The presence of well-established jihadist facilitation networks in Syria prior to the revolution, as well as the country’s proximity to other jihadist hotspots in Iraq and Lebanon, have also contributed towards its newfound status as the centre of international jihad.

Several terrorist attacks and plots have since been both planned and inspired by Syria-based jihadists, whose hostility to the Western world was brought out into the open by US-led airstrikes in the country that began in late 2014. Those bombing raids had two principal targets: the so-called Islamic State (IS) and members of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front)—two jihadist movements which, despite once being organisationally linked, effectively declared war on each other in 2014. While IS had established a self-proclaimed caliphate stretching across parts of Syria and Iraq in mid-2014 and had called for and received pledges of allegiance from small jihadist groups and individuals around the world, the latter appeared to be evolving from being a pragmatic and widely popular Syrian jihadist movement into an organisation with a more overt desire to one day impose its Islamic rule in other parts of Syria, with or without the support of other factions.

This book is exclusively focused on one component of the Syria-based insurgency: the role played by Sunni jihadists and their Syrian Salafist allies. There are of course also Shia jihadists playing an equally significant role in the conflict, on the side of the regime and Bashar al-Assad. The interplay and interdependence of both these components will be scrutinised, as will the role of international state and sub-state actors on both sides of the conflict. However, the overarching focus of this book is to provide a detailed account of how the Syrian Jihad emerged, grew and has evolved throughout several years of brutal conflict. It will therefore follow a chronological format, beginning with early chapters detailing the initially peaceful stages of the revolu-

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tion in early 2011; the socio-economic and socio-political underlying factors behind both the revolution and its susceptibility to jihadism; and an investigation of the Assad regime's dangerous flirtation with jihadist militancy that both directly and indirectly facilitated its emergence in the early days of the revolution.

This book is also driven and motivated by over four years of personal experience and engagement with hundreds of Syrian insurgents, from ordinary foot-soldiers to many of the most powerful group's leaders and senior political command structures, from secular nationalists to devout Salafists. Most of these men picked up weapons as a last resort to protect their communities, but they now find themselves embroiled in a vicious and seemingly intractable civil conflict. Many of these revolutionaries—from young men in their twenties to those in their fifties, all of whose lives have been thrown into turmoil since 2011—have become friends and acquaintances. It is hard not to take their stories personally, from a young IT graduate who lost seventeen members of his family in the horrific sarin gas attack outside Damascus in August 2013 to an older sheikh who spent three separate extended periods in prison living in inhumane conditions and being tortured merely for being an outspoken member of the political Islamist opposition. This is to name only two. None of these men particularly wanted to be carrying guns in their homeland, but the struggle for justice and freedom has become a very personal one.

The experiences, stories and comments of these men, all now insurgent fighters, are interwoven throughout this book. Many now reflect on the peaceful pre-revolution days and wonder: was all worth it? Why did the 'West' come to the aid of Libyans when they rose up against Gaddafi, but ignored the plight of Syrians when they were beaten, tortured, shot, blown up and gassed? This is a legitimate question worthy of more investigation.

Four years of concerted research and work on the Syrian conflict and its complex insurgency has also brought brought me into contact with jihadist militants, from al-Qaeda, IS and other independent and international groups. This access has been of immense value in acquiring greater familiarity with terrorist organisations that are otherwise off limits and closed to Western nationals. Maintaining contact and a sporadic dialogue with such individuals is a delicate task, but the insight gleaned proved time and again that it was worth the time invested. Nonetheless, the publication of an extensive policy-focused assessment of IS for the Brookings Doha Center in December 2014 incurred an aggressive reaction from Islamic State and its support communities online, thus placing this author on several official and unofficial IS 'lists.'

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This experience served as a reminder of the intensity of jihadist self-awareness and self-protection amid international scrutiny and attack.

Knowing Syria as I do, with its extraordinary history, architectural and natural beauty and its superlatively welcoming people, the rise of jihadist militancy across the country is deeply concerning. That such groups, who hold such inherently violent and exclusionary ideologies, have become an integrated and fundamental component of the revolution and the anti-government insurgency is proof only of the failures of the international community to back a moderate Syrian nationalistic opposition that only wanted better things for their homeland.

Despite their broad ideological differences, most Syrians still involved in the revolution in 2015 want what they wanted in 2011, but the sheer power and intimidating dominance of jihadists has forced them to befriend their enemies. This book will tell the story of how this unfortunate state of affairs came to be. Where did the jihadists come from in the first place? How did they establish themselves, and what was their role in the revolution? What role did external actors play in facilitating the rise of jihadists and how might US-led and Russian intervention impact their status in Syria?

These questions and many more form the basis of *The Syrian Jihad*. Ultimately, we must also reflect on how a virtuous and well-meaning populist revolution, yearning only for the virtues of freedom, became transformed into an intractable civil war in which jihadists have found such a comfortable home.

Charles R. Lister, Doha, October 2015

## INTRODUCTION

Syria currently represents the centre of the world for jihadist militancy. Even the high-profile conflict in Iraq is a rung lower given the psychological pull of conflict zones for men seeking to attach an Islamist ideological fervour to a specific political–military cause. While September 2015 estimates suggested at least 30,000 non-Syrians have joined the jihad in Syria at some point since 2011, it seems likely that this number is probably higher. After all, intelligence officials from the UK alone revised that country's citizen flow into Syria from 600–700 in March 2015 to an extraordinarily higher estimate of 1,600 the following month, with an additional five citizens leaving for Syria every week.<sup>1</sup>

Such flows have significantly raised the profile and long-term sustainability of the jihad in Syria, but the domestic dynamics within Syria have played an equally significant role, if not one that is far more important.

Understandably, much has been written about the phenomenon that is the 'Islamic State.' Its slick media production, its brutal levels of violence, apocalyptic rhetoric, its effective fusion of fanatical Islamic extremism with ideals of Baathist Arab power, as well as its image as an international movement building a proto-state that spans across 100-year-old colonial borders, has seized the world's imagination. But although initially an Iraq-based organisation, IS benefited hugely from the conflict in Syria, and today the effective capital of its 'Islamic State' lies in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa. Moreover, much of the group's most valuable resources lie in Syria, where the immense complexity of the conflict offers it a sustainable long-term presence and territorial control.

The Syrian Jihad is about much more than IS, however. Countless other powerful jihadist groups have made Syria their base, many of which are led by and include within their ranks veteran jihadist figures with extensive experience in the upper echelons of al-Qaeda and other major jihadist organisations.

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One of these groups is al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra, which has arguably established an even more sustainable presence in Syria than IS. Through an intricately stage-managed game of pragmatism and Machiavellian power politics, Jabhat al-Nusra has carved out a stake in Syria that over time has become both tacitly accepted and militarily powerful. Its sustained focus on recruiting heavily from within Syria's pro-opposition population has ensured it has, by and large, avoided the kind of isolation from popular opposition dynamics experienced by IS.

However, IS's dramatic advances in Iraq and its proclamation of a caliphate, not to mention its status as the primary focus of international airstrikes, has presented an existential challenge to Jabhat al-Nusra and its jihadist legitimacy. This has encouraged a shift within Jabhat al-Nusra's pragmatic posture, to the extent that it has begun to show signs of demonstrating the kind of belligerent and self-assertive behavior that got IS into trouble in 2013 and early 2014.

