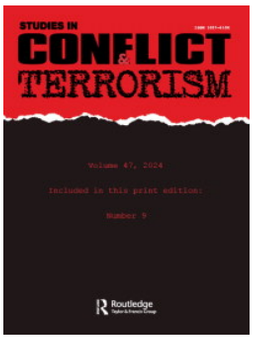

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Can Jihadis' Strategic Interests Trump Their Ideology? Foreign Support and Insurgent Survival in Syria

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ABSTRACT

The role of ideology in civil wars is particularly contentious, especially when it comes to Jihadi insurgents. Ideology is one of these groups' defining characteristic, which questions what happens when Jihadis' ideological commitments contradicts their strategic interests. This article explores these tensions with a particular focus on the issue of foreign support for the Syrian insurgency after 2011. The article argues that ideology matters and has contributed to division and infighting between Syrian insurgents for most of the conflict. But this research also contends that armed groups – including Jihadis – can adapt their ideological positions in line with their strategic interests as long as they manage to implement such changes without jeopardizing their internal cohesion. This careful balance explains the operational strategies of numerous armed groups in competitive environments such as Syria's. The article draws on extensive interviews with Syrian insurgents over the past few years, including leaders and commanders of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra as it transformed into HTS.

Ideology is arguably one of the main distinctive features of Salafi Jihadi groups.[1] Jihadis – who are defined in this article as Sunni Muslims adhering to the Salafi approach to Islam (but see Gunning, Lefevre and Valbjørn in this special issue) – initially drew inspiration from the Egyptian and Syrian insurgents that strived to replace their domestic regimes in the 1970s and travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan by the late 1980s where they inter-mingled with Muslim fighters that started to mobilise against the Soviet invasion.[2] Jihadis differ from other Islamists (defined here as political movements in the image of the Muslim Brotherhood) in many ways, including their legitimisation of violence against Muslim rulers that do not implement their vision of Islamic law and by the nature of the political entities that they want to impose in the Muslim world.

This article focuses on one of the main ideological tenets of such salafi-jihadi groups: their opposition to any support by foreign countries that do not share their ideological preferences. Positions towards such foreign support has been a divisive issue since these groups' early days as the "Jihadi trend" specifically took distance from other Salafis during the first Gulf War in opposition to the Saudi monarchy's decision – sanctioned by mainstream Salafi scholars – to rely on American soldiers

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to protect itself against Iraq.[3] The Salafi Jihadi emancipation from other Islamists informed the development of its theological-political corpus in opposition to any actor non-aligned with their approach to Islam, justified in the concept of *al-wala' wal-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) that claims that Muslims should only support and ally with one another.[4]

The 2011 uprisings posed a profound ideological challenge for the Jihadis.[5] After a phase of expansion in the 2000s in which local insurgents franchised with al-Qaeda by aligning their opposition to local regimes with an anti-Western agenda,[6] the uprisings that destabilised several Arab regimes from 2011 onwards refuted the idea that the so-called close and far enemies – Muslim states and Western countries – have to be fought conjointly. As a new warscape evolved in Syria, Western states no longer opposed violent opposition to local regimes but supported some such campaigns. In the next few years, while Western countries assembled a coalition against Islamic State and continued to target al-Qaeda affiliated groups, they also overlooked other Islamists, including many Salafis that previously partially overlapped with Jihadi Salafism without being aligned with al-Qaeda in Libya and Syria.[7]

The changes induced by the 2011 uprisings hence raise a key question: what happens when an armed group's core ideological tenets – in this case opposition to foreign support – contradict its strategic interests? Most research on Jihadis instead examines the impact of their distinctive ideological traits without considering whether Jihadis can renounce some of their key ideological commitments and in what conditions.[8] This issue is nonetheless critical to comprehend the role of ideology for these groups, especially what Jihadis do when their ideology strain their ability to survive and pursue their strategic interests. There are contrasting cynical and essentialist viewpoints regarding the degree to which ideology influences their actions. By examining the detailed evolution of their stances on a pivotal issue, this analysis demonstrates how ideology can indeed steer their actions, while also revealing its potential for reinterpretation in the pursuit of strategic interests.

This article explores Jihadi ideological opposition to foreign support through a careful case study of Syria, which epitomises the complex warscape of this special issue. There are several key features of warscapes relevant to this question. The first key dimension is the international dimension of the conflict. The Syrian conflict has internationalised since its early days on both sides of the spectrum.[9] Foreign support for the regime has primarily involved foreign states – Iran and Russia – providing direct or indirect support (through other insurgents such as Hizbullah) to the regime.[10] Russia then transformed its support for the regime by 2017–2018 with the Astana political track.[11] External opposition on the opposition side of the Syrian warscape was, for a long time, extremely diverse. A divided Syrian opposition has received contradictory support from states – Western, Arab, and non-Arab alike –, wealthy donors, other insurgents, and foreign fighters.[12] Last, the Syrian warscape has had far-reaching global consequences. It influenced Western perceptions of Russia prior to the war in Ukraine and, it exacerbating Western insecurity regarding refugees and contributed to a surge in violence across Europe after 2015.

Second, in warscapes one sees a proliferation of armed actors, with the conflict extending beyond the interaction between one or several insurgent groups and a domestic authority. There is also a conflict between Western countries and some

insurgents, first IS, then Jabhat al-Nusra between 2014 to 2016, and now between US and Shia militias allied with Iran. Furthermore, there is a conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish-led SDF in the North not directly related to the Syrian regime. Third, Syria epitomises the continued uncertainty between war and peace uniquely characteristic of warscapes. Since the March 2020 ceasefire, the conflict no longer includes active frontlines, with direct combat replaced by low level skirmishes opposing armed opposition groups to the regime and pro-regime militias.[13] Internationally, Turkey and Russia have effectively stalled the conflict into a political-military management of the short and long-term future of Syria, in which local players – opposition and regime alike – are largely dependent on their foreign backers. Organisationally, the insurgency is more locally embedded than ever before and increasingly involved in governance, be it the Salvation Government promoted by HTS in the north-west or the Interim Government promoted by the Syrian National Army in the north that coordinates with foreign states and the UN eco-system.

