

RAQQA: FROM REGIME OVERTHROW TO INTER-REBEL FIGHTING

Lucas Winter

Foreign Military Studies Office

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This paper details the March 2013 takeover of Raqqa by Syrian rebels and the subsequent rebel infighting.

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In early November 2011, as Syria’s uprising was in the early stages of morphing into a nationwide insurgency, President Bashar al-Assad traveled to the Euphrates city of Raqqa to pray. Syrian national television beamed images of the president, flanked by religious and local political figures (including Governor Adnan Sakhni and local Baath Party Head Suleiman Suleiman), as he entered a Raqqa mosque. His praying for the cameras on the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha (the “day of the sacrifice”) was more than a

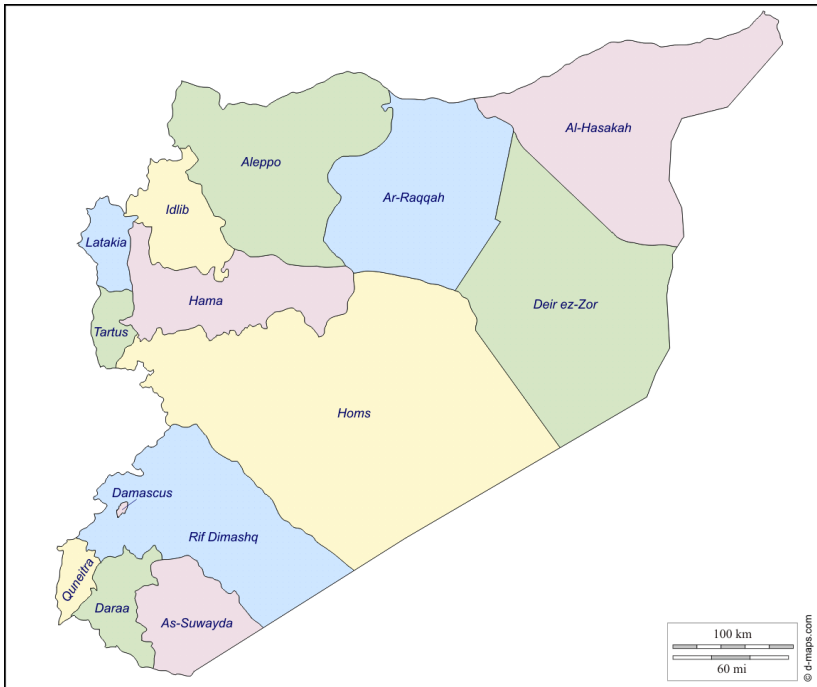


Figure 1

Source: <http://d-maps.com/m/asia/syrie/syrie50.gif>

public display of piety; it was meant to show that Syria was under control and the growing violence was little more than a foreign-backed *jacquerie*.

Sixteen months later Raqqa became the first provincial capital to fall into rebel hands. In early March 2013 the provincial governor and local Baath Party chief once again appeared in front of the cameras, only this time it was the opposition’s Orient Television rather than the Syrian state channels, and the two were hostages rather than VIPs.¹

Many greeted the fall of Raqqa with jubilation. After all, it was the closest that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had come to achieving its self-stated goal, i.e., violent regime overthrow. Raqqa, many wishfully thought, was the long-awaited first domino. Yet nine months later, as 2013 drew to a close, Raqqa remained the only provincial capital out of regime control. Furthermore, the

¹ The opposition Television Orient provided on-the-ground reports of Raqqa’s takeover, including interviews with the two regime officials. Television Orient is carried by both of the two main satellites in the region, Arabsat and Nilesat; thus, in addition to the heavy internet traffic, these videos received significant television viewership. While the Baath Party head was the same man who prayed alongside al-Asad in November 2011, the governor had been replaced in September 2012.

most hardline of Syria's jihadi factions – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – reigned supreme in Raqqa.

Raqqa lies at the western edge of the Jazeera Plateau, the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which includes part of Syria, Iraq and Turkey (Mesopotamia). Within Syria, Raqqa represents a bridge between the province of Aleppo on the one hand and al-Hassakeh and Deir Ezzour, Syria's two easternmost provinces, on the other.² Although far to the east of Syria's main north-south axis of power, Raqqa lies at an important crossroads of four distinct areas: the Euphrates Valley and to the southeast, Syria's Kurdish-majority al-Hassakeh Province to the northeast, Aleppo and its countryside to the west, the Turkish border to the north.³

Raqqa Province is desert crossed by an inverted-T fertile territory. The

vertical axis of this area follows the Balikh Basin, which links Raqqa to the town of Tel Abyad on the border with Turkey.⁴ The eastern axis follows the Euphrates Valley as it meanders to the border with Iraq via the Syrian province of Deir Ezzour. The western axis follows the highway linking Raqqa to the province and city of Aleppo.⁵

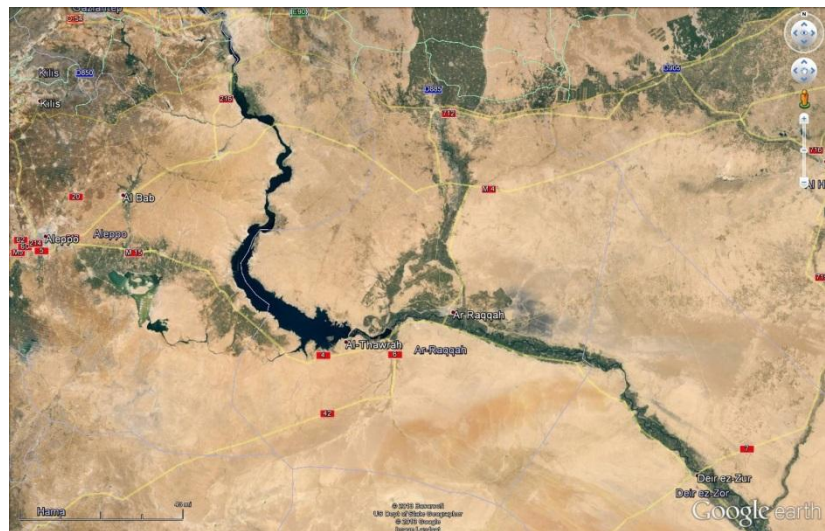


Figure 2 (Google Maps)

² It also borders Homs province to the south, but this area is largely uninhabited desert.

³ Syria's Kurdish-majority areas (al-Hassakeh province) also border Raqqa to the northeast; parts of northern Aleppo province in the northwest also have a sizeable Kurdish population.

⁴ Halfway up, this line is crossed perpendicularly by the highway linking Aleppo to al-Hassakeh, Syria's main Kurdish-majority city.

⁵ Halfway between Raqqa and Aleppo is the town of Maskana, which itself is a nexus of Aleppo and its eastern food belt directly west and the Manbij plain and Euphrates Valley to the north.

Administratively, Raqqa is divided into three districts: Raqqa Center, al-Thawra⁶ and Tel Abyad. These three districts are further subdivided into ten subdistricts, which are detailed in Table 1.⁷

Raqqa is a historically rich and politically vibrant site that has been involved in both pro- and anti-government protests since early in the Syrian rebellion, although in contrast to Syria's other cities, an internal insurgency never developed here. As a result, the city remained relatively quiet, drawing in hundreds of thousands of refugees and earning the nickname "the hotel of the revolution."⁸

At the time of Raqqa's fall in March 2013 there were, at the broadest level, three types of rebels fighting in Syria: the jihadis fighting for an Islamic state (transnational jihadis), the jihadis fighting for regime overthrow (nationalist jihadis), and the non-jihadis fighting for regime overthrow (nationalist non-jihadis). These categories are ideal types, and there is obviously overlap between the first and second and the second and third. Nonetheless, each of these three categories had their general umbrella group: in the case of the first it was Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), for the second the

Islamic Front (IF) and for the third the FSA.

