



Brothers in Alms: Salafi Financiers and the Syrian Insurgency

Summary: Gulf-based Salafi financiers have had a diminished role in the Syrian civil war recently, but their influence will linger in the country's religious sphere.

Thomas Pierret
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Today, any discussion of the role of transnational Islamist actors in the Syrian conflict invariably focuses on Salafi-jihadi organizations, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State and al-Qaeda. In 2012–2013, however, the conflict was primarily shaped by other transnational networks that were run by more mainstream activist and quietist Salafi fundraisers based in the Gulf, particularly Kuwait.

Besides providing significant humanitarian support for opposition-held areas and refugees abroad, these fundraisers helped establish the largest rebel coalitions during the Syrian war. Yet their success was short-lived; by 2014, Salafi-backed coalitions were rapidly running out of steam. This resulted from military setbacks and intra-rebel factionalism, and also a decrease in private donations from Gulf countries as Salafi fundraisers faced state repression at home and declining public interest globally in the events in Syria. Concomitantly, inside Syria, the need for more pragmatic, less ideological rebel coalitions and the growing assertiveness of foreign states supporting the uprising combined and gave rise to new patterns of alliance. Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers often played no role in these newer coalitions, but their influence lingers in the country's religious sphere.

Why Gulf-Based Salafists Supported Syria's Opposition

The decision of Gulf-based Salafists in 2011 to take the lead in financially supporting rebel groups in Syria stemmed from a drive to bolster themselves at home and abroad. This in turn only heightened competition among Salafi networks, particularly between activists and quietists (known as such because they preach obedience to the incumbent). In Kuwait, fundraising for the Syrian rebels was spearheaded by activist Salafists, who had previously been minor players on the Salafi scene when compared to their rivals from the quietist, Saudi-aligned Revival of Islamic Heritage Society

(Jamiyyat Ihya al-Turath al-Islami), or RIHS.

The most dynamic of the Kuwaiti fundraisers was the preacher Hajjaj al-Ajami. He partnered with Hakim al-Mutayri, leader of the Umma Party, a transnational political organization promoting political liberalism at home and strident anti-imperialism abroad. Early on, the party played an outsized role in Syria by supporting Ahrar al-Sham, once the largest rebel faction and a cornerstone of the Syrian Islamic Front (al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya al-Suriyya) founded in December 2012. Muhammad al-Mufrih, the leader of the Umma Party's banned Saudi chapter, helped establish Ahrar al-Sham in 2011, and Muhammad al-Abduli, an Emirati counterpart, died while fighting with the group in Raqqa in 2013.

The Syrian conflict represented a similar opportunity for another regional network of Salafists, often dubbed "Sururis," after Mohammed Surur Zein al-Abidin (1938–2016). A Syrian in long-term exile—living in Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and finally Qatar—Zein al-Abidin blended Salafi religious doctrines with a Muslim Brotherhood–like focus on political issues, a combination that proved a major inspiration for the Sahwa movement that challenged the Saudi regime during the early 1990s. His influence in Syria was minimal prior to 2011, not only because of his absence but also because his criticisms were focused on the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, where most of his followers lived.

With the 2011 uprising, Zein al-Abidin reoriented his efforts toward Syria. In September 2012, he threw his weight behind the Syria Islamic Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrir Suriyya al-Islamiyya), which brought together several thousand fighters from four of the most powerful Syrian rebel factions: the Islam Brigade (later the Islam Army) in Damascus Governorate; the Farouq Battalions in Homs Governorate; and, owing to the Syria Islamic Liberation Front's financial capabilities, two groups previously co-opted by the Muslim Brotherhood, namely Souqour al-Sham in Idlib Governorate and the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo Governorate.

The activist Salafists' spearheading of fundraising activities for Syrian rebels triggered a similar move on the part of their quietist, pro-Saudi rivals. Following Riyadh's preferences, these networks initially supported attempts at establishing a command structure for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) under the aegis of officers who had defected from the Syrian army. The Saudi-based, Syrian television preacher Adnan al-Arour, who blamed Kuwaiti activist Salafi fundraisers for bypassing such initiatives in favor of radical factions, was invited as a keynote speaker to the September 2012 inauguration meeting of the Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils, a contender for the FSA leadership.

Famous early defectors who had joined the FSA, such as Lieutenant Abd al-Razzaq Tlass and Captains Ammar al-Wawi and Ibrahim Majbur, also became commanders in the Front for Authenticity and Development (Jabhat al-Asala wal-Tanmiya), which the quietest RIHS established in November 2012. Its decision to step up its involvement in the Syrian conflict must be understood in light of its delicate domestic position at the time. The RIHS's activist rivals had significantly increased their visibility due to their proactive support of the rebels, and other causes throughout the region, after the Arab uprisings in 2011. Furthermore, the society's internal cohesion was threatened by a reformist wing that joined the domestic Kuwaiti opposition, against the wishes of the RIHS leadership. At a time when victory appeared possible for the Syrian rebels, the activist Salafists' sponsorship of the most powerful insurgent coalitions could have dramatically bolstered their standing across the region, a very real risk to their quietist counterparts.