This article examines the conflict between Jihadis' ideology and strategic interests through the issue of foreign external support. One might expect Jihadi groups to behave differently than other groups within warscapes because of these ideological commitments. While Jihadis' ideology encompasses broader themes than just foreign support, the significance of external backing proved pivotal in Syria, sparking numerous internal conflicts and factional divisions among these groups. But ideology did not provide a single, clear set of guidance to Jihadis. The acceptability of external state support for the Syrian insurgency instead became a key dividing line among them. Aside from IS and al-Qaeda, which both opposed any alliance with foreign states, the largest Jihadi groups or those partially Jihadi – Ahrar al-Sham and then former Jabhat al-Nusra/Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – increasingly legitimised nurturing ties with other states. But legitimising external support was controversial internally for both groups, which could not simply change position to fit their strategic interests. Ideology is not merely a set of political commitments. It also shapes cross-factional Jihadi dynamics, which means that Jihadi groups can change their strategic views only as long as they can maintain their organisational cohesion and prevent internal dissidence in favour of other groups (see Hafez and Gabbay in this special issue for similar dynamics in Iraq).

This research builds on extensive field research with Syrian insurgents undertaken for the past few years, including a range of interviews with leaders and commanders of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra as it became HTS. It also relies on hundreds of communiques from Syrian insurgents that were either retrieved online or communicated to the author. Such in-depth, on the ground research, which is often difficult for researchers to carry out, is nonetheless the only way to explore the internal debates and adaptation strategies of armed groups within warscape conditions. Rather than assuming that ideology is the sole explanatory factor of armed groups' behaviour, this research takes ideology seriously to grasp its specific role and possible reintepretation over time. It does not presuppose that Jihadis are unique in this regard; similar dynamics exist in other ideologically committed groups in protracted warscapes, whether leftists, nationalists, or otherwise. This article therefore contributes to the ongoing debate on the significance of ideology versus strategic incentives and their interplay highlighted by Lynch, Gunning and Valbjørn in this special issue. It specifically

emphasises two key contextual dimensions for Jihadis: (1) the structure of foreign support for the insurgency and (2) the dynamics of inter factional competition. This illustrates how Jihadis can adjust to shifts in external foreign support as necessary, while also addressing the challenges posed by other groups that share similar beliefs to mitigate the risk of defection to other factions.

Ideology and External Support for the Jihadis

There are vigorous debates surrounding the role of ideology in civil war research. Ideology is defined here as "a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic, or other social group), an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change – or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action."[14] The most influential research agendas in civil war research, including macro level comparisons,[15] the micro-level turn,[16] and meso-centred research,[17] tend to focus on material factors underpinning violence while being either silent on ideology or considering it primarily to be a legitimising tool, an instrument, or a variable swayed by material change. More recent research conversely argues that ideology has an independent role that can be disaggregated.[18] Ideology plays a role on the side of the insurgents and their perception by other states and groups, and impacts their alliance systems, institutionalisation, mobilisation, use of violence, and the socialisation of their combatants.[19]

Ideology figures more prominently in research on Jihadi groups than on many other types of armed actors. Salafi Jihadi insurgents embrace the Salafi approach to Islam, which advocates for the imitation of the first three generation of Muslims and relies on the medieval theology doctrine of *ahl al-hadith*, which is adverse of any religious innovation and calls for a more thorough methodological reliance on the Quran and the prophetic tradition.[20] The Jihadis politically legitimise the violent removal of Muslim rulers that do not implement their approach to Islam, and their foreign backers.[21] The Jihadi ideological corpus builds upon the views of early Egyptian and Syrian insurgents that first legitimise fighting domestic Muslim leaders, and joined other foreign fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Bosnia in the 1990s, and Iraq in the 2000s. In practice, the main features of Jihadi insurgencies is their revolutionary and transnational nature.[22] Jihadi insurgencies attract cadres mobilized around their political projects,[23] are efficient managers of human resources,[24] and use extreme ideologies to achieve success.[25] Jihadis have been particularly adroit at recruiting across domestic divides,[26] which is partially explained by the specificity of their support structure underpinning their resilience.[27] In the absence of state sponsorship, several decades of conflicts involving Jihadis has spanned the creation of an interconnected Jihadi social movement of militants[28] that has contributed to the diffusion of new ideological frames,[29] modus operandi such as suicide bombing,[30] and has prolonged the duration of these conflicts (see Svensson et al. in this special issue).[31]

Ideology has two distinct yet interrelated components essential for advancing armed group's strategic interests: (1) a normative dimension, which encapsulates the ideals and principles guiding their program of action, and (2) an instrumental dimension, often driven by pragmatic considerations and a degree of utilitarianism.[32] Seurat

nonetheless notes that there is no necessarily a strict divide between ideology and interest; armed groups' ideology may occasionally align, clash, or even be redefined to suit their evolving interests.[33] In an ideal scenario, the normative and instrumental components of ideology align, but challenges arise when tensions emerge, particularly concerning pivotal elements of the program of action, such as foreign support (especially opposition to foreign support for the Jihadis). These tensions stem from differing perspectives between their leaders and commanders, who might oppose renouncing some of their ideological commitments. Ideas are indeed not mere "cheap talk" in this context. Research of armed groups' ideologies emphasises its importance for individual fighters and role in keeping armed groups' cohesion.[34] The most intriguing question therefore lies in the circumstances in which armed groups can adapt their ideological standpoints to fit their strategic interests without jeopardizing their internal cohesion.

Syria's warscape after 2011 provides an important importunity to analyse what Jihadis do when their normative commitments contradict their strategic interests. Before 2011, al-Qaeda argued that Jihadis could never establish local Islamic states as long as Muslim regimes were supported by Western countries, especially the U.S. Fighting the so-called near and far enemies simultaneously was not only possible but desirable since both fights would help to achieve the same long-term strategic objective in the Muslim world. The Arab uprisings decisively undermined this approach since the violent removal of existing regimes, in both Libya and Syria, became possible on the condition that local insurgents do not affiliate themselves to either al-Qaeda or, in a subsequent phase, Islamic State (IS). In these conditions, many international actors including Western countries also started to support insurgent groups, which created tensions with the Jihadis' opposition to any foreign support by non-Islamist regimes (virtually all states). Aside from limited short-term accommodation with other states, like Mauritania and Iran, Jihadis did not change position on foreign support before 2011.

