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Military-Political-Social Roles of Islamic Opposition Armed Groups Under the Weak State: the Case of Syria, 2011-2018

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The focus of the Study: Islamist (non-Jihadist) Armed Groups

This study examines a subset of Islamist armed groups, namely the Islamist movements influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood that were (except briefly in some cases) neither institutionally nor ideologically part of the global radical Jihadi movement, such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS. The groups covered are Ahrār al-Shām (Free Men of Levant), Jaysh Al-Islām (Islam Army), Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām (The Martyrs of Islam Brigade), al-Jabha al-Janubiyya (The Southern Front), The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood affiliates (such as Faylaq al-Shām), and Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant). On one hand, despite their adoption of slogans and agendas referencing Islam as their ideological foundation, the groups studied do not share the agenda declared by Salafi-Jihad or radical Islamic groups like Al-Qaeda or ISIS. Furthermore, they have not acknowledged or aligned themselves with any Salafist scholars or theological doctrines. Instead, the self-identified values of these groups continue to reflect nationalist aspirations for liberation from regime control and the people's desire for human rights. On the other hand, they are primarily locally formed

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within the majority of Syrian Muslim Sunni communities, with the main goal of participating in the political transition and future processes in Syria and no stated objectives for expansion beyond the country's borders.

According to Pierret's (2017) classification, the most significant groups appear to be the Salafi lite and the quietist, as they hold considerable potential for political influence during and after the conflict. Ahrār al-Shām, a leading member of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (Jabhat al-Tahrīr al-Sūriyya al-Islāmiyya (SILF)), exemplifies a Salafi lite group[1]. Its members seem to be moderate non-Salafi leaders and maintain close relations with leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), who have influenced them to adopt similar approaches to democracy and governance. Furthermore, except for the Islam Brigade in Damascus, most members of SILF have incorporated the national flag into each group's individual logo. Ahrār al-Shām was previously aligned with the Turkish/Qatar axis and received financial support for humanitarian relief from the Turkish NGO IHH[2] (Humanitarian Relief Foundation) and the Qatar Foundation. However, as the war progressed, the group shifted alliances and adopted a violent approach, aligning itself with Saudi Wahhabi lines of support.

The research addresses essential questions about whether there were significant differences among Islamist armed groups in Syria concerning military strategies, partnership policies, and local administration and service provision. If so, in what ways do they differ? What factors contribute to these differences? What

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[1] A full profile of this group can be found on: Mapping Militant Organizations. "Ahrār al-Shām.." Stanford University. Last modified 5 August 2017. https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523

[2] IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation is a conservative Turkish NGO, whose members are predominantly Turkish Muslims, active in more than 100 countries, the abbreviation IHH is taken from the Turkish name İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı, that translate in English into The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief.SILF

impact, if any, do the relations of Islamist armed groups with international and regional powers have on their political decision-making in Syria? How have the relationships between the Islamist armed groups and the communities under their control developed, and how do they contribute to the power consolidation process of the armed groups.

The Theoretical Framework

This article focuses on the interaction of Islamist militias at two distinct levels: the state, in forms of collaboration, confrontation, or replacement, and society, both as a source of legitimacy for and as a challenge to the state.

The framework of analysis used for this research combines failed state theory with various theories on the governance of non-state actors. It also addresses the argument about state-society relations, civil society amid war, the application of social movement concepts, and collective action theory.

Failed State Theory and Islamist Armed Groups' Attempts to Govern:

State actors fail when consumed by internal violence and are unable to deliver positive political goods, leading citizens to question the state's credibility and legitimacy. Furthermore, civil unrest and insurgencies are key characteristics of failed states, often also serving as evidence of a proxy international conflict and indicating that the state is losing its monopoly on the exercise of violence within its territory.

Another component of the theoretical framework adopted in this paper is Joel Migdal's state-in-society approach study (2001) (Migdal 1988, 31-33, 141). He argues that we must look beyond state hegemony that dominates the creation and use of violence and explore the rich interactions within society across multiple

systems of rules. Society competes with the state, thereby affecting governance. Adhering to nonstate rules of conduct challenges the fundamental claim of states: the right to make the rules that guide people's lives.

Civil Society, Social Movements, and Collective Action:

Civil society becomes particularly visible during the public's struggle against authoritarian regimes, a context in which Syrian civil society emerged that does not necessarily relate to the traditional state-market-society dichotomy. Instead, civil society plays a power-balancing role in the conditions of failed or weak states and largely dysfunctional markets. Currently, there is a new form of Islamic civil society that acts as the moderate wing of Islamist armed groups and substitutes for the state in territories where the latter fails to deliver. The politicization of Islamic civil society by Islamist armed groups subsequently raises questions about civil society's capacity to represent the people's interests truly.

The Violence-Governance Triangular Model Deployed to Understand the Syria Case:

Islamist armed groups initially engaged in battlefields often with international support. Their political participation was limited to roles within the opposition umbrella and peace negotiations as military experts overseeing their territories. Over time, they began to engage in local politics alongside other civilian and military actors. Several groups progressed toward institutionalization, expanding their roles to include local governance. This relationship forms a triangle involving the central state, local communities, and Islamist groups, characterized by interactions of violence and governance. The central government often suppresses the Islamist struggle for territory, while external interactions influence political negotiations, driven by international pressure and internal community calls to end armed threats.

Examining the relationship between the state and society highlights the increasing influence of society in governance within weak or failed states. The framework should also include non-state actors, ethnic and cultural groups, and relevant state institutions. Interactions between the central state and society reveal: 1) the state's control through violence and the monopolization of services, and 2) community mobilization against perceived state inefficiencies in delivering public goods. Additionally, analyzing the community's relationship with Islamist militants' sheds light on the evolving interactions between newly emerged armed groups and their host communities. Various factors are driving this relationship toward deeper engagement and complex decision-making, shifting power dynamics, and creating new forms of community-militant relations as the situation evolves, as indicated below.

State-Society relations: conflict often creates conditions for civil society to thrive, taking advantage of the cracks in authoritarian regime control, where the presence of Islamist armed groups allows civil society more leeway. This also requires that civil society engages with Islamist armed groups that may not share the values of "modern" democracy. These community-based groups create significant new political dynamics outside the state's formal institutions and occasionally manage to pressure the government to adopt their agendas. Examples include the establishment of the Ministry of State for National Reconciliation to manage negotiations between the regime and local communities.