Syria's Jihad is therefore a complex story, involving a huge cast of jihadist actors operating within one of the most intense and multifarious civil wars in recent history. In establishing a base in Syria and by playing a role in its revolution, Sunni jihadists had a crucial part in internationalising the conflict.

One consistent theme throughout the Syrian civil war has been the sheer multitude of insurgent and jihadist protagonists involved. By early 2015 at least 150,000 insurgents within as many as 1,500 operationally distinct armed groups were involved in differing levels of fighting across Syria, some within broader umbrellas and fronts and others existing entirely independently. Although the emergence of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the summer of 2011 appeared at the time to herald the formation of an organised and moderate armed Syrian opposition, it quickly fell victim to the fact that its leadership was based outside Syria, in refugee camps in southern Turkey. Not only was its command-and-control potential thus hampered from the start, but its financial support was divided according to the respective interests of regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar as well as governments in Europe and the United States.

In fact, the consistent failure of external states with interests in supporting the revolution to unify their provision of assistance explains not only the proliferation of insurgent factions, but also the opposition's incapacity to present a genuine threat to the Assad regime. The fact that groups found themselves having to compete with each other for funding and support, and in so doing were often moulding their image and ideological frames of refer-

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ence towards those potential backers, meant that very few of them retained a consistent strength and long-term viability. Such inconsistencies ensured that external initiatives aimed at establishing a unified structure for the insurgency would almost certainly fail. Thus, separate attempts to establish and operationalise provincial military councils, the Supreme Military Council and a ministry of defence within the exiled interim government all fell far short of attaining anything like success on the ground inside Syria.

Moreover, although not immediately visible at the time, the FSA was only one of many armed insurgent movements to emerge in mid-2011. From June that year a number of more Islamist-minded factions were coming together and setting up bases outside Damascus, in Homs and in Syria's north. These were groups such as Kataib Ahrar al-Sham—which would go on to become the largest and arguably most powerful Syrian insurgent group—Suqor al-Sham and Liwa al-Islam, as well as the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.

By mid-2011 a broad range of insurgent actors, which reflected the varied social backgrounds of Syrian society, had emerged. This did not augur well for a well-organised and unitary armed opposition. Moreover, as time passed, actors on the more Islamist end of the insurgent spectrum began demonstrating superior levels of internal organisation and insurgent coordination, and were thus enjoying sustained and reliable sources of support from outside sources. Qatar in particular played a key role in buttressing such groups in the conflict's first twelve months, while Turkey and Jordan had an influence on their borders with Syria which ensured that certain groups acquired more reliable channels of support than others.

It was within this context of insurgent proliferation, moderate failures to unify and escalating violence and brutality that jihadists found and established such solid foundations. Not only did Syria present an attractive proposition for prospective jihadists as a result of its prophesied place in Islamic tradition, but also its close proximity to Europe through Turkey undoubtedly facilitated the arrival of foreign fighters from a very early stage. Among the various early starters within the jihadist camp were several groups founded and led by Chechens. At first, these were not Chechens coming directly from Russia's North Caucasus, but rather individuals already residing within Turkey's well-established Chechen diaspora communities.

Jihadist groups also directly benefited from the failures of more moderate insurgents, which encouraged the perception that the jihadists were more extensively and reliably funded, more professional, better armed and equipped, and were therefore simply more successful in battle. As such, many Syrian

men involved in fighting for the revolution chose to join groups with a more extreme outlook than they were perhaps initially inclined to, but did so in order to be part of a 'winning team' and the better to fit in with what was an increasingly Islamist landscape, especially in northern Syria.

While revolutionary and of significant value to the outside world, the explosion in the use of social media to publish and promote battle updates, insurgent bulletins and other news arguably also discouraged broad opposition unity in Syria. Any group intending to be taken seriously in Syria maintained social media accounts on multiple different platforms, which by itself induced a dynamic of self-promotion that was often contrary to the presentation of a single unified opposition. Jihadists in particular proved especially adept at managing their use of social media and the production of qualitatively superior video and imagery output, which further demonstrated the reputation of professionalism that they were gaining on the battlefield.

Ultimately, however, while the Sunni jihadist component of Syria's insurgency fed off and benefited from others' inadequacies and failures, it also established and maintained its own unique internal dynamic. As the number of jihadist groups grew through 2013 and 2014, the two key nodes of al-Qaeda and IS (or its predecessor, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)) emerged as defining influences around which other factions either aligned themselves or asserted continued independence. As 2015 began, both had effectively established their own unique *modi operandi*, and although they were pursuing the same objective, al-Qaeda (or Jabhat al-Nusra) had adopted an incremental approach towards establishing Islamic rule. These diverging strategies precipitated a significant debate within the broader jihadist community, which by extension split the world's jihadists into two camps.

However, while IS had manoeuvred itself into being an avowed enemy of the entire Syrian insurgency by late 2013 and early 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra had quite ingeniously redefined itself as a jihadist organisation enjoying a broad base of acceptance within Syria's opposition-supporting community. By pragmatically managing its relations with the broader insurgency, Jabhat al-Nusra was limiting the extent of its al-Qaeda-like objectives. However, at least within its senior leadership, the intent to one day establish Islamic emirates across Syria remained. Such objectives began to materialise more overtly in late 2014 until the rumblings of resistance induced a 're-moderation' in April 2015. Whether that would endure remained to be seen, but it is unlikely that the group's senior leadership and foreign fighter contingents will simply relinquish such goals, even amid rumours of an internal debate regarding its official relationship with al-Qaeda.<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

All these developments relating to the jihadist insurgency, the broader Syrian opposition, external supporting states, the Syrian regime and its internal and external backers will form the spine of this book's narrative. The Syrian conflict and the jihadist insurgency evolved through a number of different phases. From the point at which the revolution began in early 2011 until mid-2012, the dominant theme was of a fledgling insurgency emerging amid an escalating regime crackdown on protest and opposition to its authority. The interplay between these two opposing dynamics ensured that the Syrian revolution turned into a bloody and complex civil conflict in which jihadist groups could establish a concrete foothold and integrate themselves within a broader cause widely seen as having legitimacy: fighting to protect Sunni civilians facing indiscriminate and brutal repression. Jabhat al-Nusra was the first such group to become active in Syria, announcing its emergence publicly in January 2012, six months after it had begun to form in the summer of 2011.

With nationwide conflict in Syria an established reality by mid-2012, the next phase was characterised by important insurgent victories that lasted until roughly mid-2013. While southern Syria was beginning to emerge as a key stronghold of moderate FSA factions with close links to neighbouring Jordan and also Saudi Arabia, the north was evolving into an environment more favourable to groups with an Islamic frame of reference, including jihadists. Through the winter of 2012–13 Islamists in northern Syria led a number of important strategic victories against the regime, thereby facilitating Jabhat al-Nusra's integration into the wider insurgency. That the US designation of the group as a terrorist organisation in December 2012 sparked nationwide protests in support of Jabhat al-Nusra illustrated how quickly the group had begun to win a degree of broad acceptance among Sunnis. Meanwhile, other jihadist groups were forming in northern Syria, several led by Chechens and others by experienced militants from North Africa and the Middle East.

