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Syrian Jihadis' reaction to the Gaza conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the reactions of Jihadis and former Jihadis in Syria to the ongoing war on Gaza. This issue is significant because it highlights how groups that initially had a unified stance on the eve of the Syrian conflict in 2011—marked by their opposition to Muslim regimes and a Salafi outlook – later fractured during the Syrian conflict, leading to divergent positions on the war on Gaza. Global Jihadis, including al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS), adopted very different stances. Al-Qaeda has attempted to soften its previous theological criticisms of Hamas with a cautious praise for the organization and timid attempts at promoting unity. In contrast, IS has remained vehemently opposed to Hamas, arguing that the group fights for non-religious reasons, allies with 'enemies of Islam', and does not seek to implement Islamic law. Perhaps the most intriguing perspective comes from former Jihadis, who view Hamas as a political and military model, although they are cautious about the Palestinian group's praise for Iran and renewed links to the Syrian regime. This research argues that political considerations – such as the need to appeal to specific audiences and the dynamics of cross-factional competition – take precedence over theological concerns. Additionally, it finds that these divergent positions have not led to any violent actions from Syria.

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Introduction

The impact of the war on Gaza is particularly significant in Syria as the country remains highly polarized, embroiled in an armed confrontation between several sides that, to the exception of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), ostensibly oppose Israel and support armed struggle in principle. This is intriguing because it suggests that various sides engaged in conflict with one another must find ways to articulate positions that may align partially with those of their adversaries. The Syrian conflict hence reveals much about

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how different actors – including the regime, the armed opposition, and Jihadis aligned with either al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) – reinterpret their political and religious views within a changing context.

These divergences are notable concerning the groups that were or remain partially or fully Jihadi, who were divided during the Syrian conflict.¹ At the beginning of the war in 2011, these groups were somewhat unified in their Salafi outlook, opposition to existing Muslim regimes, and hostility towards foreign countries, especially Western countries, due to the latter's support for these regimes. However, although they originate from a common theological corpus and initially held similar political views, Jihadis have evolved in very different directions over the course of the war due to a combination of competition for the leadership of the Syrian armed opposition, their own lessons from previous conflicts in which Jihadis were involved, such as Iraq, and their own adaptation to Syria's unique domestic and international features. Over more than a decade, these have caused internal fractures and violent conflicts among Jihadis (Hamming, 2022; Moghadam & Fishman, 2011).

Jihadi-Salafis' internal differences are evident in their positions on the war in Gaza, particularly in their views on Hamas, which is Ikhwani and not jihadi-Salafi.² Jihadis' views have evolved as a result of their fight against the regime and its Iranian allies – both of which they continue to denounce for pursuing a Shia sectarian agenda – but, more importantly, because of their own conflict with one another. These internal struggles have notably compelled them to develop more distinctive and opposing political and religious views that have positioned them at odds with one another and now inform their position on the Gaza conflict. This evolution illustrates that while the interplay between Jihadis' theological and political considerations is dynamic, political considerations – including the need to cater to a specific audience – and cross-factional competition tend to prevail over theology. This holds true even for a group like IS, which claims to prioritize theology above all else.

This article examines the positions on the war on Gaza of three main components of the Jihadi social movement at the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011: Al-Qaeda, IS, and two groups that distanced themselves from global jihad during the conflict – Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, which was rebranded as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in 2017, which I will term 'post-jihadi-Salafis'.³ By exploring the roots of their divergences and the consequences of these differences during the ongoing conflict, the article argues that the differing stances of the main actors – such as Ahrar al-Sham and HTS's conditional support for Hamas, al-Qaeda's ambiguity, and IS's clear rebuttal – largely result from their efforts to differentiate themselves from one another during the Syrian conflict, which the war in Gaza is only confirming by entrenching these differences further. This means that ideology has become more central for IS due to its strategic interests and positioning.

For al-Qaeda, ideology remains influential but has been shaped by evolving interests. In contrast, ideology plays a far lesser role for groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, who prioritize other considerations. Ultimately, while all these groups claim to engage in jihad, their interpretations and objectives differ significantly. For Hamas and the post-jihadi-Salafis in Syria, jihad is fundamentally a struggle against occupation and for liberation (including from dictatorships). Al-Qaeda conversely frames jihad as a broader war between Islam and unbelief though it exhibits more political pragmatism compared to IS's strict focus on religious purity.