State-Islamist militants' relations: The interactions between the state and Islamist militants are characterized by exchanged violence with occasional appeasement attempts to gain broader support. a) Islamist militants' resort to armed violence against ruling regimes to achieve their objectives from within the state system itself, and b) the militants' transnational operations

expand into the territory of other states where Islamists play a sub-regional role, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Society-Islamist militants' relations: The armed groups' struggle for local and international legitimacy is evidenced by their efforts to be recognized as the representative party of the "people" in political negotiation forums. Consequently, they invest in their local community relationships. In this case, local communities appear to support the political positions of the ruling Islamist armed groups. In other instances, the militant groups have been disconnected from the community due to being preoccupied at the frontlines or being unaware or uninterested enough to consolidate local political power. Moreover, there have been reported incidents of force where Islamist armed groups have oppressed communities and, in several cases, conducted assassinations. The community's struggle for self-governance and to maintain an independent public space from political or military actors is worth examining. Therefore, this study addresses that aspect of the society-militant relationship.

The Emergence of the Islamist Armed Groups in Syria: Motivation, Objectives, and Scale of the Islamist Groups in Syria

According to Wiktorowicz, violence becomes the appropriate tactic when three conditions accompany the political opportunity structure: (1) state repression creates a political environment of bifurcation and brutality; (2) insurgents establish exclusive organizations to protect themselves from repression; and (3) armed groups promote anti-system frames, depicting the regime as fundamentally corrupt, to motivate collective action to overthrow agents of repression. These radical organizations become even more radicalized through an increasing belief in total war (Wiktorowicz 2004). As such, the sectarian violence in Syria is neither an inevitable result of religious antagonism nor an

externally produced outcome with no basis in the preexisting social reality, but an outcome of regime-opposition interactions.

The Syrian uprising began in 2011 with peaceful protests at Friday prayers. In Syria, public gatherings have been forbidden since the 80s unless organized via official directives and monitored closely by the state security apparatus. Friday prayers were permitted and were, therefore, an excellent (if not only) opportunity for hundreds of demonstrators to use as a pretext for gathering prior to the actual protests. The choice of time to gather for Friday prayers was, thus, initially a consequence of logistical necessity rather than evidence of a religious agenda. Nonetheless, several media campaigns focused on the grievances of the 1982 incidents in Hama with the intention of reviving vengeance and mobilization for demonstrations. Participating in the protests, members of the Syrian Musim Brotherhood influenced the design of the slogan and banners for each Friday gathering, depending on the locality[3].

Violence and arms appeared from the initial months of the Syrian uprising in 2011, and the escalation seems to have been unavoidable. The initial non-violent and peaceful approach to the uprising began to shift due to contextual necessity imposed by both the increasing oppression by the state, resource availability, and international support for the Free Syrian Army, a secular anti-regime group formed of army deserters, beginning in July 2011 (Landis 2011). The increasing violence resulted in the increasing Islamization of the uprising and the the accelerating exit of non-Islamist participants fearing Islamists' extremism. The

[3] Depending on the location, banners and themes of the demonstrations were also composed by individual non-religious activists such as activist Raid Faris and artist Ahmad Jalal in Kafr Nubul of Idlib while the SMB effect is more visible in the central region of Homs, Hama and occasionally in rural Damascus (Kafranbel Banners 2012).

armed rebels were predominantly made up of Sunni Arabs from rural areas.

Among the first groups to be established were the Liwā' al-Haqq in Homs governorate (August 2011), Ahrār al-Shām in Idlib governorate (December 2011), and Liwā' al-Islām in East Ghūṭah of rural Damascus governorate (September 2011). These Islamist groups were for a period unified under the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), which was established in September 2012[4]. In December 2012, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) established the Shields of the Revolution Council (Hay'at Durūʿ al-Thawra) to unify brigades and battalions with moderate SMB ideology, whose primary mission was the protection of the peaceful popular movement from violent attacks by the regime (Carnegie 2012)[5]. In December 2012, SILF changed its name to the Syria Islamic Front (SIF) and shortly after to the Islamic Front (IF), as more groups joined and some regional countries, especially the Gulf countries and mostly Saudi Arabia, started to provide more resources in order to limit the expansion of al-Nusra Front in Syria. However, the Islamic Front became dysfunctional as of early 2015, as the largest groups, Ahrār al-Shām and Jaysh al-Islām, were mostly operating independently. In 2015, the members of the IF joined Ahrār al-Shām, which once again dominated most of the Islamist groups operating in the north.

The Southern Front, officially affiliated with the FSA, is included in this study, considering its transformation and merging with the Islamist armed groups. The HTS is also included in this study due to its drastic transformation from an Al-Qaeda affiliate into a localized structure and its establishment in 2107 of the

[4] The complete establishment declaration is available in Arabic only on Youtube dated 21 September 2012.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0i6RsPLwQA

[5] Revolutionary Shield Committees established in September 2012 and officially launched in Istanbul on December 2012 in a ceremony attended by the leader of SMB and the Free Syrian Army. (Carnegie 2012)

Syria Salvation Government (SSG) focused on oppositionist governance in Idlib.

Ahrār al-Shām formed its first umbrella organization, the SIF, in December 2012, in order to unite moderate Syrian Islamic opposition forces. While the SIF refused to submit to FSA command, it regularly coordinated military maneuvers with FSA-affiliated brigades.

