AN OVERVIEW OF THE SYRIAN INSURGENCY

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Abstract. *This paper explores some of the structural conditions existing in the body of Syrian Opposition, both political and armed ones, focusing on some of the circumstances that allowed the rise of the extremist factions that are now the main opponents of the Assad regime. Without entering into the dynamics of the Syrian conflict, also significant for explaining the rise of violent, extremist Islam, our endeavor only marginally touches its current representatives, while attempting to prove that the rise of extremism was a natural occurrence and, given the history of Syria's flirt with terrorism, maybe unavoidable.*

Keywords: *Syria, Assad, Syrian opposition, political Islam, terrorism.*

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The wave of the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia in January 2011 arrived in Syria on March 15th, with protests in the southern town of Daraa against the torture of students guilty for anti-government graffiti. The heavy retaliation of authorities led to the spread of the protests across the vast majority of the country. Although President Bashar al-Assad made some minor attempts of reform, the brutality of the government's crackdown in the following weeks and months only served to generate increased unrest and, at the same time, made a political compromise increasingly unlikely. Defectors from the army started attacks against the government, only increasing the level of violence. Across the span of more than two years, the conflict escalated into a full-fledged civil war between the Assad regime and an array of armed groups with various political objectives.

The increased levels of violence made millions of people lose their homes inside Syria or flee across the borders into the neighboring countries, where shortages are leading to terrible sufferings, while also threatening to spillover the conflict outside Syrian borders, especially in the case of Lebanon or Iraq. Complicated by a large number of divisions, the long duration of the conflict also led to its radicalization, with more and more sectarian overtones.

At the same time, as the conflict continued to drag on, foreign actors were more and more drawn into it, all of them for different reasons, ranging from simple aid for the refugees to open support for the warring sides and further prolonging the bloodshed. The increased outside interference and the attempts of direct foreign intervention, as was the case in early September 2013, threatened to engulf the whole region into war. Attempts of reaching a peaceful settlement are finally made due to external pressures, but with uncertain chances of success.

Since 2012, Islamic fundamentalism also became present in the Syrian civil war. In the form of the domestic al-Nusra Front and the later addition of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) with roots in neighboring Iraq, the advance of al-Qaeda-affiliated religious extremism has been steady. They were slow to rise, but more disciplined, more violent and better organized than their secular FSA counterparts and by early 2013 their success was clear, marked by the large swathes of Syria they had captured.Their example was inspiring and others followed. Many factions joined to form the Syrian Islamic Front in early 2013, which later reorganized in the Islamic Front during the autumn of 2013. This Salafist umbrella organization is now the most powerful coalition of armed groups in Syria estimated to field around 40,000 fighters.

The increased radicalism of these groups and their successes in the field are dangerous for the entire region and are threatening the peace inroads that are taking place in Geneva. During the last months, this new actor in the Syrian civil war proved its strength in launching coordinated attacks and inflicting several defeats on ISIS. Although this news of severe infighting between radical, extremist rebel factions may be considered encouraging, it can also have negative consequences. Should the Islamic Front emerge victorious, it would further prove that radical violent Islam is the key to win the war. It would serve to sideline the FSA and further radicalize the conflict. It would also cast doubts on how a post-war Syria would look like.

This paper explores some of the reasons that over time converged into the current situation when most of the Syrian Insurgency adheres to a radicalized Salafist orientation, with Jihadist overtones. There are many causes for this development, among some of which are an incapable Syrian political opposition, an increasingly unsuccessful, corrupt, and unpopular Free Syrian Army, an increasingly religiously motivated armed opposition, the legacy of decades of Syrian state-sponsored terrorism that eventually

turned against the Assad regime, outside involvement in the conflict for certain extremist factions, a constant inflow of radicalized foreign volunteers joining the call of fighting for Islam, and so on.

All of these causes are equally important in explaining the ascension of the extremist, fundamentalist factions that are currently forming the large majority of the armed opposition against the Assad regime.

Our research will focus only on a few of these, though. The exact process of radicalization of the armed opposition, although vital in understanding the current state of events, is a topic too large for the purpose of this paper and a summary analysis would only serve to offer an incomplete picture of the subject. Also missing from this analysis is the involvement of foreign actors which contributed to the rise of extremism and the case of foreign fighters in the Syrian civil war. Although there is undisputed evidence to prove both of these facts, their covert and/or insufficiently documented nature prevent us from having a clear image of how much of an impact they had on the process of radicalization.

We shall explore the evolution of the political opposition in Syria in the last decades, to understand why it has failed to offer an alternate political solution to the Assad regime, a solution that could have attracted a majority of the Syrian people to its cause and could have prevented the civil war and the rise of extremism. Despite numerous attempts of reforming the Syrian society and state before the start of the Syrian Uprising in 2011, and despite outside efforts of strengthening it, Syrian political opposition, both from inside the country and from exile, has failed every single time to achieve enough unity and cohesion so as to become a credible alternative to Assad.

We will also examine the Free Syrian Army (FSA), its nature from the time of its inception to the present day, when it constitutes only a small fraction of the armed opposition. Despite high hopes of success and large amounts of foreign aid invested in it, it has failed to achieve a decisive military victory against Assad's Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Although it has managed to achieve some successes, especially in the winter and spring of 2013, inherent structural weaknesses prevented it from becoming a real military force for the opposition.

The final section of this paper looks into how the legacy of Syrian state-sponsoring of international terrorism as a foreign policy tool also contributed to some extent to the current state of events. Decades of financing, training and aiding international terrorism, especially in neighboring Iraq during the last decade, although sometimes served Syrian national interests, were a dangerous game to play. We believe that Syria's involvement with terrorism of the worst kind eventually had a boomerang effect, in that it served to build the foundations upon which terrible factions like Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIS would later rise.

Syrian Opposition before 2011

Media reports on the early Syrian Uprising often made use of the phrase "the Syrian opposition", implying that there was a single and recognized group that was representing the Syrians with anti-regime views. The facts were, and three years later still are, quite the opposite: besides the actual absence of a united, monolithic, Syrian opposition, until 2011 there was not even a faction that could have been called dominant among the various Syrian opposition groups.