Of Raqqa's three fronts, the western is most important for understanding the rebel takeover and more specifically the town of Maskana, which is near the administrative

DISTRICT	SUBDISTRICT	POPULATION (2004)	Regime Base	Rebel Takeover
Raqqa Center	Raqqa Center	338,773	Division 17	3/4/13
Raqqa Center	Al-Karama	74,429		11/27/12
Raqqa Center	Al-Sabkha	48,106		1/8/13
Raqqa Center	Maadan	42,652		1/16/13
Al-Thawra	Al-Thawra Center	69,425	Tabqa Airport	2/11/13
Al-Thawra	Al-Mansoura	58,727		
Al-Thawra	Al-Jurneyyeh	31,688		
Tel Abyad	Tel Abyad Center	44,671		9/19/12
Tel Abyad	Suluk	44,131		9/19/12
Tel Abyad	Ein Eissa	40,912	Brigade 93	9/19/12

boundary separating Raqqa and Aleppo Provinces. Maskana fell out of Syrian government hands on 11 August 2012 when four armed groups claiming affiliation with the FSA chased local

⁶ The eponymous capital of this district was originally named al-Tabqa but was officially renamed al-Thawra, in what is now an ironic twist of fate, by Hafez al-Assad. Al-Thawra means the revolution.

⁷ Syria, as a whole, is divided into 14 provinces, 60 districts and 281 subdistricts.

⁸ The commonly cited figure is that Raqqa's population went from 200,000 to over 1,000,000.

regime strongmen out of town. Of the four groups, only the “Musaib bin Umar Battalion” was local. The remaining three were from other parts of Manbij district (of which Maskana is a subdistrict).⁹

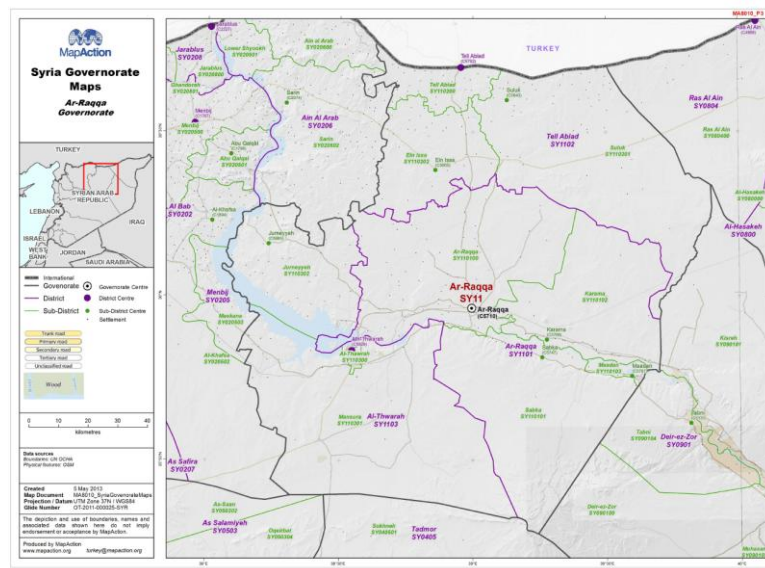


Figure 3 Source: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MA8010_SyriaGovernorat_eMaps_mapperies_Landscape_ArRaqqa.pdf.pdf

In November 2012 these four groups were joined by one from the eastern Aleppo countryside (Deir Hafer district) and several from the Raqqa sub-district of al-Tabqa, just across the provincial border to the east.¹⁰ These groups were also joined by jihadi fighters from the “Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya” (Islamic Dawn Movement), an Aleppo-based movement that would subsequently merge with Ahrar al-Sham to form the foundation of the IF in the Eastern Aleppo Countryside/Raqqa Province region.

In November 2013 al-Fajr al-Islamiyya and the various local battalions attacked the army barracks and military intelligence facilities located alongside the agricultural hamlet of Dibsi ‘Afnan, about halfway between Maskana and the town of al-Tabqa in Raqqa.¹¹ After nearly a week of holding the line and repelling regime reinforcement attempts, on 19 November they overran all regime positions there. The Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya produced a slick 15-minute video detailing the operation. One segment showed an al-Fajr leader declaring the area from Maskana to al-Tabqa “liberated” and naming the various groups involved in the takeover.¹²

⁹ Of the other three groups, one was from the town of al-Khafsa to the immediate north and two from Manbij further north: Ahrar al-Furat (al-Khafsa), Jund al-Haramain (Manbij), Karama (Manbij). A video from 12 August 2012 mentions these four groups: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvF-2lSkTYo> (Accessed 3/1/14) Al-Karama and Ahrar al-Furat would later join the Tawhid Brigade.

¹⁰ At least one of the groups also identified as being from the steppe (Badia).

¹¹ The same rebel coalition was at the same time attacking the al-Jirrah Military Airbase to the west of Maskana along the highway toward Aleppo.

¹² The groups mentioned as involved are: Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya, Katibat Ahrar al-Tabqa (al-Tabqa), Katibat Uwais al-Qurani (al-Tabqa), Katibat Musaib bin Umair (Maskana), Katibat Abu Dujana (Deir Hafer), Katibat Saraya al-Furat (al-Tabqa), Katibat Usud al-Sunna (jihadi), Katibat Shuhada al-Jamaa Jund al-Rahman, Katibat Ahrar al-Badiyah.

The 15-minute video produced by al-Fajr al-Islam is available at:

One of these groups was the Katibat Usud al-Sunna, which was linked to an entity calling itself the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (Mujahideen Shura Council – MSC).¹³ The MSC rose to relative prominence in June 2012, after being involved in the storming of Bab al-Hawa, the key border crossing that links Aleppo to the Turkish city of Antakya. Its leader, a Saudi-born Syrian takfiri dentist named Firas al-Absi “Abu Mohammed,” was killed by a member of the FSA-affiliated Kata’ib Farouq al-Shimal (Northern Farouq Battalions – NF) at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on 31 August 2012.¹⁴ After Firas al-Absi’s death, his brother, Amr al-Absi “Abu al-Athir,” allegedly took over the organization, which quickly grew from 180 to 540 fighters, according to the “Wiki Baghady” Twitter account.¹⁵ After seeking Saudi backing and being rebuffed, he entered into an alliance with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, head of the Islamic State in Iraq. His group, which was called the Majlis Shura Dawlat al-Islam (Islamic State Shura Council), changed its name to MSC in deference to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s Islamic “state.”¹⁶

Until January 2013 the MSC was considered, if not a part of JN, at least under its umbrella.¹⁷ The JN banner had been planted nearly a year before, in January 2012, via an audio recording attributed to its leader, “Abu Mohammed al-Jolani.” Al-Jolani was reportedly an Iraq veteran who took orders from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. From the outset JN was not a single coherent organization, but rather a banner under which Syria’s vast network of jihadis could operate.

The MSC had a public split with JN in January 2013, when Firas al-Absi’s suspected murderer, a top Farouq leader named Thai’r Waqqas, was assassinated in his hometown of Sarmada by

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufH92tXbDKw> (Accessed 3/1/14).

¹³ Video available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKSQMVMfJIU> (Accessed 3/1/14).

In addition, MSC leader Abu al-Athir is in some media accounts identified as leader of the Usud al-Sunna. See: “Hal Qarara al-Baghdadi ‘Azl Z’aim Jabhat al-Nusra?” *Asian Society Information Agency*, 20 May 2013.

<http://www.asianewslib.com/prtgx9t.ak9yn4r.ra.html> (Accessed 3/1/14).