Following a period of dramatic insurgent victories, the tide began flowing in the Assad regime's favour in mid-2013. After a concerted Hezbollah-led offensive succeeded in recapturing the town of al-Qusayr close to the Lebanese border in June 2013, the Syrian army—increasingly backed by Iran and foreign Shia militias—acquired a major morale boost, which led to a six-month period of opposition losses in Syria's strategically vital western border with Lebanon and around the country's largest city, Aleppo and the capital, Damascus. More than anything, this phase represented one of regime recovery rather than victory, and the long-term outcome was more of a strategic stalemate, in which neither the opposition, nor the jihadists, nor the regime and

its supporting militias were in a position decisively to 'win' the conflict. This may have been a motivating factor behind the regime's otherwise hard to explain sarin gas attack on Damascus's East Ghouta suburbs in August 2013, which killed over 1,400 people.

Such horrific atrocities notwithstanding, the arrival of ISIS in Syria in April–May 2013 opened a rift within the jihadist component of the insurgency in Syria, whereby Jabhat al-Nusra ended up breaking away from ISIS—its mother organisation. Throughout the final months of 2013, ISIS operated as an increasingly self-assertive actor willing to attack and aggressively undermine other groups standing in its way. As inter-factional tensions rose across northern Syria, the regime became the only beneficiary.

This dynamic continued into early 2014, when Syrian opposition patience with ISIS's aggression ran out and a major offensive was launched against the group across northern and eastern Syria in January 2014. While the regime attempted to exploit the opening up of another front in the conflict, the major strategic shifts through mid-2014 were between ISIS and the remainder of the armed opposition, including Jabhat al-Nusra. ISIS sustained serious losses between January and March and withdrew altogether from three governorates, refocusing its forces around its power base in the northern city of Raqqa and in the eastern governorate of Deir ez Zour. Despite this, and perhaps in reaction to it, ISIS launched its own dramatic offensive in mid-2014 in Iraq, capturing the city of Mosul and marching south towards Baghdad, before proclaiming the establishment of a caliphate spanning parts of Iraq and Syria.

This dramatic series of events, and ISIS's renaming of itself simply as Islamic State sent shock waves around the world, but particularly across Syria. A new inter-jihadist competitive dynamic had emerged to challenge the jihadist credibility of al-Qaeda, and in particular of Jabhat al-Nusra. However, the most strategically consequential shift sparked by IS's successes was the initiation of US-led international military intervention—in the form of cruise missile and air strikes—against jihadist targets in Iraq (from August 2014) and Syria (from September 2014). This introduced a new and dangerous element of anti-Westernism into the conflict in Syria—especially within jihadist factions, but also across much of the wider opposition, which accused the West of willingly allowing over three years of civilian deaths at the Assad regime's hands, only later to intervene against the jihadists. The real danger was in the effect that the strikes had in definitively creating a new international enemy in the eyes of IS and Jabhat al-Nusra—both of which had previously been focused solely on the local conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

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As 2015 began, therefore, the conflict in Syria had become a complex web of local, national, regional and international dynamics, involving many different actors. A very large number of battlefronts were active within Syria's borders, and jihadist militants continued to expand their influence. While the international community seemed more committed to countering IS in Iraq, it was becoming apparent that any anti-jihadist strategy in Syria remained limited more to counter-terrorism rather than a grand strategy aimed at eradicating these groups.

In March 2015 the broad scope of the insurgent 'opposition,' including Jabhat al-Nusra, appeared to experience a significant boost, and by the end of the month a valuable Syria–Jordan border crossing had been captured and the city of Idlib had fallen into insurgent hands—only the second governorate capital to do so, after Raqqa. Insurgents inside Syria spoke at the time of increased levels of support being sent into Syria's south and north by regional states increasingly self-confident after militarily intervening against Houthi advances in Yemen. Opposition forces consequently continued to win significant back-to-back victories in Idlib governorate through the summer, raising a question mark over the Assad regime's potential to survive.

However, despite the rise in confidence and continued gains by the insurgency through the first months of 2015, the fact remained that both Jabhat al-Nusra and IS remained comfortably in place as major power-players in Syria. IS had spent several months preparing the ground for infiltrating areas around Damascus, further into Syria's interior governorates of Homs and Hama, as well as into the south, and looked far from being an organisation weakened by international attack. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra remained an integral part of the northern insurgency, and was still notably strong in southern Syria. Multiple other jihadist factions remained active and influential across Syria, and thus it was hard to see anything but a continued and significant jihadist militant presence in Syria in the months and years to come.

At the end of the day, the story of Syria's conflict and its evolution is extremely complex, but the trajectory of jihadist militancy within its ever-changing dynamics has steadily increased in scale and potential. A great many jihadist groups have emerged and established themselves on a local and sometimes national level in Syria, but generally, the pro-al-Qaeda, pro-IS and independent poles illustrate the entire jihadist landscape currently in existence. However, a crucial fourth pole is the expressly *Syrian* Salafist factions that largely retain similar conservative values as jihadists, but focus their existence solely within a Syrian operational perspective. Groups such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-

Islamiyya (Ahrar al-Sham) and Jaish al-Islam, for example, have become invaluable links between jihadists and the broader insurgent opposition and, as long as these Salafists remain supportive and accepting of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, jihadists will reap the benefits of perceived legitimacy.

Simply put, and contrary to what many moderate FSA factions have said officially and on the record, a vast majority of Syria's insurgent opposition has fought alongside and coordinated closely with Jabhat al-Nusra since mid-to-late 2012. While such cooperation takes place despite vast ideological differences, it has continued because an effective military opposition to the Assad regime has been a more important priority. There is, however, a better potential alternative to such cooperation with jihadists: a closer and more beneficial relationship with the international community.

Despite this, the Western world has failed to sufficiently reach out to, engage with and support a broad enough section of the opposition inside Syria to persuade others to cease their support for jihadists. This remarkable lack of commitment to reinforce a *Syrian* insurgent opposition has directly provided the space for jihadists to emerge as the dominant players in Syria that they are today. Unless this level of commitment changes, Syria will continue to represent the centre of the world for jihadist militancy for many years to come, and the consequences for such policy shortsightedness will not only fall upon Syria and Syrians, but will affect the world at large.

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PART I

SETTING THE SCENE

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## BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

### PROTEST

It took only twenty-eight days for the Tunisian people to overthrow their president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, from his twenty-three-year seat of near absolute power. That ‘revolution’—and indeed what has become known as the Arab Spring—was sparked by a single tragic act of desperation and personal protest by twenty-six-year-old street vendor Tarek al-Tayeb Mohammed Bouazizi, who self-immolated outside the office of the governor of Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010. Forced through personal circumstances to become the main breadwinner for his family at the age of ten, Bouazizi, who was locally known as ‘Basboosa’, had been unjustly tormented by local officials for years. That he was again harassed early that fateful morning in December 2010 catalysed his transformation into an icon overnight. His story, and his subsequent death on 4 January 2011, struck a nerve for many throughout the region.

Thirty-eight days later protesters in Egypt overthrew President Hosni Mubarak, whose authoritarian rule in that country had lasted nearly three decades. At this point, the long-held but unspoken regional norm of avoiding demonstrations of public political opposition was well and truly destroyed. By late February protests had erupted in at least fourteen other countries across the Middle East and North Africa, including in Libya, where an armed revolution would end up co-opting the support of NATO and end in Muammar Gaddafi’s death on 20 October 2011; and in Yemen, where sus-

tained political protest eventually forced President Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign on 27 February 2012.

