



The Emergence of the “Islamist Alliance” in Syria

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Executive Summary

- September 24, 2013, saw the final nail driven into the coffin of the US and Western effort to influence, let alone control, the Syrian armed opposition.
- Thirteen of the leading armed opposition organization inside Syria that jointly represent some 75% of the rebel forces now unite under an Islamist-Jihadist banner as the “Islamist Alliance”. The “Islamist Alliance” was created in order to establish the Sharia throughout Syria and to formally reject the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as their legitimate representative. Significantly, the Alliance includes some of the largest units of the ostensibly moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) as well as al-Qaida affiliated organizations.
- The prominence of some of the Alliance member organizations indicate the abandonment of the US and Western political effort and the chimera of moderate armed opposition not only by the FSA and Jihadist forces but, significantly, by their sponsors Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and most likely Qatar. These three sponsoring states will now be focusing on the overt sponsorship of Jihadist forces and neo-Salafi Jihadism in Syria and the entire Mashriq. Thus, the emergence of the “Islamist Alliance” is just another inevitable step on the path to Jihadist eruption.

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ANALYSIS

September 24, 2013, saw the final nail driven into the coffin of the US and Western effort to influence, let alone control, the Syrian armed opposition.

Abdul-Aziz Salamah, the political leader of Liwaa al-Tawhid in northern Syria, announced that thirteen of the leading armed opposition organization inside Syria decided to unite their efforts under an Islamist-Jihadist banner as the “Islamist Alliance”. The Alliance claims to represent more than 75% of the rebels fighting the Bashar al-Assad administration. The “Islamist Alliance” was created in order to establish the Sharia throughout Syria and to formally reject the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as their legitimate representative. Significantly, the group includes some of the largest ostensibly moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) as well as al-Qaida affiliated organizations. Khalid Khoja, a senior SNC official in Turkey, estimated that the 13 groups had around 20,000 fighters and that “they effectively control northern Syria.”

The supreme leadership of al-Qaida warmly endorsed the new alliance in a special communique. “A group of powerful Mujahideen units rejected the authority of the pro-western Syrian opposition leadership abroad and called for it to be reorganized under an Islamic framework,” the al-Qaida communique read. “These forces call on all military and civilian forces to unite under a clear Islamic framework based on Sharia law, which should be the sole source of legislation.”

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The immediate roots of this dramatic shift go back to mid-September – when the leaders of the main Jihadist organizations and other armed groups gave up on the war winning intervention by the US-led West and started to reconcile themselves with the irreversible loss of grassroots popular support and legitimization in the Syrian interior. Under such conditions, the Jihadists’ stated goal of an Islamist Sharia-state against the wishes of both the vast majority of Syrians and the Assad administration has now become the only viable objective for the armed opposition. This realization was a reaffirmation of the claim by neo-Salafi Jihadist leaders that there could be no genuine cooperation with, and support from, the US-led West irrespective of the routine political, intelligence and military cooperation with the sponsoring intelligence services including the “Mukhabarat Amriki” – that is, US intelligence.

This stunning reversal was both inevitable and unexpected. The Jihadist forces have dominated the armed struggle inside Syria since early 2012. The aid provided by the sponsoring states – Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia; all of whom have also been fronting for the US – enabled the Jihadist forces to gradually dominate and/or destroy the localized rebel forces recruited and run under the command of local chieftains from the local popular bases (tribes, villages, townships, etc.). By fall 2012, the remaining local militias have been driven into protecting their popular bases against the Jihadists and thus out of the anti-Assad fighting. By spring 2013, the majority of localized militias were inclined to make deals with the Syrian security forces in order to jointly withstand, and where possible defeat, the ascent of the Jihadist forces. A minority of the localized militias allowed themselves to be swallowed by the Jihadist forces because they have become the sole source of weapons and other supplies in the destitute Syrian interior.

Meanwhile, as of back in spring 2012, officials of the “Mukhabarat Amriki” have closely supervised and effectively dominated on-site the distribution of military, logistical and financial aid to the Syrian armed opposition.



Although the US never “formally owned” the massive weapon shipments from Libya, Pakistan and Qatar, and subsequently also from the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, operatives of the “Mukhabarat Amriki” instructed their allies – the formal foreign sponsors of the Syrian opposition in Turkey and Jordan – in great detail and specificity who should get what weapons and other supplies, and when.