The political landscape of the opposition was so fragmented and disjoined that there was a constant bickering among the opposition activists themselves about what groups or coalitions of groups were more effective than others in their resistance against the Assad regime, or which enjoyed more popular support than others.

In the beginning, all the organized groups were small, and sometimes the word of a prominent dissident carried more weight than that of a political party with many members.

This sort of dysfunctions are, nonetheless, only one of the reasons for which the Syrian opposition is in a perpetual state of fracture. Another reason is that the current movements and organizations which are calling themselves "the opposition" have emerged after half a century of Baathist rule. Accordingly, some well-established groups are standing side by side with organizations that were just created, while various personal and political rivalries with decades-old roots are constantly disturbing the opposition even today (Lund, Weakening regime, weaker opposition, 2011).

The Muslim Brotherhood of Syria

The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1944. For a while it made the pragmatic decision to participate in the elections and parliamentary politics, but after the coup of 1963 by the Baath Party it suffered a process of radicalization.

During the 1970's, the group underwent divisions along ideological and regional rifts, with a violent Hama faction, the Fighting Vanguard, of Jihadist branding, which began carrying terrorist attacks against governmental and religious minorities' targets (Seale, 1989).

The regime declared war on the Muslim Brotherhood in 1979, and defeated it with the use of brutal measures, out of which stands the infamous "Hama Massacre" of February 1982, with casualties estimates varying between 30,000 and 40,000 (The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2002).

The Muslim Brotherhood was forced to flee into exile and spent the following decades in hiding and dealing with further internal divisions. After Bashar al-Assad replaced his father in 2000, the organization tried to reconcile with the regime, in the context of the

Damascus Spring. It moderated its agenda and attempted to restore connections with other secular opposition groups. These efforts were distilled into the "*Political Project for the Future Syria*" of 2004, in which the organization called for a non-sectarian multi-party democracy (IkhwanWeb, 2005).

At the beginning of the Arab Spring in Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood was the largest opposition group. Although it had no significant presence within the country since 1982, it was considered a symbol of opposition for a large number of conservative Syrians.

The National Democratic Assembly (NDA)

The organization was established in 1979, as a coalition of various Arab parties of nationalist and leftist nature, but it was put down soon after, in 1980. Although it was largely ineffectual, it was considered the main structure for the secular opposition until the succession of Bashar al-Assad.

While a very weak umbrella organization, the NDA comprised individuals with considerable experience and international contacts and in 2011 was the most important structure of "traditional opposition" within Syria (The Majalla, 2012).

The Damascus Declaration (DD)

Due to the Syrian complications in Lebanon with the Hariri assassination of 2005, the Syrian policy towards the new state of Iraq and its efforts of undermining the US-led coalition, various Syrians opposing the authoritarianism of the Assad regime believed that another US-led regime-change operation would soon come to Syria. This context led to new efforts to unify the ranks of the opposition movements.

As such, in October 2005 the Damascus Declaration was announced, which was a joint statement by a large number of opposition groups asking for a more liberal and open Syrian society and a multi-party democracy. Among the signatories were the Muslim Brotherhood, the NDA, Kurdish parties, and various prominent dissidents (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012).

But the curse of division and split followed this unifying attempt too. In January 2006 there was already a split between the Islamism vision of the Muslim Brotherhood and the secularist ideas of the other parties. The Brotherhood soon left the Damascus Declaration and joined the National Salvation Front in 2006. In 2007, the DD leadership election led to various conflicts between nationalists and socialists on one hand, and Syrian-based activists against exiled dissidents. The organization was further weakened by the regime arrests of a number of its members. The new leadership in exile elected in 2009 retained very little – if any at all – connection with the opposition inside Syria (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012).

To summarize, the decade before the Arab Spring erupted in Syria witnessed a number of attempts by Syrian opposition movements and organizations to unite themselves and to present a more powerful resistance against the authoritarian nature of the Assad regime. But all these were exercises in futility, as the divisions and splits soon followed every one of these unifying enterprises. In addition, regime pressure against the opposition movements made these attempts even more difficult.

On the eve of the Arab Spring, all the major Syrian political opposition parties were in complete disarray. The Damascus Declaration suffered a number of splits and was confined into exile; the NDA was paralyzed between bickering among its main parties, while the NSF had ceased to exist.

This disastrous state of the Syrian political opposition just before 2011 was to have important effects on the dynamics of the Syrian Uprising. It meant that the old, existing, political parties were virtually incapable to aggregate the demands of the Syrian society, and that could be seen with extreme clarity throughout 2011, when there were many protests in Syria, but they proved incapable of formulating a unifying set of demands and pressure the Assad regime into offering real reforms. It meant that the Uprising was carried out mainly at a local, community level, by various individuals willing to confront the regime, and not on a national level, due to the lack of a vision for the entirety of the Syrian society. It also meant that without a unified political vision for reforms, what was left was only the physical removal of the regime. It meant that if solutions were impossible to find within Syria, they were to be offered, or imposed, from the outside, by various third parties. In the regional and international context and dynamics, it meant that, should the Assad regime fail or refuse to give in to the protesters'demands, civil war was inevitable.

The Syrian Revolution

Inspired by the previous uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab Spring began in Syria too, in March, 2011. Attempts by the exiled groups to start protests during the winter failed. What sparked the revolution was a local protest in Daraa in mid-March, in southern Syria.

The "traditional opposition"played no role in the drift towards the revolution that followed in the spring of 2011, but, in fact, was caught completely off guard by the start of the revolution. Following the dissent and divisions of the previous years, it was too weak in terms of numbers, organization, and resources to bring any contribution to the anti-governmental protests and activities within the country. As such, this "traditional opposition" was not in charge of the Revolution, although it managed to offer some sort of assistance (The Christian Science Monitor, 2011).

From Daraa, the revolution spread quickly to other parts of the country, with help from the international media, which reported the anti-regime protests. By the summer of

2011 it had spread to most of central and northern parts of Syria, like Idlib, Homs and Aleppo, while other areas remained undisturbed. As the uprising increased in intensity and spread to different areas, the importance of sectarian feeling and class divisions became more and more apparent.