\* \* \*

The common understanding of the Syrian revolution holds that it began on 15 March 2011, but this doesn't entirely tell the whole picture. In fact, the first notable incident of public protest against the government of President Bashar al-Assad took place in the north-eastern city of al-Hasakah on 26 January 2011, when a local man, Hasan Ali Akleh, poured a can of petrol over himself and set his body on fire. Although this act took place amid the tumult surrounding the proliferation in and escalation of various anti-government movements around the region, Akleh's apparent act of desperate protest did not precipitate immediate demonstrations across Syria.

While pre-existing Syrian opposition groups did call, via Facebook and Twitter, for a 'Day of Rage' across the country on Friday 4 February, nothing of note took place, with one relatively minor exception: On the morning of 5 February several hundred protesters took part in a demonstration in al-Hasakah, but with minimal fanfare or consequence.

Nonetheless, the significance of regional events was having its effect. A violent assault on a shopkeeper in Damascus's famous Souq al-Hamadiyya by police on 17 February triggered an impromptu protest, where locals repeatedly exclaimed: 'Syria's people will not be humiliated!' Perhaps this represented the landmark moment, the modest turning-point in Syria's political consciousness, whereby an individual act of government thuggery catalysed a psychological rethink. Approximately 5,000 people ended up taking part in the unplanned protest in al-Hamadiyya, which, considering the centrality of its location, made the incident a telling one.

The key catalyst came in a series of developments in the southern city of Deraa, beginning on 6 March, when fifteen schoolboys, aged between ten and fifteen, were arrested and detained by members of the Idaraat al-Amn al-Siyasee (Political Security Directorate) for having painted the words *al-Shaab yureed eskaat al-nizaam* ('The people want to topple the regime') on a wall. The phrase had become well known as the slogan of the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and although the children were clearly far too young to harbour genuinely threatening political motivations, they were nonetheless beaten and allegedly tortured in various ways, including by having their fingernails pulled out.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, as reports of their detention spread throughout the country, acts of sporadic and planned protest spread, although still on a comparatively small scale.

On 7 March thirteen prominent political activists serving prison terms in the infamous Adra prison in the north-east suburbs of Damascus released a joint letter declaring themselves 'prisoners of conscience' and announcing the start of a hunger strike. This strike, they said, was predicated on their demand for a complete cessation of 'political arrests' and for the government to remove 'injustices' and to restore 'rights that have been taken from civil and political life'.<sup>2</sup> Included in the list of thirteen signatories was Anwar al-Bunni, a human rights lawyer who had been sentenced to five years in prison for signing—along with nearly 300 other academics and political activists—the May 2006 Beirut–Damascus Declaration, which called on the Syrian government to respect Lebanon's independence and territorial integrity. Another hunger striker was eighty-year-old Haithem al-Maleh, a former judge and pro-democracy activist imprisoned in 2009 for 'affecting the morale of the nation' during a television interview on London-based opposition channel Barada TV.

The following day the government announced a presidential amnesty to political prisoners over the age of seventy—in honour of the fortieth anniversary of Hafez al-Assad's endorsement as president of Syria on 12 March 1971—thereby freeing Haithem al-Maleh. Later that day twelve Syrian human rights groups demanded that the government 'amend all laws that prevent human rights organisations from working openly and freely, and civil society from playing its role effectively'. The demands also focused on the rights of Syrian Kurds, who it said faced 'all forms of discrimination' and should immediately be 'entitled to enjoy their culture and use of their language in accordance with their civil, cultural, social, and economic rights'.<sup>3</sup>

On 10 March several dozen imprisoned Kurdish activists from the Partiya Yekîti (Kurdish Democratic Unity Party) and Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD, or Democratic Union Party) joined the hunger strike launched by prisoners in Adra, and two days later Kurdish protesters held demonstrations in the north-eastern cities of Qamishli and al-Hasakah.

As in other areas of the region, Kurds had long suffered from disproportionate levels of discrimination in Syria. Kurdish cultural gatherings, including for the annual New Year festival of Nowrûz, were effectively banned, and political gatherings were frequently met with violent repression. Such struggles had been an established reality for decades. In 1962, in a remarkable act of state-organised ethnic discrimination, a Syrian census stripped 20 per cent of the Kurdish population—approximately 100,000–120,000 people—of their Syrian citizenship, leaving them officially stateless and classified as *ajaanib* (foreigners). At the time, the government claimed that these Kurds were in fact

refugees from Turkey who had illegally infiltrated al-Hasakah governorate in 1945. Subsequent evidence, including an investigation by Human Rights Watch, shows these government claims to have been largely false.<sup>4</sup> By 2011 this stateless Kurdish minority had multiplied to an estimated 300,000 people, all of whom had no right to hold government jobs; to vote in elections; to marry Syrian passport-holders; or to be awarded university degrees.

Tensions were rising in Syria, that much was clear; but the process of protest was still largely restrained and limited in scope. But on 15 March youth activists exploiting the new age of social media successfully organised protests in Damascus and Aleppo, collectively known as the 'Day of Rage.' The events, organised primarily through a Facebook page entitled 'The Syrian Revolution against Bashar al-Assad 2011', mustered several hundred people and, although security forces did not resort to force, six protesters were detained in Damascus's Old City. On the following day a similarly sized group of protesters demonstrated outside the Interior Ministry in Damascus's Marjeh Square, where families of political prisoners held aloft photos of their relatives whose release they were demanding. Thirty-five people were detained at that protest, including a ten-year-old boy, well-known philosophy professor Tayeb Tizini and prominent human rights activist Suheir al-Atassi. Similar protests erupted that day in Aleppo, Deir ez Zour, Hama, al-Hasakah and Deraa.

'The atmosphere was full of gas and only needed a spark to explode,' explained Amjad Farekh, a trainee dental surgeon from Damascus who ended up coordinating protests in the capital before helping found the small insurgent group Liwa Jaish al-Muslimeen in 2012. A member of Farekh's activist circle 'offered to set fire to himself' as an act of protest, but this was deemed to have been 'too much—we needed a more effective way.'<sup>5</sup>

If these initial indirectly coordinated protests failed to convince people that the ball was now rolling, events on Friday 18 March made it clear that Syria was entering a new and dangerous phase of instability. At this point the fifteen schoolboys in Deraa were still in detention, and relatives were making increasingly strident attempts to obtain more information and were demanding their release. The children happened to be members of many of Deraa's largest tribes and families, including the Zoubis, the Ghawabras, the Masalmas, and the Baiazids.<sup>6</sup> In a now infamous meeting several days earlier, senior representatives of the boys' families had met with the chief of Deraa's Political Security Directorate, General Atef Najib, who, although accounts still differ, was at the very least adamant that the boys' arrest and subsequent detention had been entirely justified.

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Two accounts of this meeting have survived. One, propagated by supporters of the Assad regime, claims that Najib agreed to meet with senior family members in his private office, but proceeded to defend the legitimacy of their continued detention while admitting that several of the boys may potentially have been physically mistreated. The other, far more inflammatory, account is still widely shared amongst opponents of the government. This tells the story of a meeting in which Najib berated the boys' fathers for allowing their children's misbehaviour and effectively told them to forget their sons, go home and make more children with their wives—and, should they prove infertile, to deliver their wives to his office and he would ensure they gave birth to new sons. Whichever account is more accurate is now academic. Either would have been enough of an insult to ensure that further escalation was inevitable.