This article examines the evolution of the Jihadi opposition to foreign support when it started to conflict with their strategic interests. The focus on foreign state support for armed groups is for two primary reasons. First, it is true that Jihadis harbor additional ideological aspirations, notably the establishment of an Islamic state. However, despite variances in their views as to what such a state would look like, it was never a divisive cause in the war, except for ISIS, due to these groups' understanding that they could not establish an Islamic state while fighting the Syrian regime. Foreign support, on the other hand, was crucial for these groups' survival and success throughout much of the conflict. State-sponsored foreign support also carries greater tension compared to support from individuals or non-state entities due to its much higher volume, leading to tensions as states are more inclined to impose their agendas on these groups or try to use them as proxies.

This analysis develops a three-level analytical framework to the study of external support for the Syrian insurgency and its Jihadi component more specifically. The first level is constituted by the structure of external support for the armed opposition, including the number and characteristics of the actors that have supported Syrian insurgents, their level of coordination or competition and their objectives. The second level concerns the structure of the insurgency inside Syria, and the position of the Jihadis therein. It includes the number of groups, their key features, and their changing interactions with one another. The last level focuses on the ideological and political

arguments developed by Syrian Jihadi insurgents on external support overtime, especially state support for the opposition. This theoretical framework also considers insurgents' interactions with civilians, which is a growing research agenda that is directly relevant to Jihadi groups.[35]

The First Phase: Divided External Support for a Divided Opposition Until 2014

The first phase of the conflict that started in 2011 shows the substantial diversity of insurgent groups and foreign supporters of the insurgency, including states that primarily supported non-Jihadi actors. Foreign support for the insurgency divided the Jihadis between who justified it and tried to reach a consensus with other Jihadi and Islamist leaning actors, like Ahrar al-Sham, and those that adamantly opposed it like ISIS.

The Syrian conflict started in 2011, when a wave of popular protests inspired by regional developments was violently repressed by the Syrian regime. Without dwelling on unnecessary details, the militarisation of repression by the regime was historically rooted. The nature of the regime and its security services rendered it unable to respond to popular demands for reforms.[36] The nature of the state-society relations across Syria largely the regime's approach to the wave of protest that spread in 2011, as well as the scope and level of violence employed against these communities.[37] In 2011, the Syrian regime was organised around exclusive political structures. It relied on an increasingly narrow base of support. Regime reliance on a narrow base of support and the associated monopoly of the Baath party over the state's structures has impeded the emergence of an autonomous, or at least semi-autonomous civil society.[38] The regime's foreign allies also stood by the regime regardless of the costs, which immunised the regime from foreign pressure. Iran and later Russia were unlikely to force the regime to meaningfully restrain or undertake profound structural change.

The characteristics of the regime largely explain the organisational characteristics of the insurgency, especially its localism. The weakness of civil society combined with indiscriminate regime repression underpinned the localism of the early armed gatherings that could mainly structure themselves around friends, acquaintances, and neighbourhoods.[39] The armed groups created during the first phase of the conflict hence had to rely on local social networks that provided a sufficient level of trust.[40] These characteristics reinforced early insurgents' embeddedness in their local communities. They also account for the proliferation of thousands of armed groups between 2011 and 2012 throughout the country. More substantial coordination only materialised once insurgents seized control of larger territory and received foreign support.

The involvement of foreign actors widened from 2012 onwards as foreign countries tried to alter the balance of power to achieve their own objectives. Foreign states, European as well as regional, started to provide non-military and limited military support to different armed groups to increase pressure on the regime. They did not seek to topple the regime, as in Libya, but mostly strived to reinforce the opposition to force the regime to negotiate with its opponents.[41] Successive attempts to institutionalise external support in a cohesive organisational structure that could unify the insurgents in Syria repeatedly failed.[42] The coordinating structures were afflicted by

mutual suspicion between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which favoured their own allies. Similarly, external assistance to the insurgency by the US was raised by General David Petraeus in 2012, before beginning the training of several factions in 2013.[43] From 2013 to 2017, more than one billion dollars was spent in light weaponry, training, salaries, and some TOW anti-tank weapons but no game-changing surface-to-air missiles.[44] On the other side of the spectrum, non-state assistance started to be given by an array of actors from 2012 onwards, including Islamist actors in the Gulf – especially Kuwait and Qatar –, veterans of previous jihads, and increasingly newly mobilised foreign fighters.[45]

Divided external support for the insurgency not only failed to unite armed opposition to the regime, it also failed to help foreign states-supported insurgents take the lead. Instead, a variety of groups with different ideological leanings and organisational configuration mushroomed throughout Syria. We can place the groups that consolidated in the beginning of the conflict in several categories that are more complex than the dominant dichotomy that separates arguably secular groups affiliated to the FSA and Islamist groups, which is not satisfactory to examine armed groups' early days. Early insurgents primarily diverged along their local embeddedness, geographic spreading, and the type of relations between their sub-units. Since most military units started locally, these factors suggest that the most prominent factor underpinning armed groups' survival and consolidation (or divisions) was their comparative modes of organisation. Organisational factors underpinning cross-localities coordination and integration were critical to insurgents' early trajectories. They presented notable features that shaped armed groups' evolution and their prospects of survival in the beginning of the conflict.

Although the armed opposition displays real internal diversity, we can still differentiate several categories of groups within its ranks. The first category features the local groups that adopted the Free Syrian Army (FSA) label.[46] These groups' main feature was to outstretch quickly in absence of wide supporting networks and shared ideological leanings. Their early expansion throughout opposition-held areas led to relatively rapid split along personal and local divides, later followed by their sub-units' joining of other groups especially as foreign support waned. Their initial growth, which was sustained by their status as early risers, success on the ground, and foreign military support, was paradoxically too quick. As groups primarily formed by local units converging during important military battles, loyalty remained based on sub-groups structured around particular geographic areas or prominent individuals. These early groups overstretched before building internal resilience. Without strong underpinning networks, whether local or ideological, they did not survive external rivalry between several countries that started to support their favourite factions. They disappeared as organised groups and only managed to reconstitute in larger entities along constituting sub-brigades. The main exception was in the south, where more coherent support centralised through Jordan facilitated their coordination under the Southern Front label. The other exceptions were local units that avoided overstretching by remaining in their early geographic strongholds.[47]

Second, small brigades were established by Jihadi foreign fighters in the beginning of the conflict. These groups primarily formed in north and northwest Syria thanks to its proximity with the border with Turkey, although Jordanians reached the south

of Syria and Lebanese militants the province of Homs as well. Some had a stronger pre-existing identity and project while others formed especially for the Syrian conflict.[48] The small brigades never had a leading role in the conflict. Even the largest one, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), essentially remained on the margin of factional dynamics throughout the entire conflict. Other small brigades remain small and independent or joined larger units especially Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State (IS).