In a March 2013 interview the MSC spokesman mentions that the group was involved in Dibsī ‘Afnan. See: “Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen: La Khawf ‘ala al-Aqaliyat fi Suria al-Islamiyya!” *Orient News*, 13 March 2013.

http://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=2440 (Accessed 3/1/14).

¹⁴ For more on this event, see: Shami Witness, “On the Jabhat an-Nusra vs. Kata’ib al-Farouq fitna” 27 March 2013. <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/on-the-jabhat-an-nusra-vs-kataib-al-farouq-fitna-by-shami-witness/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

¹⁵ Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/wikibaghdady> (Accessed 3/1/14).

¹⁶ Abu al-Athir would later be named to the important post of ISIS head in Aleppo province.

¹⁷ Shami Witness, “On the Jabhat an-Nusra vs. Kata’ib al-Farouq fitna” 27 March 2013.

<http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/on-the-jabhat-an-nusra-vs-kataib-al-farouq-fitna-by-shami-witness/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

supporters of al-Absi. JN was immediately blamed for the killing; on 14 January 2013 JN's leadership issued a statement disassociating itself from the conflict between NF and the MSC.¹⁸

The conflict between the NF and MSC, as noted earlier, dated to late August 2012, when the NF assassinated MSC leader al-Absi and took sole control of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.

	TYPE	COALITION	UNIT	PLACE OF ORIGIN
	Nationalist Jihadi	Islamic Front (IF)	Musaib bin Umar Battalion	Maskana (Aleppo Province)
			Ahrar al-Sham Movement	Idlib Province
			Al-Fajr al-Islamiyya Movement	Aleppo
	Transnational Jihadi	Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)		National
		Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS)	Mujahideen Shura Council	Aleppo
	Sunni Nationalist	Free Syrian Army (FSA)	Farouq al-Shimal Battalions	Northern Aleppo Province
			Thuwar Raqqa Brigade/Rayat al-Nasr Brigade/Tahrir Raqqa Front	Raqqa Province

Bab al-Hawa was just one of three border crossings in Aleppo to fall out of Syrian government hands. To the northeast of Bab al-Hawa and directly north of the city of Aleppo, the Bab al-Salama crossing near the town of Azaz was controlled by the Northern Storm, a group of local smugglers who claimed affiliation with the FSA. Further east, the border crossing of Jarablus in Manbij Province was in the hands of the Aleppo-based Liwa al-Tawhid (Unity Brigade).¹⁹ The next border crossing to the east, Tel Abyad in Raqqa Province, came under pressure from the NF in September of that year.

Tel Abyad is slightly less than 100 kilometers north of the city of Raqqa (roughly the same distance that separates Raqqa from Maskana). It is located on the border with Turkey, at the northern end of an agricultural basin (Balikh) that was a major part of the Euphrates Project, a

¹⁸ See: "Jabhat al-Nusra al-Suriyya tanfi 'alaqatiha bi Kata'ib Shura al-Mujahideen," *Assakina*, 14 January 2013. <http://www.assakina.com/news/news2/21060.html> (Accessed 3/1/14).

¹⁹ "The Fight for Syria's Border Crossings," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 4 March 2013. <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/11/article55321187> (Accessed 3/1/14).

Liwa al-Tawhid was the first rebel group to enter the city of Aleppo. For more on them see: "The Story of Al-Tawhid Brigade: Fighting for Sharia in Syria," *al-Monitor*, 22 October 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/10/syria-opposition-islamists-tawhid-brigade.html> (Accessed 3/1/14).

development scheme that ran for several decades starting in the 1960s, which aimed to harness the Euphrates waters to increase food production. Halfway between Raqqa and Tel Abyad, the highway linking Aleppo to al-Hassakeh via Manbij horizontally bisects the Balikh. The small town of Ein Eissa lies along this highway (to the west of the basin) and is home to one of the Syrian military's three key fortifications in Raqqa Province, the Army's 93d Brigade.²⁰ The other two regime garrisons are the 17th Division HQ just north of the city and the al-Tabqa Military Airport to the west. All three still remained in government hands as of early 2014.

The town of Tel Abyad is the capital and main population center of the eponymous district in the north of Raqqa Province. On 19 September 2012 rebels quickly overran the town's border post. A dizzyingly large number of FSA-affiliated groups claimed credit, but the NF quickly emerged as the strongest among them, having amassed both power and cross-border links through its control over the important Bab al-Hawa border crossing.²¹ The group had. NF fighters were distinguished by their matching dark green T-shirts and were described by one observer as "Syria's up-and-coming rebels."²² After seizing the border post rebels quickly overran regime positions in the town itself, making Tel Abyad the first area in Raqqa Province to be "fully liberated."

The regime was displeased, and its twofold response came the following day. First, it carried out several airstrikes in the region, the most publicized occurring in Ein Eissa, where, according to opposition accounts, a gas station was bombed, creating a massive explosion that killed around 70 people.²³ Tel Abyad and the nearby town of Ain Arous were also attacked, allegedly with helicopters. In addition, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad replaced Raqqa governor Adnan

²⁰ The open source is not entirely clear on the 93rd Brigade. Some call it a tank regiment rather than a brigade, while other reports say it is a Syrian special forces unit. Either way, the base remains in government hands as of early 2014.

²¹ As one report notes: "Depending on who you talk to, the border post was liberated by two groups (Farouq and Ghoraba al-Sham) or a combination of seven or eight groups, or two dozen." See: Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Up-and-Coming Rebels: Who Are the Farouq Brigades?" *Time*. <http://world.time.com/2012/10/05/syrias-up-and-coming-rebels-who-are-the-farouq-brigades-2/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

²² See especially: Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Up-and-Coming Rebels: Who Are the Farouq Brigades?" *Time*. <http://world.time.com/2012/10/05/syrias-up-and-coming-rebels-who-are-the-farouq-brigades-2/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

²³ Al-Jazeera: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msGeyb9r3Ac> (Accessed 3/1/14).

Sakhni, a businessman, with Hassan Jalali, a former deputy interior minister and close associate of the president's chief of staff, Abu Salim Daaboul.²⁴

The NF detachment in Raqqa was led by a local named Mohammed Dhahir (Abu Azzam), who had been posted in Bab al-Hawa at the time of the killing of Firas al-Absi, head of the MSC. Despite favorable coverage in both Western and Gulf media, he was unsuccessful in running Tel Abyad.²⁵ Specifically, the NF's inability to enforce order both within its ranks and vis-à-vis other groups meant that FSA gangs proliferated. These groups sought to capitalize on the economic windfall and political opportunities offered by the border; extortion, whether through kidnappings or illegal checkpoints, became widespread.

A 4 November 2012 video uploaded to YouTube showed Abu Azzam lecturing fighters about the dangers of such behavior.²⁶ NF had already been accused of thuggish behavior while running the Bab al-Hawa crossing.²⁷ Despite its leader being from Raqqa, NF lacked a local base of support and was seen as beholden to Turkish interests.²⁸ While local attempts to impose order

²⁴ Jalali had been the mayor of Deir Attiyah (15 years) and Nabek (5 years), both near Damascus, before becoming a deputy interior minister in 2006. See: Mohammed Mansour, "Hassan Salih Jalali: al-Sayid al-Muhafidh fi Qabdha al-Jaysh al-Hurr," *Orient News*, 11 March 2013. http://www.orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=2409 (Accessed 3/1/14).

Sakhni, a wealthy businessman, was part-owner of the important Asia Pharmaceuticals company and had been accused of hoarding scarce fuel supplies. He was named industry minister. See: "Bil Wathiqa: Bashar al-Asad y'ain al-liwa al-fasid Hassan Jalali Muhadifhan lil Raqqa?!" *All4Syria*, 17 September 2012. <http://all4syria.info/Archive/54314> (Accessed 3/1/14).