In their Syrian endeavor, the Gulf-based Salafists owed their initial success to a unique combination of factors. One was the high GDP per capita of their countries, which made donations from Gulf citizens to Salafi groups more likely. Given Saudi Arabia's ban on private fundraising for the Syrian rebels from May 2012 onward, such donations began centralizing in the more permissive states of Qatar and Kuwait. A Salafi fundraiser for Syrian rebels, Nayef al-Ajami, even served as Kuwait's justice minister in early 2014. In such an environment, Salafi supporters of the Syrian cause were able to operate openly, tapping into a larger pool of donors than the low-profile networks that usually

funded radical Islamist militancy.

A second advantage was the high profile that some of the fundraisers had acquired as television preachers. For example, Hajjaj al-Ajami, who was only twenty-four in 2011, had hosted an Islamic reality show, and Arour had broken through in media with anti-Shia polemics. Shafi al-Ajami, another major Kuwaiti fundraiser for Ahrar al-Sham, relied on the popularity of his partner Nabil al-Awadi, an immensely popular television cleric who, by September 2011, had become the single-most influential tweeter on Syria. Moreover, whereas regional states were either hostile to jihadi networks or dealt with them indirectly, activist Salafists were mainstream enough to partner openly with Qatar and Turkey, while quietist Salafists did so with Saudi Arabia.

Mainstream Salafists also initially benefited from their relative ideological flexibility in efforts to assemble large coalitions of Syrian rebels, among which, owing to years of state repression, genuine Salafists were in short supply. Gulf-based fundraisers could not connect with full-fledged Salafi communities, with the exception of Zahran Alloush's group in Douma that gave rise to the Islam Brigade. Rather, they established ties with local factions through individual brokers, such as veteran jihadists, preachers, and political activists. Therefore, Salafi fundraisers were not choosy when recruiting beneficiaries, although they encouraged the adoption of Islamic symbols and slogans by rebel factions and tried to shape the factions' politics according to their own agendas. They did not impose the same far-reaching ideological compliance that jihadi organizations, by way of comparison, expected from their affiliates.

So, for example, although he was a major backer of Ahrar al-Sham and more hardline factions, Hajjaj al-Ajami also sponsored FSA founder Colonel Riad al-Asad. The Surur-backed Syria Islamic Liberation Front was a heterogeneous alliance, including the genuinely Salafi Islam Brigade alongside Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamists. However, the group did not include jihadists due to decades of polemics from Zein al-Abidin on what he called the "party of extremists" (*hizb al-ghulat*). As for the Front for Authenticity and Development, it gravitated toward tribal factions in eastern Syria. This was not because quietist Salafism was strong there but because of personal ties, such as those linking Khalid al-Hammad, the front's secretary general and a Kuwait-based Syrian expatriate, to his native governorate of Deir Ezzor.

The influence of Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers seemed to peak in November 2013 with the merger of the Syria Islamic Liberation Front and the Syrian Islamic Front, creating the Islamic Front (Al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya). The move was unprecedented for two reasons: it led to the largest Syrian rebel coalition ever; and the new coalition was funded by both political and quietist Salafists, thanks to the dual networks of patronage of Zahran Alloush's Islam Army, a key faction in the Syria Islamic Liberation Front.

However, what looked like a show of strength and unity rapidly turned out to be nothing of the sort, as by summer 2014 the Islamic Front had turned into an empty shell. Part of the problem had to do with realities on the ground. Military setbacks at the hands of the regime sparked factional divisions among groups that had been affiliated with the Syria Islamic Liberation Front, including the Tawhid Brigade, the Farouq Battalions, and Souqour al-Sham, which lost its powerful Daoud Brigade to the rising Islamic State. Moreover, the rivalry between Ahrar al-Sham and the Islam Army, the two pillars of the Islamic Front, resulted in the formation of subcoalitions within the alliance, thereby undermining the initial ambitions to build up a centralized leadership.

The comparatively modest Front for Authenticity and Development outlived other contenders, although it has also been diminished by the vagaries of war. The quietist Salafi coalition suffered a serious blow in summer 2014, when the Islamic State expelled rival armed groups from eastern Syria. Local members from the front formed the Lions of the East Army (Jaysh Usud al-Sharqiyya), and subsequently spearheaded anti-Islamic State operations in the Badiya (Syria's central desert) with the support of the CIA-supervised Military Operation Command, based in Jordan. In 2016, the

Front for Authenticity and Development lost its eastern assets following the establishment of the New Syrian Army (later renamed the Revolution Commandos Army), which partnered with the Pentagon. First, the Lions of the East withdrew from the front in opposition to the project. Then the front broke with the New Syrian Army after its commander, Khazal al-Sarhan, in documents leaked by the Islamic State, was seen wearing a U.S. flag on his shoulders and expressing a disregard for civilian casualties. The front still formally exists in western Syria, but seems largely inconsequential.