In December 2013, Ahrār al-Shām dissolved the SIF and co-founded the Islamic Front, the largest alliance of Syrian opposition forces that has existed in the Syrian civil war, with six other militant groups (Suquor al-Sham, the al-Tawhid Brigade of Aleppo, Jaysh al-Islām, the al-Haqq Brigade of Homs, the Kurdish Islamic Front [KIF], and Ansar al-Sham). The Islamic Front, with 40,000–70,000 fighters at its peak, was the most powerful Islamic group until it splintered in mid-2014 due to disagreements between Ahrār al-Shām and Jaysh al-Islām. Ahrar cooperated with ISIS in 2012-13; however, Ahrār al-Shām and HTS turned against ISIS after it killed an Ahrār al-Shām member in January 2014. Furthermore, from 2014 through 2015, Ahrār al-Shām strengthened its alliance with al-Nusra (later HTS) by coordinating attacks and creating the Jaysh al-Fatih[6] umbrella group which in 2015 drove the Syrian army from Idlib province. Ahrār al-Shām became part of Jaysh Halab (Army of Aleppo), an umbrella organization that was created by former Ahrār al-Shām leader Shaykh Hashim al-Shaykh in February 2016. The

[6] Jaysh al-Fatih , literally translated as the Army of Conquest, is an umbrella organization that was formed in 2015 as an alliance of Islamic militants (Fatih al-Shām, Ahrār al-Shām, Faylaq al-Shām, Jaysh al-Sunnah, al-Haqq Brigade, and Jund al-Aqsa) active in the Idlib governorate bordering Turkey and several areas of the Latakia and Hama governorates. The umbrella organization peaked after taking control of the Idlib governorate from the al-Asad Regime in March 2015. The alliance is supported by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and present their shared interest in Syria (Singupta 2015).

group included five FSA factions (the 101st Division, the 16th Division, the First Regiment, the Mountain Falcons Brigade and the Sultan Murad Division) as well as the Harakat Nūr al-Dīn al-Zanki, but it excluded the Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām. In 2018, Ahrār al-Shām joined the Syrian Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrīr Suriyya)[7], demonstrating a move toward a more inclusive nationalist ideology.

Established in 2013, **Jaysh al-Islām** (The Islamic Army) has been one of the largest military alliances in the history of the Syrian conflict with 43 brigades and battalions fighting in the Damascus region under the leadership of former Liwa' al-Islām's commander Zahran Allūsh during 2011–2013 (Zaman Alwasl 2013). The group's formation was motivated by generous funding from Saudi Arabia, motivated by the need to create a stronger army that could fight the ISIS and, ultimately, the regime (The Guardian 2013).

Jaysh al-Islām's ideology was a mix of Salafism and Syrian nationalism. It denounced the Jihadists' brutal tactics and mistreatment of civilian supporters of the opposition and continued to fight ISIS (Tsurkov 2016), It first ousted ISIS from Eastern Ghūṭah in July 2014 when ISIS militants were shown being executed by Jaysh al-Islām members (BBC 2015). By 2015, members of Jaysh al-Islām had reached 25,000 fighters (Tsurkov 2016) in addition to heavy military equipment and tanks. It was later able to contribute to military operations in various governorates besides Damascus, including Homs, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Darʾā, and Qunietra governorates.

Furthermore, the armed groups' forces in East Ghūṭah had established a judiciary system called the Unified Judiciary Council, which was considered to be one of the few cases of successful governance by armed groups, where all armed groups

[7] This differs from the Syria Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) mentioned previously. The Syria Liberation Front (Jabhat Tahrīr Sūriyya) was established in February 2018 with more nationalist manifestation.

collectively ceded the control over legal affairs to a committee composed of Islamic law scholars (Lund 2016).

Subsequently, through late 2015 and early 2016, Jaysh al-Islām together with Faylaq al-Rahman and Ahrār al-Shām, formed the Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghūṭah, which was functional until the death of Zahran Allūsh in December 2015. Thereafter, intra-opposition conflict escalated between Jaysh al-Islām and Faylaq al-Rahman. This led to their surrender to the regime and the evacuation of thousands of fighters and their families from Eastern Ghūṭah to Idlib province in northern Syria.

Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām (the Martyrs of Islam Brigade) was formed in March 2013 as a combination of smaller armed opposition groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army in Dārayyā (Enab Baladi 2013). The brigade acted as the military division of the Local Council of Dārayyā that was established in October 2012 (Dārayyā Local Council 2014). In February 2014, the group joined the Southern Front, an umbrella alliance of opposition groups in southern Syria including part of rural Damascus and Daraa governorates.

In August 2015, the regime enforced a military encirclement on Dārayyā, preventing supplies into the city, including food and medications, which put the besieged population under severe humanitarian conditions. Months of besiegement extended, the smuggling of supplies and military equipment became increasingly difficult and the Liwa fell into isolation within Dārayyā town. Consequently, the leaders of Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islam blamed the Southern Front for providing no support. Liwā' as part of Dārayyā Council signed a surrender deal with the Syrian government and 700 fighters were evacuated with their families and relocated to Idlib in northern Syria in September 2016 (UN news 2016). The leaders of Liwā' continued to be active in the North, especially associating with the Syrian interim

government based in Turkey; however, many of the Liwā' members were arrested in the HTS strategy to dominate Idlib province.[8]

The Southern Front military alliance was constituted of 49 Syrian opposition factions covering southern Syria, namely Darʾā, Qunietra, and Southern Damascus governorates (Naylor 2015). In its early years, the Southern Front was mainly supported by member countries of the "Friends of Syria" [9] group, namely the US, the UK, and Jordan who invested in the training and equipment to the Syrian oppositions armed groups active in the Southern region, bordering Jordan and the Syrian Golan heights occupied by Israel, through the Military Operations Centers (MOC) (Sadaki 2016).

Members of the Southern Front militant groups ranged from independent moderate-aligned groups, such as Harakat Bayan, to borderline Jihadi groups, such as Ajnad al-Shām. Several of these groups absorbed FSA Brigades, such as Nūr al-Dīn al-Zanki and Al-Rahman Corps. These factions often utilized the Syrian Independence flag—although inconsistently and not exclusively (Roche 2016).

In late 2015, the support from MOC to the Southern Front began to decline, and the fighting shifted from fighting against the regime to an in-group fight. By June 2018, the regime army defeated the Southern Front forces, who agreed to either accept

[8] Upon participating in Astana peace talks in January 2017, the leader of Liwā' Shuhadaʾ al-Islām was arrested by HTS and appeared in a videotape handcuffed and being investigated on his participation (SyriaTV 2018).
[9] Friends of Syria was initiated by then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy, with the purpose to solve the Syrian conflict, after Russia and China had vetoed a 4 February 2012 UN Security Council resolution. Its first meeting occurred on 24 February 2012 in Tunisia. Followed by a regular conference in Istanbul, Paris, Marrakesh, Rome, and London throughout 2012 and 2013. The primary members of the group are France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Albania, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the US and Canada (Danin, 2012).

reconciliation deals with the government and remain in their hometowns or to relocate their activities to Idlib in case of their rejecting of reconciliation deals.

