



# THE SALAFIST ROOTS OF THE SYRIAN UPRISING

by William Van Wagenen | Apr 28, 2020

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In the mainstream view, the Syrian conflict began in the Spring of 2011 with a period of peaceful, pro-democracy protests, which were then brutally suppressed by the Assad regime. As the liberal-left Intercept describes it, “Syrian civilians rose up to demand political reform. That protest movement soon turned into open revolution after government forces met the protestors with gunfire, bombardment, mass arrests, and torture.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the best early expression of this view comes from prominent Syrian dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh. Writing on April 10, 2011 in the New York Times, Saleh claims, “Although some argue that the demonstrations are religiously motivated, there is no indication that Islamists have played a major role in the recent protests, though many

began in mosques. Believers praying in mosques are the only ‘gatherings’ the government cannot disperse, and religious texts are the only ‘opinions’ the government cannot suppress. Rather than Islamist slogans, the most prominent chant raised in the Rifai Mosque in Damascus on April 1 was ‘One, one, one, the Syrian people are one!’ Syrians want freedom, and they are fully aware that it cannot be sown in the soil of fear, which Montesquieu deemed the fount of all tyranny. We know this better than anyone else. A search for equality, justice, dignity and freedom — not religion — is what compels Syrians to engage in protests today. It has spurred many of them to overcome their fear of the government and is putting the regime on the defensive.”<sup>2</sup>

When taking a closer look at events during the first months of the Syrian uprising, however, a very different picture emerges. Salafist activists and militants played a key role from the beginning of the uprising, while launching an armed insurrection against the Syrian state. Syrian sociologist Muhammad Jamal Barout noted that the Salafist movement was prominent in “creating and pushing the events” of the Syrian uprising, and pointed to the important role played by supporters of Muhammad Sarour Zein al-Abeddine, an exiled Salafist cleric who mixed the anti-Shia views of Ibn Taymiyya with the ideas of revolution and the sovereignty of God of Sayyid Qutb.<sup>3</sup> Salafist activists and militants viewed the 2011 uprising as a chance to reignite the 1979-1982 war against the Syrian government, which they viewed as a heretical, “Alawite-led regime,” in hopes of erecting a fundamentalist religious state in its place.

This desire of the Salafists to topple the Syrian government aligned with the goals of US intelligence. US planners sought regime change in Syria to weaken Iran, and in response to Syrian, Iranian and Hezbollah support for Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation.<sup>4</sup> With the help of regional allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and the Future party in Lebanon, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided billions of dollars’ worth of weapons and equipment to Salafist militant groups. This informal partnership between Salafist militants on the ground and foreign intelligence agencies ensured that the protest movement would become militarized, and that the ensuing Salafist-led insurgency would plunge Syria into one of the bloodiest wars of the last half century.

Valid Syrian government claims that it faced a nascent armed Salafist insurgency from the beginning of the uprising were not considered credible, while false claims of opposition activists, such as Saleh’s above, about the entirely secular and peaceful nature of the uprising were wrongly taken at face value. Little effort was made by the Western press to determine which of the conflicting narratives (pro-government, pro-opposition, or neither), were indeed accurate.

In most narratives of the Syrian uprising, the long history of the conflict between the Syrian government and the country’s Salafist community before the 2011 uprising is simply ignored. Also ignored are the activities of the Salafists during the first weeks and months of the uprising. In these narratives, it is as if Syria’s Salafist community simply did not exist until many months after the uprising started, while armed Salafist militant groups came into existence seemingly out of thin air, and only in response to the alleged government crackdown on peaceful secular protestors.

The Salafist segments of the opposition, which advocated sectarianism and violence, were present from the beginning, however, and ultimately proved to be much stronger than their peaceful counterparts, both secular and religious. Syria analyst Aron Lund consequently

noted that, “Some Western and Syrian critics of Assad have argued that the militarization and Islamization of the uprising was an inevitable reaction to brutal repression, and that democratic activists represented the ‘original revolution.’ But a vastly stronger Islamist movement begged to disagree, and as Syria continued its descent into sectarian civil war, such counterfactuals simply did not matter — the opposition was what it was, not what its backers would have liked it to be.”<sup>5</sup>

In the remainder of this essay, I describe the role that Salafist activists and armed groups played in the first weeks and months of the Syrian uprising, as well as the role of US intelligence and its regional partners in militarizing the protest movement.

## The Ghosts of 1982

The conflict between Syrian government and the country’s Salafist community stretches back decades. Writing in the pro-opposition *al-Jumhuriya.net*, ‘Arwa Khalifa observes for example that, “The conflict between the Salafi movements in Syria and the political regime did not start with the [2011] Syrian revolution. Rather, this conflict, which historically possessed its own mechanics and self-causes, was initially part of the battle of the al-Assad regime with the movements of political Islam and its military branches, such as the Fighting Vanguard,” the military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood which engaged in armed struggle against the Syrian government between 1979-82.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Syria expert Patrick Seale, the June 16, 1979 killing of 32 Alawite officer cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School marked the formal beginning of that war.<sup>7</sup> At the time, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sa’id Hawwa advocated violence against Syria’s Alawites based on the religious rulings of Ibn Taymiyya, the 14th century religious scholar who urged the extermination of Alawites as heretics.<sup>8</sup> Seale explains that on June 26, 1980 President Hafez al-Assad narrowly escaped an assassination attempt, which killed his body guard. Assad responded the next day by executing 500 Brotherhood prisoners held in Tadmur prison. Membership in the Brotherhood was formally banned by the Syrian government, by penalty of death, on July 8, 1980. Brotherhood militants detonated a series of car bombs in Damascus, between August and November 1981, including an explosion in the Azbakiya district that killed or wounded hundreds of civilians. The Syrian army defeated the Muslim Brotherhood-led insurrection in 1982, after the Brotherhood leadership tried but failed to ignite a nationwide revolt from the city of Hama on February 3.<sup>9</sup> Brotherhood sources claimed the three-week battle resulted in 20,000 or more deaths, while the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), estimated a much lower number, some 2,000, including 300-400 Brotherhood militants.<sup>10</sup>

In the years immediately preceding the 2011 uprising, the Syrian government had continued to use harsh measures against Syria’s Salafists broadly to counter the threat of Salafi-Jihadist terrorist groups. The *Financial Times* noted for example that according to the Strategic Research and Communication Centre, a UK-based Syrian institute, Syria’s Salafi-Jihadis are “a small minority that the regime initially promoted after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, allowing members to join the Iraq insurgency. Realising that the Salafi jihadis could pose a domestic danger, however, Damascus has in recent years moved against them.”<sup>11</sup>

This danger was illustrated by two waves of terror attacks in Syria during the years leading up to the 2011 uprising, namely between 2004-06 and 2008-09. Terrorism expert Peter

Neumann writes that “Representatives of European intelligence services stationed in Syria at the time say that they received reports about terrorist incidents ‘on a monthly basis.’”<sup>12</sup> The deadliest terror attack occurred in 2008, when a car bomb exploded in a Damascus suburb, near the Sayyida Zeinab shrine. The shrine is revered by Shia Muslims and contains the grave of Zaynab, the daughter of Ali and Fatimah and granddaughter of the prophet Muhammad. The *LA Times* quoted Syrian State media as reporting that the “vehicle was loaded with more than 400 pounds of explosives and blew up between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. in a busy pedestrian area often filled with Lebanese, Iraqi or Iranian religious tourists,” killing 17 and injuring 14.<sup>13</sup>