The sponsoring intelligence services, including the “Mukhabarat Amriki”, never had any illusion who was getting these weapons and what was being done with the US-endorsed and -supervised distributed weapons and ammunition. Formally, particularly for the consumption of political Washington, these weapons went to the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, led by Brigadier General Salim Idriss, and through them to the FSA units and forces inside Syria. Alas, virtually all FSA-affiliated field commanders repeatedly complain that they did not get any weapons and supplies. Indeed, independent monitoring of the Turkey-origin convoys confirmed that the bulk of the weapons have always been delivered to Jihadist forces. Furthermore, the Jihadists intentionally received excess quantities that they used in order to lure and take over localized non-Islamist forces that were otherwise literally starving for food, supplies and weaponry. In May 2013, a senior FSA commander reported that several FSA units with over 3,000 FSA fighters joined the Jabhat al-Nusra in northern Syria alone.

The current unraveling started in mid-September. According to Jihadist sources, over a 1,000 FSA fighters swore the oath of allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham and the Jabhat al-Nusra in northern and eastern Syria, particularly in the province of ar-Raqqah. At the time, the Jihadists already had between 7,500 and 10,000 fighters in the ar-Raqqah area. FSA sources conceded that the Raqqah Revolutionaries’ Brigade and the God’s Victory Brigade have pledged loyalty to the Jihadists. The two brigades were part of the FSA as late as 9 September. Thus, the last non-neo-Salafi forces operating in the central Euphrates Valley – the bastion of the Jihadist movement in both Syria and western Iraq – formally joined the Jihadist cause.

On September 20, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham in eastern Syria announced that five FSA kitaeb (“battalions”) with over 3,000 fighters swore the oath of allegiance to the Islamic State. In addition, the entire Brigade of Nasr Salahuddin of the FSA joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham in northern Syria.

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Then, on 24 September, Abdul-Aziz Salamah, the political leader of the Liwaa al-Tawhid, read the “Communique No.1” of the “Islamist Alliance” comprised of the thirteen armed opposition organizations.

“The mujahideen militant factions and forces that have signed this statement convened, consulted with each other, and concluded the following [four point agreement],” Salamah announced.

“These forces and factions call on all military and civilian organizations to unite under a clear Islamic framework, set forth by the magnanimity of Islam, operating on the basis that Sharia is the arbiter of governance and making it the sole source of legislation,” Salamah read.

“This force believes that those deserving of representing it are those who have lived its burdens and shared in its sacrifices of honest sons,” Salamah’s statement reads. “This force feels that all groups formed abroad without returning to the country [and] without consulting those inside do not represent them, so the force will not recognize them.”

The members of the “Islamist Alliance” explicitly refuse to accept the Western-sponsored political leadership. “Therefore, the National Coalition and its supposed government under the presidency of Ahmad Tumah do not



represent them and will not be recognized by them,” Salamah stated.

In conclusion, in the name of the “Islamist Alliance” Salamah urged “all militant and civilian organizations to unify their ranks and words, eschew division and discord, and put the interests of the Ummah over that of any single group.”

Although thirteen armed opposition organizations signed “Communique No.1” of the “Islamist Alliance” – only eleven are known:

- Jabhat al-Nusra for the People of Sham (al-Qaida’s formal arm in Syria);
- The Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement (a 20,000-strong Jihadist group that leads the Syrian Islamic Front);
- Liwaa al-Tawhid (an FSA brigade in the Aleppo area under the support of Turkish Military Intelligence);
- Liwaa al-Islam (Saudi-sponsored neo-Salafi brigade that operates in Aleppo and Damascus in the ranks of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front);
- Liwaa al-Suqour al-Sham (a major FSA brigade that doubles as a member of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front);
- The al-Fajr Islamic Movement (a large unit in the Syrian Islamic Front);
- The al-Noor Islamic Movement (a Jihadist brigade that operates in Aleppo);
- The Noor al-Din al-Zanki Kitaeb (Saudi-backed Jihadist battalions – or brigade – fighting in Aleppo);
- The Fastaqim Kama Umirta Group (local unit based in Aleppo);
- Liwaa al-Ansar (an FSA-affiliated predominantly Jihadist brigade that fights in the Idlib and Aleppo regions); and
- The 19th Division (the largest and best organized FSA unit that fights in Aleppo as an ally of the Liwaa al-Ansar).