Protests were concentrated in rural area populated by Sunni Arabs. Although the larger cities of Damascus and Aleppo also had their share of protests and activism, there were larger street rallyings in the majority Sunni Arab countryside or in the poor suburbs with rural immigrants. The Kurdish areas in the northeast were generally calmer, given the Assad regime strategy of alleviating the Kurds. Given the Alawi majority in the government and the influence of the secular Baathist Party, areas in Syria with a larger concentration of religious minorities have, in general, followed the leadership of the regime.These areas include the Alawi-majority in the northwest and the Druze in the south. The Syrian Christians, spread in the major cities, also followed the regime, fearing the rising of Islamists.

Although some concessions were made by the Assad regime in the spring of 2011, like the end of the state of emergency, the release of political prisoners, the promise of a new constitution and permission to form political parties, major structural reforms were avoided out of fear that the regime would collapse. Such steps were too little, too late to appease the revolutionary movement in the country. As the protests continued and increased in intensity, regime attempts of cracking down the movement led to an increasing number of casualties, which, in turn, meant that hopes of a political compromise solution disappeared (CNN, 2011).

Throughout the summer of 2011, various paramilitary groups began to appear along the Turkish and Lebanese borders, with increased resort to violence on both sides. A majority of these armed factions began to use the name of Free Syrian Army (FSA), while some of them seemed to be controlled from Turkey by the defector colonel Riad al-Assad (Holliday, 2012). Also, sectarian killings around Homs in November 2011 between Alawites and Sunnis led to a general decline in confessional relations, particularly in the religiously mixed areas of Syria (Shadid, 2011).

The international developments in the winter of 2011 ruled out a Libya-style foreign intervention to depose Bashar al-Assad, given the opposition of Russia and China in the UN Security Council. This opposition led to increased demands, both foreign and domestic, for international support to the FSA. In the spring of 2012, a number of states (Turkey, Qatar, USA, France, and Saudi Arabia) formed the "Friends of Syria", a group of sympathetic governments, which tried to garner support for the Syrian revolution. This group, together with help from individual countries, favored the Syrian National Council, an opposition organization formed in the summer of 2011, and tried to link it to the FSA (Reuters, 2012).

The trends that appeared within the Syrian opposition movements in 2011, its political weakness, the lack of central leadership and coordination, a multitude of local-based militias, of which only a handful are affiliated to the FSA, the fragmentation of the political opposition between the exile-dominated, pro-FSA and pro-foreign intervention Syrian National Council (SNC), the National Coordination Bureau (NCB), a nonviolent and opposed to intervention organization within Syria, together with the ethnic-based Kurdish National Council (KNC), various smaller political groups and individual dissidents, would set the tone for the next years of the Syrian Uprising and the subsequent civil war.

The Syrian National Council

Until the late 2012, this was Syria's largest opposition coalition and successful in attracting international support for its cause. While attempts to organize it started as early as August 2011, it was formally established in October 2011, with Turkish and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries' backing.

The Council is dominated by political exiles from the previous decade, with both Islamist and liberal participation. An umbrella organization, it comprises the biggest Syrian opposition individual party – the Muslim Brotherhood, remnants of the Damascus Declaration, the Assyrian Democratic Organization and other minor parties. A characteristic of the Council is the division between the leadership in exile and the Syrian-based grassroots organizations, such as the Local Coordination Committees. The Council lacks support from Syria's socialist and Arab nationalist groups, which tend to favor the NCB. Its Kurdish and religious minorities' representation remains weak (Foreign Policy, 2011).

Given the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Council and the strong backing from its main supporters – Turkey and GCC countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, supporters that provide almost the full financial support for the Council – fears were raised that the organizationwould have a much too powerful Islamist orientation. This has led to constant divisions, defections and rejoining by various members (Solomon & Ayman, 2012).

Like many other opposition groups, the Council has little, if any, real control over the developments inside Syria, but has managed to secure some symbolic allegiance from the protesters in the street, which gives it some political weight. In late 2011, the Council began coordinating its efforts with the FSA, an important addition to its political weight (Zavis & Marrouch, 2011). But this joining of forces between the largest coalition of armed resistance factions inside Syria and the largest political coalitions outside Syria also gave rise to the question of who was to have the upper hand: the Council and its exiles, or the FSA battalions?

In November 2012, the Council joined the Syrian National Coalition, another umbrella coalition organization. Inside the Coalition, it retained the largest number of seats, 22

out of 60. Until January 2014 it was subsumed to this organization. It split from it in January 2014, in protest over Coalition's decision to participate in the Geneva II Peace Conference for Syria (The Times of Israel, 2014).

Given the defeat of the FSA at the hands of the Islamist rebels in December 2013, the Council has lost a significant part of its political weight. At the beginning of 2014 its future remains uncertain, but if the past serves for guidance, it will most likely suffer further divisions and splits.

The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Syrian National Coalition – SNC/SOC)

In November 2012 another, even larger, coalition was formed in Doha, Qatar. Its components are the Syrian National Council (until January 20th, 2014), the Democratic Party of the Arab Socialist Union, the Movement (Together) for a Free and Democratic Syria, the National Democratic Block and the National Alliance.

This was a renewed attempt to strengthen the Syrian opposition and give it more weight. It was accomplishedfollowing international pressure to achieve a greater political representation, with parties from the entire Syrian political spectrum being united under a single banner. The location of its inception, in Doha, Qatar, is significant, given the substantial financial support offered by the GCC countries.

The Coalition was recognized by a number of countries as the legitimate Syrian government, but its reach inside Syria was minimal at best, and almost nonexistent today. Like all the other Syrian political coalitions, it suffered from extensive internal dissent, with its leadership being vacant for many months in 2013 (Al Jazeera, 2013). Last, but probably not least, its members were divided over the international policies regarding the foreign intervention in Syria, with the SNC splitting from the Coalition in January 2014, in opposition to the talks with the Assad regime in Geneva.

Its creation came at a time when was clear that the FSA was incapable of winning the Syrian Civil War and was slowly degenerating into a collection of warring local warlords, more interested in personal enrichment from war profiteering than in fighting against the Assad regime. It also coincided with the rise of the Salafist and Jihadist factions in the war, of which most notable were the Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). All these developments adversely affected the Coalition, weakening its internal importance.

The National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCC/NCB)

This coalition organization was formed at a meeting in Damascus between various Syrian secular political and Kurdish parties, in June 2011.