The third category is Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State (IS). The group emerged from a pre-existing armed group when a commander of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, and several of his associates moved from Iraq to Syria in 2012. Al-Jolani initially proposed the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra to ISI as a project that would not repeat the behaviour of ISI in Iraq considering the domestic nature of the Syrian jihad as opposed to a reaction against foreign occupation.[49] Jabhat al-Nusra embraced a top-down approach to mobilisation. Early Jabhat al-Nusra leaders initially gathered in Damascus before spreading throughout the country thanks to their pre-existing networks that allowed them to recruit individually and orchestrate high-level bombings against regime forces.[50] Jabhat al-Nusra initially collaborated with most other groups, yet strongly opposed the involvement of other countries including Western countries.[51] IS then tried to reassert control over the group, helped by its military gains in Iraq, where the group started to attack prisons to free its military cadres and grow in influence before projecting its military power in Syria from 2013 onwards.

The most successful group during this phase was Ahrar al-Sham.[52] Ahrar al-Sham followed a hybrid pattern of development characterised by a unique combination of other groups' essential features. The group combined a degree of localism and trans-nationalism that differentiated it from purely local units as well as more transnational groups. Ahrar al-Sham's first military units benefited from the local embeddedness of the factions that emerged as a bottom up process throughout Syria.[53] In contrast with the factions only based in one main stronghold, however, Ahrar al-Sham emerged in several places more or less simultaneously in geographic areas that were not besieged by the regime and remained well connected to foreign supporters. Ahrar al-Sham therefore did not rely on one strong man. Embeddedness in activist networks associated with the latent Islamic social movement, ideological proximity, and a gradual bottom-up consolidation enabled the group avoid over-stretching in contrast with the groups that quickly disappeared. The group's cross-factional consolidation also differentiated Ahrar al-Sham from Jabhat al-Nusra, which also partially exploited shared prison and international supporting networks but for a more elitist – and therefore limited – mobilisation. These complementary characteristics have helped Ahrar al-Sham's build-up internal cohesion based on decentralised organisational structures united by core ideas. Moreover, Ahrar al-Sham's embeddedness in multiple social networks allowed it to gather support from an array of actors, from mainstream Salafi preachers to activists and veterans of other jihad.[54]

The choice of Western countries to support the opposition to the Syrian regime, including the insurgency, divided the Jihadis. While in the 2000s many Jihadis were swayed by al-Qaeda's agenda, the Syrian conflict exposed new divergences between fighting local versus foreign enemies. al-Qaeda could no longer argue that local regimes would never be toppled without fighting their external backers. Moreover, Western countries themselves changed position. While they still opposed al-Qaeda and allied

groups, they became more willing to overlook non-affiliated Islamists that took distance from al-Qaeda and, increasingly, IS. That was true in Syria as much as in Libya. Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, for instance, were not listed as terrorist groups and the US opposed Russian attempts to do so.[55]

The first partially Jihadi group to legitimise foreign support for the opposition was Ahrar al-Sham. Many of its early leaders started to reflect on the excesses of Jihadi Salafism in prison before 2011, and were cognisant of the need to avoid the excesses of the al-Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq.[56] They were later joined by Jihadi veterans who opposed bin Laden's agenda, who reinforced the group's willingness to distance itself from global jihad. Considering the divided structure of the insurgency in which multiple Jihadi groups competed for support, Ahrar al-Sham's strategic choice was to foster a broader consensus among Islamist actors to limit dissidence and internal threats to its own organisational cohesion. Ahrar al-Sham hence led the initiatives promoted by a range of Islamists and Jihadi groups to mainstream themselves. In 2014, the group promoted a revolutionary covenant of honour (*mithaq sharaf thawri*) to assert Islamist factions' inclusion in the Syrian mainstream armed opposition to the regime.[57] For the first time, the covenant emphasised the political – as opposed to religious – objectives of the revolution against the regime and IS's radicalism. It sought to distance the insurgency from Salafi Jihadi internationalism by claiming that they were manned by Syrian fighters without foreign allegiance. It instead insisted that the Islamist component of the insurgency merely wanted to establish a just state that would respect the rights of all its citizens, including religious minorities. The new positions were confirmed by additional communiques stating that Ahrar al-Sham did not have external relations to al-Qaeda but was only fighting for the self-determination of Syrians with multiple means including military.[58] Ahrar al-Sham's transition was undoubtedly eased by the fact that it was not only a Jihadi movement, but an agglomeration of Jihadis, Salafis, and other Islamists and activists, which eased the group's learning curve.

But Ahrar al-Sham failed to establish a consensus with other Jihadis. By 2014, the Islamist component of the insurgency was already divided. Jabhat al-Nusra, which was initially created by ISI commanders, refused to heed ISIS's attempts to control the group and asserted its independence in 2013. Then, ISIS started to attack other factions, which fought back and expelled the group from northwest Syria in early 2014. Opposition to foreign support became a dividing line – and an excuse for internal conflict – inside the Islamist component of the insurgency. The most controversial elements for Salafi Jihadi groups like IS, but also Jabhat al-Nusra, was the covenant of honour's assertion that the signatories were willing to meet and cooperate with regional and international state supporters of the uprising. IS was the most vehement critic. The group excommunicated the factions allied with Ahrar al-Sham for collaborating with Western countries, expressing its readiness to nurture ties to democratic states, and striving to establish an inclusive civilian body that would conduct normalised international relations.[59] Ahrar al-Sham's overture also triggered strong opposition by Salafi Jihadi intellectuals and groups non-affiliated to IS. Jabhat al-Nusra notably denounced collaboration with states arguably at war with Islam, the prevalence of citizenship over religious brotherhood, and the absence of commitment to a state ruled

by Islamic law.[60] But despite that position, Jabhat al-Nusra did not isolate itself, and continued to work with the mainstream insurgency.

The first phase of the conflict is important for two reasons. First, the comparison between different groups and their external supporters suggests that stronger state-support for insurgents does not necessarily empower the most externally-supported factions. FSA affiliated groups received more state support, but state support was divided and these groups' organisational weakness – partially caused by the absence of pre-war networks – was a substantial impediment to their consolidation. Organisational weakness prevented them from exploiting state support to lead the insurgency. External support by other actors, including independent religious scholars and organisations but also other insurgents, conversely helped many Islamist groups in the beginning of the conflict, especially Ahrar al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham notably benefited from a wide interconnection to many social networks to empower itself within the insurgency, while avoiding Western sanctions.