²⁵ Farouq Brigades, in general, were not viewed in a good light. As one account notes, "You see, Farouq Brigades, 'are a bunch of thieves,' as one of my sources described them. Northern Farouq is notorious for its extensive smuggling businesses of diesel, cement, and even hashish. They carry out extortion on their checkpoints. They charge exorbitant taxes for goods passing through their checkpoints..." Shami Witness, "On the Jabhat an-Nusra vs. Kata'ib al-Farouq fitna" 27 March 2013. <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/on-the-jabhat-an-nusra-vs-kataib-al-farouq-fitna-by-shami-witness/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

²⁶ Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WgbzrO2XA> (Accessed 3/1/14).

²⁷ The original Farouq Battalion from Homs had faced similar accusations of thuggish behavior in 2012: Sharmine Narwani, "Homs Opposition: Al Farouq Battalion is Killing Us," *al-Akhbar*, 13 May 2012. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/7297> (Accessed 3/1/14).

²⁸ For more on external support for Syrian rebels see: Thomas Pierret, "External support and the Syrian insurgency," *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2013. http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/09/external_support_and_the_syrian_insurgency (Accessed 3/1/14) and

Malik al-Abdeh, "Rebels, Inc." *Foreign Policy*, 21 November 2013. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/11/21/rebels_inc?page=full (Accessed 3/1/14).

were made in the town of Tel Abyad, militias reigned supreme.²⁹ It was not until JN began extending its soft-power influence through Tel Abyad's Shari'a Councils that a semblance of order began to emerge.³⁰

Raqqa's strategic depth lies to its east, along the Euphrates Valley. This area of narrow agricultural hamlets leads into the province of Deir Ezzour, Syria's gateway to Iraq's al-Anbar Province. Local rebels easily overran the various subdistricts east of Raqqa city and up until the border with Deir Ezzour in late 2012 and early 2013. The eastern subdistricts of Raqqa fell within a few months of each other: Karama around 27 November 2012, al-Sabkha around 8 January 2013 and Maadan around 16 January 2013. In the first week of February 2013 rebels overran the Baath Dam east of the city of Raqqa.³¹ On 20 February 2013 the al-Kibar facilities, which rose to fame after being bombed by Israel in 2007, were overrun. All of these successes were claimed by FSA-affiliated groups, including some that would later be involved in the fight for Raqqa.

While the FSA seemed to dominate this area, the more important areas of Deir Ezzour further to the southeast were seeing a robust and visible jihadi presence emerge. In December 2012 Deir Ezzour's JN joined with several other jihadi groups to form a Mujahideen Shura Council Front.³² The links between this group and the Aleppo-based one of the same name are not entirely clear beyond a common link to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's organization. The jihadi presence in Deir Ezzour was strong, and as the groups moving in toward Raqqa from Aleppo got closer the influence of jihadis increased.

In the second half of 2012, the smattering of local FSA groups throughout Raqqa and Aleppo's countryside began consolidating into larger groups. On 26 September 2012, shortly after the Tel Abyad border crossing was overrun, a group calling itself the Liwa Thuwa Raqqa (Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade) formed. The group was associated with the Syrian Military Council

²⁹ One video, for instance, describes the newly formed local "internal security" branch. Oddly, the Syrian regime flag remains on this rebel police force's headquarters, as apparently was the case in other parts of Tel Abyad: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9_Uo6xzYn0 (Accessed 3/1/14).

³⁰ Yusef Shaykhu, "Tel Abyad fi Qabdhat al-Nusra wal-Hayiah al-Shar'aiyya," *al-Akhbar*, 1 March 2013. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/178521> (Accessed 3/1/14).

³¹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ja4aXiiuYFI> (Accessed 3/1/14).

³² See: Bill Roggio, "Syrian jihadists, including al Qaeda's Al Nusrah Front, form Mujahideen Shura Council," *The Long War Journal*, 12 December 2012. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/syrian_jihadists_inc.php (Accessed 3/1/14).

(SMC)³³ and was involved in the fight for Raqqa.³⁴ On 4 December 2012 another set of local units claiming FSA affiliation banded together to form the Liwa Rayat al-Nasr (Victory Banner Brigade). This brigade brought together rebels from the Aleppo districts of Deir Hafer, Manbij and the Raqqa district of al-Thawra.³⁵ Three weeks later, on 25 December 2012, these two coalitions joined with two larger FSA groups (the NF and the Ahfad al-Rasul) and others to form the Jabhat Tahrir Raqqa (Raqqa Liberation Front).³⁶ This new coalition claimed to include over 90% of the military units active in the province and declared the launch of operations to fully liberate Raqqa.

Thus, in early 2013 the dynamics in each of Raqqa's three fronts were slightly different. In the west, jihadis linked to the MSC joined the FSA rebels and the recently formed IF (which was led by Ahrar al-Sham and included Maskana's Musaib bin Umar Brigade and Aleppo's al-Fajr al-Islamiyya Movement).³⁷ To the north, the FSA/SMC Jabhat Tahrir Raqqa seemed a powerful, unified coalition.³⁸ Finally, the areas to the east of Raqqa were no longer in regime hands, having been taken over by a smattering of local FSA groups.³⁹ Although the regime held on to several parts of Deir Ezzour further along the Euphrates, a corridor linking Iraqi-based jihadis to their Syrian counterparts along the Euphrates Valley was being opened.

The main rebel push, though, was clearly coming from the west. It still had to get past al-Tabqa, home to the Euphrates Dam (Sidd al-Furat), the country's largest. At al-Tabqa the Aleppo-Raqqa Road is met by a desert highway coming from Hama and Homs to the southwest. The entrance to al-Tabqa from the desert is protected by a military airport just south of the junction.⁴⁰ Although

³³ Basically the successor of the FSA.

³⁴ Formation video : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3hgUzXoZX4> (Accessed 3/1/14).

³⁵ Formation video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCF4Q3tZQ-s> (Accessed 3/1/14).

³⁶ Formation video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eYNH8WPcdE> (Accessed 3/1/14).

³⁷ 21 December 2012 video announcing the formation of the Islamic Front:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVwEsEjJeuo> (Accessed 3/1/14).

31 January 2013 video announcing al-Fajr's merger with Ahrar al-Sham to become the "Ahrar al-Sham Movement."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YciNoYz9EYM> (Accessed 3/1/14).

³⁸ On 4 February 2013, announced the launch of operations to liberate Raqqa.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Snq_CEPiknM (Accessed 3/1/14).

³⁹ A Farouq-FSA splinter group, the Jabhat al-Asala wa al-Tanmiya (Authenticity and Development Front), was also active in the eastern Raqqa region, as was the Liwa Ahfadh al-Rasul (Grandchildren of the Prophet Brigade), which was able to establish a presence in Raqqa, but was kicked out a few months later.

⁴⁰ As of January 2014 the airport remained in regime hands.

rebels seized some oil facilities off this desert highway, the airport is an important regime fortification that has survived repeated attacks.

The town of al-Tabqa itself had been restive since early in the Syrian protest movement. Armed groups, including defectors, began carrying out urban insurgency attacks against security forces in the early summer of 2012.⁴¹ By the end of 2012 al-Tabqa had indigenous fighting forces coordinating with the three powerful rebel fronts (FSA, IF, JN), as became clear in Dibsī ‘Afnan.