As a result of this and other terrorist attacks, the Syrian government initiated a far-reaching crackdown on Syria’s Salafist community. A 2009 Human Rights Watch report states for example that “The largest group of defendants before the [Supreme State Security Court] in the last three years can broadly be categorized as ‘Islamists’ – proponents of an Islamic state where shari’a (Islamic law) would be enforced.” The report went on to state that in many cases, the security court “relied solely on the defendants’ possession of CDs and books by fundamentalist clerics as ‘evidence’ of belonging to groups planning terrorist acts” and that the court “has cast the net too wide in its prosecution of Islamists and has blurred the lines between holding or expressing fundamentalist religious opinions or beliefs (which is protected by international law) and actual acts which warrant being criminalized, such as involvement in violence.”<sup>14</sup>

Syrian government repression of the Salafi community is further illustrated by the career of the well-known Syrian human rights lawyer, Razan Zeitouneh. According to a former colleague, Zeitouneh was “one of the team of lawyers representing regime opponents in court. The regime is most fearful of political Islam and the Kurds, so the majority of political prisoners in Syria are Islamists, who, like the Kurds, are treated particularly badly. Zaitouneh therefore also defends Salafists, whose views she personally rejects. But like all prisoners, they have earned the right to a fair trial.”<sup>15</sup>

As a result, most of the political prisoners languishing in Syria’s brutal prison system before the start of the uprising in 2011 were Islamists [the largest group of defendants], and it was the Islamists who also suffered the most at the hands of the Syrian secret police. This explains why, during the first weeks of the uprising, opposition activists demanded the release of all political prisoners.<sup>16</sup> Zahran Alloush, who formed the armed opposition group, Jaish al-Islam, was among the Salafi prisoners released by the government in a June 2011 amnesty. According to *Khaleej Online*, Alloush was released due to popular pressure, as his father was well known Salafist preacher based in Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup>

The demand for the release of Salafist political prisoners was something some secular opposition activists later came to regret. Opposition activist Mousab al-Hamadee explained that “I first met Hassan Abboud in the autumn of 2011, before he became Ahrar al Sham’s high emir. He had just been released from prison by the government of Bashar Assad in response to demands for political reform. As an organizer of some of those demonstrations, I thought it appropriate for me to meet some of the prisoners I’d helped free...By late 2012, it had become clear to many of us in the secular opposition that Ahrar al Sham was stabbing us in the back. Foreigners began showing up in its ranks. Running into Saudis, Egyptians and Kuwaitis fighting with Ahrar al Sham became the norm.”<sup>18</sup>

Other opposition activists and their supporters in the Western press attempted to blame the rise of the Salafist armed groups on the Syrian government itself and resorted to spreading conspiracy theories suggesting that Assad released Salafists such as Hassan Aboud and Zahran Alloush from prison to deliberately Islamize and militarize an otherwise peaceful and secular uprising.<sup>19</sup>

The 2011 uprising therefore gave Syria's Salafists (the Muslim Brotherhood included) the chance to take revenge against the Alawite-led Syrian government that had long been oppressing them and to achieve "freedom" according to their own fundamentalist religious outlook.

## The Use of Hate Speech

In contrast to the mainstream view, a significant segment of the Syrian opposition consisted of Salafist activists, who did not advocate secular, liberal democracy, but instead wished to replace the Alawite-led secular Syrian government with one based on a fundamentalist (Salafist) interpretation of Islamic law.

For example, British state media (*BBC*) claimed that the organizers behind the Syria Revolution Facebook page (the mechanism through which many early anti-government protests were organized) were "not from any political group but were simply activists and rights campaigners from Syria and Europe."<sup>20</sup> However, Syria expert Joshua Landis of the University of Oklahoma confirmed that these activists were Muslim Brotherhood members, including the page's administrator who lived in Sweden.<sup>21</sup> Syrian blogger Camille Otrakji consequently observed that, "If you read the older posts on the Syrian Revolution Facebook page (before they got a facelift and professional PR help), you wouldn't believe how much religious language you find, and also how much deception there is. They were trying to whip up sectarian hysteria, to radicalize Syria's Sunnis so as to bring down the regime. This is not what most Syrians want, but they have enough Syrians they can potentially influence."<sup>22</sup>

This segment of the opposition used hate speech to incite members of Syria's growing Salafi community to violence against the country's minority religious groups as part of an effort to topple the government. This was manifest through sectarian slogans chanted at some of the early anti-government demonstrations, such as "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave!"<sup>23</sup>, "Let us speak plainly, we don't want to see Alawites,"<sup>24</sup> and "No to Iran! No to Hezbollah!"<sup>25</sup>

Journalist Harout Ekmanian, an Armenian Christian from Aleppo, explained in 2016 that, "'Alevis to the grave, Christians to Beirut' was a slogan invented during the first days of the rebellion and it is still commonly used. However, back then, it was condemned, because there were people with different views in the opposition. Once the opposition started to carry arms and became militarized, this slogan is started to be used more commonly."<sup>26</sup>

Opposition media activists have commonly dismissed such threats of genocide and ethnic cleansing as propaganda, spread by the government to cause fear among Syria's minority groups and cause them to remain loyal to Assad. They claim that government supporters graffitied "Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut," on public walls and paid infiltrators to shout the same slogan at anti-government demonstrations.<sup>27</sup>



Ekmanian acknowledges that the government did attempt to exploit minority groups to its own advantage but makes clear that the threats by Salafist segments of the opposition were nevertheless very real. He explains that, “The state wanted to make the Christians look like its supporters and the opposition wanted to get rid of the Christians anyway; this is a perfect match. Thus, Christians, especially Armenians, are trapped in their current situation.”<sup>28</sup>

Kim Sengupta of the *Independent*, who spent considerable time embedded with opposition militants in northern Syria, confirmed that these chants were common, as well. She wrote in November 2012 that the number of “jihadist groups had undoubtedly grown and is a source of concern among the more secular revolutionaries. Some groups have banned the chant ‘Christians to Beirut, Alawites to their graves’, which started early in the uprising.”<sup>29</sup> If these chants had not been common, the more secular commanders would have had no reason to ban them.

These Salafist elements of the opposition opted for armed struggle from the earliest days of the uprising. Salafist preachers based abroad (such as Muhammad Sarour Zein al-Abbedine,<sup>30</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradhawi,<sup>31</sup> and Adnan Arour<sup>32</sup>) and others based within Syria (including Louay al-Zouabi in Deraa,<sup>33</sup> Sa’id Delwan in Douma,<sup>34</sup> Amjad Bitar in Homs,<sup>35</sup> and Anas Ayrout in Banyas<sup>36</sup>) agitated for armed insurrection and helped facilitate the flow of foreign fighters, weapons, and cash from the Gulf states to assist Salafist opposition fighters in Syria.