Second, the first phase of the conflict reveals that external support for the insurgency exacerbated internal Jihadi divisions. While foreign countries, including Western countries, started to support the insurgency, internal competition between Jihadi insurgents prevented the establishment of a consensus between them. In absence of consensus, foreign support was used to denounce one another for compromising on key ideological tenets. The Jihadis hence divided in three directions. Ahrar al-Sham and its local allies increasingly legitimised external support – including by Western states – for the opposition. Jabhat al-Nusra opposed IS's orders to orchestrate armed operations abroad, and did not plan external operations since the group focused on its fight against the Syrian regime. But Jabhat al-Nusra also opposed external support for the opposition and became antagonist to foreign-supported groups. Last, IS excommunicated all the groups that received external support, starting with Ahrar al-Sham and its local allies.

Foreign support for the insurgency	Divided, including Western and Arab states, foreign fighters, and individual entrepreneurs
Structure of the Jihadi insurgency	Competition between several large groups
Ideological position on foreign support	Only a partial justification by Ahrar al-Sham

Second Phase: Narrowing Foreign Support for a Polarising Armed Opposition Until 2016

The number of active insurgent group dwindled from 2014 to 2016.[61] Only a limited number of groups survived, often by gathering local military units in a common organisational umbrella. Growing external support for the regime preceded a more coordinated response by Western and Gulf countries that bolstered, for some time, the insurgency. Islamist insurgents took the lead but growing foreign support for the opposition still remained a dividing issue.

The first notable dynamic occurred on the side of the regime. The regime lost its territorial control over most of Syria between 2012 and 2013, as well as its external border with its neighbours. Many countries, including Western countries, believed that the regime could only survive for several weeks but that its fate was ultimately sealed. This development reinforced external intervention by regime supporters, especially

Iran. Iran supported an array of primarily Lebanese and Iraqi non-state armed groups to protect the regime and man up the increasingly large front-lines with the armed opposition.

The structure of the insurgency also started to change by 2014. Most smaller groups affiliated to the FSA disappeared, became relatively marginal local units only present in a limited geographic area, or joined larger entities including some prominent Islamist actors.[62] More importantly, IS isolated itself from the mainstream opposition and set up in the East of the country where it linked up with its Iraqi stronghold. The group defined itself as a state to which all Muslims, including other insurgents, should pledge allegiance. Though IS was not directly state supported, its advances in Iraq was akin to state support. A campaign of prison attacks freed up many leading cadres of the organisation, who took over large parts of Iraq including the Northern city of Mosul. These advances provided a strategic depth to the group, significant resources, and military equipment seized from the Iraqi army. IS's territorial consolidation additionally allowed the group to mobilise thousands of foreign fighters that could be used to stabilise its territory and launch war against other actors, including the Kurdish-lead YPG and other Syrian insurgents. In the summer 2014, IS started to attack the Kurdish region of Iraq, assassinate Western hostages, and reduced the Yazidi religious minority into slavery. A large coalition of countries lead by the US was create in reaction, to sustain a military campaign against the group.[63]

These developments largely informed the position of the US regarding support for the insurgency. The US did not want to reiterate its past contribution to other conflicts with thousands of troops on the ground. Instead, the US wanted to coordinate the large scale aerial military campaign with a local partner. The two main choices were to either use some of the Arab groups associated with the mainstream opposition, or to rely on the Kurdish-lead YPG. The US ultimately believed that Syrian Arab insurgents did not want to prioritise their fight against IS, but still aimed at fighting the regime. The US and its allies therefore relied on the Kurdish YPG, which it officially diluted into the Syrian Democratic Forces to alleviate – without success – Turkish fears that the US was military boosting a group affiliated to the PKK. The military campaign was a success in containing, and then pushing back IS. In parallel, the US and several European countries expressed their dismay at the regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians. Obama initially drew a so-called red-line at these weapons, which failed to prevent the regime from using chemical weapons again against the suburbs of Damascus in August 2013.

A window of opportunity for Western and Gulf supporters of the insurgency occurred in 2015, when a brief regional rapprochement between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey boosted the mainstream insurgency. These three countries contributed to the most successful institutionalisation of cross-factional military coordination during the same time-frame. The Jaysh al-Fath (the Army of Conquest) coalition was established in March 2015 to seize the provincial city of Idlib.[64] After the failure of FSA-affiliated groups to consolidate, the new coalition exposed the domination of Islamist factions on the ground, especially Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. The Jaysh al-Fath coalition transformed military dynamics on the ground. The synchronisation of external support from several states that previously embraced antagonistic agendas reinforced the military coalition and facilitated the seizure of the city of Idlib

on March 28, quickly followed by the expulsion of remaining regime forces from Syria's northwest. The military momentum nurtured the decision to replicate the model elsewhere.

But the successes of the military operation rooms challenged the insurgency in new ways. Close collaboration with Jabhat al-Nusra exacerbated international criticisms that the Syrian opposition was allying with al-Qaeda.[65] Jabhat al-Nusra's ties to the organisation created by bin Laden increasingly burdened the insurgency. The group's allegiance to al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor, which was only given to preserve group cohesion after the split with IS, was exploited by the Syrian regime and its international allies – especially the Russians – to vilify the opposition by claiming that they were not essentially different from IS. Despite Jabhat al-Nusra's insistence that it was not planning foreign attacks, external pressure was reflected in Ahrar al-Sham's strong words against the external affiliation.[66] Even Western states were uncomfortable with the situation. They imposed strict conditions on the use of specific weapons such as anti-tanks weapons, whose use had to be reported and video tapped before further provisioning. Other weapons were simply never provided, especially anti-aerial weapons. Military collaboration would not ultimately be sufficient without a clearer political project that could alleviate international fears as well.

In addition, international support for the opposition informed Russia's decision to intervene in September 2015. Russia quickly reversed the gains made hitherto by the insurgency and shifted balance of power on the ground. The city of Aleppo, which had been partially controlled by the opposition since 2012, was the main focal point as Syria's second city. Aleppo was a symbolic, economic, and political objective for the two sides of the conflict, also strategically important due to its proximity to the Turkish border. The Aleppo offensive launched by the regime and its foreign allies started in October 2015. In the next few months, regime forces assisted by foreign militias primarily supported by Iran and Lebanese Hizbullah reconquered an array of strategic towns around the city that gradually isolated insurgent-held areas from their strategic life-line connection to Turkey. In summer 2016, regime forces successfully severed the insurgents' supply routes and besieged them. The successive counter-attacks launched by the insurgency failed to yield any result considering the wide imbalance of power. By the end of the year, a ceasefire was proclaimed and the insurgents were forcibly evacuated out of the city under massive military pressure.