Still, it is also important to underline that, in contrast to groups in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, there have been no attacks on Israeli or US targets from these groups from Syria. HTS has systematically dismantled IS cells in north-west Syria and cracked down on al-Qaeda, which it forbade from operating in the province (International Crisis Group, 2023). It is therefore impossible for al-Qaeda to carry out any actions against Israel, even if it wanted to do so, while IS is confined to the east of the country with no ability to launch operations from there. As for the armed opposition, while Israel remains theoretically an enemy, its actions in Syria have mainly targeted Iranian figures and Hizbullah – which the opposition is actively fighting – which means that the opposition has no reason to attack Israel. In a way, their enemy's enemy might not be a friend, but it is not a direct foe either. The US also stopped fighting former Jihadis in Syria while killing Qassem Suleimani, who led the war against them, which explains why former Jihadis are now willing to engage with them based on shared interests against Iran and Russia.

Jihadi factionalism in Syria

The Syrian conflict has been highly divisive for Jihadis. Initially, it provided a significant boost for them, offering new opportunities to fight at a time when Jihadis in Iraq were weak in 2010–2011 and those in places like Somalia and Afghanistan were relatively isolated. This new environment created a real opening for the emergence of various groups attracting fighters from various countries or regions such as Morocco, the Gulf, Chechnya, and Turkistan. Foreign fighters either formed their own factions or joined one of the three largest groups at the time: Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and IS, which also exemplify the main trends in Syria.

Ahrar al-Sham was the first to distance itself from other Jihadis by engaging politically – not just militarily – early on (Drevon, 2020, 2021). The group was formed by a diverse group of commanders, including former foreign fighters, militants active in the Iraq war, and local individuals not previously involved in militancy. Many founders were either close to or previously associated with Jihadis but were critical of al-Qaeda, particularly due to the

extreme violence in Iraq. When the Syrian conflict began, Ahrar al-Sham aimed to promote a new project distinct from both al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. Over the years, the group increasingly dissociated itself from al-Qaeda and IS, gradually aligning more closely with the mainstream armed opposition to the regime. This shift reflected their desire to carve out an identity separate from other Jihadis while becoming more integrated with the broader armed opposition to the Assad regime (Drevon, 2024).

The second group to distance itself from the Jihadis, but in a more convoluted process, was Jabhat al-Nusra. Initially established by Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, an Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) commander in Iraq, Jabhat al-Nusra quickly gained popularity after refusing to implement ISI orders, such as sectarian warfare and attacking the mainstream Syrian opposition in Istanbul.⁴ In 2013, as ISI attempted to reassert control over Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Jolani resisted his former Iraqi leaders and instead pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda since he believed this was the only way to maintain the loyalty of many of his commanders and soldiers (Khalifa, 2020). Three years later, under pressure from other groups, especially Ahrar al-Sham, which refused to form a new coalition with them as long as they were affiliated with al-Qaeda, al-Jolani severed ties with al-Qaeda (Drevon & Haenni, 2021). Jabhat al-Nusra then rebranded as Jabhat Fath al-Sham before it became Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in 2017. Subsequently, HTS clamped down on IS and al-Qaeda elements in northwest Syria, solidifying its separation from its former Jihadi legacy (International Crisis Group, 2023; Zelin, 2023).

Global Jihadis have become increasingly isolated in Syria as a result of the separation of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, two of the largest groups active in the country. To survive, IS rejected all other groups, claiming to be the historical caliphate and the only legitimate Muslim authority worldwide, thereby gaining the allegiance of many smaller groups of foreign fighters (Hamming, 2022). Al-Qaeda, significantly weakened, tried to regain the initiative when loyalists split from Jabhat al-Nusra and later formed Hurras al-Din. However, Hurras al-Din remained a small organization that never managed to grow because of the HTS pressure, which restricted the organization before clamping down on its commanders (Drevon & Haenni, 2021).