Faylaq al-Shām (The Levant Legion), was an alliance of 19 smaller factions formed in 2014, most of which were previously part of the revolutionary shields group affiliated with the SMB (Syria360 2014). The Legion's primary financial and human resources came from the Brotherhood. In addition, SMB members assumed leading positions leading the Legion on the ground where their strategies were distinguished ps by their attempts to mediate among rival opposition groups .[10]

In 2015, Faylaq al-Shām joined Jaysh al-Fatih in a new alliance aimed at strengthening military coordination among the opposition. Subsequently, the group began to publicly distance itself from the SMB due to concerns about a potential negative reaction from Saudi Arabia, long suspicious of the Brothers, and a resulting decrease in financial support from Riyadh.

Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām (Levant Liberation Committee, abbreviated as HTS) is an umbrella militant group formed in January 2017 as a result of a merger among Jabhat Fatih al-Shām (formerly al-Nusra Front), the Ansar al-Din Front, Jaish al-Sunna, Liwā' al-Haqq, and the Nūr al-Dīn al-Zanki Movement.

The original core of the group, the al-Nusra Front, was created in January 2012 as an offspring of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)[11]

[10] For instance, Faylaq al-Shām was able to play an instrumental role in mediating the recent dispute and ceasefire in Idlib, February 2018, between the Hayʾat Tahrir al-Shām —HTS and SLF (Enab Baladi 2018).

[11] The Islamic State (in Arabic ad-Dawla al-Islāmiya; IS) Emerged from the remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a local offshoot of al Qaeda was founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2004 following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by Western forces. The group changed its name to ISIS in 2013. ISIS launched an offensive on Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014. On June 29, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced a caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to

under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jūlāni. Upon the expansion of ISIS from Iraq to Syria, al-Jūlāni rejected the ISIS project and affirmed the group's allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Subsequently, al-Nusra split, with particularly foreign fighters following Baghdadi's edict and joining ISIS, while others remained loyal to al-Jūlāni or left to join other Islamist brigades (Spencer 2013). In early 2015, al-Nusra Front leader Abu Mohammed al-Julani opted to seek better integration of his movement within the Syrian revolution and its people. Nusra merged with other Syrian Islamic groups and publicly denounced non-Syrian outsider organizations, including Al-Qaeda. By July 2016, al-Nusra Front merged with Jaysh al-Fatih and formed the so-called Jabhat Fatih al-Shām that expanded again in 2017 to include other groups and formed HTS with Abu Mohammad al-Jūlāni as the commander in charge.

The strategic shift of HTS toward more inclusive governance was marked by the establishment of the Syria Salvation Government (SSG), which adopted a national state structure with national objectives. Throughout 2017, HTS was involved in notably intense armed conflict with rival rebel groups vying for full control of Idlib province and in September 2017, the SSG was established in the province, leading to the disbandment of rival local councils across northwestern Syria.

The Military–Political Role of Islamist Armed Groups at the National and International Levels

The Evolving Military Role of the Islamist Armed Groups in Syria:

The opposition military's role has three objectives: protecting civilians during protests, attacking the regime, and gaining control

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Diyala in Iraq and renamed the group the Islamic State. By December 2015, it held an area extending from western Iraq to eastern Syria, about a third of Syria and 40% of Iraq, containing an estimated eight to twelve million people (Cederman and Girardin 2007, Celso 2015)

over territories. As the conflict prolonged, some of these groups became organized under the patronage of foreign powers to achieve other purposes, such as the U.S. mobilizing groups for the war against ISIS. Still, Syrian Islamist groups receiving this support justified it as a mid-term collaboration to survive their long-term fight against the Assad regime.

The protection of civilians carried out by Islamist armed groups can be categorized into three types. The first type involves providing information during civilian demonstrations, particularly regarding safety and security at meeting points. This includes updating information about the deployment and presence of government security, addressing security arrangements, and ensuring the safe passage of civilians through frontlines and borders by utilizing communication devices and intelligence. Islamist armed groups performed these roles for civilians as early as the first year of the uprising, before the situation escalated into open armed conflict. As the regime's reactions were often lethal—encompassing aerial bombardments and heavy weaponry—local communities were extremely reluctant to host or support armed groups; instead, many chose to flee the area.

Defections from regular army forces, coupled with delays in backup and support from the main body of the regime's army, started to facilitate territorial takeovers by armed groups. Furthermore, these operations received assistance from advanced intelligence and supplies provided by foreign states to the armed groups. In 2012, particularly in July, a major attack was launched by Jaysh al-Islām and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to weaken the regime during a meeting at the Crisis Management Cell in the National Security building in the center of Damascus. This attack led to the deaths of prominent figures within the regime, including Minister of Defense Dawud Rajiha, his deputy Asif Shawkat (head of national security), Hisham Bikhtyar, and

Hasan Turkmani (head of the Assad regime's Crisis Management Cell).

Another objective of the early military activities of Islamist armed groups was to capture the territories and border crossings of opposition-friendly countries, particularly Turkey and Jordan. This initiative provided these groups with a strategically advantageous geographic position, placing them in direct contact with supportive foreign states. In response, the regime implemented a military encirclement of opposition-controlled areas within Syrian territory, while its use of air forces gave it a tactical advantage.

In December 2015, the UN Security Council issued a resolution designating ISIS and the al-Nusra Front as transnational terrorist organizations (The United Nations Security Council 2015). This development indicated that Islamist armed groups are now being urged by their sponsoring states to cooperate with United States policies to combat terrorism, align their efforts with the war on ISIS, and continue fighting against the regime simultaneously (The United Nations Security Council 2015).

The Development of the Syrian Political Opposition into an Umbrella Organization

The political bodies of the Syrian opposition were organized abroad almost immediately after the onset of the popular demonstrations in Syria. The first opposition conference took place in Istanbul in April 2011, followed by the formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) in August 2011.

Since the United States did not support the SMB's dominance over the SNC, it backed the establishment of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (hereafter referred to as the Syrian Coalition) toward the end of 2012. The Syrian Coalition was led by a prominent Islamic scholar named Mu‘az Al-Khatīb[12] from November 2012 to April 2013. He

[12] Ahmed Muāz al-Khatib al-Hasani, born in 1960, comes from a well-known Sunni Muslim Damascene family. His father was a prominent Islamic scholar

advocated national unity, expressed a willingness to negotiate with the regime, and condemned the radicalization of Syrian opposition fighters. However, the lack of support from Western governments compelled him to resign, and he was succeeded by George Sabra[13]. In 2013, the Syrian Coalition established the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which was recognized by the United States and European countries as the sole legitimate opposition government and received Western funding (Agence France Presse 2015).