A native of the Hawran region in southern Syria, Muhammad Sarour Zein al-Abbedine is famous for writing the book, “*Then Came the Turn of the Majus*.” According to Iraqi academic Nibras Kazimi, Sarour’s book inspired Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the notorious leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), to call for genocide against Iraq’s Shia population shortly before Zarqawi’s death in 2006.<sup>37</sup> One Saudi writer described how, “Muhammad Sarour Zein al-Abbedine combined the cloak of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab with the pants of Sayyid Qutb, by holding the book of Tawheed in the right hand, and the Shade [In the Shade of the Qur’an] in the left hand.”<sup>38</sup>

Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, the 18th century reformer and spiritual forefather of the modern Saudi state, called for waging war against both non-Muslims and those Muslims who did not conform to his teachings, most notably the Shia. In 1801, Abd al-Wahhab’s followers sacked and plundered the Shiite religious city of Karbala, located in modern day Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

Sayyid Qutb, a prominent Muslim Brotherhood theoretician executed by the Egyptian government in 1966, called for armed struggle to overthrow political leaders or regimes he viewed as heretical for failing to rule according to Qutb’s own interpretation of Sharia law.<sup>40</sup>

Muhammad Sarour’s innovative mixture of these two ideologies is particularly pernicious in the Syrian context, as it calls for not only toppling the Syrian government, but also exterminating Syria’s minority Alawite population broadly (the Alawite faith is viewed as an offshoot of Shiism).

Muhammad Jamal Barout notes that the slogan “No to Iran! No to Hezbollah!” became common in anti-government demonstrations as a result of Muhammad Sarour’s influence.

Barout writes that, “The merging of hostility for the [Syrian] regime and Hezbollah was the result of the Salafi propaganda campaign originating from the Gulf countries which targeted Shiites generally, and which focused on the concept of the Shiite-Nusayri [Alawite] alliance, as expressed in the writings of Muhammad Sarour Zein al-Abbedine.”<sup>41</sup>

Syrian academic Hassan Hassan also noted Sarour’s influence within the Syrian protest movement. Hassan observed upon Sarour’s death in 2016 that, he “was quietly active in the Syrian uprising” and was also “a pioneer of the bridging between revolutionary ideas derived from political Islam and traditional religious concepts taken from Salafism. The mixture helped produce what is known today as Salafi-jihadism — of which ISIL and Al Qaeda are products.”<sup>42</sup>

The opposition umbrella group, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which was created in December 2012 and enjoyed support from the United States and other Western powers,<sup>43</sup> also noted the important role played by Sarour during the uprising. Upon Sarour’s death in 2016, the group stated it was “deeply saddened to hear of the death of scholar Mohammed Suroor Zain Abidin at the age of 78. Abidin devoted his life to the defense of the right and just causes of the Islamic nation. He was also a devoted supporter of the Syrian people...May he rest in peace. May the revolution for freedom and dignity emerge victorious.”<sup>44</sup>

On April 25, 2011, one month after the first major anti-government protest in Deraa, Yusuf al-Qaradhwai, a prominent Muslim Brotherhood cleric based in Qatar, called for toppling the Syrian government, claiming that the “train of the revolution has reached its station in Syria.” Qaradhwai, who has a significant following throughout the Arab world due to his religious program on the *al-Jazeera* satellite channel, attempted to incite his followers in Syria against the government on sectarian grounds during the same speech, claiming that “the people treat President Assad as if he is Sunni, he is educated, young, and can accomplish a lot, but his problem is that he is a prisoner of his entourage and of his [Alawite] sect.”<sup>45</sup> In December 2012, al-Qaradhwai claimed on *al-Jazeera* that it was necessary to fight anyone supporting the Syrian government, including not only combatants, but also civilians and religious leaders.<sup>46</sup>

Saudi-based Salafi cleric Adnan Arour also played a significant role in early events. Originally from Hama and a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Arour had a significant following in Syria, thanks to his own satellite television program, and was well known for his anti-Shia and anti-Alawi sectarianism.

As Islamic scholar and opposition supporter Thomas Pierret notes, Arour had “made a name for himself over the previous five years with his anti-Shiite programs. As soon as demonstrations started in Deraa, Al-‘Arur reoriented his media effort to support the uprising with the programme *With Syria Until Victory*...Al-‘Arur rapidly acquired considerable popularity among the protestors: he was frequently praised by crowds during demonstrations.”<sup>47</sup> Then *al-Jazeera* journalist Nir Rosen noted in March 2012 that Arour’s “name is often chanted in demonstrations” and that Arour often spoke at early protests via satellite feed from Saudi Arabia, where many of the opposition media coordinators were based. Rosen also notes that Arour was popular in Sanamain, a conservative town near Deraa and an early site of protests.<sup>48</sup>

Muhammad Jamal Barout notes that Arour studied at the hands of Salafi scholars Sheikh Nasir al-Din al-Albani and Sheikh Bin Baz in Saudi Arabia, and “became famous among some strict Salafists who seem to think that God created them only for the sake of killing the Shia, due to his debates with the Shia and Sufis,”<sup>49</sup> and that “Arour, who possesses a certain influence in the ranks of popular religious groups broadly through his satellite channel ‘*Sifa*,’ changed from forbidding rebellion against the sovereign power before the outbreak of the protest movement, to supporting [rebellion] and aiding it, and inciting participation in it,” while asking supporters to call out “‘God is great’ from the rooftops” of their homes.<sup>50</sup>

Arour notoriously warned in June 2011 that “Those Alawites who remained neutral will not be harmed. Anyone who supported us will be on our side, and will be treated as a citizen just like us. As for those who violated all that is sacred, by Allah, we shall mince them in meat grinders and we shall feed their flesh to the dogs.”<sup>51</sup>

Islamic cleric Anas Ayrout gave anti-government sermons at the al-Rahman mosque in Banyas and used the mosque as a base to organize early anti-government demonstrations in the city. In the first anti-government demonstration in Banyas on March 18, 2011, protestors attacked an Alawite truck driver, while three weeks later, on April 10, Ayrout’s supporters publicly stabbed to death an Alawite farmer, Nidal Janoud.<sup>52</sup> Ayrout later became a member of the Western-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) and in 2013 called for killing Alawite civilians to create a “balance of terror” to compel them to abandon support for the government.<sup>53</sup>

Western journalists and academics sympathetic to the uprising attempted to obscure the sectarian orientation of these Salafi preachers and their supporters among the anti-government demonstrators. Thomas Pierret argued for example that Arour’s threat to mince Alawites in meat grinders was not meant to threaten the entire Alawite community, but “was very specific, it targeted ‘those who violated sanctities,’ a reference to rapists.”<sup>54</sup> Pierret also suggested that Muhammad Sarour and his followers “constitute a factor of relative moderation for the [armed] groups they sponsor,”<sup>55</sup> even though Sarour’s anti-Shia sectarianism heavily influenced Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s calls for genocide against Iraq’s Shia population, as noted above.