The insurgency therefore had to adapt to external pressure to adapt. Jabhat al-Nusra had to be responsive to the pressure of the armed opposition – especially Ahrar al-Sham – and renounce al-Qaeda. Ahrar al-Sham and its allies insisted that organisational merger was impossible as long as Jabhat al-Nusra kept its allegiance to al-Qaeda. They believed that any new entity inclusive of Jabhat al-Nusra would be listed as a terrorist organisation by foreign countries. Jabhat al-Nusra had to recognise that its ties with al-Qaeda would continue to obstruct organisational unity after heated internal debates on the trade-off associated with cutting ties to the organisation.[67] The ties to al-Zawahiri's group were used by Russia to justify exemptions to mutually agreed upon ceasefires and continue to strike large areas throughout insurgent-held territories, including where Jabhat al-Nusra was absent. The US, which had independently targetted many prominent Jabhat al-Nusra leaders in multiple drone attacks, could not oppose Russia's claims though it rejected the latter's assertion that Ahrar al-Sham was similarly

a terrorist organisation.[68] Jabhat al-Nusra's embeddedness in the opposition, which was a strength to the group's survival, became a real burden on everybody else. Although the opposition recognised that Jabhat al-Nusra merely pledged allegiance publicly to al-Qaeda in 2013 to survive the split with IS, they were now pressuring the group to renounce the allegiance. Ahrar al-Sham was adamant that no unification could occur as long as Jabhat al-Nusra kept its foreign subordination. While Ahrar al-Sham managed to avoid international terrorist designation, the group was cognisant that military collaboration with Jabhat al-Nusra dismayed Western countries, including the US. The group's divergences from al-Qaeda and IS were usually acknowledged but repeated efforts to engage with Western countries were obstructed by its military collaboration with Jabhat al-Nusra, which precluded real Western military support.[69]

The insurgency also increasingly had to manage the growing Turkish role in the conflict. Turkey was adamant about preventing the consolidation of a contiguous autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria in a PKK-associated entity especially in the north of Aleppo. It used smaller Syrian armed groups associated with the armed opposition to seize the north of Syria. While the Syrian conflict used to be a political card for Turkey, it increasingly became a national security issue. The Turkish role created turmoil inside the insurgency. Turkish re-assertion forced the armed opposition to adapt and increasingly align with its interests.

The positions of the armed opposition on Turkey's incursion into northern Syria varied. Ahrar al-Sham expressed early on support for a safe zone in the north under Turkish influence.[70] The Islamic council and an independent Salafi congregation of religious scholars active in Syria (*majlis shura ahl al-'ilm*, the consultative council of the people of science*)* also praised Turkey for the creation of a safe zone, especially if it could help unite the factions in a united army.[71] Turkey and its Islamist-leaning government was also perceived differently from other Western countries. The Salafi scholars, for instance, disassociated the "factions of the pentagon," which it considered corrupt, from the "sincere factions" supported by Turkey that could create a local administration.[72] While most other groups endorsed the same position, Jabhat al-Nusra had previously argued that its conception of Islamic law prevented its participation and withdrew from the region.[73] The group then maintained a strong opposition to the operation. It recognised that "ulama" were divided on their judgement, but also blamed the US for its support for the PKK and their connivance with Russia on fighting them, as the most efficient force in Syria. Collaboration with foreign military forces in the North was considered unlawful, even as mere coordination.[74]

Accommodating Turkey became a key divide in the polarised insurgency. By the end of 2016, the insurgency wanted to complete its unification but the opposition polarised instead around the issue of external alliances. One segment of the insurgency wanted to cement its cooperation with Turkey and favour a more political track in alliance with Turkey. The groups included most factions previously affiliated to the FSA and the majority of Ahrar al-Sham, which wanted to embrace the Syrian revolutionary agenda.[75] The other component of the insurgency privileged a military track around former Jabhat al-Nusra. They believed that military strength only could reinforce the opposition around a clear project, and was wary of foreign ties that could lead to unacceptable compromises, bring Turkish troops in, and compromise foreign fighters.

Ahrar al-Sham's evolution illustrates the impact of political divergences on internal cohesion. Though the group was the first partially Jihadi insurgent to legitimise foreign support in the interest of the Syrian insurgency, internal divides remained. One faction was willing to fully embrace the Syrian revolutionary agenda, align its political position with other armed groups, and establish strategic ties with Turkey. This position was opposed by other leaders who were reluctant, and preferred to strengthen military collaboration with Jabhat al-Nusra instead. An internal quarrel heightened internal tensions, with each faction trying to marginalise its opponent through internal restructuring, and a lasting contention between the group's political and religious offices, which respectively stood for each of the two faction. After failing to win the leadership election by the end of 2016, the proponents of stronger ties with Jabhat al-Nusra created Jaysh al-Ahrar inside Ahrar al-Sham to show their military strength.

In a final round of discussions, the insurgency polarised around Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra and failed to unite. Many groups aligned with Ahrar al-Sham feared being listed as terrorist alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as the latter's domination over any new entity. The second camp denounced other for their instrumentalisation by Turkey and Western countries. The polarisation of the insurgency in two poles remained a major impediment to a fuller alignment with Turkey, despite the insurgency's strategic interests. Jaysh al-Ahrar split from Ahrar al-Sham and joined Jabhat al-Nusra as well as several smaller entities in a group called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017.

The second phase shows that the two largest groups were responsive to international incentives in favour of international support, but that the polarisation of the insurgency prevented the elaboration of a consensual position. Instead, foreign support was used to denounce one another for making too many concessions. Ahrar al-Sham, which was more open to international collaboration, had to be very careful in its ideological arguments and draw a line on any alignment with the US specifically, to avoid being accused of collaborating with a country that was still targetting Jabhat al-Nusra in drone strikes.