On 18 March the boys' families and hundreds of other local citizens marched through Deraa demanding the release of the children, a crackdown on corruption and the realisation of genuine democratic reform in Syria. The protest came to a standstill outside the residence of Deraa's governor, Faisal Kalthoum, where a gradually expanding conglomeration of security guards, riot police and Political Security Directorate personnel fired tear gas and water cannons, and then, for the first time, local security forces opened fire with small arms and four people were killed. In an instant, the Syrian revolution was born.

In the five days that followed President Assad deployed a government delegation, which included Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Moqdad and senior military intelligence officer and Assad insider General Rostom Ghazali, to reassure locals that the central government was committed to ensuring justice. Although the children were finally released, multiple signs of torture on their bodies only added to the rising sense of fury within the local population. On 20 March protesters ransacked and set fire to the local Baath Party headquarters and several other municipal buildings, including the Palace of Justice. Reconciliation looked a very distant possibility, and became effectively impossible after security forces launched a two-day clearing operation aimed at defeating all areas of anti-government sentiment. This included an assault on the ancient al-Omari Mosque, which protesters had adopted as a central meeting point and makeshift hospital. At least five people were killed in the operation, which subsequent video footage showed had left blood lining the mosque's internal walls. Although Governor Kalthoum was sacked on 23 March and General Najib quietly removed from his post and placed under investigation in early April, this was too little too late.

Despite being the birthplace of the revolution, Deraa had long been seen as a base of government support. Hafez al-Assad had strategically elevated prominent Deraa-born men into senior positions of authority, such as tribal leader Mahmoud Zoubi as prime minister from 1987 to 2000; Sulayman al-Qaddah as head of the Baath Party between 1985 and 2005; and Farouq al-Sharaa as foreign minister between 1984 and 2006. But events in Deraa in early to mid-March 2011 under Bashar's tutelage put an abrupt end to that relationship of delicate and purchased trust.

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There were small protests across several other Syrian municipalities on 18 March, including at Damascus's ancient Umayyad Mosque, where Amjad Farekh and his brother were arrested and then imprisoned. According to Farekh, their arrest provided the 'spark in my home town of Qaboun', where more and more protests then followed.<sup>7</sup> By the time they were released a month later—after suffering torture—the revolution had been well and truly born. Notwithstanding these other protests, what happened in Deraa was the largest by some margin in terms of scale and, most importantly, would serve as the undisputed catalyst for the revolution and civil conflict that continues today. Deraa quickly became known as the Cradle of the Revolution, and much of the responsibility for that can be attributed to the actions of Atef Najib.

A cousin of Bashar al-Assad, Najib was one of five children born to an Alawite mother, Fatima Makhoulouf—the sister of Anisa al-Assad, the wife of Bashar's father and former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad—and a Sunni father, Najib Alaah. As a young recruit to military school, Atef grew close to Bassel al-Assad, who as Hafez's eldest son, was at the time the favoured choice to succeed his father as president. However, Bassel's death in a car accident on 21 January 1994 left that duty to his less confident and somewhat geeky younger brother Bashar. Nonetheless, Atef quickly joined the intelligence apparatus, where his self-interested actions and aggressive behaviour saw him sacked some time in 1992. He remained out of service until the late 1990s, when his Assad family insider mother Fatima managed to acquire his re-employment in the *mukhabarat* (military intelligence) in Damascus's south-western suburb of al-Mezzeh. Growing increasingly wealthy through his management of a self-constructed and tightly controlled personal fiefdom—which he enforced by monitoring the police and local political figures—Atef had again begun to push his luck, and was steadily sidelined by officials above his pay-grade, including a distant relative and the former chief of Syrian intel-

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ligence in Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan (aka Abu Yuroub). Having grown increasingly exasperated as a result of his declining level of influence, Atef grudgingly agreed to the post of chief of Deraa's Political Security Directorate some time in late 2008 or early 2009.<sup>8</sup>

While this may have seemed a demotion compared to his base in the centre of power that was Damascus, Atef soon set about constructing an intricate personal web of control around Deraa's extensive financial infrastructure, which was linked primarily to official and illicit cross-border trade with Jordan as well as the lucrative water rights industry. Power and money had become Atef's *raison d'être*, and he was in his self-righteous and self-serving element. Thus, with such power, Atef presided over the detention and probable torture of fifteen young boys, an act that almost overnight precipitated a revolution and civil conflict that changed Syria forever. While Atef was seen on occasions in Damascus's Four Seasons Hotel throughout the summer of 2011, his location today is unknown.

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Despite proving itself as the 'Cradle of the Revolution', Deraa was by no means the only population centre to rise up so early against the authority of the Assad government. Protests quickly expanded in scale and geographical spread, not just encompassing governorate capitals but dozens of other towns and villages, including predominantly Sunni Muslim districts of the cities of Latakia and Tartous—both of which are key strongholds of Alawism, of which President Assad is a member. This was indeed partly a result of a conscious or unconscious (or both) element of 'group think', whereby the effect of protests across the region was intensely infectious, but it was also more than that. It was the result of something much deeper.

As a country, and particularly since the accession to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000, Syria had developed a number of deeply damaging long-term structural weaknesses that in just such a time of potential instability had the capacity to accelerate localised sources of protest and instability into part of a nationwide movement. These pre-existing catalysts were particularly evident in the spheres of socio-economics; the relationship between the state and Sunni Islam; the continued prevalence of Syria's one-party state and endemic government-facilitated corruption; and the qualitative demise of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

The following pages will briefly cover these various aspects and their relative importance within pre-revolution Syria in relation to their role in encouraging the proliferation of anti-government protest and anger in early 2011. This is not intended to be an exhaustive assessment, nor is it meant to cover all the

minutiae involved; there are many better sources dedicated to the subject. It is simply intended to provide some foundational context upon which to interpret the main subject of this book: the emergence, development and evolution of jihadist militancy within Syria's anti-government insurgency.

Socio-economically, Syria was balancing on a precipice. When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as president in mid-2000 he began putting into place the stepping-stones necessary for a new and, for Syria, revolutionary policy of Western-style neoliberalism and economic liberalisation. The comparatively modern Bashar—with roughly two years of experience under his belt working in ophthalmology at the Western Eye Hospital in London's affluent Marylebone—looked set to open Syria up to the wider world.

This initial promise helped spark the *rabia dimashq*, or Damascus Spring, whereby academics, intellectuals and others began a period of intensive discussion and debate over Syria's political and social future. This reformist culture led the establishment of so-called *mutadayaat*, or forums, where discussion groups would gather publicly to debate issues of perceived importance. As a sign of the times of hope, even members of the traditionally closed-minded Baath Party joined these forums, openly discussing the feasibility of political reform, the value of democracy and liberalism and other such populist topics. The rapid rise to prominence of the issue of political imprisonment—raised in this context in the famous Statement by 99 Syrian Intellectuals on 27 September 2000<sup>1</sup>—led to the release of several hundred detainees from Mezzeh prison in Damascus a little over a month later, in November.