The position of the globalists: Al-Qaeda and IS

Historically, al-Qaeda and IS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (which became Islamic State in Iraq or ISI in 2006), operated under the same umbrella with a very critical stance towards Hamas. Al-Qaeda's criticisms of Hamas were threefold. First, al-Qaeda condemned Hamas for participating in the 2006 legislative elections, viewing this as heresy. Al-Qaeda has consistently denounced democracy and party politics, including direct criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood from which Hamas originates, since its inception

(Drevon, 2022; Lynch, 2011). This stance is based on the belief that democracy represents the sovereignty of the people rather than the sovereignty of God. Second, al-Qaeda criticized Hamas for not fully implementing Islamic law in the Gaza Strip. Despite some attempts to introduce some Islamic regulations in Gaza, Hamas has not enforced Islamic law and the penal punishments as strictly as al-Qaeda expects (Brenner, 2016). Last, al-Qaeda denounced Hamas for taking actions against local Jihadis, such as Jaysh al-Islam and Jund Ansar Allah, accusing Hamas of repressing these groups instead of supporting them (International Crisis Group, 2011).

During the war on Gaza, al-Qaeda's position has shifted somewhat, with the organization praising individual leaders of Hamas and the Qassam Brigades without explicitly endorsing Hamas as a movement (al-Qiyadat al-'Ammah, Al-Qaeda, 2023; Subcontinent, Al-Qaeda, 2023; al-Mujahidi, Harakat al-Shabaab, 2023; Qaedat al-Jihad Organization in the; Arabian Peninsula, 2023; wal-Muslimiin, Tandhim Qa'idat al-Jihad bi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam, 2023). This change of position is driven by three reasons. First, it reflects al-Qaeda's evolution following the 2011 Arab uprisings, in which the organization has sought to adopt a more localized agenda that claims to be relatively more lenient towards civilians, contrasting with IS's brutal tactics, but also towards other non-Jihadi armed groups with whom al-Qaeda sought to ally (Hafez, 2018). Second, since the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2021, Sayf al-Adl, its potential new leader whose position remains unconfirmed, has advocated for a rapprochement with Iran, where he resides, and which supports Hamas as part of the Axis of Resistance (Moghadam, 2017). Last, though al-Qaeda's previous theoretical views on Hamas have likely not transformed, the organization still tries to act as a vanguard of the Muslim community for whom Palestine represents a significant cause to which it has to be responsive.

Al-Qaeda has therefore sought to capitalize on Hamas's jihad while avoiding any concessions that would compromise its longstanding ideological positions. Al-Qaeda central published several communiqués praising the 'mujahideen' – soldiers engaged in jihad – in Gaza and notable Hamas figures, such as Saleh al-Arouri, who was killed in an Israeli strike in Beirut, and Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, referring to them as a 'mujahid' (al-Qiyadat al-'Ammah, Al-Qaeda, 2024). Similarly, al-Qaeda affiliates, such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and JNIM in the Sahel have all expressed praise for the fighters in Gaza. To balance their opposition to Hamas's political views, al-Qaeda and its franchises avoid explicitly mentioning the movement to create an impression that there is a distinction between the al-Qassam Brigades, which they praise, and the broader Hamas movement. Additionally, they link the war in Gaza to their global conflicts, even associating it with 9/11 and the 'caravan of martyrs' including Osama bin Laden and the former Taliban leader Akhtarullah Mansur

(2024; al-Hindiyya, Jama'at Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Shab al-Qara, 2024), despite Hamas consistently opposing such connections (Cragin, 2009). Al-Qaeda affiliates have also rejected the notion that the conflict is merely a local struggle against Israeli occupation, framing it instead as part of a global war between Islam and unbelief (2024; al-Hindiyya, Jama'at Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Shab al-Qara, 2024). In all cases, the praise from al-Qaeda never mentions the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which is considered much closer to Iran.⁵

This careful balancing act has also compelled al-Qaeda figures and affiliates to reconsider whether they should strategically reposition themselves in relation to Hamas too. A prominent religious scholar acting in defence of al-Qaeda's historical views, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, has launched hostilities and strongly opposed to Hamas, which he continues to denounce for neglecting Islamic law, aligning with Iran, and fighting for 'the dirt and the land' (Bunzel, 2024). Others, however, hold different views. Abd al-Rahman al-Makki, reportedly close to al-Qaeda's leadership before his death in 2024, acknowledged significant disagreements over Hamas and its 'deviant' path though he argued that the war is between Islam and unbelief (Al-Makki, Abu Abd al-Rahman, 2024). While critical of Hamas's 'misguided' approach and opposed to following its trajectory, he cautioned against hastily declaring takfir on the Palestinian group (excommunicating from Islam), emphasizing the need to consider its circumstances and position. Similarly, AQAP emphasized the importance of unity within the Muslim community. The group stressed shared struggles and framed the conflict as one between Islam and disbelief despite real ideological differences with Hamas (Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazeera al-'Arab, 2024). Lastly, Sayf al-Adl, writing under the pseudonym Salim al-Sharif, published a series of texts criticizing Western support for Israel and supporting Hamas, describing the situation as the beginning of a new phase in the conflict, and emphasizing the need for Muslims to unite and close ranks (Al-Sharif, 2024).