Foreign support for the insurgency	Increasingly dominated by Turkey
Structure of the Jihadi insurgency	Polarisation around Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham
Ideological position on foreign support	Only a partial justification by Ahrar al-Sham

Last Phase: A Dominant Ex Jihadi Insurgent with One Hesitant Ally Post 2017

The last phase of the conflict began in 2017. The role of Western countries largely receded – along with the marginalisation of the UN-supported Geneva process – against the backdrop of a Russian-Turkish reassertion over conflict management in Syria. The consolidation of a more limited number of active actor, in addition to a relative freeze of the conflict, directly impacted the insurgency and forced them to accommodate their new environment.

The polarisation of the insurgency peaked after the failure to unite the opposition in northwest Syria, against the backdrop of a dominant Turkish role in northwest Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra, as it transformed into HTS, feared that the continued strength of Ahrar al-Sham could be used to eradicate the group. HTS had reasons to believe

that foreign countries, especially Russia, could pressure Turkey to act against it by using local groups like Ahrar al-Sham as a possible conduit. Military hegemony on northwest Syria became the only means to impose a new regional and international reality that other actors would ultimately have to accept and manage.[76] If unity was not possible through negotiations, it had to be imposed militarily. Internal contentions for power were therefore not the product of irreconcilable ideological differences, which existed, as much as the outcome of a logic of survival between two groups vying to lead the insurgency in northwest Syria. A former HTS religious scholar previously affiliated to Ahrar al-Sham, Abul-Fath al-Farghali, presented three main reasons for the internal confrontation between the two groups, where he favoured HTS. He insisted that (1) Ahrar al-Sham's civilian project was a threat to HTS, (2) HTS needed to control the border with Turkey and expel Ahrar al-Sham from it, and that (3) HTS's hegemony would allow the group to force Turkey to rely on it as an intermediary instead of other groups.[77] This hegemonic project was therefore qualitatively different from what IS previously tried to impose. HTS insisted that it remained committed to the revolutionary project and claimed that it did not strive to impose its domination over other factions.

Turkey imposed itself militarily as the dominant actor after 2017. The imposition of a new Kurdish-lead order on a third of Syria created a new strategic threat to Turkey. By the end of the battle of Raqqa against IS in October 2017, Kurdish forces were effectively in control of northeast Syria and its oil resources. From August 2016 to March 2017, Turkey responded to the Kurdish breakthrough by launching a new military campaign called the Euphrates Shield officially aiming at fighting both IS and the Kurdish YPG in the West of Kobani. The campaign relied on a combination of local Syrian armed groups provided with Turkish weaponry and Turkish air-support to take control of the Northern Syrian cities of Jarablus, al-Rai, and al-Bab by Spring 2017. The military operation was followed by the olive branch campaign (*ghasn al-zaytun*) launched in early 2018 to seize the Kurdish inhabited areas further to the West and decisively severed Kurdish zones in northern Syria with Russian acquiescence.

The new Turkish-led order increasingly forced the insurgency to adapt. Insurgent responses to the Astana process supported by Turkey in coordination with Russia diverged. Armed groups closer to Turkey were invited and participate. Ahrar al-Sham argued that the group conducted internal discussions on the positive and negative yield of participation before refusing to attend as it would not achieve substantial objectives such as a ceasefire. But the group added that it opposed an internal confrontation between proponents and opponents of the process, as the latter should not excommunicate or accuse of betrayal the groups that decided to go.[78] HTS was conversely more adamant. The group insisted that the Astana process strived to achieve politically what could not be achieved militarily. It claimed that the process was treacherous to God and his messenger.[79] HTS additionally denounced the Russians for exploiting internal factional divisions against one another, in addition to their numerous crimes.[80]

The ultimate ascent of HTS paved the way for the formation of its own dominated government.[81] HTS's victory over Ahrar al-Sham and its allies brought all the province of Idlib under administrative control of its supported Salvation Government.

Paradoxically, HTS followed Ahrar al-Sham's trajectories but managed to achieve its opponent's objectives. HTS created a political bureau when it was establish to develop more refined political positions. After criticising and opposing the group for opening up to Turkey, HTS developed tactical ties with it while seeking to transform the relation into a strategic partnership.[82]

Regardless of HTS's previous positions, it ultimately followed a similar political trajectory similar to Ahrar al-Sham's, even as it described the latter as a failing project.[83] After becoming the hegemon of northwest Syria, HTS argued that it was also formed to reach out to other countries, including Turkey and Western states. The group's religious council resorted to the same tradition previously used by Ahrar al-Sham, Islamic Law-Guided Public Policy (*siyasat al-shar'iyya*), to similarly argue that it is necessary to prioritise enemies and neutralise antagonistic forces without making compromises on principles.[84] HTS also argued that the implementation of Islamic law is linked to a group's strength, which changes in contrast with the principles that do not. HTS even argued that, in this jihad, there should be no internal fight over religious creed considering that this is a war for survival,[85] which would make fighting alongside non-Salafis a non-issue. For instance, the group publicly supported the Southern Front regardless of previous ideological differences as they fought the same enemy.[86] HTS ultimately added in several communiqués that, as an independent organisation, it does not threaten other states but rather seeks to develop equilibrated relations and collaboration with them for the purposes of regional stability.[87] It meant that the group welcomed humanitarian work by neutral organisations, which other Jihadi groups had rejected.[88]

But HTS adopted a different modus operandi from Ahrar al-Sham in practice. Instead of legitimising its choices by creating a cross-factional consensus, HTS imposed its hegemony before making political concessions. HTS addressed the threat of radical dissidence gradually. The most potent threat came from previous HTS leaders that formed the pro-al-Qaeda splitter group, Hurras al-Din. When HTS initially tried to restrain them with the detention of their most prominent leaders, many HTS's own sub-factions complained and threatened the leadership. They denounced the campaigns of arrests and demanded the establishment of independent courts of justice with independent religious scholars like Jordanian-based Abu Qatada.[89] They claimed that they would leave HTS if the group failed to respond to their demands. The nature of the threat posed by Hurras al-Din was therefore not quantitative as much as qualitative. Although the al-Qaeda-aligned entity had far fewer soldiers and material resources than HTS, it presented a potential alternative that could have swayed many of HTS sub-groups and commanders that disagreed with the strategic direction of its leadership. The emergence of Hurras al-Din therefore illustrates how, like Ahrar al-Sham in the past, HTS similarly had to navigate internal and external dynamics carefully between antagonistic demands for political opening and the necessary preservation of internal cohesion. It could not simply impose its political decisions over sub-brigades when the cost of defection was too low and other competing groups were too strong.