In contrast to Pierret, Syrian scholar Abdallah Hanna lamented the sectarianism and hate speech of the Salafist televangelists, noting that, “There is no doubt that one of the factors of the popular movement lies in the hatred of Alawites that control the regime. But not all Alawites benefit from the wealth of the regime. . . . So why attack the Alawites and call for hostility to them as a sect? Why do oppressive forces arise on the ground in some religious circles to wage a war through religious satellite channels on the Alawite sect as a whole?”<sup>56</sup>

Unsurprisingly, most Syrians rejected the sectarianism of the Salafists, and therefore rejected the Syrian opposition broadly. Nir Rosen acknowledged that Arour’s “popularity has encouraged secular Sunni and minorities to prefer the regime,”<sup>57</sup> while Syrian historian Sami Moubayed explained that simple demographics show that most Syrians are not sympathetic to Islamist or Salafist ideology as advocated by Arour and the Muslim Brotherhood. Moubayed writes that, “Ten per cent of the population is Christian, and they would never vote for the [Muslim] Brotherhood. Neither would the fifteen percent Alawite and Shiite communities, or the three per cent Druze, or two per cent ‘others’ (Circassians,

Jews, Ismailis). Then come fifteen per cent Syrian Kurds and ten per cent tribes and Bedouins, who although Sunni Muslims, would also never support an Islamic party. That adds up to fifty-five per cent, topped with no less than twenty-five per cent of Syria's seventy-five per cent Sunni majority, who are seculars or ordinary Syrians simply un-attracted to political Islam."<sup>58</sup>

Abdallah Hanna's suggestion, that the hate speech of Arour and others is really directed at the Alawite community as a whole, is also unsurprising, given the long history of anti-Shia hate speech from Salafi preachers in general. Shortly after Anas Ayrout's 2013 call for revenge against Alawite civilians, fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Nusra Front, and Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) cooperated to carry out a string of attacks on Alawite villages in Latakia in August 2013, massacring 190 civilians and taking some 200 hostage, according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>59</sup> Syrian dissident Nidal Nuaiseh acknowledged at the time that, "Salafist calls for the murder of Alawites are not new, but are at the core of the Salafist ideology, and have been at its core for hundreds of years."<sup>60</sup> Nuaiseh attempted to distance the mainstream opposition from the massacres, suggesting they were carried out by "non-Syrians." This claim was later shown to be incorrect, however, when video emerged of FSA head Salim Idriss insisting on his group's involvement. The *New York Times* reports that Idriss' comments came in response to "criticism from Islamist groups that his fighters were hanging back," during the attacks on Alawite villages.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, other elements of the protest movement opposed the sectarianism of the Salafists, and instead attempted to promote unity and religious co-existence by chanting slogans such as "One, One, One, the Syrian people are one" and "Peaceful, peaceful, Muslim and Christian, Sunni and Shia!" during early protests. These protestors took to the streets demanding democracy and an end to the Syrian government's notorious corruption, emergency laws, indefinite detention of political prisoners, and lack of press freedoms.

In the Damascus suburb of Douma, for example, Adnan Wehbe of the Arab Democratic Socialist Union party played a large role in the demonstrations and organizing local committees. These protestors chanted slogans calling for freedom, national unity, and for remaining peaceful, while helping to prevent Salafist protestors from destroying public institutions and burning down the municipal building in Douma.<sup>62</sup>

Opposition to the Salafists in Douma was not limited to those with a secular outlook. Salafist violence was also opposed by a number of local Sunni Muslim clerics, including the Mufti of Douma, Abd al-Hamid Delwan Abu Basheer, who remained supportive of the government and spoke out against the "infiltrators" and "rioters" engaging in violent actions during demonstrations and called for the Syrian Army to intervene to protect civilians.<sup>63</sup> Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bhouti, the country's most prominent Sunni cleric and a staunch critic of Salafism, also remained supportive of the government. Al-Bouthi was assassinated by opposition militants in 2013, after Yusuf Qaradhwani indirectly called for his killing during an interview on *al-Jazeera*.<sup>64</sup>

In Deraa, the mufti of the al-Omari mosque, Sheik Ahmed Siyasna, strongly supported the anti-government demonstrations but opposed resorting to violence and tried to solve the conflict between protestors and the government peacefully. Siyasna participated in negotiations with the government and met with President Assad to present the demands of Deraa's protestors to him directly, despite pressure from supporters of Muhammad Sarour

to change his position and cut off negotiations.<sup>65</sup> Siyasna also opposed the stock piling of weapons in the al-Omari mosque by opposition militants, something he was ultimately unable to prevent.<sup>66</sup>

## Armed Groups Form Before the Uprising

In the Spring of 2011, Salafist elements of the opposition not only participated in protests alongside these more secular elements, but also formed armed militias and began attacking Syrian police, security forces, and soldiers within days of the first protests. Armed opposition militants also carried out an assassination campaign against Syrian army officers, alleged informants, and civilian government supporters.

According to Hassan Aboud, the leader of the Salafi militant group the “Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant” (Ahrar al-Sham), the group’s underground cells participated in organizing the initial anti-government demonstrations in Syria, and also engaged in combat against Syrian security forces as early as May 2011.<sup>67</sup> Rania Abouzeid of *Time Magazine* similarly reported that according to one fighter from Ahrar al-Sham, the group “started working on forming brigades ‘after the Egyptian revolution . . . well before March 15, 2011, when the Syrian revolution kicked off with protests in the southern agricultural city of Dara’a.”<sup>68</sup>

Writing in *Al-Monitor*, Syrian journalist Abdullah Suleiman Ali also indicates that Ahrar al-Sham was active in the early months of the uprising. He reports that according to his source within the group, foreign fighters, “including Saudis, were in Syria as the Ahrar al-Sham movement was emerging, i.e., since May 2011.” Suleiman notes that these Saudi fighters joined Ahrar al-Sham based on recommendations from senior al-Qaeda figures, and that long time jihadi activist and former Fighting Vanguard member Abu Khalid al-Souri played an important role in establishing the group.<sup>69</sup> Opposition activist and later McClatchy journalist Mousab al-Hamadee explained that “One of my friends who is now a rebel leader told me that the moment the group announced itself in 2011 it got a big bag of money sent directly from Ayman al Zawahiri, the leader of al Qaida.”<sup>70</sup> When the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, formally announced its existence in January 2012, newly arriving foreign fighters began joining Nusra instead, but Ahrar al-Sham was initially the preferred group for militants of the notorious terror group wishing to fight in Syria, and Ahrar and Nusra remained close allies throughout much of the Syria conflict.<sup>71</sup> Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri’s designated Abu Khalid al-Suri as his envoy to mediate the dispute that led to the splintering of the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq (later ISIS) into two separate organizations.<sup>72</sup>

Exiled Salafi cleric Muhammad Sarour Zein al-Abedine (discussed above) provided the ideology guiding Ahrar al-Sham, while supporters of Sarour constituted the local social base undergirding the militant group.<sup>73</sup> Supporters of Sarour also constituted the militant wing of the protest movement in Deraa, which refused dialogue and negotiations with the government.<sup>74</sup>

Muhammad Sarour was able to draw on Saudi fighters and money to support Ahrar al-Sham due to the strong roots of the Sarouri movement in the kingdom, which date back to the 1960’s. Sarour spent the longest period of his life (after Syria) in Saudi Arabia (1965-74), and achieved his greatest success preaching there. His followers became spread throughout the country, enjoying popular support and official standing, with many holding

high positions in religious and educational institutions.<sup>75</sup> Kuwaiti Islamic scholar Ali al-Sanad notes that most of the sheikhs and leaders of the activist wing of the Salafist movement in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states supported Ahrar al-Sham, because they viewed the armed group's ideology as closest to their own.<sup>76</sup>

## Thank God for Bandar

Supporters of Muhammad Sarour were not alone in supporting Ahrar al-Sham and launching a war against the Syrian government under the cover of the anti-government protest movement. US, Qatari, Turkish, and Saudi intelligence played a crucial role in supporting the nascent Salafist insurgency.