IS's position similarly reflects its evolution during the Syrian war, leading to clear opposition to Hamas. Factional competition with other Jihadis during the Syrian conflict drove IS to isolate itself, claiming to be the sole legitimate authority for Muslims worldwide and denouncing all other Jihadis as illegitimate. This stance is even more pronounced with Hamas, which IS excommunicates for failing to implement Islamic law in Gaza and for allying with Iran, which IS brands as a Shia heretic state (Islamic State, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). During the war on Gaza, IS criticized Hamas for fighting Israel for nationalist rather than religious reasons. IS believes that Israel should not be attacked solely for its occupation but that Jews – not only Israelis – should be attacked wherever they are. Additionally, IS's religious agenda asserts that Palestine should not be prioritized over other regions. Jihad is not about nationalism or resistance but about establishing Islamic law and prioritizing Palestine reflects a nationalist agenda that contradicts IS's approach to Islam.

The position of global Jihadis on the Gaza war hence reflects their respective evolution over the past decade. These groups were united under the al-Qaeda umbrella in the 2000s – despite growing differences of views over ISI's excessive violence in Iraq, which did not cause a formal split – before differentiating themselves from one another during the Syrian conflict due to their internal contest for power in the Jihadi movement. This rivalry informed the development of new positions, including new ideological stances on a range of religious and political issues. This is evident in al-Qaeda's adoption of a more pragmatic approach, partially in response to IS's isolationism. Without altering its core religious views, al-Qaeda has shifted towards a more flexible strategy to adapt to the changing warscape (Lynch et al., 2024). Thus, ideology, though still informing these groups' positions, is largely shaped by changing interests.

The former Syrian Jihadis

The positions of post-jihadi-Salafis in Syria on Hamas and the war in Gaza are political and not religious. Although Ahrar al-Sham and HTS still adhere to Salafism, theology does not inform their views on Hamas. For instance, there is no public condemnation of Hamas for its failure to implement Islamic law or discussions of divisive Salafi concepts like *al-wala wal-bara* – which stipulates that Muslims should only ally with Salafi Muslims who uphold the same creed – that could be used to denounce the group theologically. For these groups, fighting alongside non-Salafis is not problematic.

The first dimension of former Jihadis' views on Hamas pertains to its supportive role during most of the conflict. In 2012, Hamas distanced itself from the Syrian regime and left Damascus (Napolitano, 2013), breaking ties with a longtime ally that had supported it since the 1990s. Syria had backed Hamas during the Second Intifada and provided refuge after its expulsion from Jordan, which paralleled a growing support from Iran, and Hizbullah. During the Syrian conflict, Hamas voiced support for the Syrian opposition, emphasizing the importance of siding with the people. Hamas leaders in Istanbul engaged with the Ahrar al-Sham leadership early in the conflict and offered guidance on organizational structuring and political programme.⁶ This collaboration extended to the military sphere, with Hamas establishing a defence group in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp and providing training to opposition factions. Of particular significance was Hamas's transfer of tunnel-building skills, which opposition groups used to launch attacks against regime forces.

Former Jihadis see Hamas as an illustrative model of how to navigate the complex interplay between military and political priorities though they continue to diverge from the Muslim Brotherhood and remain religiously Salafi. Despite differing views on democracy, which it opposes as a guiding

philosophy, Ahrar al-Sham recognized early on Hamas as an effective example of Islamist movements successfully managing military and politics.⁷ Its leaders view Hamas as a counterbalance to the narrow focus on armed struggle only favoured by al-Qaeda, which eschews formal politics. For them, Hamas demonstrates that engaging in both politics and armed struggle can be complementary strategies. Jabhat al-Nusra's internal debates initially revolved around its relations with IS and later with al-Qaeda, while avoiding directly engaging in politics. While it did not excommunicate the Muslim Brotherhood or Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood's president Mohammed Mursi officially, it also refrained from engaging with more political stances beyond fighting the regime. Then, as HTS, the group created its own political bureau and started to see parallels with Hamas and the Taliban, not necessarily in terms of practical governance but in demonstrating that armed groups can engage with diverse actors including foreign states, participate in negotiations, and seek international recognition while remaining committed to their core objectives (Drevon & Haenni, 2021). Still, even before the war in Gaza, HTS warned Hamas against rapprochement with the Syrian regime. Without mentioning any religious argument, the group insisted that such a move contradicted Hamas's stated commitment to freedoms and the demands of the people outlined in its 2017 political document (al-Muhara, Idarat al-Shu'un al-Siyasiyya al-Manatiq, 2022).