The FSA was the first and possibly the only armed opposition group with a nationalist (i.e., non-Islamist) discourse formed by individuals or units who defected from the national army. However, in time a few FSA-affiliated militants openly identified

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and preacher. al-Khatib originally studied Applied Geophysics and worked for six years as a geologist before becoming a dedicate Islamic preacher and the imam of the historic Umayyad Mosque in Damascus early 90s, following the footsteps of his father. After he was banned from preaching during the rule of Hafiz al-Asad, al-Khatib began to operate underground. He was imprisoned several times for his criticism of the government during the 2011 uprising before he fled the country and settled in Cairo. al-Khatib is not allied to any political party and is known as a moderate who has called for political pluralism and strongly opposes sectarian divisions among Syrians (BBC 2013).

[13] George Sabra was born in 1947 to a Christian family in Qatana city of rural Damascus governorate, graduated with a geography degree and worked as a schoolteacher. He has been politically active as a leftist, pro-Arab, secular opposition since the 70s when he joined the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) and was later elected to its Central Committee in 1985. Sabra was a co-founder of the Damascus Declaration opposition coalition in 2005, and in the same year, the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) changed its name to the Syrian Democratic People's Party. At the start of the Syria uprising 2011, Sabra was arrested twice in April and July 2011. He left Syria in January 2012 to join the Paris-based Syrian National Council. Sabra filled in as the acting president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces during April-July 2013 (Carnegie, n.a).

themselves as Islamists to attract foreign (Arab Gulf) support. The FSA also recognized the limitations of its ground forces and the importance of maintaining its objective to overthrow the regime. Thus, it broadened its alliances in 2013 to include moderate Islamist militants, such as the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front.

In contrast, the Islamist armed opposition groups in Syria declined to unite under the FSA flag and rejected the opposition umbrella in exile (i.e., the Syrian Coalition) as the political leadership of the Syrian opposition (Phillips 2013).. The alienation of the opposition in exile from the popular base and from the daily experiences of those on the ground throughout the conflict, coupled with the exclusion of many Islamist opposition armed groups from the structures of the political umbrella due to their late emergence on the political scene, can be traced to their rejection of the idea of a secular state and Western democracy, at least in the earlier phases.[14]

The International Initiative for Peace Negotiations and the Legitimacy Struggle

The international community's strong interest in peace talks and negotiations provided opposition forces, including Islamist armed groups, an opportunity to strengthen their political umbrella organization, which ultimately became more inclusive under the High Negotiation Committee (HNC). The HNC was initially formed at a conference for the Syrian opposition in Riyadh in 2015, tasked with appointing an opposition delegation and acting as a reference point for negotiators with representatives of the Syrian regime on behalf of the participants (Lund 2015). The committee consisted of 25 members, 6 of whom represented the militants. Additionally, Aḥrār al-Shām, along with other opposition forces and armed groups, signed the final declaration of the conference. The invitation to peace talks signifies

[14] Interview with Hassan Aboud by AlJazeera TV https://bit.ly/2nI2tVm broadcasted on June 11, 2013, last accessed September 30, 2019.

the international community's evident recognition of Islamist opposition armed groups as equivalent to state actors.

On December 28, 2016, Turkey and Russia reached an agreement on a nationwide ceasefire plan for Syria, which was set to take effect at 00:00 on December 30, 2016, [15] and invited Islamist opposition armed groups to participate in the peace talks. Among the invited groups were Aḥrār al-Shām, Jaysh al-Islām, and Sham legions.

The first round of the Astana talks occurred in January 2017, featuring representatives from the Syrian government and Syrian opposition delegations, along with delegates from Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the UN. The Syrian opposition delegation included representatives from 14 armed opposition groups, including Faylaq al-Shām, Jaysh al-Izza, and Jaysh al-Islām (CNN 2017). For the first time, direct peace negotiations for Syria incorporated both secularists and Islamists, allowing delegates to sit face to face, which enhanced the influence of Islamist armed opposition groups, especially given the regime's historical reluctance for direct meetings with Islamists and its refusal to engage with them in the same manner as the Syrian Coalition, despite the international support received by the Islamists.

Furthermore, the Astana talks presented a political opportunity for armed groups to discuss Syria's future beyond the ongoing armed conflict. Participation indicated a transformation in the role of Islamist opposition armed groups, shifting from being viewed as ‘spoilers’ of peace and security in Syria to becoming

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[15] The ceasefire plan and initiative of peace talks was communicated to the Security Council by a Letter dated December 29, 2016, by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations and the Chargé d’Affaires of the Permanent Mission of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (United Nations 2016). The initiative was immediately endorsed by the Security Council Resolution 2236 adopted on December 31, 2016 (Security Council 2016).

'contributors' to conflict resolution. The role as a spoiler suggests that armed actors involved in inter-group conflict perceive the peace process as a threat to their interests, prompting them to undermine it through armed violence (Stedman 1997, 5). Conversely, their role as contributors indicates that these armed actors recognize the limits of their political ambitions and show a willingness to share political power. Each Islamist armed opposition group is also required to engage with its respective constituency and communicate this change in stance, transitioning from direct military engagement aimed at ousting the regime to participating in political negotiations.

The Astana talks in January 2017 resulted in several agreed actionable points, such as (a) the parties' agreement that the solution to the Syrian crisis is political rather than military; (b) the parties agreed to jointly combat ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra while establishing de-escalation zones across Syria[16].

In summary, the struggle against jihadists drained substantial military and human resources from these groups, diminishing their strength and shrinking their controlled territories. Politically, Islamist opposition armed groups progressively engaged in international diplomacy and political negotiations alongside their military gains, showcasing their ability to defend the

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[16] The three counties (Russia, Turkey, Iran) agreed to establish four de-escalation zones in Syria. The largest one of those included the Idlib Governorate and adjoining districts of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia Governorates; the other three zones were set up in the northern rebel-controlled parts of the Homs Governorate, the rebel-controlled eastern Ghūṭah, and along the Jordan–Syria border. In those areas, combat operations would be halted as of May 6, 2017; it also envisaged suspension of flights of military aircraft in those areas, as well as the creation of conditions for humanitarian access, medical assistance, return of displaced civilians to their homes, and restoration of damaged infrastructure. The memorandum was concluded for six months and could be extended automatically. A full text of the de-escalation zones agreement is published on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website in English. http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041

borders of the regions they governed, where many people resided under their protection.