The coalition is based in Syria, it favors regime change in the country and seeks the transition to a democratic government, and adheres to three principles: No violence, No sectarianism, and No foreign intervention (National Coordination Committee, 2012). Its strategy of trying to negotiate the fall of the Assad regime has attracted high criticism from other opposition organizations and it was left isolated on the political spectrum. It has even brought accusations of being an extension of the government (Reuters, 2012).

Although isolated, the NCC is the result of a significant attempt of unifying the secular, socialist, and nationalist spectrum of the Syrian opposition inside the country. To a certain degree, it represents a counterbalance to the foreign-based and Western-supported SNC. Its member parties were joined together in 2011 by a common fear of an expected Western intervention in Syria along the Libyan lines; such an intervention would likely result in a sectarian conflict and maybe even the dissolution of the country.

The NCC is considered to be the "moderate political opposition" inside Syria, but over the years its importance has faded away, as the Syrian Civil War increased in intensity. True to its declarations, in January 2014 it rejected the Geneva II Peace Conference on Syria, on the grounds that it constituted a foreign intervention in the domestic issues of Syria (Black, 2014).

Local Coordination Committees (LCCs)

At the outbreak of the Syrian Uprising, the "traditional" opposition in Syria was caught unprepared, and for a while it lagged behind the events, trying to catch up with the spontaneous popular protests. In the first few weeks, there were no leaders of the Syrian revolution to speak of, but in late April 2011, various local councils and committees began to emerge.

Even though various party members were present in these groups, there were no formal organizational ties to the existing political groups. As the revolution continued, more developed and formalized structures appeared in various "liberated areas" from the regime control, which were replacing the absent official Baathist bureaucracy. A good example of such true "grassroots" organizations was the "Homs Revolutionary Council", established in late 2011 and which functioned as a de facto revolutionary government in areas of Homs outside the regime control (Al Jazeera, 2012).

The local coordination groups began to form early in the uprising, following the model established by previous revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. The term LCCs became loosely associated with various movements dominated by young Syrian activists. However, their main activities are in the media – relaying information to and from the country.

Most of the LCCs were trying to fill the gap between the various local demonstrator networks, usually organized on a neighborhood, village or town basis, by transferring the information to and from them and relaying it further to other opposition groups or

the international media. The members of the LCCs did not usually initiate the protests themselves.

Their actions put them in a very visible role in the early days of the Syrian Uprising, but as the time progressed and more and more fighting factions appeared, these began to communicate to other groups or with the outside world by means of the Internet, either by creating their own webpages, uploading videos to YouTube or even by Twitter. This means of communication is has been extensively used by the Salafist and Jihadist factions in the Syrian Civil War.

Kurdish-based Opposition

In the early days of the Syrian Uprising, the Assad regime, fearing a repeat of the Qamishli riots of 2004, came ahead to the long-time Kurdish demands of citizenship and increased cultural liberty. Some local festivals were allowed and the citizenship issue was quickly solved through presidential decree (KurdWatch, 2011).

Under these and other regime concessions, the Syrian Kurds largely stayed out of the protests that shook the country throughout 2011. While there were scattered protests in the Kurdish areas, they subsided rather quickly due to both Kurdish and government reluctance to further inflame the situation (KurdsWatch, 2013). Although in 2011the Assad regime made extraordinary efforts to engage the Kurdish minority, it was refused by the Kurdish public opinion (KurdWatch, 2011).

Throughout 2012 and 2013, there have been few armed clashes in the Kurdish areas of Syria. For a while it appeared that the FSA or other factions have yet to establish a foothold in those areas. Only in late 2013 and in January 2014 were there reports of Kurdish local militias defending local communities against the advances of the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS (Oweis, 2013).

The most important Kurdish party in Syria is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), established in 2003, although it is not the single political representative of the Kurdish minority. It is a signatory member of the NCC, and although it has a limited role within that coalition and other national Syrian politics, it is considered central to Kurdish affairs.The PYD calls for circumvention of the struggle in Syria and focus on increasing the strength of the Kurdish minority, in order to have a stronger position at the bargaining table at the end of the conflict (KurdsWatch, 2011). Between 2011 and 2014 it largely stayed true to that strategy and in January 2014, it even refused to participate in the Geneva II Peace Conference.

Syrian Salafism

Due to a number of factors, like the fall of the leftist or socialist ideologies in the Arab world and an increase in religious fervor in the Muslim world after 1990, the Salafi ide-

ology had made some advances in the Syrian society in the '90s. With both theological and financial support from the closely related Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia, it spread especially in the poor rural and in tribal areas of Syria, including around Deraa countryside and along the Jordanian frontier, in closest proximity to Saudi Arabia (Lund, 2013).

Salafism tends to be more intolerant than political Islam, but has a weak organizational structure. In Syria most Salafists prefer to focus on preaching and the conversion of other Muslims to their own version of Islam. Also, in Syria there seemed to be an avoidance of political involvement by the Salafists, being focused on their own morality rather than engaging in society (Lund, 2013).

A quick overview of the political factions of the Syrian Opposition shows that, besides the main characteristic of incredible, mind-blowing, divisions that is constantly undergoing, the affiliations, allegiances and divisions are following the main cleavage lines of the Syrian society: secular vs. Islamist vs. socialist vs. nationalist vs. ethnic vs. religious minority. As if these were not enough, another one must be added, a consequence of the repressive nature of the regime, the exiled vs. the internal, domestic opposition.

All of these lines of fracture are present at the same time and almost all Syrian political organizations are constantly oscillating among them.There is no dominant faction among this array of Syrian political denominations. The Muslim Brotherhood of Syria may be the largest and may have the highest prestige, but it is not large enough to dominate the others, and it is itself prone to constant divisions and splits.

Even the international pressures on the exiled opposition to achieve a common front against the Assad regime, either by individual states like Turkey, United States, Saudi Arabia or Qatar, or by supportive coalitions like The Friends of Syria have failed to achieve lasting results. On the contrary, it may have produced additional fracture lines among the various camps backed by different foreign countries with their specific and divergent interests. The latest of these splits is the departure of the Syrian National Council from Syrian National Coalition, in January 2014, as a sign of protest against the Geneva II Conference.