However, this does not imply that these groups offered full-fledged support to Hamas during the conflict though for political and not religious reasons. Instead, their stance, which is also shared by other armed opposition groups, including smaller ones like Faylaq al-Sham – which is closer to the (Syrian) Muslim Brotherhood – and mainstream Islamic institutions like the Islamic Council, is of critical support. Publicly, they back Hamas as a resistance group fighting against occupation, a sentiment widely echoed in the region (e.g., al-Jolani, Abu Muhammad, 2023; al-Muhara, Idarat al-Shu'un al-Siyasiyya al-Manatiq, 2023; Al-Sharif, 2024). However, they only referred to Hamas's military targeting without recognizing publicly – let alone condemning – its war crimes against civilians on 7 October. Their primary concern lies with Iranian support. In interviews, they acknowledge Hamas's reconciliation with Iran post-2019 due to its own vulnerabilities and lack of alternative state support.⁸ Yet, they take issue with Hamas's overt endorsement of the Iranian leadership in its communications. This is particularly evident in Hamas's numerous praises for Iranian General Qassem Suleimani, who played a direct role in combating armed opposition groups in Syria. While they do not equate Hamas with Hizbullah and Iraqi Shia militias, which directly engaged Syrian opposition forces and caused civilian casualties among Syrians, they believe that Hamas's accolades for the Iranian leadership go too far. Simultaneously, they refrain from mentioning the Palestinian Islamic

Jihad in their communications. While smaller, this group is also perceived as being too closely associated with Iran partially for doctrinal and ideological reasons.

The former Jihadis' views of Hamas therefore are not rooted in religious doctrine; rather, they are primarily political. While these groups may not align with Hamas on religious grounds, their critiques are more about political differences, especially the Palestinian group's public alignment with Iran. This aspect no longer sets them apart from non-Jihadis or even non-Salafis.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has been a catalyst for significant divisions among Jihadis, which has directly influenced their perspectives on Hamas and the conflict in Gaza. Previously unified under the al-Qaeda umbrella, the Syrian conflict compelled Jihadis to distinguish themselves from one another as they vied to mobilize a shared constituency. This drive led IS to assert its claim as the sole Muslim authority, isolating itself from all others and engaging in conflict with Muslims and non-Muslims, states and non-state actors alike. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, was compelled to adopt a more populist agenda, maintaining its core views while becoming somewhat more accommodating. Meanwhile, former Jihadis, distancing themselves from both IS and al-Qaeda, increasingly embraced and legitimized politics, relegating their religious views to a more secondary role. The war on Gaza has therefore only served to confirm more clearly these groups' divergences. We can also note that former Jihadis still consider Palestine a significant cause, but they now primarily focus on their own domestic fight in contrast to al-Qaeda and IS, for whom the Syrian conflict was always only one battleground among many, rather than the ultimate objective.

Notes

1. Jihadis share worldviews and an endorsement of violence – at least in theory – against Muslim regimes that fail to implement their understanding of Islamic law and, often, their foreign supporters. See Drevon (2017)
2. Hamas stems from the Muslim Brotherhood and is thus Ikhwani, believing in a nationalist agenda while engaging in formal politics – domestically and internationally – which jihadi-Salafis such as al-Qaeda and IS oppose. See also Cragin (2009).
3. Post-Jihadi-Salafis, like Ahrar al-Sham and HTS, still uphold the Salafi creed and approach to Islam, but have distanced themselves from Jihadi Salafis by abandoning its core principles, such as the commitment to global jihad and the rejection of alliances with foreign states. Instead, these groups now pursue political projects that prioritize local governance and seek international normalization.

4. Interview with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani and several of Jabhat al-Nusra's founders.
5. Though the association between the group and Iran is not necessarily that of a proxy. Cf Skare (2021).
6. Interviews with several Ahrar al-Sham leaders and other armed groups.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

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