In April 2011, former Bush Administration official John Hannah alluded to Saudi efforts to funnel Saudi fighters to Syria under the supervision of former Saudi Ambassador to the US, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Hannah warned that the Saudis might “once again fire up the old Sunni jihadist network and point it in the general direction of Shiite Iran.” Hannah then recommended US officials partner with Bandar to make sure his activities would serve US goals, among them efforts to “undermine the Assad regime.”<sup>77</sup> The cooperation between the CIA and Saudi intelligence recommended by Hannah indeed materialized and was publicly acknowledged by US intelligence officials and in mainstream US media, though not until years later.

Former Qatari foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani, acknowledged the early cooperation among the region's intelligence agencies to stoke the insurgency in Syria, under US direction. Al-Thani explained that, “When the issue in Syria first began, I went to Saudi Arabia and met with King Abdullah. Upon instructions of his Royal Highness, I addressed the situation. The Saudi King said, ‘We are with you.’ The Saudi King said, ‘You lead the Syrian file and we coordinate with you.’ We took responsibility and we have all evidences on this issue. And anything that went was going to Turkey and was coordinated with US forces. The distribution of military support was happening by way of American, Turkish, Qatari, and Saudi forces. They were all there, the military personal were there.”<sup>78</sup>

V.A. Haran, the Indian ambassador to Syria at the start of the uprising, claimed that “Many of the gulf countries threw their prison doors open and sent all their al-Qaeda type people to Syria, gave them weapons, gave them money, they said don't come back before Assad is overthrown,” and that this was confirmed to him by a senior UN official.<sup>79</sup>

Abdullah Suleiman Ali reported in *al-Monitor* that many of the Saudis arriving in Syria to fight managed to leave the country via Riyadh airport (as confirmed by posts on their Twitter accounts), despite formal travel bans from the Saudi government due to past radical activities, and that other Saudis managed to travel to Syria to fight within weeks of being released from prison.<sup>80</sup>

The *Daily Beast* reported on this issue as well, explaining in December 2013 that, “U.S. intelligence sources say dozens of Saudi jihadists have been allowed to fly out of Riyadh without challenge, several after being released from detention and many of whom were under official travel bans. Those going to fight are not obscure figures: a major in the Saudi border guards was killed in early December in Deir Atieh in Syria; another Saudi jihadist killed fighting in Aleppo was the son of Maj. Gen. Abdullah Motlaq al-Sudairi. Hardline

Salafist Saudi clerics have also been heading to Syria without incurring problems from Saudi Arabian authorities.”<sup>81</sup>

In 2016, Mark Mazetti reported in the *New York Times* that Saudi efforts to arm opposition militants in Syria “were led by the flamboyant Prince Bandar bin Sultan, at the time the intelligence chief, who directed Saudi spies to buy thousands of AK-47s and millions of rounds of ammunition in Eastern Europe for the Syrian rebels. The C.I.A. helped arrange some of the arms purchases for the Saudis, including a large deal in Croatia in 2012.”<sup>82</sup>

Mazetti noted as well that the CIA had for decades relied on Saudi intelligence for both financial and logistical assistance for operations the CIA was not allowed to undertake directly, for legal reasons or due to opposition from the US Congress. This included operations in Angola in the 1970’s, and in Nicaragua and Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>83</sup>

Other US allies also played a crucial role. Mazetti writes further that “The White House has embraced the covert financing from Saudi Arabia — and from Qatar, Jordan and Turkey,” and that “estimates have put the total cost of the arming and training effort at several billion dollars.”<sup>84</sup>

In 2014, US Senator John McCain expressed appreciation for Saudi efforts. McCain told the Munich Security Conference, “Thank God for the Saudis and Prince Bandar, and for our Qatari friends,”<sup>85</sup> after he and fellow US Senator Lindsey Graham had met with Bandar to encourage the Saudis to arm the “rebels” in Syria.<sup>86</sup>

By relying on allies, under CIA direction, to fund extremist Salafist militias in Syria, the Obama administration was able to promote the false view that the US had not intervened in Syria. US Vice President Joe Biden also publicly acknowledged Saudi and Turkish support for Salafist armed groups in Syria, including al-Qaeda and even ISIS, while at the same time (falsely) claiming these close US-allies were acting against US wishes.<sup>87</sup>

This led to accusations of US “inaction” in Syria from US hawks and Syrian opposition supporters, and to claims that the US had abandoned or even opposed the Syrian insurgency, despite aggressive US intervention on its behalf.<sup>88</sup> In the face of such criticism, US Special Envoy to Syria Michael Ratner, in a meeting with members of the Syrian opposition, explained that “The armed groups in Syria get a lot of support, not just from the United States but from other partners,” while Secretary of State John Kerry added in the same meeting, “I think we’ve been putting an extraordinary amount of arms in,” and “Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, a huge amount of weapons [are] coming in. A huge amount of money.”<sup>89</sup>

## When Did Militarization Begin?

While US and Saudi officials claim the arming of opposition militant groups began in 2012, the flow of weapons to these groups from neighboring Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, and with the help foreign intelligence agencies, began much earlier.

The Syrian government claimed it was intercepting weapons being smuggled into Syria from Iraq in early March 2011, two weeks before the outbreak of protests in Deraa on March 18.<sup>90</sup> These claims were largely dismissed by Western observers but are likely credible given similar claims from opposition sources. Muhammad Jamal Barout writes that according to prominent opposition and human rights activist Haitham Manna’, there were secret communications between some Syrian businessmen abroad who found themselves

in a battle of revenge with the Syrian regime because their interests had been harmed by the network of the pro-regime businessman Rami Makhlouf, and that these groups were willing to fund and arm opposition movements throughout the country. Barout notes that these businessmen apparently had relations with professional networks capable of delivering weapons to any location in Syria and that some members of the Future Movement (a prominent political party in Lebanon led by Saad Hariri and known to have strong Saudi and US support) were among those arranging these weapons shipments. Barout notes further that Manna' publicly disclosed part of these contacts in an interview on *al-Jazeera* on March 31, 2011, just two weeks after the beginning of anti-government protests, with Manna' claiming that "he had received offers to arm movements from Raqqa to Daraa three times by parties he did not identify in the interview."<sup>91</sup>

Manna' confirmed further details to journalist Alix Van Buren of Italy's *la Repubblica* newspaper, speaking "about three groups having contacted him to provide money and weapons to the rebels in Syria. First, a Syrian businessman (the story reported by Al Jazeera); secondly, he was contacted by 'several pro-American Syrian opposers' to put it in his words (he referred to more than one individual); thirdly, he mentioned approaches of the same kind by 'Syrians in Lebanon who are loyal to a Lebanese party which is against Syria.'"<sup>92</sup>