The great majority of these political factions are united by only one idea: the removal of the Assad regime. Beyond it, there are as many visions for Syria's future, as there are factions. But even on this more or less binding goal the opposition cannot agree on how it could be achieved: by national dialogue, by military force, by foreign intervention?

This Syrian predisposition to constant division is probablyone of the most important factors that allowed the Assad regime to survive this long. It is most likely that, by playing various factions against each other, the regime will continue to survive, in one form or another.

The Syrian Civil War

The Free Syrian Army (FSA)

Ever since the Assad regime started the crackdown on the protests taking place within Syria by deploying units of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in April 2011, there were constant reports of defecting soldiers, most of whom refused to fire on protesters. Banding together with civilians with military experience, these small groups represented the first cases of armed opposition against the Assad regime. Their areas of operation spread all across the country, but appeared to be concentrated mostly in the areas near Syria's western borders, specifically Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. These bands attempted to hold territory and sought to establish a safe zone from which to organize and conduct attacks against the regime forces, but were constantly pushed back by the regular SAA units. They managed to succeed in their attacks by forcing regular forces to fight in many places at once and overstretching them.

Using hit-and-run tactics in their attacks against security forces and various regime facilities, their number grew constantly over 2011. Given the disparate inceptions of these armed bands (or gangs as were called by the Assad regime) all throughout Syria, there were numerous attempts of unification of the armed resistance movements and coordination between the units.

First mentions of the FSA are from late July 2011, when a number of high-ranking officers, led by colonel Riad al-Asaad, defected from the SAA and fled into Turkey, from where they announced the formation of the opposition's army, which would fight for the removal of the Assad regime. All throughout 2011 and in early 2012, a large number of defections continued to increase the FSA's strength. Despite these defections, the vast majority of the armed resistance was comprised of civilians with military experience, to which the defectors constituted a significant organizing addition. High-ranking defectors provided the officers' corps for these armed units (Al Jazeera, 2012).

It is important to specify that the FSA announced by colonel Riad al-Asaad was not an organized, hierarchical, rigid, military structure. It was rather a brand name, to which various armed opposition units would adhere, for a number of reasons: affinity with FSA's goals, access to better funding, ammunition or supplies and so on. This approach was the only one possible at the time given the disparate nature of the armed opposition, but it was also to be its main weakness, and prove to be impossible to alleviate. Another important obstacle to increased unification and control was the gap between the formal leadership of the FSA located in Turkey and the field commanders within Syria, which retained complete authority over their forces. As was the case of the exiled political opposition, they were unable to control the combat operations or influence the events inside the country.This resulted into an overall lack of coordination between

the operations of various units, even if they were in the same province, with further consequences of many unsuccessful operations and a general protraction of the civil war.

Within the multitude of armed groups, in spite of their fragmentation and various affiliations, some patterns that allow a better understanding of how this armed opposition is constituted, have surfaced.

The rebel formations, to a certain degree, may be classified into two distinct categories: local battalions and the larger brigades. The first group gravitates towards affiliation with the FSA and accepts the loose coordination of the regional Military Councils. These small units are fighting on a limited geographical area, usually in defense of their own community, seldom ideologically affiliated and are receiving their fundsfrom the FSA Command in Turkey, FSA sponsors or other international benefactors, usually from the GCC countries.

The second group of units, the so-called brigades, are usually led by civilians with military experience, and are often ideological motivated and acknowledge the existence of a private patron, also most often from the GCC countries. These larger brigade units are able to carry out operations in more than one region across Syria and are operating separately from the loose FSA command structure (Levinson, 2012).

Although the cooperation between these two types of rebel units is not excluded, it usually takes form at a small, local level, for a precise tactical objective, and seldom runs deeper. Also, this distinction between the two categories has led to infighting on numerous occasions, and further divisions.

Following the Doha Conference of November 2012 in which the Syrian political opposition was restructured into the Syrian National (or Opposition) Coalition, the FSA also underwent a reorganization. In December 2012, at a conference in Antalya, Turkey, the FSA accepted to be included into the SNC, and created the Supreme Military Command as the official military arm of the SNC. Among the stated goals for this reorganization, we should mention the uniting of forces in order to prevent chaos and disorganization, to push to the sidelines and reduce the influence of the extremist, Jihadist factions, and to prevent these factions from overtaking power centers within Syria (Mroue & Hubbard, 2012).

Despite constant reorganization attempts and increased foreign help towards the FSA over the years, this part of the armed opposition against the Assad regime failed to achieve notable successes on the battlefield. Although in the first few months following the creation of the SMC, the 2013 rebel offensive gained ground against the Assad regime, the FSA was defeated in the Battle of Qusair in May-June 2013, after which it was removed from the spotlights by the ascension of the extremist, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups like Jabhat al-Nusra or the ISIS. In December 2013 it suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of these groups, when its headquarters and military depots in northern

Syria were captured by ISIS after a surprise attack. Many units were routed into Turkey and FSA operations in northern Syria were effectively brought to an end. In these last months, FSA-affiliated units have been undergoing another reorganization process and will probably resume their operations in the spring of 2014.

Besides the extraordinary fragmentation of the armed opposition in Syria which has terrible consequences upon the conduct of the military operations and is considered the prime cause for the slow advances in the war and for its prolongation, there are other explanations for the general poor performance of the FSA and the rise of the violent, extremist factions in the last year.

As was explained above, FSA units' field commanders have almost complete authority over their forces in the field and are only loosely coordinated by the FSA Supreme Military Command. As a consequence of this reality, many such commanders, together with their units, were struggling since the early days to obtain funds, weapons, ammunition and supplies.

A good source of money was found into illegal smuggling of various commodities over the border, usually into Turkey. But as time went by and war dragged on, many of the FSA-affiliated commanders found out that war is a very profitable business. Since 2012 an increased number of reports have been revealing the high corruption and war profiteering of the FSA. From levying tolls at innumerable checkpoints on the roads, to smuggling oil, Syrian ancient artifacts, to corrupt distribution of foodstuffs in the liberated communities, even kidnappings for ransom are just a few of the fundraising sources used by an increasingly corrupt FSA (Sherlock, 2013).

This drift of the "regular" FSA-affiliated units toward profit andpersonal enrichment goes a long way in explaining the rise of the extremist, Jihadist groups in the Syrian civil war. Even though there are no direct reports, given the utter corruption of the FSA it is not inconceivable to assume that a great part of the weapons, ammunition and supplies available toal-Nusra or ISIS comes from the reselling by the FSA of the international aid provided by foreign intelligence agencies.