On September 25, Jihadist officials rushed to further explain the earthquake. “The main goal [of the “Islamist Alliance”] is to unify the fighting forces,” explained Bashir Saleh of Liwaa al-Tawhid. He ridiculed the relevance and influence of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) inside Syria. “The problem is that the Coalition is outside and it doesn’t know what is happening inside,” Saleh explained. “Maybe one or two or three of the Coalition members have come and entered Syria but then they leave quickly like they are foreign visitors.” Abu-Zaki of Liwaa al-Suqour al-Sham also stressed the irreconcilable disconnect between the exiled leaders and the fighting forces inside Syria as the cause for the “Islamist Alliance” formation. “We welcomed our brothers on the outside to partake in the revolution,” Abu-Zaki explained. “But when they didn’t represent us and the demands of the revolution, then we had to release the statement.”

The significance of the formation of the “Islamist Alliance” is not lost on the SNC leadership in Istanbul. SNC spokesman Louay al-Mokdad reported that Idriss had already called some of the rebelling leaders and commanders, “and they told us they signed this because they lost all hope in the international community.” But Idriss and al-Mokdad were quick to blame the perfidy of the US-led West for calamity that befell them. “We are really tired, Bashar al-Assad is killing us, all the West is betraying us, and they want to negotiate with the regime over our blood,” al-Mokdad quoted the commanders as telling Idriss.



Ultimately, the prominence of Liwaa al-Tawhid and Liwaa al-Islam in the formation of the “Islamist Alliance” is the key to comprehending the true importance of the earthquake. Liwaa al-Tawhid has long been effectively controlled by Turkish Military Intelligence. The brigade is the biggest Free Syrian Army unit in the Aleppo area. It is used repeatedly by the Turks for their own purpose, for example fighting the Kurds. Similarly, the Liwaa al-Islam is one of the largest Jihadist group in the Damascus area and in all likelihood was responsible for the August 21 chemical attack. The brigade is dominated by Saudi Intelligence and has performed numerous missions on the behalf of Riyadh. Hence, the mere prominence of Liwaa al-Tawhid and Liwaa al-Islam indicate the abandonment of the US and Western political effort and the chimera of moderate armed opposition not only by the FSA and Jihadist forces but, significantly, by their sponsors Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and most likely Qatar. These three sponsoring states will now be focusing on the overt sponsorship of Jihadist forces and neo-Salafi Jihadism in Syria and the entire Mashriq.

The impact of the intensifying Jihadism-sponsoring on Turkey is fast approaching the irreversible point. Writing in the September 23 issue of the *Milliyet*, Kadri Gursel warned that Turkey has transformed into the Pakistan of the Middle East while Syria has become its Afghanistan. “Turkish territory in the border region that arches from Hatay to Gaziantep is on the way to becoming the ‘Peshawar of the Middle East,’ that is, a region where the state has no control over the border and outlawed forces move as they like,” Gursel warns. “While we are Pakistanizing, our neighbor Syria – torn by a civil war – is in the grips of Lebanonization (ethnic and sectarian polarization), Somalization (collapse of public order and state) and Afghanization (dominance of al-Qaida and Jihadists), with all those processes intertwined and mutually exacerbating each other.”

Kadri Gursel blames the Jihadism-sponsorship policy of Ankara for the unfolding regional crisis. “Those capable of reading the map of the Syrian civil war would also discern this: If Turkey had not been Pakistanizing, Syria would not have been Afghanizing. It means that the Jihadists – mainly the al-Qaida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra – could not have Afghanized Syria’s northern region bordering Turkey without logistical support from quarters in Turkey and easy access to Turkish territory and the Syrian border,” Gursel observes. And just as the Jihadization and radicalization of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area have evolved into the irreversible self-destruction of both countries and the ensuing destabilization of the entire South and Central Asia – so is the comparable transformation the Turkish-Syrian border region currently undergoes threatening to not only self-destroy both countries but set an entire volatile region aflame. The emergence of the “Islamist Alliance” is therefore just another inevitable step on the path to Jihadist eruption.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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