All this apparent liberalising took place within a challenging political environment for Bashar, who, upon assuming office, was faced with his father's old guard, whose loyalty to the traditional Baath values of socialism and Arab nationalism did not go hand in hand with political liberalisation and a potential opening up to Western sources of investment. One of Hafez's most ardent supporters and head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, Ali Douba, was pushed aside quickly in February 2000, into a kind of forced retirement in the Douba family home town and ancient coastal fortress of al-Qurfays in Latakia's Jableh district. But others, including Bashar's brother Maher al-Assad—the commander-in-chief of the ultra-loyalist Republican Guard and the army's Fourth Armoured Division—remained in their seats, and as such, Bashar's policy of openness did not last long.

With such new and previously unknown political freedom, prominent members of the Damascus Spring perhaps began to push towards the invisible boundaries far too quickly. The red line was seemingly crossed in August 2001

when the secretary-general of the Syrian Communist Party and a key political activist, Riyad al-Turk, appeared to celebrate this newfound freedom in Syria by exclaiming on Al-Jazeera that 'the dictatorship has died'. Turk was promptly arrested in Damascus several days later on 1 September, and with that the Damascus Spring came to an abrupt end. Another prominent activist, Riyad Seif—who had teetered on the edge of establishing a new political party—was detained on 5 September; and prominent Syrian economics academic Aaref Dalila was taken in on 9 September. Many other activists met a similar fate that month, and were duly imprisoned for periods lasting throughout the 2000s.

While political reform and openness most certainly failed, Bashar's determination to introduce economic liberalism into state policy did not. On 10 October—around a month after the effective end of the Damascus Spring—the Syrian government submitted an official request to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Although this objective was only realised in May 2010, when the United States dropped its opposition as part of a wider initiative aimed at bringing Syria in from the cold, the sentiment coming from Assad's upper policy-making echelon was clear. But what was equally clear was that any process of at least partial integration into the international economic system was going to be a slow one. After all, Syria was widely regarded—rightfully so—as a thoroughly active member of the Iran-led axis; something that would become increasingly clear in the mid-2000s when senior elements within the Syrian government and security apparatus would actively facilitate the movement of jihadist recruits across the Syrian border into Iraq, where they contributed towards the escalating al-Qaeda-led insurgency against the US-led coalition.

Nonetheless, while clearly slow in the early 2000s, the momentum within Damascus to push liberal economic policies gained initiative upon the appointment of Abdullah Abd al-Razzaq Dardari to the post of deputy prime minister in charge of economic affairs in 2005. Dardari was a fluent English and French speaker with a thoroughly Western education: he gained his Bachelor's degree from the International Richmond University in the affluent London suburb of Richmond, and followed that up with a Master's degree from the University of Southern California and a post-graduate degree from the London School of Economics (LSE). After brief posts as a journalist for *al-Hayat* and as a representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), he joined the Syrian government, where he almost immediately became a key figure in the drafting of long-term economic policy. His background and liberal economic values made him a respected figure

within the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). His value within Bashar's economic strategy was clear.

From 2005 onwards privatisation of banking and business was actively encouraged on both state and municipal levels. On 7 May 2005 Dardari helped push through his Five Year Plan, which placed new emphasis on 'poverty mapping'; encouraging policy reform to integrate small and medium enterprises (SMEs) into the formal and state-administered sector; and withdrawing state control from areas of investment and other economic activities where 'market mechanisms are found to be worthy of playing an essential role.'<sup>2</sup> Dardari also began initiating a strident outreach to foreign banks and financial bodies in search of increased levels of foreign direct investment (FDI). He was seeking to add to the trend started in January 2004, when the Beirut-based Banque Bemo and the Riyadh-based Banque Saudi Fransi joined forces to establish Syria's first independent and privately owned bank, Banque Bemo Saudi Fransi. Contacts were soon made with a number of regional and international banks, including the Bank of Jordan (resulting in the establishment of Bank of Jordan Syria in late 2008); Fransabank (established in Syria in 2009); and Citigroup and HSBC.

By 2006 Syria's FDI levels had reached \$600 million, which, when compared to a 1990–2000 average of \$127 million, and only \$180 million in 2003, represented a significant improvement. The numbers, however, were still far inferior to those of Syria's neighbours such as Lebanon, which in 2006 received \$2.794 billion; Jordan, which received \$3.121 billion; and Turkey, which received \$20 billion.<sup>3</sup> But when including other sources of foreign investment, most of them less officially administered and recordable by UN bodies, Syria's received foreign investment level for 2006 reached a number around \$1.6 billion.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, although this push for economic liberalisation may have seemed a positively intended move by Syria's senior leadership, whether by direct orders from Bashar al-Assad or a consequence of long-established cronyism and elite-led corruption, the partial opening up of the Syrian economy served largely to benefit the pre-established ruling class. A lack of political reform explains much of this, as Syrian government policy continued to be implemented by Damascus-appointed officials at both provincial and municipal levels, almost all of whom tinkered with policy to suit their own financial ends.

As such, Syria did indeed experience increased wealth and improved and more competitive levels of capital accumulation, but the majority of this was

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placed in the laps of the ruling elite. And what wasn't, was more often than not taken in by the shadowy but immensely powerful *mukhabarat*. In some respects, enhanced levels of finance flowing towards private enterprise presented *mukhabarat* officials with an opportunity. Ironically, the localised power and social-level influence of these secret police officials increased as they sought to tighten their grip on the activities of local business owners.

Although Syria's gross domestic product (GDP) had risen to \$59.15 billion (up from only \$19.3 billion in 2000),<sup>5</sup> the gap between rich and poor had simply continued to widen. Salaries had continued to stagnate, and while economic liberalisation had opened Syria up to cheap foreign manufactured goods, this had had a dramatically damaging effect upon domestic manufacturing, which simply could not compete. Fuel prices had also risen notably, and access to water had both declined and become more costly. The middle class was particularly badly hit by this concurrent rise in the cost of living, while the rural working class, the majority of whom were reliant on income from the agricultural sector, struggled terribly.

The prospects for these rural farming communities were dealt a further blow by a series of deeply damaging droughts between 2006 and 2010. They struck the agriculturally vital north-east particularly badly, adding to the region's already existing struggles with rapidly diminishing groundwater levels—which were themselves a result of corrupt mismanagement and naively overambitious farming development projects. In fact, the management of water resources in Syria at the time was so complex—it involved elements within a total of twenty-two ministries, councils, commissions and directorates<sup>6</sup>—that simple-minded policy making was inevitable and opportunities for corruption would have been rife.