Syrian state Sponsorship for Terrorism

Early Years of the Cold War

Direct use of terrorism by the Syrian state was often employed under Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000), for a number of reasons: to secure and maintain control and power for the regime within Syria, to assert itself in the Middle East in opposition to Israel or other Arab states and sometimes to serve the interests of its patron and ally USSR.

Given the sectarian nature of the Assad regime in Syria, comprised mostly of the Alawi minority (an offshoot of Shia Islam) and ruling over a resenting Sunni Muslim majority, it is quite easily understood why the regime is aggressive and bellicose, both in

its domestic and foreign policy. The Alawi minority has since the beginning benefited disproportionately from Assad's rule and should it lose power, they fear what the same might happen to them. As such, the regime often used its agents for clandestine operations, involving assassinations of Syrian dissidents, journalists, exiles and so on (Bakri, 2005).

Syrian efforts to oppose Israel, to increase its power and to assert itself in the Middle East were primarily based upon covert means, especially after the military defeats against Israel. Also, attempts to pressure Jordan, Lebanon or the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were made using direct state terrorism. In Lebanon it helped out to push out US and Israeli troops between 1982 and 1984 and maintained Syrian control over most of the country. It also strengthened the alliance with Iran and Libya and increased its utility vis-à-vis the Soviet Union (Pipes, 1989).

The Syrian state made use of direct terrorism because it allowed actions otherwise not possible to back openly, intimidated opponents, and because it was inexpensive. Until 1986, Syrian agents targeted various moderate Arab officials, Palestinian allies of the PLO, Iraqi officials or Israeli and Jewish persons throughout the world (Byman, 2005).

After its terrorist operations were repeatedly exposed in the mid '80s, the Assad regime stopped using direct terrorist actions and relied heavily upon various proxies, in the form of external terrorist groups, to do its dirty work, while also restraining its operations to the Middle East. This moved away the spotlight from the regime, lowered the political costs of such actions, allowed the regime to plausibly deny knowledge of the terrorist attacks and avoided potential military strikes (U.S. Department of State, 1986).

The Syrian relationship with the Palestinian resistance was built during the leadership of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000). It is likely that Hafez al-Assad decided to make use of the terrorist means used by the Palestinians against Israel because the regular military confrontation has proven to be a losing option too many times. Israel military victories against Syria in 1967, 1973 and 1982 proved without a doubt that Syria could not use conventional leverage against Israel.

In order for Syria to achieve its strategic goals, the return of the Golan Heights and a possible reconciliation with Israel, other means were necessary, and Palestinians were ready and waiting for opportunities to strike back at Israel. In addition to these realpolitik reasons, there was probably also an ideological commitment for the Palestinian cause, as can be ascertained from many of Assad's speeches, where he accepts the use of terrorist means for the "struggle against occupation, carried out by the national liberation movement" (Ganor, 1991).

Based upon these objectives, Syria began offering support to a number of Palestinian organizations, such as: the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command, the Democratic Front for the

Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Struggle Front, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and so on (State, 2008). These organizations established and maintained offices in Damascus throughout the years, for political and informational activities, according to Damascus. After the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Syria also began aiding either directly, or by funneling Iranian help, the Hezbollah organization (Shatz, 2004).

Besides helping these Palestinian organizations in their actions against Israel, Syria tried to make use of them in its rivalry with the neighboring countries. For example, it engaged the services of the Abu Nidal Organization to attack Jordanian officials in Europe and pressure King Hussein to withdraw from negotiations with Israel and the PLO (Byman, 2005).

With all the benefits that supporting the Palestinian cause against Israel or its Arab neighbors brought Syria, this was a double-edged sword. Their attacks against Israel always carried the danger of sparking another losing war for Syria. Moreover, Arab enthusiasm for their struggle could have inflamed the public opinions in the Arab countries, including Syria, pressuring their regimes towards action or leading to revolts against their leaders. These outcomes would have been disastrous for Syria, and so the Assad regime tried as much as possible to control the Palestinian cause and also to use it to increase its internal legitimacy (Hinnebusch, 2001).

Syrian support for the Palestinian terrorist organizations continued even after the end of the Cold War and despite the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace process. After the 1991 Madrid Conference, a number of Syrian-based Palestinian organizations established the "Ten Front" in Damascus in order to oppose the peace talks (Shaul, 2000).

This continued support was used by the Syrian regime even in its peace talks with Israel, in order to extract border concessions or to ensure that it was not excluded from the table. According to the U.S. Department of State, in 2006 President Bashar al-Assad "expressed public support for Palestinian terrorist groups", while the Syrian government provides "security escorts for their motorcades" (State, 2008).

One of the reasons for this continuity, besides the affinity with the Palestinian cause and opposition to Israel, must be searched in the strength and credibility (or the lack thereof) of the new Syrian leader. The rush with which Bashar was promoted into senior governmental positions by his father did not allow him to build authority and credibility within Syria.These weaknesses meant that a radical shift from the previous policies would have exposed the regime to internal criticism and prove dangerous for the regime's survival. A pragmatic strategy for regime's survival thus required a continuity of the earlier approaches (International Crisis Group, 2004).

The main state institution involved in covert terrorist operations was the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, under the command of Major General Muhammad al Khawli, which reported directly to Hafez al-Assad. This organization directed the individuals involved

in terrorist operations, trained them, offered them weapons, forged documents and so on, through the military attachés at the Syrian embassies (Ganor, 1991).

To summarize, Syria entered the new millennium with a powerful and decades long legacy of using and supporting terrorism in various forms, either by its own secret agents, or by relying on external organizations which were prone to use terrorist means for their objectives. This legacy included a significant covert infrastructure for creating and sustaining international terrorist networks.

Although Syria had signed various international documents and treaties for combating terrorism and suppressing the financing of terrorism, their implementation was by the year 2000 well behind schedule (Middle East & North Africa Financial Action Task Force, 2006). This reluctance to implement the international treaties for combating terrorism is probably based upon the pragmatic, domestic, requirements of the Syrian regime, the advantages of possessing such an instrument in negotiations with Israel, pressuring Syria's neighbors and, to a degree, to real ideological belief in aiding the Palestinian cause.

