External support and the Syrian insurgency

BY THOMAS PIERRET

Would arming moderate Syrian rebels reduce the influence of their radical counterparts? This question, which has been extensively debated by proponents and opponents of indirect military involvement in Syria, has perhaps become obsolete: backing the most pragmatic insurgent groups is what Saudi Arabia has been doing for months now, and it seems to work.

In the autumn of 2011, anti-regime demonstrators across Syria were praising a "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) whose leaders were predominantly defector officers. Although sometimes bearing Islamic names and using religious formulas in their statements, the FSA battalions were hardly putting forward any "Islamist" agenda at that time. By late 2012, however, the situation had profoundly changed. Use of the FSA label was increasingly rare among armed groups, many of which were abandoning the Syrian national flag in favor of the black banner of the Prophet. The rise of hardline Salafi factions like the al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) led by Ahrar al-Sham, a faction with strong roots among Syrian veteran fighters of the Iraq war, was apparently irresistible, as FSA-affiliated battalions played the second roles in the rebels' major conquests at the time (Taftanaz, al-Jirah, Raqqa).

The radicalization of the Syrian insurgency has often been interpreted as a quasi-natural phenomenon, the inevitable outcome of a brutal sectarian conflict that has made Salafi-jihadi ideology increasingly appealing to Syrian Sunnis. This view is debatable, however, since the rise of radical Salafi groups throughout 2012 was in fact paralleled with the watering down of their rhetoric. In particular, although rejecting the Syrian flag, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) increasingly emphasized the Syrian, rather than global, character of their jihad. When in April the leader of the

Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, revealed that he was behind the creation of JN and announced the fusion of the two organizations into an "Islamic State of Iraq and Sham" (ISIS), he was rebuked by JN leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who insisted on the need to preserve the "Syrian specificity" of his group, a stance that received the support of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri. Other major insurgent groups, including Ahrar al-Sham denounced both al-Baghdadi's decision and al-Julani's pledge of allegiance to Zawahri. Although this rejection was partly driven by the fear of rejoining JN/ISIS on the U.S. terrorist list, it also suggests that transnational Jihad had little currency among the popular base of the rebellion.

During their "golden age" that is, before the JN/ISIS split, Syrian Jihadis were thus abandoning part of their ideological specificity. They were therefore converging with FSA-affiliated insurgents, which at the same moment were undergoing a process of Islamization. The quasi-general rejection of JN's November 2012 statement against the Syrian National Coalition was much less rooted in some disagreement about the Islamic character of the post-revolutionary state (be it called "civilian" by the moderates) than in diverging views about the exiled opposition and its state supporters. The recruitment by JN of a large number of Syrians, which by early this year vastly outnumbered foreign volunteers within the organization, also resulted in a more flexible approach to the enforcement of Islamic rules in the public space. As for anti-Alawite/anti-Shiite discourse, it was far from a Jihadi monopoly, as it was also gaining ground among mainstream rebel groups as a result of the increasingly sectarian character of the war. In that respect, it is interesting to note that the strongholds of hardline Salafi groups in Syria, namely the north and the east, are very predominantly Sunni areas where the sectarian issue is far less salient than in Homs and Damascus.

The one main reason for the success of hard-line Salafists throughout 2012 was a matter of superior material resources. As illustrated in numerous press reports at that time, such resources made them inherently more appealing but also more disciplined

compared with groups that sometimes had to finance themselves through looting and other criminal activities. Contrary to the common wisdom, militant Islamists were not funded by Gulf states, which at that time were providing only limited quantities of material help in an erratic and overly selective fashion, but rather by private donors.

The identity of JN's silent partners remains totally obscure to this day, but the idea that Gulf monarchs may support the franchise of an organization -- i.e. al Qaeda -- that brands them as apostates and waged an armed insurgency on Saudi soil a decade ago does not make sense. As for Ahrar al-Sham, it has been funded from the onset by the politicized wing of the Kuwaiti Salafi movement. The latter's ideologue Hakim al-Mutayri holds views that are particularly abhorrent to Saudi rulers, namely a curious mixture of political liberalism, Jihadi-like anti-Westernism, and hostility to Gulf regimes. Saudi authorities, which have banned private fund-raising campaigns in favor of Syrian insurgents, have also actively opposed attempts by politicized Kuwaiti Salafis at using their relatively liberal homeland as a hub for Saudi donations to their favorite armed factions in Syria

The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria, a more pragmatic, FSA-affiliated Islamist alliance, benefitted from the fund-raising efforts of another foe of the House of Saud: Muhammad Surur Zayn al-‘Abidin, an Amman-based Syrian veteran activist who inspired the Sahwa ("Awakening") movement that challenged the Saudi monarchy in the early 1990s. Attempts by the Muslim Brothers at co-opting certain groups through umbrella organizations like the Committee for the Protection of Civilians and the Committee of the Shields of the Revolution have made the Islamist insurgent scene even more repulsive in the eyes of Saudi rulers.