The Social–Political Role of Islamist Armed Groups in the Daily Life of the Local Community

A weak state, then, is a state that cannot insert itself into the survival strategies of its citizens (Migdal 1988, 22). A failed state in the context of Syria does not refer to the absolute absence of governance; rather, when the institutions of government ceased to function in densely populated areas, some alternative modalities emerged to fill this gap in civil administration, order and security, judicial services, and more. Among these modalities were the local administration councils (LACs) (Ali 2015). In an attempt to organize local governance in Syria, the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) was created as a coordinating body responsible for channelling international donations into liberated Syrian territories through the LACs and NGOs (ACU 2011). Specifically, western donors financially supported the ACU not only for the purpose of humanitarian relief in opposition-controlled territories but also to support the institutionalization and formalization of community-level governance.

On the other hand, the Islamist armed opposition groups found themselves under pressure to fulfil the demands of the local people. Such demands included filling a persistent gap in social services--internal security and order and provision of related judicial services; provision of public relief assistance, especially for the segment of the population directly impacted by the armed conflict in the form of displacement, a situation that introduced competition among various institutions over resources and legitimacy.

Subsequently, the national-level opposition system of the LACs under the umbrella of the Syria Coalition and the ACU competed

not only with each other[17] but also with the Islamist armed opposition groups that were striving for legitimacy and recognition through alternative governance structures at various levels (Angelova 2014).

The provision of services does not automatically grant legitimacy. Instead, it is a means for actors with the capacity to the use violence to acquire legitimacy through the provision of services and specifically by ensure the security, especially through a concrete system of dispute settlement (Baylouny 2010). In providing the latter public good, Islamic armed opposition groups acknowledged, to some extent, a form of accountability to the local population. The adoption by the Syrian Islamic Front of 'gradualism' in the implementation of its fundamentalist religious agenda where populations did not support the latter was another example of this (Pierret 2017, 143–144). in the areas outside the control of the regime, the armed groups and the community shared the Islamic identity as a means of connectedness and a medium of common language, facilitating a set of accepted rules for conflict resolution.

This situation may have also introduced competition into governance because the central government, according to context and location, also intended to maintain ties with the local community in these locations. For instance, the regime run Homs

governorate continued to supply FSA-controlled towns in rural Homs with a share of subsidized goods, such as wheat flour and house cooking gas, even. When under the control of the opposition FSA. In addition, it paid the monthly wages of defected army personnel throughout negotiations in preparationfor their reintegration into the national army.

Social Services and Relief Operations

[17] Such as the competition between the unified administration council of East Ghūṭah and the Local Council for Rural Damascus (Angelova 2014).

In contested locations, especially in urban areas the withdrawal of services were sometimes used to punish populations in opposition controlled areas. Subsequently, many people fled the opposition-controlled territories due to extreme violence and lack of services (or else they sought refuge in neighboring countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.) The electricity and water cuts imposed on the areas controlled by the armed groups were caused partly by the the groups' abuse of services and suspension of the central state's provision of staff, equipment, and fuel. Regarding the former in Aleppo, Dar'ā, and Damascus the Islamist armed opposition groups were condemned for abusing their control of water resources which led to scarcity in water supply to densely populated locations (Shaam Network 2016; United Nations, 2016; AlJazeera, 2016). Furthermore, Islamist opposition armed groups prevented civilians from acquiring services from state institutions and accused individuals who approached these services of being traitors. In the majority of opposition-controlled territories the LACs tackled the role of mediation with Islamist armed opposition groups to ensure population access to services (Ali 2015)..

The LAC election process occurred in secrecy and involved only activists and rebel fighters due to fears of arrest and possible government attacks on large gatherings. And, with few exceptions, such as Dārayyā, which exemplifies a unique integration between militants and the local council, Islamist armed opposition groups generally replaced the LACs with their own offices whenever they gained sufficient power. For instance, the Jaish al-Islām structure included 26 non-military administrative offices responsible for addressing everyday issues such as health and education.

Other examples of localized governance structures under the control of the islamist opposition armed groups includes the following:

The Islamic Commission for the Administration in Liberated Territories' in Idlib (hereafter called the Commission) was established on the basis of the initiative and agreement by major Islamist armed groups who were active in Idlib. 100 staff in 2015, which reach 1,262 after one year (Eldorar 2015). In Eastern Ghūṭah local councils were quickly established in the main towns in the enclave, but a government-imposed siege rendered survival nearly impossible without a stronger internal administration. As a result, armed groups who were active inside the enclave, notably Jaysh al-Islam, were forced to negotiate the creation of common bodies to ensure better coordination and efficient use of resources. Dārayyā was entirely controlled by a homogeneous military group composed mainly of locals which directed resources to the local administration council to ensure the continuity of minimum services. The local council and Liwā (armed brigade) shared decision making and observed a clear division of labour between military and civilian functions.

Generally, service provision and relief work involved many overlapping areas due to the conflict context. Relief funding was channeled through the ACU to relief offices of the LACs, charities, community-based organizations, NGOs, and also =to the relief units of opposition armed groups. The military units might specialize in maintaining heavy machinery for water pumping and electricity generation. They also focused on controlling routes and borders, and reports indicated that they generated illegal profits from selling relief and commercial supplies entering these territories at inflated prices. The profit-seeking behaviour of Islamist opposition armed groups included trade with both the regime and al-Qaeda or IS-groups affiliated groups (Turkawi 2018).

Dispute Resolution and Provision of Judicial Services

To reinforce security and order, Islamist armed groups found themselves in need of a complementary judicial system that could determine the cases raised by the population under their control, especially with the widespread use of arms and increase

in criminal acts in the absence of conventional police and security administration (Zeidan 2017). Early examples of armed groups settling their differences through a resort to shariʿa experts within the community became an example to be followed (Ekman and Meyer 2021).