A Reversal of Fortune in Syria

From 2014 onward, Gulf-based Salafi financiers were generally irrelevant in new rebel coalitions built on the remnants of the Islamic Front and similar groups. Three main factors were at play: a decline in donations from these Gulf-based fundraisers as a result of restrictive measures and a changing public mood at home; new military realities and organizational needs inside Syria; and a growing effort by state sponsors to consolidate rebel forces.

While the fundraising strategy of mainstream Salafi supporters in the Gulf had been premised on their media exposure and ability to operate publicly, by 2014 this had become a liability. Such visibility made the fundraisers vulnerable to a crackdown encouraged by the U.S. government. The United States sanctioned activist Salafists, such as Hajjaj al-Ajami and Shafi al-Ajami, who primarily supported mainstream Islamist Syrian factions but had become increasingly open about also sponsoring the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front. U.S. pressure resulted in the resignation of Kuwaiti justice minister Nayef al-Ajami due to his involvement in Syria-related fundraising. Activist Salafi networks in Kuwait were further weakened by the decision of local authorities to join the region-wide repression against Islamist dissent following Egypt's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. Most notably, the authorities deprived Nabil al-Awadi of his Kuwaiti citizenship and ordered the closure of the Surur-linked Fahd al-Ahmad Association.

Growing repression at home was not the only factor diverting Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers, and the public, from the Syrian cause. While fatigue inevitably developed in the face of a protracted, increasingly fragmented conflict—donations reportedly began decreasing as early as 2013—other regional issues emerged. This included the overthrow of Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 and the subsequent repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the Houthi expansion in Yemen and the ensuing military intervention by Gulf states.

However, Salafi funding for Syrian factions did not cease entirely. The quietists and Sururis, who had not funded jihadists, continued supporting their favorites: the Front for Authenticity and Development and the Islam Army. Yet, regardless of the difficulties faced by their benefactors, the original Salafi coalitions in Syria no longer suited the rebels. The nationwide character and distinct political identity of these coalitions had been part of a PR strategy designed to appeal to Gulf donors concerned with their beneficiaries' relevance and ideological correctness. From a purely military perspective, however, these coalitions were useless because they aligned groups often physically scattered across Syria, which limited the possibility of cooperation on the ground.

This was not an insurmountable problem as long as regime forces seemed to be crumbling. However, as the tide turned throughout 2013, tactical synergy at the governorate level between groups of different ideological persuasions became a matter of survival for the insurgency. The trend was most remarkably illustrated by the creation, in spring 2014, of the short-lived Consultative Council of the Mujahidin of the Eastern Region in Deir Ezzor. This group united all local factions, from FSA-labeled ones to the Nusra Front, against the regime and the Islamic State. Likewise, in Damascus's Eastern Ghouta, the Unified Military Command brought together the Salafi Islam Army and its bitter rival, Afnan al-Sham, a faction led by Sufi clerics and figures tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. Elsewhere, military imperatives, combined with the growing assertiveness of foreign states involved in Syria, gave rise to local alliances. These included the Southern Front, backed by the United States and Jordan, and the Army of Conquest in Idlib Governorate and the Aleppo

Conquest operations room, sponsored by Turkey and Qatar. The nationwide pattern of rebel consolidation that had been promoted by Gulf-based Salafi financiers had become obsolete.

Conclusion: What Remains of the Salafi Legacy

In retrospect, the Syrian conflict appears to have represented a brief window of opportunity for Gulf-based Salafi fundraisers, who faded into oblivion as rapidly as they had initially come to the fore. Yet their long-term impact should not be underestimated. Their financial backing was a key factor in the rise of the two leading non-jihadi factions in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham and the Islam Army, leading to Salafism's unprecedented visibility in mainstream Syrian opposition politics.

Support for the armed factions in Syria also went hand in hand with less visible efforts on the part of Salafi humanitarian and proselytizing nongovernmental organizations. This included the RIHS, which has continued providing aid inside and outside Syria through its Syria Relief Committee (Lajna Ighatha Suriya), and the Surur-linked Hayat al-Sham al-Islamiyya, which claims to have distributed more than 1 million religious booklets and employs 150 full-time preachers across Syria and in refugee camps.

Salafi clerics have also broadened their foothold at the top level of Syria's religious elite, which had been the preserve of traditionalist, Sufi-leaning scholars. This change has been illustrated by the prominent role that the Hayat al-Sham al-Islamiyya plays in the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council, the foremost religious authority among mainstream opposition and armed rebel groups. Combined with the religious indoctrination provided by Salafi armed factions themselves, these developments suggest that the map of the Syrian religious field has been durably redrawn. The post-uprising increase in Salafi influence is likely to persist long after the Islamist rebel fronts of 2012–2013 become a footnote in the history of the Syrian conflict.

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Carnegie Middle East Center

Emir Bechir Street, Lazariéh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon

Phone
+961 1 99 15 91

Fax
+961 1 99 15 91

Contact By Email

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