Saudi Arabia does not only despise the Muslim Brothers, but political Islamic movements and mass politics in general, which it sees as a threat to its model of absolute patrimonial monarchy. Saudi policies are not driven by religious doctrines, as is too often assumed, but by concerns for the stability of the kingdom, which translate

into support for political forces that are inherently conservative or hostile to Islamist movements: these forces can be apolitical Salafis aligned with the Saudi religious establishment (the Ahl al-Athar Battalions in Syria, funded from Kuwait by the quietist Heritage Association), but first and foremost non-religious forces such as the secular intellectuals and tribal chiefs Riyadh has recently backed against the Muslim Brothers and Qatar within the Syrian National Coalition. Of course, in Syria like in Egypt, these politically conservative forces also include the military. Riyadh has been the driving force behind several initiatives aimed at organizing the insurgency under the aegis of defector officers rather than of the civilian volunteers that run most Islamist groups: General Mustafa al-Sheikh's Revolutionary Military Council, General Hussein al-Hajj Ali's Syrian National Army, the Joint Command of the Military Councils, and General Salim Idriss's Headquarters of the Free Syrian Army. Revealingly, Saudi-aligned Syrian Salafi preacher Adnan al-Arʻur enthusiastically promoted these initiatives and was invited as a guest-speaker at the establishment of the Joint Command.

Given this preference for the least Islamist component of the rebellion, the marked increase in Saudi involvement in the conflict over the last months has translated into a revival of the mainstream insurgency, and a decline in the relative weight of hardline Salafis. This pattern has been particularly clear in the southern province of Dara'a, where Croatian weapons purchased with Saudi money were delivered by the Jordanian intelligence starting in November 2012. Although some of these weapons ended up in the hands of militant Islamists, they overwhelmingly empowered FSA-affiliates such as the Yarmuk Brigade, the Fajr al-Islam Brigade (not to be confused with the SIF-affiliated al-Fajr Islamic Movement), and the Omari Brigade. Albeit outdated, Croatian rocket-launchers and recoilless rifles have allowed insurgents to make significant inroads into an agricultural plain, which had hitherto been easily defended by the regime. After the setback they suffered in Khirbet Ghazale last May, the rebels resumed their advance and recently seized important loyalist positions in Inkhil, Nawa, and Dara'a.

Arms deliveries from Jordan have also enabled the rebels to withstand the pressure of loyalist forces around Damascus. In that region too, hardline Salafis are minor players, with the insurgent scene dominated by FSA-affiliates like the Maghawir Forces, the Shuhada al-Islam Brigade, the Sufi-leaning al-Habib al-Mustafa Brigade, and the Salafi al-Islam Brigade. A member of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria, the latter has secured Saudi support despite its links with the aforementioned Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin, probably as a result of its considerable military weight in Damascus's eastern suburbs.

Mainstream insurgents have also been on the rise in the north, where the sieges of the air bases of Abu al-Zuhur (Idlib), Minakh and Kwayris (Aleppo) have been dominated by groups like Ahfad al-Rasul, Shuhada Suriyya, the al-Fath Brigade, the Asifat al-Shamal Brigade, the Nur al-Din Zanki Battalions and the Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade. Although members of the ISIS led the final assault on Minakh in early August, what brought the nine-month siege to an end was the destruction of the tanks defending the base with Chinese HJ-8 guided missiles provided by Saudi Arabia to moderate factions. The missiles, which are now also deployed in Dara'a, had been introduced in the north in June following the fall of Qusayr and signs of an imminent loyalist-Hezbollah offensive west of Aleppo. The new weaponry allowed insurgents to neutralize the regime's armored units in the region and to launch a successful offensive on Khan al-Asal, a strategic location that commands the entrance of the regime-held part of Aleppo. Most of the battle for Khan al-Asal was conducted by the 9th and 19th divisions of the FSA, which are part of a nationwide order of battle which so far also includes the 1st, 2nd and 4th divisions in Damascus, the 3rd, 4th (bis) and 5th in Deir al-Zour, the 6th in Hama, the 11th in Raqqa, and the 13th in Idlib.