The 2007–8 crop season was hit the worst, with average levels of rainfall declining by 66 per cent from the normal annual average. As a result, crop yields declined by 32 per cent in state-irrigated areas, while other areas reliant on rainfall for watering plummeted by as much as 79 per cent—which combined meant that Syria's agricultural production declined to a level of 2.1 million tonnes, or less than half of the average of 4.7 million tonnes. For the first time in fifteen years Syria was forced to import wheat to feed its population.<sup>7</sup> And to add to the growing misery, the central government cancelled several key subsidies in 2008 and 2009, which resulted in dramatic increases in the prices of fuel (diesel increased from SYP7 (\$0.14) to SYP25 (\$0.53) in May 2008)<sup>8</sup> and agricultural fertiliser (increased from SYP450 (\$9.60) to SYP900 (\$19.15) in May 2009).<sup>9</sup>

The effects of drought, corruption and economic liberalisation, together with minimal political reform, meant that Syria experienced high levels of rural-to-urban migration in the 2000s. A great deal of this population movement was undertaken by agricultural workers, for whom farming had simply become no longer financially viable. Labour statistics show that an estimated 460,000 people stopped working in the agricultural sector between 2001 and 2007, representing a sector change of more than 10 per cent of Syria's total workforce and a 33 per cent decline in Syria's agricultural labour force.<sup>10</sup> The north-eastern governorates of al-Hasakah, al-Raqqa, and Deir ez Zour saw the most dramatic population shifts, with many people moving much further south, to suburbs around Damascus and also to the cities of Homs and Deraa. By 2009, for example, the UN estimated that between 60 and 70 per cent of villages in al-Hasakah and Deir ez Zour had become entirely deserted.<sup>11</sup>

The development of a number of sprawling, poverty-stricken suburbs comprising large numbers of financially frustrated and largely unemployed or underemployed citizens around Syria's urban centres was of significant consequence for the country's socio-political future. It was these people, the working citizens who felt cheated by a corrupt and often inept government apparatus, that started and led the country's first anti-government protests in early 2011.

All of this meant that by 2010, although economic growth and expansion was a reality, the pursuant failure of the government to distribute added income had caused considerable financial contradictions, putting the country's economy on a precipice of sorts. Socially, this economic policy mismanagement had further reinforced an already existing class divide in Syria, between the government-aligned political and economic elite.

In terms of religion, the presidency of Bashar al-Assad opened up more doors to Syria's Sunni majority than had been available during his father's time. Hafez al-Assad had sustained a complex relationship between his government in Damascus, the increasingly powerful mini-state that was the *mukhabarat*, and Sunni Islam. While his fundamental foundations within the secular and socialist Baath Party meant that religion played a minimal role within his political psyche, its central place within society could not simply be dismissed, and subtly institutionalised attempts were made to present Hafez as a pious man. In fact, immediately following the 1963 Baathist coup—known in Syria as the 8 March Revolution, and which would eventually propel Hafez to the presidency in 1971—the Baath Party, and by extension the Syrian government, maintained an often hostile relationship with portions of Syria's politicised Sunni community.

The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood represented an immediate barrier to the consolidation of Baath power following the 1963 coup. With political liberty and religious practice the first targets of the newly empowered Baath elite, supporters and members of the Brotherhood emerged in opposition. Alawites quickly came to dominate politics and the parliament, with the country's Sunni majority forced into subjugation. In such a context, Brotherhood militiamen clashed several times with Baath Party personnel in 1963, which prompted the swift and effective prohibition of the organisation in Syria in 1964. This, however, proved a deeply damaging decision, as portions of the Brotherhood soon came to represent armed opponents of Baath rule.

Beginning in 1964, the Brotherhood played a lead role in instigating a series of strikes, protests and riots across Syria. In the first incident of real significance, in April, Brotherhood supporters in the central city of Hama began taking control of key roadways and districts. Roadblocks were swiftly set up, stores selling alcohol were attacked and the imam of the city's Sultan Mosque, Sheikh Mahmoud al-Habib, emerged as a vocal supporter of what was widely perceived as a localised uprising.<sup>12</sup>

Several days into the localised revolt, the death of one pro-Baathist fighter during a riot near the Sultan Mosque proved the provocation necessary for then President Amin al-Hafez to approve an all-out assault by the National Guard on Brotherhood positions across the city. Focusing on the Sultan Mosque, the National Guard's tanks and field artillery took only two days to defeat what was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's first insurrection against Baath Party rule. At least seventy Brotherhood supporters were killed and their leader, Issam al-Attar, was forced into exile in Germany.<sup>13</sup>

With the Brotherhood thus banned in Syria and with the battle lines drawn, a prolonged period of tit-for-tat protests by the Brotherhood and unforgiving crackdowns by the Baathist security apparatus began. These tensions and hostilities continued both above and below the surface through the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, when Hafez al-Assad forced himself into the presidency (in 1970–1).

Two years later a newly proposed Syrian constitution was drafted, which included a clause specifying that the Syrian president did not have to be Muslim. This re-energised Brotherhood-led protests across the country, and by the late 1970s, following Syria's occupation of Lebanon in 1976, suspected Brotherhood-linked gunmen had begun carrying out sporadic assassinations and targeted small-arms attacks on key military, political and pro-Baath individuals, many of whom were Alawite.

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All these years of rising tensions led eventually to an armed assault on the Aleppo Artillery School in the city's al-Roumseh district on 16 June 1979, which left as many as eighty-three training cadets dead. This was to be the first act of the so-called Fighting Vanguard (al-Talia al-Muqatila). Composed of followers of Brotherhood-affiliated Marwan Hadid—who had died in 1976, a year after his arrest for advocating armed jihad in Syria—and led by several individuals, including Adnan Uqla, Ayman al-Sharbaji, Husni Abu and Mohammed al-Zoubi, the Fighting Vanguard launched an armed insurgency against the Baath government and its Alawite leadership in what has commonly become known simply as the Islamist Uprising.

Following sustained violence, strikes, and protests that often brought entire cities and towns to a standstill, the government passed Law No. 49 on 7 July 1980, which made membership of the Muslim Brotherhood a crime punishable by death. Despite approximately a thousand Brotherhood members surrendering to authorities during an initial fifty-day amnesty, suspected Fighting Vanguard attacks continued across the country. While many attacks targeted Alawite officials and population centres, Sunni members of the state-sanctioned Muslim leadership (or *ulama*) were also targeted, including, most famously, Sheikh Mohammed al-Shami, who was shot dead in his mosque in Aleppo on 2 February 1980.

Following three large car bombings outside government-linked targets in Damascus in August, September and November 1981, the notorious insurrection in the city of Hama began. Fighting Vanguard and other Sunni gunmen seized control of the city, prompting a sustained three-week military bombardment campaign that killed somewhere between 10,000 and 40,000 people. This massive and largely indiscriminate use of military power, in what is now known as the Hama Massacre, brought the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria to its knees, and for many years the organisation essentially ceased to exist.

Syria subsequently suffered from what some have termed a 'turban drain',<sup>14</sup> as prominent Sunni scholars fled from Syria and settled in more accommodating countries elsewhere in the region. The 1980s represented an era of unrivalled political authoritarianism in Syria during which Sunni Islam and religion in general was kept tightly controlled by the state apparatus. Many mosques were open only at prayer time, and chose to shut their doors to the traditional hosting of religious lessons and discussions.

However, although Hafez al-Assad may have imposed a brutal defeat upon the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, he could not escape the reality that Syria retained a majority Sunni population. The key to reasserting a peaceful equi-

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librium was acquiring and fostering relationships with Sunni leaders who would be willing to assume positions of public religious authority but simultaneously to be distinctly non-political and acquiescent to government expectations regarding the private practice of moderate Sunni Islam. As such, the government in Damascus presided over the establishment of the Hafez al-Assad Institutes for the Memorisation of the Quran (Ma'ahid Hafez al-Assad li'l Tahfiz al-Qur'an).<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly, the all-seeing *mukhabarat* kept a close eye on the institutes' activities.