The main assault on al-Tabqa began on 10 February 2013.⁴² It was a fairly quick affair, a well coordinated attack in which rebel forces overwhelmed the regime. Within a single day most security and military checkpoints and agencies in the town, including the dam itself, had been overrun.⁴³ A video posted on YouTube showed a large weapons cache seized from the military intelligence headquarters.⁴⁴ Many regime soldiers and security agents either defected, fled, or were captured, including mid-level officers such as the heads of Political Security (Amn Siasi) and the Border Guard (Hajanah).⁴⁵ A subsequent video shows them, along with the head of security for the Euphrates Dam, pleading with the regime to exchange them for rebel prisoners.⁴⁶

The takeover of al-Tabqa changed the balance not only between the regime and rebels in Raqqa, but also within rebel ranks, tilting power away from the FSA and toward the IF and JN.⁴⁷ The powerful Tawhid Brigade, a member of the recently constituted IF, joined the fray. Several groups that began as FSA affiliates were now part of the IF, including Maskana’s Musaib bin Umair and Deir Hafer’s Abu Dujana. JN had not participated as such in the Dibsī ‘Afnan fight, but was now mentioned as a key member of the coalition attacking al-Tabqa. The NF, in contrast, was notably absent from the fight.

⁴¹ The Uwais al-Qurani Battalion, which would later join one of the FSA coalitions, claimed an ambush of military intelligence in September 2012. Several videos also show defections by and kidnappings of regime figures in al-Tabqa in the summer and fall of 2012.

⁴² Regime checkpoints and other points outside of the city began to be targeted in late January, paving the way for the storming of the city.

⁴³ The well coordinated attack involved the simultaneous takeover of all key regime fortifications, including an air defense base, military police, political security, the Euphrates Dam, military intelligence, and others.

⁴⁴ Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BqcOPS7y6w> (Accessed 3/1/14).

The man in this video lists the following groups as participating: JN, Ahrar al-Tabqa, Saraya al-Furat, Uwais al-Qurani, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Katibat al-Bara’, Hudheifa bin al-Yaman, and Mohammed bin Abdullah.

⁴⁵ Video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNuIVCAN7I8> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁴⁶ Video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUKNIY2ka5M> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁴⁷ On 11 January 2013 the Taftanaz Airbase in Aleppo province fell to a coalition that included JN and Ahrar al-Sham, and from which they also gained a great deal of weaponry and ammunition.

It was thus the two Islamic coalitions which took the lead in the takeover of Raqqa. The operation to take over Raqqa was called Gharat al-Jabbar (roughly translates as the “Raid of the Almighty”) and was announced by Ahrar al-Sham⁴⁸ and JN⁴⁹ in separate videos. These two groups, along with a local Islamic coalition formed immediately following the rebel takeover of al-Tabqa and which called itself the Jabhat al-Wahida wal Tahrir al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Unity and Liberation Front) received the bulk of the credit (and spoils) from the takeover of Raqqa.⁵⁰

The storming of Raqqa was a carefully planned and well executed operation.⁵¹ Some allege that the rebel incursion was aided by a deal struck between local tribe leader/middleman Mohammed Faysal al-Huwaidi and Head of Raqqa State Security (Amn al-Dawla) Brigadier General Khaled al-Halabi. State Security was in charge of several checkpoints leading into the city. According to an article in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, those loyal to al-Halabi “pulled out on the morning of the attack, handing over the city’s eastern entrance – and the entire eastern district – to the fighters of the Muntasir Billah Brigade and al-Nusra.”⁵² State Security, officially part of the General Intelligence Directorate/GID (Idarat al-Amn al-‘Am), is one of the key intelligence and security agencies used by the Syrian regime to contain challenges to its rule.⁵³

⁴⁸ See video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PI4_rRr3Vnk (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁴⁹ See video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEsYNH73h3k> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁵⁰ The new front brought together two coalitions from the region – al-Nasr Salaheddine and Hudhaifa bin al-Yaman. It is in the local partner for the invading Islamic coalition. See video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aefz8esu_bA (Accessed 3/1/14).

Other angle: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IpNN5TPcr0> (Accessed 3/1/14).

On the same day that al-Tabqa was overrun, the Jirah Airbase near Maskana was also overrun:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJLjqvcDnFQ> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁵¹ A total of 22 different sites were allegedly attacked. The operation was a success with one exception: one of the stated goals of the attack was to overrun the 17th Division HQ’s, something the rebels have failed to do as of the end of 2013.

⁵² See: Firas al-Hakkar, “The Mysterious Fall of Raqqa, Syria’s Kandahar,” *al-Akhbar*, 8 November 2013.

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/mysterious-fall-raqqa-syria%E2%80%99s-kandahar-i> (Accessed 3/1/14).

Al-Halabi had previously been the head of state security in Homs and Tartous and was subsequently thought to have fled to Turkey and then Lebanon. He is a Druze from the province of Suweida.

⁵³ Three other ones are important: the Political Security Directorate/PSD (Amn Siyyasi), Military Intelligence/MI (Amn ‘Askari) and Air Force Intelligence/AFI (Mukhabarat Jawiyya). During times of peace the PSD was the key mechanism for instilling fear in political dissidents; MI is more heavily armed and part of the military chain of command. During the rule of Hafez al-Assad, AFI became the premier intelligence service both domestically and abroad, given al-Assad’s Air Force background. In addition to these security agencies and the various military services, the Syrian regime has increasingly relied on loyal civilian paramilitaries to create the National Defense Force.

After quickly moving through the checkpoints leading into the city, the rebels overran a number of regime positions inside Raqqa while also blockading the 17th Division headquarters just to the north.⁵⁴ Speaking to *al-Jazeera* in the middle of the operation, a spokesman for Ahrar al-Sham rattled off some 15 military and security checkpoints or installations that had been simultaneously targeted, including the gas, sugar and water production plants.⁵⁵ It was not long before the only remaining resistance came from MI headquarters and, to a lesser extent, PSD.⁵⁶

Before MI and PSD fell, rebels stormed the governor's palace, where both the provincial governor and the local head of the Baath Party had taken refuge. It was from here that the opposition TV channel, *Orient Television*, conducted the (in)famous interview with the two local leaders on 5 March 2013.⁵⁷ The video showed three men sitting on a couch: Governor Hassan Jalil, Baath Party Head Suleiman Suleiman and a rebel identified as the "emir" of Jabhat al-Wahdat wal Tahrir al-Islamiyya, the local group which, along with JN and IF, was credited with Raqqa's takeover.⁵⁸ This "emir" was a local medical doctor who went by the name Dr. Samer.⁵⁹ In a somewhat halting fashion he explained that, in fact, two entities, in addition to his own, were behind the storming of the governor's palace: the IF and Jabhat Majlis al-Shura (the Shura Council Front). This Shura Council Front was, one might presume, associated with the front that had formed at the end of 2012 in Deir Ezzour and which included Deir Ezzour's JN. It is not clear, though, whether self-identified JN fighters from outside of Deir Ezzour considered

⁵⁴ Relative to other parts of the country, military presence is extremely light here. According to Joseph Holliday, the 17th Army Reserve Division is one of Syria's five specialized divisions. It is responsible for both Raqqa and Deir Ezzour Syria and is independent of the Corps structure. See: Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War," Institute for the Study of War, March 2013.

<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁵⁵ See video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfhPx2nA2t8> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁵⁶ A video emerged of Political Security agents captured by the Tawhid Brigade, in which they all claim to be Alawis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9UPUP0KQ2Q> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁵⁷ See video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eo4pbARB_rY (Accessed 3/1/14).

Also from JN: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBErxihiJRl> (Accessed 3/1/14).

See also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Oq21xb-DCg> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁵⁸ Several other men are also sitting in the room. One, a youth wearing a blue beret, is identified as the "emir of jabhat al-shura." Another man appears to be the same one that read the statement declaring the "liberation" of Dibsī 'Afnan on behalf of the al-Fajr al-Islamiyya; this same individual appears in the front row of the video in which the Jabhat al-Wahida wal Tahrir al-Islamiyya is formed.

⁵⁹ See: Rania Abouzeid, "How Islamist Rebels in Syria Are Ruling a Fallen Provincial Capital," *Time*, 23 March 2013. <http://world.time.com/2013/03/23/how-islamist-rebels-in-syria-are-ruling-a-fallen-provincial-capital/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

themselves as part of this front. As would emerge shortly thereafter, a rift was emerging within what had been considered the unified JN front.