Other major recipients of Saudi-funded weaponry in the area are the Nur al-Din Zanki Battalions, whose successive affiliations illustrate the capacity of Saudi state funding to extract rebel factions out of the Jihadi nexus. The group was established as a branch of

the radical al-Fajr Movement (now part of Ahrar al-Sham), then it rallied to the Tawhid brigade, and eventually affiliated with the Front for Authenticity and Development (FAD). The latter is a pro-Saudi coalition of early defector officers (Abd al-Razzaq Tlass, Ammar al-Wawi), tribal-based groups (Basha'ir al-Nasr in Deir al-Zour), and apolitical Salafis (Ahl al-Athar). The FAD's political platform is strikingly unambitious and presents no distinctly Islamist feature. Tellingly, this coalition is regarded with suspicion among Jihadi circles, which have described it as a Syrian version of the Sahwa councils set up by U.S. troops in Iraq in order to fight al Qaeda.

Hardline Salafis certainly remain important players in Syria, as recently illustrated by their role in the capture of a dozen Alawite villages in the province of Latakia, but they are now faced with unprecedented difficulties. When JN was listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government in December 2012, it was defended by a broad spectrum of opponents on the basis of its military prowess and well-managed relief activities. Following the April JN-ISIS split, however, the "Iraqi" branch of the organization has been viewed with growing suspicion among Syrians. As the ISIS's very name indicates, the problem fundamentally lies in its idiosyncratic project of state-building -- the leader Baghdadi modestly bears the title of "Commander of the Faithful." Focalization on this project has resulted in an unimpressive record of military confrontation with the regime, rigid and at times brutal implementation of an Islamic lifestyle upon the population, and increasingly tense relations with the proponents of competing projects of state-building, namely the FSA and Kurdish nationalists. By August, the ISIS was faced with hostile demonstrations in several towns, strong tensions with the FSA after the assassination of the latter's commander in Latakia Kamal Hamami by an ISIS member, and a full-fledged war with Kurdish parties in the northeast.

These developments have left the SIF as the most credible hardline Salafi opponent to the regime. The group seems to have benefitted from increasingly warm relations with

Qatar recently, probably as a reaction to Saudi Arabia's success in buying FSA-aligned factions like Ahfad al-Rasul out of Doha's sphere of influence. In Idlib province, Ahrar al-Sham and its (loosely) FSA-affiliated Salafi partner Suqur al-Sham have made intensive use of Russian-made Konkurs, antitank missiles purchased in Libya by Qatar. Yet Ahrar al-Sham should probably be wary that the emirate is an unreliable partner characterized by inherently inconsistent policies, occasional receptivity to U.S. pressures, and chronic drive to mend relations with Saudi Arabia.

In any case, recent military developments show that Syrian insurgents have become increasingly dependent on state supporters for their logistics. Gone are the days when rebels could storm lightly defended regime positions with assault rifles and a few RPGs. The retreat of loyalist forces on heavily fortified bases last winter has required a major quantitative and qualitative increase in the opposition's armament. This is something only foreign governments, not jihadi utopians, can offer. Given Saudi Arabia's apparent determination to lead the way in that respect, this situation will probably continue to favor mainstream insurgents over their radical brothers in arms in the foreseeable future.

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FREDERIC LAFARGUE/AFP/Getty Images

Three drone strikes kill 12 suspected militants in Yemen

BY MARY CASEY, JOSHUA HABER

At least three suspected U.S. drone strikes killed at least 12 alleged al Qaeda linked militants Thursday in Yemen. The strikes, in Yemen's Marib and Hadramout

provinces, all reportedly hit targets in cars. The drone campaign has been stepped up in recent week after warnings of possible al Qaeda planned attacks on Yemeni and Western targets. Thursday's drone strikes came after Yemeni security officials claimed on Wednesday that they foiled an al Qaeda plot to attack two major oil pipelines and the port city of Mukalla. At least 30 suspected militants have been killed in drone strikes in the past two weeks. The strikes have mostly been concentrated in Yemen's remote mountainous areas where al Qaeda's top five leaders are believed to be located. The United States acknowledges its drone program in Yemen, however does not comment on individual strikes. The United States and Britain evacuated their diplomatic staff from Yemen's capital, Sanaa, this week over threats of an attack, and the United States has temporarily closed 19 embassies and consulates in the region. The plot was originally believed to have been ordered by al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, however a U.S. official reported Thursday that the attacks were proposed by al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Syria