Van Buren notes as well that other opposition sources claimed that supporters of former Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who had defected to France years before, were "sowing trouble by distributing money and weapons" and meddling "with the blood of the innocents."<sup>93</sup>

Azmi Bishara, an Arab former member of the Israeli parliament and general director of the Qatar-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, similarly notes that armed groups began smuggling weapons into the Syrian city of Homs from nearby Lebanon in late April 2011, and that these weapons were initially used in individual kidnappings and assassinations. He explains that in Homs, opposition militants killed or kidnapped 30 people in one day in July 2011 alone. These weapons were also used against the Syrian army in instances when it attempted to storm a city or town, for example in Qalqilya on May 14, 2011 and in Rastan and Talbiesah on May 20, 2011. Like Barout, Azmi Bishara indicates that many of the weapons were smuggled into the Homs area by supporters of Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, as evidenced by the naming of some armed groups after his or his father Rafiq Hariri's name.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, on June 1, 2011, the UAE-owned *National* reported that according to an activist from Homs, "The army is facing armed resistance and is not able to enter" the nearby towns of Talbiseh and Rastan, as opposition militants were fighting with machine guns and rocket propelled grenades. The activist added "that in recent years weapons have been smuggled in from neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Iraq."<sup>95</sup>

## Syrian Security Forces Killed

As a result, violence carried out by opposition militants against Syrian security forces and the Syrian army accompanied anti-government demonstrations from the start. For example, *Israel National News* reports that "seven police officers were killed, and the Baath Party Headquarters and courthouse were torched" on Sunday, 20 March 2011, just two days after the first major protest in Deraa.<sup>96</sup> Journalist Sharmine Narwani confirmed that three days

later, on March 23, 2011 two Syrian soldiers, Sa'er Yahya Merhej and Habeel Anis Dayoub, were also killed in Daraa.<sup>97</sup> Narwani reports as well that according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), opposition militants killed 19 members of the Syrian security forces or "mukhabarat" in Deraa on April 1, 2011.<sup>98</sup>

On April 10, 2011 opposition militants killed 9 Syrian soldiers traveling by bus in Banyas. Opposition activists attempted to blame the killings on the Syrian government, and these claims were uncritically passed on by the *Guardian* newspaper, which linked to a video provided by opposition activists of a soldier injured in the attack. The *Guardian* claimed that the video showed the soldier acknowledging that he had been shot by government security forces after refusing to fire on civilians. But these claims were refuted by Syria expert Joshua Landis, who writes that "The video does not 'support' the story that the Guardian says it does. The soldier denies that he was ordered to fire on people. Instead, he says he was on his way to Banyas to enforce security. He does not say that he was shot at by government agents or soldiers. In fact he denies it. The interviewer tries to put words in his mouth, but the soldier clearly denies the story that the interviewer is trying to make him confess to. In the video, the wounded soldier is surrounded by people who are trying to get him to say that he was shot by a military officer. The soldier says clearly, 'They [our superiors] told us, "Shoot at them IF they shoot at you."'"<sup>99</sup>

On April 17, 2011 opposition militants assassinated Syrian Brigadier General Abdu Telawi, his two sons, and a nephew near the Zahra neighborhood in Homs. According to Syria researcher Aziz Nakkash, the killings came "at a time of heightened anti-regime demonstrations. The event was highly publicized with the mutilated bodies of the men and the funeral in Wadi al-Dahab widely broadcast on television."<sup>100</sup> Two other Alawite Syrian army officers, Ra'id Iyad Harfoush and Muaein Mahla were also assassinated in Homs at this time, continuing the pattern of tit-for-tat sectarian killings between Sunnis and Alawites in Homs.<sup>101</sup>

Then Indian ambassador to Syria V.P. Haran noted that on April 18, 2011 Syrian media reported that between 6 and 8 Syrian soldiers were killed when an armed group raided two security posts on the road between Damascus and the Jordanian border. After visiting the area two days later and speaking with locals, Haran had the impression that something even more serious had taken place. US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford and the Iraqi Ambassador to Syria both expressed their view in private conversations to Haran that al-Qaeda in Iraq (which later formed the Nusra Front) was responsible for the killings.<sup>102</sup>

Opposition sources providing testimony to Human Rights Watch confirmed that opposition militants killed 7 members of the security forces during a demonstration in the town of Nawa, in Deraa province, on April 22, 2011.<sup>103</sup>

On April 25, 2011 opposition militants killed 19 Syrian soldiers. Journalist Sharmine Narwani writes that "on April 25 – Easter Monday – Syrian troops finally moved into Daraa. In what became the scene of the second mass slaying of soldiers since the weekend, 19 soldiers were shot dead . . . by unknown assailants. The names, ages, dates of birth and death, place of birth and death and marital/parental status of these 19 soldiers are documented in a list of military casualties obtained from Syria's Defense Ministry. The list was corroborated by another document – given to me by a non-government acquaintance involved in peace efforts – that details 2011 security casualties. All 19 names were verified by this second list."<sup>104</sup>

As fighting continued between the Syrian army and opposition militants in Deraa, most Western media outlets described this as an attempt to use overwhelming force to suppress peaceful protests. Opposition sources confirmed however, that armed clashes between the Syrian army and unknown militants were taking place. *Al-Jazeera* quoted a Deraa resident on April 27, 2011 as noting that, “The army is fighting with some armed groups because there was heavy shooting from two sides,” he said. “I cannot say who the other side is, but I can say now that it is so hard for civilians.”<sup>105</sup>

Then *al-Jazeera* journalist Ali Hashem reported that armed men were crossing into Syria from Lebanon in April and May 2011 and clashing with the Syrian army.<sup>106</sup> These unknown armed men were likely Salafist militants from the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, a two-hour drive from Homs by car. *Der Spiegel* reported that Sheikh Masen al-Mohammad, a prominent Salafist cleric in Tripoli, was sending fighters into Syria as early as Summer 2011.<sup>107</sup>

In a rare early admission of the armed nature of the opposition in the early months of the Syrian uprising, Anthony Shadid of the *New York Times* reported on May 8, 2011 that, “American officials acknowledge that some protesters have been armed. Syrian television is suffused with images of soldiers’ burials.”<sup>108</sup>

Opposition militants ambushed and killed 120 Syrian soldiers in the city of Jisr al-Shagour, near the Turkish border on June 4, 2011. The violence began when an armed militant named Basil al-Masry was killed while attacking a government check point. Masry’s death angered many residents of the town, who believed rumors that Masry had been unarmed when he was killed, rather than carrying out an armed operation. As a result, his funeral became an anti-government demonstration. As protestors approached the local post office, several hundred Islamist militants emerged from among the protestors and opened fire on government snipers stationed atop the post office roof. The militants then threw incendiary devices inside the post office doors, lighting the building on fire and burning eight people to death, before turning to attack the nearby military security building, where state security and political security personnel were barricaded inside. When the Syrian authorities sent a convoy of soldiers to come to their assistance, the Islamist militants ambushed their convoy, killing some 120.<sup>109</sup>

