

Syria: “The Army of Islam”; Saudi Arabia’s Greatest Export

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Recent developments regarding “rebel” groups inside Syria have shed further light on the ideologies and political aims of the militants waging war upon the Syrian state.

On the 24th September, under the moniker of the “Islamist Alliance”, 11 of the largest and most recognisable rebel brigades – a mix of supposed “moderate Islamists” such as Liwa al-Tawhid, the largest “FSA”-branded brigade in Aleppo, alongside more hardline Salafi/Jihadi brigades such as Ahrar al-Sham, and Al Qaeda ideologues Jahbat al-Nusra – [released a joint statement](#) denouncing the western-backed expatriates of the “National Coalition” (NC), along with its equally impotent military arm, the “Supreme Military Council” (SMC). Following this statement of intent, on the 29th of September, up to 50 rebel groups operating primarily in the area of Damascus merged to form Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam). The Damascus merger also included a wide-ranging demographic of militant groups, from the supposed “moderate”, to overt Salafist hardliners. Jaish al-Islam is dominated by Liwa al-Islam, a large rebel group formerly of “FSA” branding, and led by Saudi-backed Zahran Alloush. Liwa al-Islam were also a signatory to the aforementioned statement of denunciation toward the western-backed political opposition.

These announcements have effectively put-to-bed the western propagated myth that was the “Free Syrian Army”. Militant groups the west ostensibly touted as “secular moderates” yearning for “freedom and democracy” from a tyrannical regime; have now openly declared their Salafi/Jihadi fundamentalist ideology, with the ultimate aim of creating a Syrian state ruled by Islamic law.

Already, these announcements are [being portrayed](#) as an attempt by Saudi Arabia – yes, ever tolerant and inclusive Wahhabi-preaching Saudi Arabia – and other leading Salafi factions supporting the insurgency to steer “vetted, or moderate Salafi” rebels away from the Al Qaeda aligned groups; particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), who are now portrayed as simply “foreign jihadists” and have become the leading fall-guy in Western and Gulf media for every atrocity committed by the rebels. This false perception has been built as a result of a Western and Gulf initiated [public relations campaign](#) to “moderate” the image of the Salafi/Jihadi fundamentalists (aswell as those more inclined to basic criminality, killing, and destruction) who may be more willing to meet the requirements of their Gulf donors and the United States. Yet, contrary to this divisive narrative, the same “moderate” Salafi’s who are now supposedly being encouraged to disassociate from their Al Qaeda affiliates have happily fought alongside – more often than not as a junior partner – the West’s supposed “number one enemy” (AQ) since the insurgency began in 2011.

In further contrast to the aforementioned “Awakening” narrative, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) – the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda ideologues – are still very much in the mix. Although various pundits and analysts have made efforts to publicise tensions between ISIS and JaN, the two groups still share a similar Jihadist ideology and cooperate in key areas, particularly on paramilitary operations; as do the hardline Salafi groups such as Ahrar Al-Sham, who in turn fully cooperate with the western friendly “moderates” who now form the backbone of Jaish al-Islam. In the recent ISIS takeover of the “FSA” held town of Azaz from the western-friendly Northern Storm brigade ([of John McCain fame](#)), Liwa al-Tahwid quickly offered to broker a ceasefire and acted as interlocutor between the two warring factions. ISIS in turn, rejected any “FSA” authority and have since taken control of the town – not that Liwa al-Tahwid could have stopped them anyway. These events directly contradict the notion that the new “Army of Islam” is in any rush to disassociate, let alone be able to wage war upon the ISIS or its extremist affiliates. Moreover, the leader of Jaish al-Islam, Zahran Alloush, publicly disowned his own “captain” after he warned ISIS there would be open conflict if they “continued this chaos”. The leader claimed that the comments were “dangerous” and designed to “cause strife between muslims”.

Furthermore, in a [recent interview](#) (Preview) with Al Jazeera, Alloush, free of his “moderate” chains, lets loose on his ideals for a future Syria, in which he aspires to resurrect the Umayyad Empire (2nd Islamic Caliphate with Syria at its core and Damascus as its capital), and “cleanse” Damascus of “Majous” (pejorative Arabic term for Iranians) “Rafideh” (Shi’ites) and “Nusayris” (Alawites). Rebel leaders espousing openly sectarian rhetoric has been a running theme throughout the conflict; in line with this trend, Alloush’s statement can be taken as a clear indication that his new “Jaish al-Islam” is not in the least bit concerned with abiding by a western-friendly moderate image. Alloush, like the majority of rebel leaders, is a fundamentalist Salafist, who looks on at the minorities of Syria as kafir (unbelievers) who must submit to his interpretation of Salafi Islam or be killed.

The western/Gulf media narrative surrounding this new “Islamist Alliance” is a re-hash of failed PR campaigns of the past ; attempting to mitigate the inherent fundamentalist ideologies of the insurgents waging war upon the Syrian state. Syria has been a pluralistic secular society for decades, the majority of its Sunni muslim population are conservative and have coexisted peacefully alongside the many other religions and ethnic minorities that make up Syria’s diverse society, history, and culture. The people of Syria do not aspire to a Saudi sponsored Salafi/Wahhabi leadership or doctrine of law. Contrary to the popular narrative emerging in western and Gulf media that this new force will represent an indigenous “moderate Islamist” coalition capable of taking on the foreign elements and Al Qaeda, the majority of Syrians will be repelled by the sectarian language and ideologies of Zohran Alloush, his groups overt affiliations and pandering to Al Qaeda ideologues, and his “Army of Islam”.

Considering the above context, the [narrative of home-grown](#) (Preview) Salafis somehow being more amenable to the Syrian population than their ISIS/JaN fundamentalist colleagues becomes even less tenable. Alloush’s formation of Jaish al-Islam, alongside the “Islamist Alliance” denunciation of the western-backed political opposition, show a marked shift of the insurgency further toward the Al Qaeda ideologues fighting the Syrian regime, not further away from them.

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