One of the earliest attempts was the establishment of the Unified Judiciary Council (UJC) as a joint civilian governance body in June 2014, where major Islamist armed groups active within the Eastern Ghūṭah region of the rural Damascus governorate signed an agreement to subordinate themselves to the power of the UJC. The main signatories were Jaysh al-Islām, Aḥrār al-Shām, Al-Itihad al-Islāmi li-Ajnad al-Shām, and the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front. Ultimately, Jaysh al-Islām gained the upper hand, because it controlled the main city of Dūma, the capital city of East Ghūṭah. As such, it widely interfered with the administrative council and the judiciary system.

A few of the courts played a more important role, that is, to resolve disputes among the armed groups themselves in areas with contested control. One example is Maḥkamat Dār al- 'Adl in Ḥawrān, which was established in January 2014 and was a result of the merging of various localized courts operated by small Islamist fractions. It was quickly endorsed by more than 90 small armed groups (except for the ISIS-affiliated Liwā' al-Yarmūk). It was documented that Dār al-'Adl had reportedly addressed more than 21,000 cases including criminal trials, certification and ratification of sales and purchase contracts, marriage contracts, and civil affairs related to the civil register directory (Al-Ahmad 2018).

In the South, the judiciary front was more unified, because the Court of Justice (Maḥkamat Dār al- 'Adl in Ḥawrān) was the only judiciary body in the southern province. Nevertheless, armed militants reportedly interfered with the work of the court,

especially because the court depemnded on financial contributions from the Islamist armed groups active in the south.

These courts were supported directly by the Islamist armed opposition groups and did not follow the Ministry of Justice of the interim opposition government as the Ministry exerted limited geographic jurisdiction control in the ground and could not oversee or coordinate the local courts (Zeidan 2017). The localized nature and lack of consistency among these courts created significant challenges, although they improved over time, which reflects the capacity of Islamist groups in terms of legal scholars, judges, and knowledge of law-making, as well as the political pressure to harmonize with other court systems within the same geographic location. For instance, local Islamist armed opposition groups began adopting the Unified Arab Law, which is secular, as endorsed by the Arab League. This initiative was driven by the need to create a national judiciary without replicating that of the regime and distinguished from transnational jihadi groups that adopted shariʿa Islamic law, and by the pressure from the local community and less conservative Syrian population for the modernization of Islamic law to ensure its applicability.

This decision of Aḥrār al-Shām to adopt certain references to the secular Unified Arab Law was the first endeavour to unify the juridical system in the opposition-controlled Syrian territory. Afterward, the four main judicial councils, namely, East Ghūṭah, Idlib, Aleppo, and Dar'ā, announced the establishment of the Supreme Judicial Council in Syria in July 2017.[18] This council was the first step toward a national-level opposition judiciary.

On a different tangent, ad hoc courts were formed to address specific major disputes between Islamist armed groups. Examples include the dispute between Jaysh al-Islām and Faylaq al-

[18] A copy of the declaration of establishment the Supreme Judicial Council in Syria can be found on https://www.nedaa-sy.com/news/715 published July 19, 2017 last accessed on October 1, 2019.

Raḥmān [19] (Diab 2016) as well as that between Islamist opposition armed groups and groups affiliated with al-Qaeda,[20] like Jabhat al-Nusra in Dar'ā. In such cases, Sharia law served as the primary reference for the dispute, as many Islamist and Salafist groups rejected secular law; thus, Sharia law became the only common ground for debate among these groups.

Ultimately, the unified court system and the case-specific courts introduced an additional level of development in the judicial system, where the court is recognized as a higher authority than the armed groups that established and agreed to abide by it.

In conclusion, Islamist armed opposition groups sought to gain legitimacy and community acceptance, evolving from purely militant/political entities to social/community actors responsible for managing daily life. Their willingness to establish a future state founded on Islam has prompted these groups to challenge the secular Syrian opposition and compete with each other regarding governance. Islamist armed groups enjoyed the advantage of being closer to local communities within Syria compared to the opposition-led interim government based in exile in Turkey. Consequently, they are more attuned to the realities on the ground. Nevertheless, their ability to implement a fully functional alternative bureaucratic system to that of the regime remain severely limited.

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[19] Faylaq al-Raḥmān (al-Rahman Legion) is a Syrian rebel group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army that operated in Eastern Ghūṭah, in the outskirts of Damascus, but also in the eastern Qalamoun Mountains with more than 3,000 fighters. The legion has been described as an "Islamist" or as a non-jihadi/non-Salafi "political Islamist" organization. It describes itself as "a revolutionary military entity aiming for the downfall of the Syrian regime," but does not seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state (Cafarella and Casagrande 2016).

[20] With exception of the Islamic state.

Community Relations in Areas Controlled by the Islamist Groups

Syria Civil Society After 2011:

Regime-dominated pre-2011 associations focused on addressing practical everyday social issues, many of which had both political and social dimensions, and were anticipated to contribute to social justice in the long run. The withdrawal of state surveillance over community activities in opposition-controlled territories created a space for collective social action in support of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The initial cracks in state control were not immediately filled by actors from Islamist armed groups, as those groups needed time to consolidate their military dominance and stabilize their territorial control before getting involved in community affairs. This public space was initially filled by civilian local councils that accommodate citizens, activists, and civil society actors agitating for regime change and filling the gap in governance created by the collapse of regime control in wide areas.

During the first seven years of the uprising, the number of newly established Syrian civil society organizations exceeded the total number of registered organizations from 1959 to 2011. The need for self-governance led to a significant increase in the number of NGOs and a progressive diversification of their functions and mandates: humanitarian aid, service provision, political advocacy, and documentation of human rights violations (De Martino 2017).

Post-2011, Syrian civil society found cohesion in a shared worldview focused on a global system that prioritizes human rights, democracy, and the free market as its core principles (Shah 2008). A network of trust was established through popular demands for freedom and democracy and a belief in revolution against the regime. The Syria NGO Alliance, a coalition of major Syrian NGOs operating in areas controlled by armed groups, adopted a more universal form as a non-governmental

organization, influenced by the donors who choose to provide resources, facilitate expertise exchange, and support capacity building. The primary role of the NGO sector during the war has been to deliver humanitarian assistance. But with the rise of Islamist armed groups, the role of civil society came to include criticizing the misconduct of militant groups and demanding human rights. Hence, militants began to view that space as a threat to their legitimacy and control.