Individual Sunni scholars deemed capable of providing popular depoliticised religious authority were also fostered and elevated into prominence, such as Sheikh Salih al-Farfour and Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaru. Others assumed prominent roles in the media, like Marwan Shaykhu, a senior officer in the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments), who held regular programmes on state radio and television<sup>16</sup> until the early 1990s.

A fascinating example of this state-facilitated and directed management of Sunni Islam is the case of the internationally respected Sunni scholar Sheikh Mohammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti. With an undergraduate degree and a Ph.D. from the famed al-Azhar University in Cairo, Bouti was by the age of thirty-six clearly a promising young mind within Sunni Islamic thought. Although more culturally motivated than political,<sup>17</sup> he wrote several times and in depth about the damaging consequences of the Western imported ideologies of Marxism and nationalism, claiming that the latter had been introduced into the Ottoman Empire by imperialists and Freemasons in order to undermine its structure.<sup>18</sup> But perhaps more important than any belief he held, Bouti's rejection of political Islam, and thus his opposition to the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, stood him in good stead for acquiring the support of the Baath Party and, by extension, of Hafez al-Assad. Bouti took a public stand on state television against the 1979 Aleppo Artillery School attack and labelled those involved as bandits.<sup>19</sup>

Over time, as a senior staff member at the University of Damascus through the 1980s and 1990s (while holding several honorary and visiting professorships across the Arab world), Bouti achieved the remarkably rare and privileged position of having regular access to the president, with whom he could discuss—albeit often dismissively—subjects such as the Brotherhood and notable figures within conservative Sunni circles. This unrivalled seniority and acceptance within the beating heart of the Baath Party apparatus eventually saw Bouti appointed as the preacher of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus's Old City during Bashar al-Assad's presidency in 2008. Ultimately, Bouti's perceived

loyalty to the Assad family may have contributed towards his death in an apparent bomb attack in the al-Iman Mosque in Damascus on 21 March 2013, although some aspects of his death remain deeply mysterious.

The 1990s brought with them a number of coincidental domestic and international developments that contributed towards a partial revitalisation of Sunni Islam in Syria. Perhaps most interestingly, Hafez al-Assad's role in opposing the peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis (particularly in Oslo in 1993) helped to facilitate the development of close relations between the government in Damascus and Sunni Palestinian resistance groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Despite appearing to fundamentally contradict the principle of total opposition to conservative and especially militant Islamism, this was part of an especially astute government strategy of adopting a foreign policy closely aligned with popular opinion (this would continue into Bashar al-Assad's presidency). At the same time, worsening levels of economic decline as well as continuing political frustrations helped encourage a revival of religious practice, particularly across the growing urban sprawl. But in terms of actual domestic policy, this shifting societal undercurrent was by no means understood by the state apparatus, and little was done to help incorporate this changing social dynamic.

In a sense, Sunni Islam was allowed to undergo a limited recovery within Syrian society, but only within the confines of what the government in Damascus deemed to be acceptable limits of practice. Public observation of Islam became somewhat more acceptable during the 1990s, and mosques gradually began providing the kind of social and public services that they had done in the past, and many previously exiled imams and scholars began returning to their homeland.

When Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000, Hafez's minority complex gave way to Bashar's somewhat more self-confident posture. Almost immediately, Bashar presided over a partial revival of Sunni Islam within state-accepted circles and set about establishing friendly and eventually rather cosy relationships with moderate Sunni leaders, who were duly installed in positions of authority. In the political realm, Bashar appointed Sunnis into the positions of foreign minister (Walid Muallem, from February 2006), vice president (Najah al-Attar, from March 2006), deputy minister for economic affairs (Abdullah Abd al-Razzaq Dardari, from 2005) and ambassador to London (Sami Khiyami, from July 2004).

This gradual integration of Sunni Muslims into the spheres of officialdom and the loosening of the shackles binding religious communities continued

UNDERLYING INSTABILITY

throughout the 2000s. However, in 2008 the government began implementing various initiatives that brought back memories of the Hafez administration, such as dismissing female public-sector employees for wearing the *niqab* and allowing the *mukhabarat* to reassert their vigilance over mosque and religious studies activities.

While socio-economics were the key foundational factors behind the simmering popular resentment that erupted from March 2011 into a nationwide revolution, there were many long-term political frustrations in play too. Fundamentally, it was politics that was at the foundation of much of the revolution's causal factors. Most obviously, Syria was—despite the official government line—a one-party state ruled by a family and its loyalist clique. At times, since taking power in 2000, Bashar al-Assad and his perceived interest in opening up to the world appeared to herald a new era for Syria, beginning with long-desired political reform. But despite several apparent openings, particularly in 2000 and 2005, glimmers of hope were soon extinguished by the sheer weight of the all-seeing security apparatus.

The one apparent area of political policy that remained consistent with that of the administration of Hafez was Bashar's maintaining of a foreign policy that was by and large in keeping with popular opinion. In doing so, Bashar managed to sustain the line that he was qualitatively different from most of his peers elsewhere in the region, whose foreign policies often pandered to Western expectations. Considering Syria's complex geo-political location—wedged between the socially and politically intense state of Lebanon, the nearly NATO state of Turkey, the conflict-riddled Iraq and comparatively stable Jordan—this people-friendly foreign policy may well have been what kept Syria so stable during the years of relative instability that struck many of its neighbours throughout the 2000s.

Another often overlooked area of underlying instability was the state of Syria's military, particularly in terms of its level of funding and structural upkeep. As a result of an experience-driven realism, both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad fostered the development of a military apparatus that was, at its heart, commanded by an Alawite officer corps. The bulk of manpower was composed of young Sunni men, many of them conscripts. While in theory this sectarian division of labour would be perfectly effective in sustaining an inter-state war with, say, Israel, it has proven an inherently damaging structural disadvantage in fighting an internal civil war. As such, when the revolution began in March 2011, the SAA contained approximately 220,000 soldiers, but two years later, due to the possible unreliability and potential disloyalty of the

Sunni-dominant portions of the SAA, the military was forced to rely upon an Alawite-led core of roughly 65,000 personnel nationwide.<sup>20</sup>

Disregarding sectarian make-up, the SAA also suffered from a state of relative dissatisfaction and lack of investment. The military's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 had also served as a considerable blow to operational morale. While the SAA had benefited from strong levels of military investment during the presidency of Hafez al-Assad, particularly in the form of weapons purchased from the Soviet Union, Bashar spent comparatively little on expanding its capabilities, and much of the military's weaponry was deteriorating into disrepair.

As such, when the first signs of an armed insurgency began to appear in Syria in April and May 2011, the military was ill prepared to deal with what it faced.

To put it simply, several decades of mismanagement, corruption, violence and short-termist opportunism within the Assad family, the Baath Party and similarly invested spheres of political influence meant that when Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia on 17 December 2010, several key elements within Syrian society made a revolution a real prospect. And not only that, but it would serve to determine many of the defining characteristics of the revolution and the insurgency itself.

It is, however, worth emphasising at this point that despite the still-dominant role of Alawites and the Assad family within Syria's governing elite, the country was largely stable along its very varied ethnic and sectarian lines. Bashar al-Assad had in fact fostered a partial integration into officialdom of not only Sunnis, but also members of Syria's Christian, Druze and even Kurdish communities. As such, while sectarian undertones have today certainly ingrained themselves prominently as fundamental elements within the civil war in Syria, the revolution did not initially develop along strictly sectarian lines.