MI, and with it the last of the regime's security presence in the city, fell the following day.⁶⁰ The regime responded by bombarding some parts of Raqqa and continued to do so at varying levels throughout the summer and fall.⁶¹ Most of the city, though, remained largely intact and quickly returned to relative normalcy. Although the regime's military and security installations had been either destroyed or vacated, much of the bureaucratic infrastructure remained functioning and in place. The regime continued paying most salaries, and the hydroelectric dam and the oil wells seized by rebels continued operating, as did electricity and water provision to the city. As in other parts of Syria, local networks of civil society activists sprang into action in the wake of the regime withdrawal, filling the service gaps created by the regime's defeat.⁶²

Little of the looting and chaos that had occurred in other rebel-held areas occurred in Raqqa; in at least one case, a FSA militia attempting to enter the city was allegedly turned away by force.⁶³ According to one account, it was agreed that outside battalions would leave Raqqa two weeks after the regime was expelled, handing the city fully to locals.⁶⁴

With the fall of the provincial capital, regime military and security presence in Raqqa Province was limited to the al-Tabqa Military Airport, the 93rd Brigade base in Ein Eissa and the 17th Division HQ just north of Raqqa. Aside from the occasional air raids or shelling by regime forces from these areas, the main difference in Raqqa was that force was now concentrated in the hands of rebel militias rather than the government's various paramilitary and security

⁶⁰ Many videos were uploaded of the fight for Raqqa. This video shows the surrender of several regime fighters from MI to what the narrator calls JN: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgP2e6yI4yA> (Accessed 3/1/14). Video also emerged of the bullet-ridden body of the MI's deputy director "Abu Jassem."

⁶¹ On 20 June, for instance, regime warplanes struck Raqqa's main hospital, and on 29 September they struck a secondary school on the first morning of classes.

⁶² See for instance: "How Did Raqqa Fall to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria?" *Syria Untold*, 13 January 2014. <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/story/2014/01/13/7835> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁶³ Time correspondent Rania Abouzeid, after spending some time in the town, notes that an FSA battalion made up of locals, generally considered to be an appendage of Ahrar al-Sham and called the Liwa Umana Raqqa, (Raqqa Guardians Brigade) took charge of much public security. See: Rania Abouzeid, "How Islamist Rebels in Syria Are Ruling a Fallen Provincial Capital," *Time*, 23 March 2013. <http://world.time.com/2013/03/23/how-islamist-rebels-in-syria-are-ruling-a-fallen-provincial-capital/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁶⁴ See: Jamal Khalil Subh, "Intiba'at min al-Raqqa: 'amma tabhath?" *The Republic*, 29 July 2013. <http://therepublicgs.net/2013/07/29/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%91%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%91-%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB%D8%9F/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

organizations. As a result, Arab nationalist rhetoric was replaced by a Wahhabi-inspired Sunni fundamentalist one.

The IF, and more specifically Ahrar al-Sham, became the most visible and active from among Raqqa's new rulers. They quickly took over the governor's opulent palace and secured the local branch of the Syrian Central Bank, which allegedly held the equivalent of around fifty million dollars.⁶⁵ The group also ran public services such as buses and provided electricity and water through their control of the power plant and the water department.⁶⁶ One local account from August 2013 summarizes Ahrar al-Sham's state-building strategy as follows:

Ahrar Al Sham Movement appears to be a soft power, but an ambitious one, doing its best to act as a parallel state and generating proposals that touch on all aspects of daily life, from school curricula to the management of state utilities. They are involved in both the health sector and the provision of emergency relief as well operating the Tell Abyad border crossing with a reasonable degree of competence. Dr. «H» could not hold back a smile of pride when he told me that the Movement had recently opened a Human Resources Office, a gateway for the full spectrum of experience and expertise, including from outside the Movement.⁶⁷

The transnational JN/Shura Council strategy was different. They took as their headquarters the provincial government building. Staying out of the drudgery of civil administration, the group focused on its three pillars: Allah, justice and dignity.⁶⁸ Thus they engaged heavily in religious preaching or *Daw'a* (whether through the educational sector, by influencing local religious leaders, or by simply setting up loudspeakers in the main city square), sought to take control of

⁶⁵ See: Nour Malas, "As Syrian Islamists Gain, It's Rebel Against Rebel," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2013. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323975004578499100684326558> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁶⁶ See: Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria's Jihadists face test of government in eastern city," *Reuters*, 9 April 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/09/us-syria-crisis-east-idUSBRE9380EX20130409> (Accessed 3/1/14). See also: Kristen Gillespie and Abdulrahman al-Masri, "Inside the Newsroom: The Raqqa Story that Wasn't," 28 November 2013. <http://syriadirect.org/main/30-reports/969-inside-the-newsroom-the-raqqa-story-that-wasn-t> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁶⁷ Mohammed Al Attar, "Al Raqqa: The reality of the military brigades, the administration of the liberated city and the revolutions to come," *The Republic*, 16 September 2013. <http://therepublicgs.net/2013/09/16/al-raqqa-the-reality-of-the-military-brigades-the-administration-of-the-liberated-city-and-the-revolutions-to-come/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁶⁸ For more on this see: Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing," The Quilliam Foundation <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf> (Accessed 3/1/14).

the justice system through the Shari'a Councils⁶⁹ and other newly formed legal organs, and ensured equal access to food, cooking gas and warm clothing.⁷⁰

Raqqa became a strange mix of Salafism and Baathism.⁷¹ Take education: veiling became required, much of the infrastructure was destroyed and attendance fell to less than 50%. At the same time, the ministerial bureaucracy continued to be the channel for dealing with educational matters; the curriculum continued to include a civics course praising the al-Assad regime. Another example is services: the militias collected taxes for services, including phone, electricity and water, even though the services and the employees running them continued to be paid by the regime (although they needed to make a treacherous trek to Deir Ezzour to collect their paycheck).

Overall, the presence of the Islamists was felt. The local committees, through which most service provision took place, were eventually renamed the Islamic Services Administration. Militias began carrying out religious education programs. The weekend would eventually be changed to Thursday and Friday.

Neither of the two Islamist factions was on particularly good terms with the declining NF, and within weeks of Raqqa's fall they both began putting pressure on Tel Abyad.⁷² They took over the crossing a few months later. In a 4 July 2013 interview with the opposition *Television Orient* website, NF's leader Abu Azzam explained that his fighters had gone to Qusayr (parts of which were controlled by NF), a few hundred kilometers to the southwest, to help their brothers during the heavy fighting there between rebels and the regime (backed by Hizbullah). The jihadis took

⁶⁹ Shari'a Courts and Councils have been a key element of strength for the jihadis. The delivery of justice in a clear, predictable and impartial manner, based on a fundamentalist reading of the Quran, is of growing appeal in parts of Syria that experienced looting, disorder and thuggery; this gives groups like ISIS an advantage in areas where the population remains and has an important say.

⁷⁰ See: Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "INSIGHT-Beheadings and spies help al Qaeda gain ground in Syria," *Reuters*, 5 December 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/05/syria-crisis-qaeda-idUSL5NOJG0GM20131205> (Accessed 3/1/14).

See also: Nour Malas, "As Syrian Islamists Gain, It's Rebel Against Rebel," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2013. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323975004578499100684326558> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁷¹ This should not necessarily be surprising, given that ISIS initially emerged as a combination of Islamist and Baathist resistance to the American presence in Iraq.