Opposition activists spread the false claim that the soldiers were defectors killed by their own Alawite superiors in the army, despite evidence to the contrary provided by Joshua Landis, showing the soldiers had been killed by opposition gunmen.<sup>110</sup> As Rania Abouzeid of *Time Magazine* reported, it was only years later that activists involved in the incident acknowledged that the story of the soldiers defecting was fabricated. Abouzeid had herself reported on the incident at the time, and unwittingly passed on the false claims suggesting the dead soldiers had defected.<sup>111</sup> Abouzeid later reversed her reporting and provided full details of the event after interviewing an Islamist militant who had participated in the attack, as well as other civilians that were present in the initial protest outside the post office. The militant acknowledged to Abouzeid as well that he and his men had filmed the bodies of some of the security forces they killed and presented the videos as if they showed “mass grave’s full of the regime’s victims.” The fabricated claim about defecting soldiers was used to conceal the fact that the soldiers were killed by Islamist militants, and thereby allow the uprising to continue to be viewed as peaceful.<sup>112</sup>

Six days after the killings in Jisr al-Shagour, Hala Jaber of the *Sunday Times* reported a similar incident, where Islamist gunmen used the cover of a demonstration to attack Syrian security forces, this time in the town of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man. According to tribal elders from the town, men armed with rifles and rocket propelled grenade launchers joined some 5,000 protestors demonstrating outside a military barracks in the middle of the town. The armed men attacked the barracks, where roughly 100 police were barricaded inside, causing a military helicopter to come to the aid of the police. Four policemen and 12 of the armed men were killed, while 20 policemen were wounded. The barracks was ransacked by a mob and set on fire, as was the local courthouse and police station.<sup>113</sup>

Opposition militants also began assassinating government informants during this period. Amnesty International reports that according to a relief worker involved in transporting the dead and wounded in the Damascus suburb of Douma, "In July and August 2011, one man was 'executed' around every two weeks... We would go and pick them up. The most common reason given for the killings was that the victim served as an informer for the security. The number of those 'executed' gradually increased to one every week, then two or three every week. By July 2012, three to four people were being 'executed' every day, and we stopped knowing the exact accusation. People just referred to them as informers."<sup>114</sup>

While the Syrian government faced a curious mixture of non-violent protest and armed insurrection from the beginning of the uprising, Western reporting focused only on protests, while implying that any deaths occurring in Syria resulted from the Syrian government killing peaceful demonstrators demanding democracy. To explain the deaths of Syrian soldiers and security forces, Western journalists passed on unsubstantiated conspiracy theories that the Syrian army was killing its own soldiers.

The Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies (DCHRS) was one group that helped spread these false rumors. The British state media reported on May 5 that sources within the DCHRS "said 81 bodies of soldiers and army officers had been received. Most were killed by a gunshot to the back. DCHRS says it strongly suspects that the soldiers were killed for refusing to shoot civilians."<sup>115</sup> DCHRS is based in Washington DC, while the group's founder, Radwan Ziadeh has had longstanding ties with the US and British governments. In 2010, shortly before the outbreak of war in Syria, Ziadeh was a fellow with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Ziadeh also became director of foreign relations for the Syrian National Council (SNC), which represented the US, British, and Gulf-backed political opposition abroad. Journalist Max Blumenthal notes that the NED has played a prominent role in destabilizing various governments viewed as enemies of the United States, and that according to Allen Weinstein, a founding member of the NED, "A lot of what we do today was done covertly twenty-five years ago by the CIA."

Implausible claims of the Syrian government killing its own soldiers were rejected even by Rami Abdul Rahman, head of the pro-opposition SOHR, who is a chief source of information about events in Syria for the Western press. Abul Rahman stated that, "This game of saying the army is killing defectors for leaving – I never accepted this because it is propaganda."<sup>116</sup>

## Did the Government Kill Protestors?

Certainly, the government did kill some peaceful protestors. However, while reporting from Syria in the summer of 2011, journalist Nir Rosen described how he had “been to about 100 demonstrations in Syria. In many of them I had to run for my life from live gunfire. I was terrified. The demonstrators who go out every day since March know they are risking their lives. It helps them to believe in paradise and martyrdom.”<sup>117</sup> *Times of London* journalist Hala Jaber observed in June 2011 that according to one Syrian security official, the security forces “see demonstrators in the hundreds or thousands, chanting anti-government slogans or tearing pictures of Assad — something that only a few months ago would have landed people in jail — and they react heavy-handedly and shoot randomly.”<sup>118</sup>

On May 3, 2011 Syrian political writer Camille Otrakji summarized the conflict this way: “While most protests were genuinely peaceful, many were confrontational and violent. Syria’s police and security personnel are not used to such challenges and sadly in some cases some of them probably reacted with unnecessary violence. But out of an estimated 150,000 protesters so far up to 500 died according to opposition figures. Government claims 78 died, and I believe the real figure is in between, closer to opposition figures. The government claims that many died in armed confrontations. Given that 80 soldiers and policemen also died, it is only logical that non-peaceful armed men were among the hundreds of ‘civilian’ casualties. In other words, not all civilian casualties were peaceful protestors. Many others probably died through excessive security personnel violence. We need to keep in mind that despite the bitter feeling all of us today have after hundreds died, an investigation of what happened should be conducted. None of us has access to the truth, but I think it is fair to conclude for now that the numbers imply that it is not true that there is an official policy of shooting randomly at any demonstrator. Many fatal mistakes took place, but many others died while they were taking part in non-peaceful confrontations with the army or police.”<sup>119</sup>

The Dutch priest Franz Van Der Lugt, who lived in Syria for nearly 50 years, made a similar observation. He wrote that, “From the start, the protest movements were not purely peaceful. From the start I saw armed demonstrators marching along in the protests, who began to shoot at the police first. Very often the violence of the security forces has been a reaction to the brutal violence of the armed rebels.” Van der Lugt notes further that, “Moreover, from the start there has been the problem of the armed groups, which are also part of the opposition. . . . The opposition of the street is much stronger than any other opposition. And this opposition is armed and frequently employs brutality and violence, only in order then to blame the government. Many representatives of the government [regeringsmensen – Father Frans might also be referring to supporters of the government] have been tortured and shot dead by them.”<sup>120</sup>

As Australian academic Tim Anderson observes, Van der Lugt’s testimony is important because he was an independent witness.<sup>121</sup> Van der Lugt was on the ground in Homs to witness events directly and was widely respected by belligerents on both sides of the conflict. When Van der Lugt was murdered by unknown gunmen in April 2014, after refusing to leave Homs despite terrible violence and a crippling government siege of opposition-held areas of the city, the *Telegraph* observed that, “In recent months Father Van der Lugt was known as a champion for inter-religious dialogue, who had managed to maintain working, generally good, relationships with some of the most hardline Islamic rebel groups in the area.”<sup>122</sup>

## What is Freedom?

The myth of an entirely secular and peaceful protest movement persisted in part because many of the most common chants, such as “God, Syria, Freedom, that’s all,” were ambiguous enough to allow Western observers to assume that calls for freedom and dignity by the protestors meant a call for liberal democracy, rather than a call for the freedom to live in a country governed by Salafist interpretations of Islamic law and ethnically cleansed of Alawites and other religious minorities. Similarly, the signature slogan of the uprising, “The people want the fall of the regime,” gave no indication of why they wanted to topple the government, nor what type of government they wished to replace it with.