For several reasons, the role of civil society began to decline. Violence led to the disintegration of the Syrian national social fabric (De Martino 2017). A study conducted between October 2015 and September 2016, sampling 748 Syrian CSOs nationwide, found that 60% did not hire staff from different ethnic or religious backgrounds; in other words, all employees belonged to the same sect. The justification given was that armed violence had caused a sectarian divide in society and that the population had been redistributed geographically into monoethnic communities (Al-Zouabi 2017).

Regarding women's participation and gender equality, there had initially been a significant increase in women’s activism, similar to that of other community-based organizations. But women's representation in LACs decreased between 2012 and 2014, coinciding with the rise of Islamist armed groups in Syria (Ali 2015).

The war had necessitated the establishment of the Syrian Civil Defence (SCD), commonly known as the “White Helmets,” a volunteer-based organization formed in late 2012 that primarily focuses on urban search and rescue efforts. However, their volunteers have experienced a high fatality rate during rescue operations, with 264 killed and more than 500 injured to date. Double-tap airstrikes by the Syrian regime and Russian warplanes caused over half of their deaths

In the face of combined violence and the deterioration of the population's well-being due to destruction and displacement, political activism seemed to decreased or received less attention. Many political activists fled the country. Patterns of interaction among all parties came to suffer from deep ideological differences and distrust between the regime, the people, and various armed groups.

Community Acceptance of Islamist Armed Groups:

A critical attribute of Syrian society is the solid tribal and familial connections that form the basis of the community, especially in smaller towns and rural villages far from the capital, Damascus, and major cities. Hence, armed groups who enjoyed kinship relations with communities were able to operate on the basis of trust and become more integrated into the community. However, armed groups without a prior link to local communities found it difficult to establish stable relations in the short term in the context of armed conflict (Haspeslagh and Zahbia 2015). For instance, communities with a major Sunni population and a tribal social structure and that were located far from the center were more likely to sympathize with Islamist armed groups over a national opposition army. For example, Deir Ez-Zor city was one of the first to support Islamist armed groups over the FSA. This has reflected negatively on the Syrian uprising, leading to the rise of Jihadists and excluding secular parties (NewSyria.net 2017). Deir Ez-Zor was also, however, an example of impressive popular resistance to an attempted ISIS takeover of their neighbourhoods from 2013 to 2017.

Islamist armed groups present themselves as part of the community in its struggle against the regime. Their ability to maintain presence and control depends on community acceptance, which requires militants to understand local power dynamics. This acceptance is influenced by whether the groups recruit locally and the extent to which they facilitate humanitarian operations and

services. A common perception of Islamist armed groups, however, is that the are fragmented and unable to unite around a single objective. Time has shown that these groups themselves can be oppressive and often reject space for communities to participate in civil action. Communities, on the other hand, typically attempt to influence the behavior of armed groups, negotiating issues related to their demands for peace and stability as part of their daily lives.

A key episode was the rising protests Jaysh al-Islām faced in Harasta, a city in East Ghūṭah, in 2015 denouncing the conduct of their security personnel at checkpoints. The disappearance of Razan Zaytuna, the human rights lawyer and activist, triggered widespread criticism against it. Another example of the community's claim over public space was the reaction to the assassination of two activists, Raid Faris and Hammond Junaid, in Idlib in November 2018. Both were known for being anti-regime activists and for critiquing the actions of Islamist militant groups through a radio station established by Raid, which was used to broadcast across the opposition-controlled province of Idlib (France24 2018). The widespread resentment against Hayʾat Tahrīr al-Shām in Idlib regarding the disappearance of these activists was expressed through spontaneous, yet highly organized, street demonstrations.

Collective action by civil society in areas controlled by Islamist armed opposition groups was shaped by two main elements: (a) The element of Islamist ideology and how effectively it aligned with civil society's adaptation to the Western framework of social action, human rights, and democracy; and (b) The element of violence, whose impact depended on whether the community supported Islamist armed groups' violence as needed to confront the regime's counter-insurgencies, or viewed the Islamist armed groups as an unjustified source of threat and insecurity. Additionally, the regime employed a combination of direct military

offensives and military encirclement of these territories, disrupting essential services to the population. This was followed by sporadic periods of calm and negotiations over conditions for the provision of services and essential supplies.

Conclusion

This study explores the non-military roles of Islamist armed groups in the Syrian war, demonstrating their significant expansion since 2011 and the dynamics of their alliance-building, survival, and transformation. It situates the study within its historical context, maps major non-state armed groups involved in the Syrian war since 2011, and examines factors contributing to the rise of Islamist armed groups in Syria.

The research locates the evolving role of Islamist armed groups in their triangular relationship with the local community and their opposition to the central government, characterized by both violence and governance providing public goods. Their relationship with the regime state began with armed conflict, shifting toward political engagement through peace negotiations, supported internationally. The state-society dynamic illustrates increasing collective actions amid a failed state scenario, with interactions marked by state violence seeking control vs. community mobilization against the state's legitimacy.

Community relations with Islamist militants also developed, enhancing engagement and decision-making processes, altering power dynamics, and creating a new dichotomy between the community and militants. The dual military–political roles of Islamist armed groups, went beyond territorial control and some groups evolved to provide social services, establish judiciary systems, and engage in political negotiations, assuming state-like roles. The research explored how Islamist armed groups' governance was due to a weakened state and urgent community service needs. These groups gained legitimacy by providing social services and administrative systems, filling the state's void and seeking support for future state-building. Furthermore, by

2017, during the Astana talks, Islamist opposition armed groups were acknowledged as contributors to the political solution to the Syrian conflict.

Syria's situation evolved beyond the original state-society conflict to manifest multiple layers of intra-opposition violence. The latter occurred in two ways: (a) Islamist groups' relation to the non-Islamist FSA, whose nationalistic vision many militants rejected, and (b) their actions against local civilians and political activists. Initially, collective action was expected to grow with armed opposition, but it shrank under Islamist control. Ongoing conflict and intra-militant violence reduced political opportunities, forcing many activists to flee for safety. Nevertheless, the culture of political participation persisted, with on-going efforts to maintain some public space. Islamist groups' post-conflict survival highlights their investment in the political and social landscape; some of these groups created an administrative and political structure that better positioned them to govern the community. Simultaneously, the expanded Syrian civil society adapted and learned to negotiate with Islamist armed groups, resulting in the unprecedented public self-governance space that the community has enjoyed despite the levels of violence and chaos it faced.