⁷² Rania Abouzeid, "In Syria, the Rebels Have Begun to Fight Among Themselves," *Time*, 26 March 2013. <http://world.time.com/2013/03/26/in-syria-the-rebels-have-begun-to-fight-among-themselves/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

advantage of this opportunity to storm Tel Abyad, he explained.⁷³ After being defeated in Qusayr, the NF largely disappeared.

In April 2013, merely a month after Raqqa was overrun, the tensions within JN finally came to the surface as an open struggle for leadership over Syria's al-Qaeda-linked transnational jihadi movement broke out. It all began with an audio message from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announcing that JN would merge with his Islamic State of Iraq to become the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁷⁴ The next day al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani issued a counterstatement denying the merger and asserting the independence of his movement as al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise.⁷⁵ The ensuing public spat, in which Ayman al-Zawahiri even weighed in, received wide coverage. The result was that the jihadis divided themselves between followers of al-Baghdadi and of al-Jolani.⁷⁶

In Raqqa the pro-Baghdadi faction proved stronger. The Aleppo-based MSC, which had been involved in the fighting in the Maskana Plain, was the first group to pledge allegiance to ISIS. Al-Nusra's local "emir" in Raqqa, Abu Saad al-Hadrami, also pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi.⁷⁷ That JN had been under the "Shura Council" umbrella during the battle for Raqqa seems to indicate it had become a junior partner in this region.

ISIS's first public-grabbing appearance came in May, when it publicly executed three men accused of being Alawite regime agents in a central roundabout in Raqqa.⁷⁸ ISIS relied on a

⁷³ Mohammed Iqbal Balu, "Harb al-Maabir: Ma'arik bayna Muqatili al-Dawla al-Islamiyya wa Kata'ib al-Farouq," *Orient News*, 7 April 2013. https://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=4229 (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁷⁴ Also in English called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), depending on how one chooses to translate the word "Sham," which can refer both to Syria and to the Levant. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HPQxA3> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁷⁵ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzVku-yCza> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁷⁶ Implicit in the split was that the former would have more of a pan-Islamic vision while the latter would retain (or acquire) a slight bent toward Syrian nationalism. Indeed the natural self-selection allegedly led many of Syria's foreign fighters to choose the former, thus reinforcing this distinction.

⁷⁷ A few months later, in July 2013, he switched allegiances back to al-Nusra, some say after Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly came out on al-Nusra's side, others because he realized that he had lost most of his authority to the head of ISIS in the province, Abu Luqman. According to reports, Abu Luqman is a Syrian named Ali Hammoud from Raqqa who fought in Iraq. See: "'Aks al-Sir yakshif 'an sirat al-dhatiyya li amir al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Suria,'" *'Aks al-Sir*, 4 November 2013. http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=1d646efe82673bb61871c4062c6dd05e (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁷⁸ For more on this see: "The ar-Raqqa executions ~ Confirmation of the Islamic State in Iraq and as-Sham," 15 May 2013. <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/05/15/the-ar-raqqa-executions-confirmation-of-the-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-as-sham/> (Accessed 3/1/14). On 16 September they publicly executed two more men.

variety of public intimidation techniques, including detentions and public punishments, to silence its critics. Public enforcement of particular social mores was not its main focus; it is likely that ISIS interfered less in daily affairs than some media accounts imply.⁷⁹ In many ways it simply took the regime's place (alongside Ahrar al-Sham).⁸⁰ Both groups acted with ideological zeal, implementing their slightly different versions of state-building side by side. It was like a duopolistic market, one might say, where competition was stiff but cordial. Although Ahar al-Sham was ubiquitous, it was in the end the black flag of ISIS which flew atop the provincial government's headquarters.⁸¹

By the summer of 2013 ISIS began tightening its grip. Its public opponents, including some from prominent Raqqa families, began disappearing.⁸² Italian Jesuit priest Paolo Dall'Oglio, a longtime Syria resident who had been deported by the regime early in the conflict, returned to Syria in July. Hoping to help mediate growing tensions between locals and the armed groups, he travelled to Raqqa intending to meet with ISIS and negotiate for the release of political prisoners in its custody. He was last seen heading to this meeting, but has not been heard of since.

On 17 July 2013 the FSA's "11th Division" was formed in Raqqa. It was a coalition of FSA-affiliated fighters who were banding together in the hope of both curbing ISIS and bringing order to a city that was increasingly being subject to the whims of the fundamentalists. They also hoped to reverse the FSA's continued decline.

⁷⁹ The gory and culturally totalitarian aspects of ISIS rule, which are no different, in fact, to the practices of the Saudi state, are often what gets emphasized most, preventing a proper understanding of the group. For more on ISIS's social control see: "How Did Raqqa Fall to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria?" *Syria Untold*, 13 January 2014. <http://www.syriauntold.com/en/story/2014/01/13/7835> (Accessed 3/1/14). Also see: "The Last Alawite in Raqqa," *London Review of Books*, 2 August 2013. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/08/02/syriafileing/the-last-alawite-in-raqqa/> (Accessed 3/1/14). Toward the end of the summer of 2013 ISIS began tightening its grip on Raqqa, and these types of practices hardened.

⁸⁰ Protests took place against al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. On 10 August a demonstration against Ahrar al-Sham was met with live gunfire, which further angered locals. Here is a produced June video on protesting al-Nusra: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hOsyH7zasw> (Accessed 3/1/14). Some of the slogans used in the protests were telling, with perhaps the cleverest being: "al-Haya al-Shar'aia Sarat Mukhabarat Jawwiyya," meaning the "Shura Council has become Air Force Intelligence." See: "Tandhimat Madaniyya tuwajih Dawla al-Iraq wal Sham al-Islamiyya fi al-Raqqa... wa taataridh 'ala intihakatiha," 4 September 2013, al-Sharq al-Awsat. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12699&article=742257#.UuhMMhAo5hF> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁸¹ For some of the billboards, see for instance: <https://twitter.com/3ez4/status/377230206177533952> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁸² Such as Abdullah Khalil, head of the local council, and Abdullah al-'Asaf, a judge in the local Shari'a Council. A prominent Syrian intellectual and supporter of the uprising from Raqqa, Yassin Hajj Saleh returned to Raqqa in the summer of 2013, only to leave a few months later.

One of the only relatively strong FSA groups with a presence in Raqqa was the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades, an heir of sorts to the NF. In the first half of August 2013 gunfights broke out between ISIS and FSA-linked fighters. On 14 August ISIS militants detonated a car bomb in front of the old train station, which served as the local HQ for Ahfad al-Rasul. ISIS accused Ahfad al-Rasul of being part of a foreign conspiracy to undermine their Islamic project; a few days later, Ahfad al-Rasul fighters left Raqqa.⁸³

A similar thing had occurred with fighters who sided with al-Jolani in April. Over the summer JN regrouped in al-Tabqa and in September re-entered Raqqa. In returning, JN absorbed much of the FSA's three-month-old 11th Division,⁸⁴ though some of its units also joined either ISIS or Ahrar al-Sham.⁸⁵ That same month, though, local JN leader Abu Saad al-Hadrami was captured by ISIS militants near Deir Hafer. After being held captive for several months, he was killed in January 2014.⁸⁶

Thus, ISIS and the IF (Ahrar al-Sham) remained the dominant factions in Raqqa Province throughout 2013. Their coexistence, though, became increasingly uneasy as summer gave way to fall. Both Tel Abyad and Bab al-Hawa, the border crossings formerly held by NF, were now shared between ISIS and Ahrar al-Sham. Although Ahrar al-Sham continued using Islamic precepts to justify its fight, its number one priority was – as with the FSA – regime overthrow. Furthermore, Ahrar al-Sham's rhetoric about the contours of an Islamic state was pluralistic, in sharp contrast to ISIS's immediate and absolutist vision. Finally, the IF had open channels with foreign parties. All of this made ISIS begin suspecting that Ahrar al-Sham had replaced NF as the new *sahwa* (awakenings) enemy.⁸⁷

⁸³ See: Lauren Williams, "Islamist militants drive Free Syrian Army out of Raqqa," *The Daily Star*, 15 August 2013. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-15/227444-islamist-militants-drive-free-syrian-army-out-of-raqqa.ashx> (Accessed 3/1/14).