Moreover, HTS maintained more agency than other groups as it legitimised external ties to foreign actors. The evolution of HTS shows how the group had to adapt to the new domination of Turkey in Idlib. By 2022, Turkey had sent more than ten thousand soldiers in the province. The leading role of a unique external player over

the province has forced all the insurgents to adapt. Opponents to the Turkish-led order were marginalised, and in many cases killed. HTS was a reluctant partner. The group initially attacked other factions for acquiescing to Turkish role, before following suit. HTS was more successful than its previous contender Ahrar al-Sham since it imposed its hegemony before making concessions, which limited the space for dissidence. At the same time, HTS remains different from the groups affiliated to the Syrian National Army in the North of the country, which are directly funded and supported by Turkey. HTS officially entertains little relations with Turkey. There is security and military coordination, but HTS maintains more agency than the groups that receive direct support such as Ahrar al-Sham. Moreover, HTS's new direction only had a limited impact internationally since the group continues to be internationally listed as linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS by the UN Security Council, which has largely impeded its reaching out to foreign countries.

Foreign support for the insurgency	Dominated by Turkey
Structure of the Jihadi insurgency	Dominated by HTS
Ideological position on foreign support	Acceptance of the Turkish role, with limited ideological justifications by HTS

Conclusion

The 2011 uprisings had a profound impact on Jihadis, particularly in Syria, where the initial demand for political reform ignited a conflict that persists, albeit in altered forms. Today, the Syrian conflict encompasses not only a military confrontation across stable frontlines and bombings but also a real endeavour by the opposition to establish governance structures resembling a state. These efforts illustrate the institutionalization endeavors of armed groups aiming at stabilizing their territories. Importantly, it means that Jihadis have had to adapt to new dynamics, such as Turkey and Russia's conflict management strategies, in order to ensure their survival.

The Syrian conflict underscores the challenge for Jihadis in navigating their stance on opposition to foreign support, as it increasingly clashed with their strategic objectives. Before 2011, Jihadis could oppose both local Muslim regimes and foreign states arguably supporting them. However, the 2011 uprisings challenged this perspective. Western countries' relative tolerance of violent upheavals in countries like Libya and Syria compelled Jihadis to reevaluate their stance and adjust their views, irrespective of their previous ideological allegiances. Nonetheless, such shifts were not necessarily easy. Ideology sets up a program of action that armed groups cannot easily discard when circumstances shift. Committed leaders or commanders uphold these ideological principles seriously, which reinforces the internal cohesion of these groups. Ideology hence isn't mere rhetoric; many individuals are deeply committed to it, which becomes evident in the divisions and internal conflicts it sparked in Syria. This is especially pronounced when numerous Jihadi factions vie for support from a common constituency, where any ideological compromise can be exploited by rivals for mutual denouncement. Jihadis in Syria therefore had to delicately navigate between maintaining internal unity, managing relations with other factions, and adapting to the evolving landscape of support for the insurgency, increasingly influenced by Turkey. Thus, the circumstances under which Jihadis might renounce certain views is crucial. This

necessitates a deeper understanding of the evolving structure of external state support and the changing presence of other Jihadis vying to sway a similar constituency. Ideology is therefore very much interwoven with the changing warscape in which Jihadis operate, as they try to manage their interactions with other states, shifting interests, and the fluctuating dynamics of these conflicts conflict. This evolution encompasses the ebb and flow between active confrontations and moments of relative calm, ultimately leading to the complex necessity of governance by former Jihadis in northwest Syria.

Notes

1. This research was previously presented at the Conflict Delegation and Proxy Wars in International Security conference and a TOI – POMEPS Workshop on "Islamists in Warscapes: The Evolution of Sunni and Shia Groups in Protracted Conflict." The author wishes to thank the participants for comments and suggestions.
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4. Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207–39; Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
5. "Jihadi" is a spectrum that encompasses various groups, with strictly Salafi Jihadi groups being only a sub-category along that spectrum. "Jihadi" is a label for a social movement composed of "(a) mostly informal networks of interaction, based on (b) shared beliefs and solidarity, mobilized around (c) contentious themes through (d) the frequent use of various forms of protest" [in this case, repertoires of armed violence]. Jihadis have embraced many perspectives, but they are linked to militants who engaged in conflicts such as Afghanistan in the late 1980s, Bosnia in the 1990s, Chechnya in the early 2000s, and Iraq in the 2000s. While there have been genuine differences of opinion and occasional conflicts among them, they maintain similar worldviews, sharing a general endorsement of violence – at least in theory – against Muslim regimes that fail to implement their understanding of Islamic law. Salafism plays a distinct role within Jihadism, with virtually all of the Jihadis embracing the Salafi approach to Islam. Al-Qaeda, for instance, has historically had Salafi membership but with a relatively more ecumenical approach focusing on opposition to Muslim regimes and their foreign supporters rather than strictly emphasizing Salafi beliefs. This is evident in their support for the non-Salafi Taliban in Afghanistan. On the other side of the spectrum, groups like the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) in Algeria or Islamic State (IS) strictly insist on the need for Muslims to adhere to their understanding of the Salafi methodology (for instance Alexander Thurston, "Algeria's GIA: The First Major Armed Group to Fully Subordinate Jihadism to Salafism," *Islamic Law and Society* 24, no. 4 (2017): 412–36.
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7. For instance, the US opposed the listing of Ahrar al-Sham as a terrorist group in the UN Security Council. See Michelle Nichols, "Russia Proposes U.N. Blacklist Two Syrian Opposition Groups," *Reuters*, April 27, 2016. Western countries also did not oppose the role played by former leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, including Abdelhakim Belhaj, as long as they did not align with al-Qaeda.
8. The main exception is when Jihadis renounce violence, which is analysed as Jihadi "deradicalisation." See Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009); Jerome Drevon, "Assessing Islamist

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9. Christopher Phillips, "The International System and the Syrian Civil War," *International Relations* 36, no. 3 (2022): 358–81.
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47. Interviews with leaders of Suqur al-Sham and Jaysh al-'Izza.
48. These brigades were formed by foreign contingents from an array of countries including Chechnya (Ajnad al-Kawkaz, Junud al-Sham), Central Asia and China (Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani, the Turkistan Islamic Party), Gulf countries (Suqur al-'Iz), Libya (Kata'ib al-Muhajireen, Liwa al-Umma), and Morocco (Harakat Sham al-Islam).
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Disclosure Statement

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