Transition to a radical and Islamic Fundamentalism-based Terrorism

After the ending of the Cold War and the start and advancements of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, various Palestinian or Arab terrorist organizations with a leftist/Marxist or nationalistic ideology slowly began to fade away and give ground to a more deadly form of international terrorism, which was not defined in terms of left/right, or Marxist/Communist vs. Capitalist/Imperialist dichotomies, but aspired to unite the Muslim world against the Western world and sought to establish a new Islamic Caliphate.

The roots of this new type of ideological motivation must be searched in a number of places: a new order governing the international system after the Cold War, a cultural-based rejection of the Western values, the rise of political Islam, and the religious foundations of Jihad, to name just a few. All these causes, among many others, combined during the last decades and culminated in the current phenomenon of international terrorism based on radical Islam, of which the most prominent exponents were Osama bin-Laden and his infamous al-Qaeda.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the intricacies of the new paradigm of Islamic-based international terrorism of the last decades. Nevertheless, we shall try to explore some of the causes, which, we believe, are significant for our study, of the rise of this new and dangerous global phenomenon.

First of all, the contemporary ideology of Jihadismis based upon the last century phenomenon of political Islam, which can be traced back to the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, the very first structured and organized form of Islamic fundamentalism (Mitchell, 1969).

The "Essay on Jihad" by the Muslim Brotherhood founder, Hasan al-Banna, was later developed by Sayyid Qutb, a foremost Egyptian thinker of political Islam and a prominent ideological founder of Islamism. The "neo-Jihad" concepts of al-Banna were expanded by Qutb in a quasi-Marxist vision of "Jihad as a permanent Islamic world revolution" (Euben, 1999). This revolution seeks to establish "God's rule on a global basis", and thus serves as the foundation for an alternate international systemic order which will replace the Westphalian system of the present day world. This claim of universalism transforms the ideology of Jihadism into something different than a mere religious extremism which adopts violent means. It seeks to offer a conceptual order for the world.

The general concept of Islamism, or political Islam, can be divided into three major dimensions: institutionalized Islamism, Salafism and Jihadism. All of them emerge from the same politicization of religion met throughout the Muslim world, but are fundamentally different. The institutionalized Islamism believes in achieving its goals of a Sharia-based society and state through participation in the democratic institutionalized process. Salafism draws its roots from the Middle Ages jurisprudence, and asserts the *salaf*, meaning the first Muslim community, as the most important model for contemporary Muslims to follow. In this respect, Salafists consider divergences from this first, genuine model, as a heresy, with subsequent extreme hostility towards perceived heretical Islamic sects (Shia Islam or Alawites for example). The Jihadism, on the other hand, is akin to violent actions, also known as "terror in the mind of God". Its subsequent ideology of global Jihad is built upon a particular Islamist interpretation of religious Islamic doctrines, which predicates terrorist actions with religious arguments (Juergensmeyer, 2000).

The evolution of the political Islam through Salafism and towards Jihadism offers an incomplete image if takenout of context. Another process that needs to be considered is the so-called "Revolt against the West", a self-assertive, cultural movement directed against the secularism of Western values (Bull, 1984). Islamism tries to de-secularize the character of world politics, which relates to the concept of civilizational struggle, or conflict, because these two perspectives of secular against non-secular belong to different civilizational worldviews and conflicting political visions of the world (Huntington, 1996).

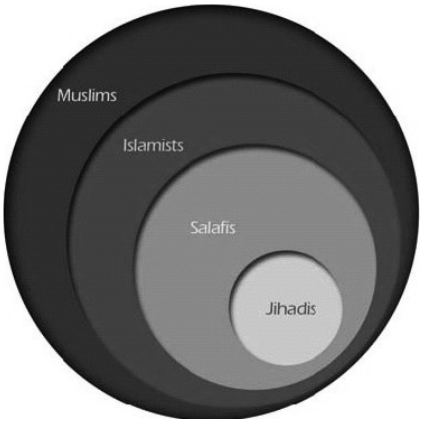

Figure 1. Militant Ideology Atlas
Source: therevealer.or

Also to be considered is the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. This event collapsed the existing international sys-

temic order and eliminated one of the two main competing systems of thought.This intellectual vacuum allowed the ideology of Islamism to gain ground in the Muslim world and to present itself as the main alternative to the new liberal democracy model of governance (Fukuyama, 1992). In this context, the successful Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, together with the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan by the religiously motivated Afghan resistance, boosted the religious fervor all across the Muslim world and further aided the spread of political Islamism, Salafism and violent Jihadism.

As these militant ideologies made their way into the post-Cold War era, a well-established Syrian security apparatus, accustomed to covert terrorist operations and working, aiding and making use of individuals ready to execute such actions, was ready for this new trend. What was needed for a new marriage of convenience between Syria and Islamic terrorism was the willingness of the Assad regimeto once again make use of aiding and sponsoring terrorism to expand Syrian interests, and, more importantly, an opportunity. This opportunity would come after the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Syrian aid for Destabilization of Iraq, 2003-2007

Since the last days of Saddam regime, foreign fighters wishing to oppose the US forces were present in Iraq, and some of them, especially Syrians, were received with open arms (RAND Corporation, 2008). Although in tiny proportion when compared with the Iraqi insurgents, their numbers grew constantly over the years. Although probably not all of them were Jihadists, after the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004, many foreigners became dependent on the terrorist group and subsequently adhered to its ideology and joined it (Gambill, 2004).

It is probable that the Syrian government at first did not provide help for those Syrian citizens to go into Iraq and fight against the US-led Coalition forces. Considering the over 700-kilometer-long desert and the desolate frontier between the two countries, illegal crossings were difficult to prevent. But as time progressed, and relations between the United States and Syria, marked with repeated accusations of Syria supporting terrorist organizations like Hezbollah or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, grew poorer, it is likely that the Syrian regime eventually agreed to overlook these crossings, when not supporting them openly (Wilson, 2004).