For Syrian Salafists intent on toppling the Syrian government and cleansing the country of Alawites, there was no contradiction between these goals and struggling for what they viewed as “freedom.” This is evidenced by the names of the anti-government armed groups they established as well as by their rhetoric.

As mentioned above, Ahrar al-Sham was one of the earliest (established in March 2011) and most powerful anti-government armed groups.<sup>123</sup> The group’s name translates to the “Free Men of Syria.”<sup>124</sup> The group received early funding from al-Qaeda,<sup>125</sup> and was founded in part by long-time jihadi militant Abu Khalid al-Suri. Ahrar al-Sham’s ideology was inspired by the sectarian Salafist preacher, Muhammad Sarour, as discussed above.<sup>126</sup>

Similarly, many of the armed opposition groups fighting under the “Free Syrian Army” banner had Islamist or Salafist orientations. While the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is typically viewed as secular and democratic, Saudi-owned *Al-Hayat* newspaper described how the FSA was first established by a group of army deserters, but then numerous Salafist armed factions, including Liwa Islam, Saqour al-Sham, Ahfad Rasoul, and the Farouq Brigades, soon began fighting under the FSA banner.<sup>127</sup>

The Lebanese *Daily Star* observed that, “More than one FSA battalion has named itself after Ibn Taymiyya, the 14th century Sunni Muslim scholar who urged the extermination of Alawites as heretics. This kind of act cancels out any favorable rhetoric or actions by other elements of the FSA, some of whose spokesmen often promise to establish a Syria that is pluralist and civil, and not religious in character.”<sup>128</sup>

Nusra Front Shura Council member Abu Firas defended the FSA from accusations of apostasy leveled at the group by ISIS, explaining that, “A lot of groups are under a big umbrella called the FSA,” and that many of them, “are believers, good and righteous people, who want the Shari’a of Allah to prevail on the earth.” Abu Firas specifically mentions Liwa al-Tawheed, Nur al-Deen al-Zinky, Liwa Islam and Jund al-Sham as being among these “righteous” FSA groups.<sup>129</sup>

Liwa al-Islam was led by Zahran Alloush, the son of a famous Salafi preacher from the Damascus suburb of Douma. Alloush’s group later grew to become another of the most powerful anti-government armed groups, namely “Jaish al-Islam,” or the “Army of Islam.” Alloush’s group fought under the “Free Syrian Army” moniker from its founding in July 2011 until mid-2012.<sup>130</sup>

Alloush, who was well known for his anti-Alawite and anti-Shia sectarianism (he called for the ethnic cleansing of these groups from Syria<sup>131</sup> and infamously paraded Alawite

captives in cages in the streets of Douma)<sup>132</sup> also viewed himself as among those “Free Syrians” struggling against the Syrian government. For Alloush however, this meant fighting against democracy, rather than for it. When answering an interviewer’s question of whether he supported democratic elections after the fall of the regime, Alloush explained that “I am also one of the free Syrian people.” At the same time, Alloush claimed that the Syrian people as a whole reject democracy and demand the establishment of an Islamic state. Alloush claimed as proof of this that the early anti-government protestors “went out from the mosques to say, ‘there is no one with us except God.’ And they said, ‘God is great.’ They did not say ‘Democracy is great.’”<sup>133</sup>

Another of the early Free Syrian Army groups was “Kita’ib al-Farouq,” or the “Farouq Brigades.” Farouq is a title referring to an early companion of the prophet Muhammad, the second Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab. The Farouq Brigades were founded in part by a Salafi preacher named Amjad Bitar, who was able to fund the group via donations from Salafi networks in the Gulf states.<sup>134</sup>

One Farouq fighter explained to a Belgian journalist that he was not “free” while living under the Baathist-led Syrian government: “Before the revolution, the regime was too strong; it had a hand on each person, and it was not possible to live as an Islamist in Syria. After the revolution, we are free to live as our faith commands us to live. The right way, in Islam, is the Islamic State.”<sup>135</sup>

Farouq, with its original base in Homs, also received support from Salafi networks in nearby Tripoli, Lebanon. According to a Salafi preacher in Tripoli who participated in sending money and fighters to Syria in support of Farouq, “Assad is an infidel. . . . It is the duty of every Muslim, every Arab to fight the infidels... There is a holy war in Syria and the young men there are conducting jihad. For blood, for honor, for freedom, for dignity.”<sup>136</sup> In Salafist discourse then, the struggle for freedom and dignity is a synonym for the struggle to establish a fundamentalist religious dictatorship.

Similarly, the terms “jihad” and “revolution” are often used interchangeably or in tandem, as are the terms “mujahideen” and “revolutionaries.” For example, in 2015, Abdullah Muhaysini, a Saudi religious cleric who served as a judge for the Nusra Front, praised the battle fought by the group (known at the time as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) to capture Idlib as “Islamic, Jihadist, and revolutionary.”<sup>137</sup> In 2020, the Nusra Front (by then known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) issued a statement describing its fighters as “revolutionary mujahideen” and its struggle as a “revolution,” while pledging to continue fighting until “Syria returns free, dignified and defiant.”<sup>138</sup>

This is not surprising given the influence of Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb on jihadi thought. His book, “Milestones” set out the strategy for using a Leninist-style “vanguard” to lead the armed struggle for an “Islamic revolution.”<sup>139</sup> Qutb wished to topple secular Arab governments and establish an Islamic state supposedly under God’s sovereignty in their place. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood splinter group that fought to topple the Syrian government between 1976 and 1982 called itself the “Fighting Vanguard.” Many of its militants went on to fight for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1980’s and later became prominent in the jihadi movement, most notably Abu Khalid al-Suri and Abu Musab al-Suri.<sup>140</sup>

The Salafist use of discourse promoting freedom and dignity, but for fundamentalist religious goals, explains why slogans as seemingly contradictory as “God, Syria, freedom, that’s all,” and “Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut!” could coincide during the early anti-government demonstrations.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the conventional view, the Syrian uprising was not entirely peaceful or secular. Syria’s Salafist movement was prominent in “creating and pushing the events” of the Syrian uprising. Salafist preachers both within Syria and abroad used sectarian hate speech to incite their followers against the Syrian government and against Syria’s Alawite and Christian communities broadly. From the earliest weeks of the protest movement, armed Salafist militants attacked and killed Syrian security forces, soldiers and police. The violence and sectarianism of the Salafists caused most Syrians, including Syria’s Sunni Muslims, to reject the uprising and take either a neutral stance or remain supportive of the government, despite its oppressive security apparatus and the corruption of the ruling elite.

While US and Gulf intelligence agencies did not orchestrate the early anti-government protests nor create the armed insurgency that accompanied them from the start, these outside actors played a key role in the conflict. US and Gulf intelligence agencies stoked the nascent insurgency by funneling billions of dollars of weapons and equipment to Salafist armed groups, because they shared the goal of toppling the Syrian government and thereby weakening Assad’s close ally, Iran. US support for the Salafist insurgency escalated and extended the conflict, leading to years of unnecessary bloodshed and suffering for millions of Syrians. Events in Syria of the past decade provide a further example of the horrendous consequences of US foreign policy in the region. As in Iraq and Libya, US foreign policy in Syria was not benign or well intentioned, but rather deliberately destructive and has caused human suffering on a scale that is difficult to fathom.

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