The increased flow of foreign fighters into Syria is raising fears that the war torn country is becoming a haven for Islamist militants. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's second in command, Michael Morrell, recently said that the combination of extremism and civil war in Syria now poses the greatest risk to U.S. national security. Counterterrorism officials say that jihadist militants are streaming into Syria at greater rates than they did into Iraq at the height of the insurgency. Many militants belong to the extremist Nusra Front, but new groups are forming under the more extremist umbrella group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The head of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA), General Salim Idris, recently accused Islamist groups of receiving funding from the Assad regime, and there have been increasing clashes between FSA forces and jihadist groups over arms and supplies. Meanwhile, the head of the opposition Syrian National Coalition, Ahmed al-Jarba, said he is working with the FSA

to pull together all rebel groups into one unified army.

Headlines

Gunmen seized two Turkish Airlines pilots in Lebanon on Beirut's airport road Friday demanding the release of nine Lebanese Shiite pilgrims abducted in May 2012 in Syria.
Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations will resume next Wednesday in Jerusalem, as Palestinians condemn Israel's approval of the construction of over 800 new West Bank homes.
The leader of Egypt's Coptic Church, Pope Tawadros II, has canceled some events in Cairo over heightened security concerns.

Arguments and Analysis

'Conspiracy Theories: the One Thing Everyone in Lebanon Has in Common' (Sulome Anderson, *The Atlantic*)

"Bilal, a Salafi sheikh, holds court at his well-furnished house in Bab al-Tabbaneh, a notoriously volatile Sunni neighborhood in the Lebanese city of Tripoli. The area, which has historically been a flashpoint for many violent conflicts with neighboring Alawites, is tense following June clashes between the Lebanese army and supporters of Sunni cleric Ahmed Assir in the southern town of Abra that left 46 dead. An uneasy truce has held in Tripoli since the army seized Assir's compound and Ramadan started, but Bilal says he's sure it won't last, and he blames that on Iran, the militant group Hezbollah, and, oddly enough, on the U.S.

'Americans see us as Bin Laden, as terrorists,' he says with a sneer.'But when the world talks about Hezbollah, they call them a militia. We have brains. We know the Americans are behind everything that's going on. They're sitting watching the blood of Muslims being spilled, and they turn a blind eye.'

Lebanon, a country rife with long-simmering sectarian tension, has recently begun to show signs of instability, escalated by conflict across the border in Syria. A heavily armed, Iranian-backed Hezbollah has attracted much condemnation for its military support of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime, while radical Sunni groups have become more powerful and mobilized, allegedly with funding from Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In addition to the clashes in Abra, incidents such as assassinations, roadside bombings and rocket attacks have taken place over the past year with increasing frequency.

As cracks appear in the relative peace that has held since Lebanon's bloody 15-year civil war officially ended in 1990, a long-standing Lebanese pastime seems to have gone into overdrive. If there's one thing people from all four major Lebanese sects -- Sunni, Shia, Christian and Druze -- appear to agree on, it's that there's a conspiracy going on, and opposing sects, backed by nefarious foreign powers, are the masterminds."

'Egypt's Constitutional Crisis' (Jill Goldenziel and David Landau, *LA Times*)

"Revolution 2.0 will be better than beta only if the new constitutional process includes broad participation and representation from all social and political groups -- including the Brotherhood, which will not disappear as a political force any time soon. Such an inclusive, consensual approach has been an integral part of nearly every successful transition from military rule to democracy. Even in a society as divided as post-apartheid South Africa, an inclusive process helped the population heal from violence by giving traditionally unrepresented groups political voice.

Egypt's military and secular groups must avoid the temptation to shut the Brotherhood and other Islamist elements out of constitution-making. The new text will not succeed without buy-in from all significant political factions. This will require compromises on the text. It is more important to draft a document that is accepted by a broad swath of the population than it is to have the text judged perfect by international groups.

The parties can help ensure that the process reflects a consenstus rather than imposition by a simple majority by writing rules that restrain the most powerful political groups while making sure that they deliberate and compromise with other factions. The new constituent assembly need not -- and should not -- be popularly elected. An elected assembly would merely ratify the dominance of the best-organized political groupings. It must instead be selected using transparent criteria that promote broad representation of all major political forces, women and minority groups."

–Mary Casey & Joshua Haber

John Moore/Getty Images