The range of support offered by Syria to the various anti-US insurgents in Iraq respected the pattern of the previous decades, meaning that it was done in a manner that provided a certain degree of deniability. This was achieved most of the times by acting as a "passive supporter", aiding the Baathist elements of the previous regime in Iraq by aensuring weak control of its borders or of its territory. This attitude allowed the organization and control of some of the Iraqi insurgency from Syria, with almost no interference from the Assad regime.

In addition to these actions by the former Baathist Iraqi officials, by 2004, Syria had also turned into an important transit point for foreign funds and fighters flocking to Iraq. Even more than a simple transit point, Syria also served as a logistical base of operations for al-Qaeda affiliated militants, as early as 2003, with fundraising operations and recruits' deployment being coordinated, covertly or not, from Damascus (Rotella, 2003). It is believed that two al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations, Ansar al-Islam and the Islamic State of Iraq (the precursor of the present ISIS) benefitted the most from the "Syria connection" (Mauro, 2009).

These activities, tolerated or encouraged by the Assad regime, were not considered essential for the survival of the Iraqi insurgency, of which the foreign fighters were only a small part, but they enhanced the opposition against the US and made it more difficult to counter (MacFarquhar, 2004).

This tolerance for the transit of foreign fighters to Iraq and the aid of the Syrian banking system for transferring funds towards the Iraqi insurgency led to US pressures on Syria to curb these activities during meetings between US delegations and the Assad regime (Wilson, 2004). The inconclusive nature of these talks eventually determined the Bush administration to impose sanctions on Syria, first in 2004, then again in 2006 (Embassy of the United States, Damascus, Syria).

In its support for the Iraqi insurgency, Syria walked a fine line between obstructive and constructive actions. While undisputedly there was anopen tolerance by the Assad regime for the organization and control of the insurgency from inside Syria and overt aid for the foreign fighters, Damascus also tried to avoid raising Washington's anger and limit the scope of its policies. When the US pressure increased, at the end of 2004, Syria handed it a number of insurgent leaders, among which were Saddam Hussein's half-brother and another 29 former Baathist officials (Tyson, 2005).

In its efforts to complicate the US mission in Iraq, the Assad regime, alarmed that it might be the target of the next regime change operation, tolerated, when not outright supported the flow of foreign fighters towards Iraq and their fundraising and recruitment operations within the country. While at the same time there was fear that the Islamist unrest in Iraq might spillover in Syria, it was impossible to comb through the individuals crossing the border and discern among their motivations. A combination of administrative border corruption, lack of authority for Bashar al-Assad's regime, and covert security apparatus dealings with the border infiltrations meant that Jihadist presence in Syria was well established throughout the last decade.

As the coalition counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq began to be more successful in 2007-2009, the transit of the foreign Jihadist fighters through Syria towards Iraq began to subside. However, the presence of Jihadist-affiliated individuals, together with a five-year long build-up of smuggling networks was, most likely, not removed from Syria.

Proof that the Syrian regime was playing with an Islamist fire that could always blow up in its face was the fact that throughout the first decade of the 21st century there were a number of terrorist attacks within Syria, against Western targets (US Embassy in Damascus, UN facilities), state institutions, and religious minorities sites. The Syrian regime blamed Islamists for the attacks in almost all cases (BBC News, 2006).

As the decade drew to an end andSyria was about to face the first tremors of the Arab Spring, the decades-long state support for terrorism was well established within the Assad regime, almost an organic part of the government. On the other hand, the legacy of the Iraqi insurrection and Syrian mingling in it was that there was now a significant presence of Jihadism in Syria, both in the form of smuggling networks, radicalized individuals and, what is more important, in the form of violent and terrorism-prone Jihadist ideology (Levitt, 2010).

Syrian Support for Terrorism in 2012

In the beginning of 2012 the Syrian regime released Abu Musab al-Suri, a top Jihadist ideologue and a high-ranking al-Qaeda operative. He was a long time fighter against the Assad regime, having fought in 1979-1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising. He was also considered to be the mastermind behind the July 2005 London bombings and was in Syrian custody since 2005 (Haaretz, 2012).

It was believed that the release of al-Suri, allegedly together with other militants, some of them formerly affiliated to al-Qaeda in Iraq, was meant either as a willingness to resort again to acts of terrorism as a foreign policy tool, or to reinforce the government's own narrative that it is fighting terrorism. Later reports of Lebanese authorities discovering a Syrian terrorist plot seemed to reinforce the first alternative (Reuters, 2012).

Conclusion

The current Islamist-based, Salafist or Jihadist and al-Qaeda-linked opposition and rebel movements and organizations present in Syria that are fighting the Assad regime may indeed contain foreign fighters that have been attracted in opposing the "heretics", but it is important to understand that these are only a small minority. The great majority of the "terrorists" from the regime's narrative are radicalized Syrians that found no other alternative.

At the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, in March 2011, it was not a foregone conclusion that there was going to be a civil war, or that violent Salafist groups would become the mainstay of the anti-Assad resistance. But structural conditions within the Syrian opposition, in both its political and armed forms, have created the circumstances that, over the course of three years, made the rise of the extremist and violent Islam unavoidable.

The constant divisions within the Syrian political opposition, divided over a staggering number of fault lines and incapable of achieving only small resemblances of unity

meant that there was no political ideology or vision for the future of Syria capable of offering an alternative to the one presented by Assad. This meant that there was an empty ideological space that was eventually filled with the extremist Islamist ideologies.

On the other hand, the unimpressive performances of the armed opposition in the form of the Free Syrian Army meant that the armed conflict with the regime would continue for a long time. Although capable of achieving some successes, the FSA proved incapable of being the right solution for the armed overthrow of the regime. This military failure, when combined with a structural predisposition for divisions, splits and infighting on the part of the FSA and its slow transformation from a revolutionary force into a corrupt and hated collection of local warlords along the last two years, meant that armed alternatives to the FSA would also have to be created.

Another important aspect is the predisposition showed by the Syrian state to make use of foreign terrorist organizations as a tool of foreign policy. The constant, decades-long cultivation of terrorism and terrorists, sometimes of the most dangerous kind, inside the country meant that the operational foundations of Jihadist groups, radicalized individuals, recruitment and training facilities and smuggling networks for fundraising were laid ready to be used, should the need arise. When the revolution arrived, some of these groups either had their ties with the security apparatus severed, or shifted their allegiance to the Revolution and began fighting against the "heretical" regime.

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