An alleged ISIS prisoner here explains how Ahfad al-Rasul was being built up with foreign support to fight and destroy ISIS: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pE1zj4Z1jQY> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁸⁴ See: Alison Tahmizian Meuse, "Raqqa's FSA Brigades Join Jabhat al-Nusra," *Syria Deeply*, 20 September 2013. <http://beta.syriadeeply.org/2013/09/raqqas-fsa-brigades-join-jabhat-al-nusra/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁸⁵ See: Firas al-Hakkar, "The Mysterious Fall of Raqqa, Syria's Kandahar," *al-Akhbar*, 8 November 2013. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/mysterious-fall-raqqa-syria%E2%80%99s-kandahar-i> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁸⁶ See: Thaer al-Ahmad and Mazen Badr, "Al-Nusra urges rebels to help free leader from ISIL captivity," *Syria Newsdesk*, 27 December 2013. <http://syrianewsdesk.com/en/2013/12/27/news-al-nusra-urges-rebels-help-free-leader-isil-captivity> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁸⁷ Based on its experience in Iraq, ISIS sees "tribal awakenings" or Western-backed Sunni fighters, as a grave threat.

At the same time, the fear of *fitna* (schism, communal strife) was latent in all camps. Unity was considered the only way for the Syrian uprising, whether it meant Islamic State or regime overthrow, to emerge victorious. Both ISIS and the IF believed that unity could only be achieved through Islam and thus were wary of perceived attempts to sow discord.

Two incidents tipped the balance toward open confrontation.⁸⁸ The first came in September 2013, when an Ahrar al-Sham leader named Abu Obeida al-Binnishi was killed at an ISIS checkpoint outside of Atarib, near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in Aleppo Province. At this point the groups still remained on fairly good terms, as evinced by their interest in conducting a joint investigation into the case. Because ISIS does not accept submitting to any authority other than itself, third-party mediation was not an option. As a result, the parties agreed to conduct an investigation together. The investigation went nowhere. An official statement released by Ahrar al-Sham in October 2013 accused ISIS of sabotaging the process, describing the many cases in which the ISIS representative, “Abu Muslim al-Masri,” purposely postponed or ignored engaging in serious discussion of the case with Ahrar al-Sham’s “Shari’a Emir,” Abu abd al-Malek; this was in the rare cases that Ahrar al-Sham leaders were able to track him down.⁸⁹ The case comes across as one in which the desire for a negotiated solution came largely from the Ahrar al-Sham camp.

Problems were also brewing in the towns between Aleppo and Raqqa, specifically the important Maskana junction, from which the invasion of Raqqa had begun. In nearby Deir Hafer, west of Maskana, the “Abu Dajana Battalion,” an early FSA-affiliated group that had become the local Ahrar al-Sham affiliate, was rubbing locals the wrong way through its mixture of mismanagement and intimidation.⁹⁰ It was in Maskana, though, that tensions spilled over in early December 2013.

⁸⁸ A third famous case is the November beheading of Mohammed Faris, an Ahrar al-Sham leader in Aleppo, by ISIS militants.

⁸⁹ See: “Ahrar al-Sham tarwi qisat al-tahqiq fi maqtil al-Binnishi wa mumatila Da’ash,” *Zaman al-Wasl*, 5 October 2013. <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/41811.html> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁹⁰ See comment on Deir Hafer Facebook page, available (google cache) at: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:wILFZIJ_LJEJ:https://ar-ar.facebook.com/here.deirhafer/posts/621040054585538+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us (Accessed 3/1/14). The case of the Abu Dujana Battalion was one that ISIS brought up in its mediation with Ahrar over the killing of Abu Obeida.

Although the two sides disagree on the specifics, fighting was sparked by ISIS's detention of a man named Ali al-Alawi in Maskana. Al-Alawi seems to have been able to move freely in the area, acting as a middleman between regime and rebels. According to Ahrar al-Sham, al-Alawi had been summoned by the city's Shari'a Court but was abducted by ISIS before being able to appear there. According to ISIS,⁹¹ he was a regime agent who was being brought to justice; when news broke that al-Alawi was being held, armed men from Ahrar al-Sham surrounded ISIS headquarters. Two Ahrar al-Sham leaders entered and at gunpoint demanded that al-Alawi be released.⁹² According to Ahrar al-Sham, the men were there to attempt mediation and were promptly kidnapped. The Ahrar al-Sham-affiliated Musaib bin Umair Battalion, though, later issued a statement disassociating itself from these events.⁹³

Either way, deadly armed clashes broke out between the groups. ISIS attacked Ahrar al-Sham's headquarters in Maskana and forced them to withdraw west to the al-Jirah Airbase, which served as a prison and base for Ahrar al-Sham.⁹⁴ ISIS captured several Ahrar fighters, among them a leader named Hussein Suleiman. Known as "Abu Rayan," he was a doctor who had run the Tel Abyad border crossing for Ahrar al-Sham after it had been taken over from NF.⁹⁵ Abu Rayan was from Maskana and had been involved in the formation of the Musaib bin Umar Battalion.

⁹¹ ISIS has gone to great lengths to explain its side of the story, in greater detail than Ahrar al-Sham. See: "Qatli bi Niran al-iqtital al-janibi baina Ahrar al-Sham wal Dawla wa hadhihi al-tafasil," 10 December 2013. <http://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/44102.html> (Accessed 3/1/14). On 11 December local ISIS leader Abu Dajan al-Kuwaiti issued an audio statement explaining their side of the story. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7LcNngdjUo> (Accessed 3/1/14). He also conducted a detailed interview about the events: "Hiwar Sahafi m'a abi dajana al-Kuwaiti amir tandhim al-dawla al-islamiyya fil Iraq wal Sham fil Maskana," *Syrian Media Center*, 6 January 2014. <http://www.syrianmediacenter.com/%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁹² See: "Ahdath Maskana bil Tafasil yarwiha amir al-dawla al-islamiyya fil Maskana," 19 December 2013. <https://thabat111.wordpress.com/2013/12/19/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81/> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁹³ They pointed to Ali al-Alawi as the source of the problem. See: "Shabbih wara al-ishtibakat al-lati jarat baina Ahrar al-Sham wal Dawla al-Islamiyya fi madina Maskana birif Haleb," *'Aks al-Sir*, 17 December 2013. http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=cdbc18bdad8627cb9c61b360fbc88d62 (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁹⁴ "Akbar jara'im Da'ash 'alal itlaq, "Dawla al-Baghdadi" taslim al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya tabiban qiyadiyan b'ad qatlihi wal tamthil bi juthathihi," *'Aks al-Sir*, 31 December 2013. http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=058e6dd8d4b2b4cd2c80c63d917868f0 (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁹⁵ See for instance this mid-August directives issued in his name: <http://sadaalsham.net/?p=3787> (Accessed 3/1/14).

According to local ISIS leader Abu Dajana al-Kuwaiti, Abu Rayan was one of the men who had entered ISIS headquarters and demanded that Ali al-Alawi be released. Later that year it emerged that Abu Rayan had been killed in ISIS custody. On 31 December 2013 ISIS exchanged the remains of Abu Rayan and several others for nine prisoners held by Ahrar al-Sham. Abu Rayan and the others showed signs of having been tortured before being killed.⁹⁶

The case of Abu Rayan received extensive coverage.⁹⁷ Over the next few days clashes broke out between ISIS and rebel groups throughout northern and central Syria (particularly Idlib, Aleppo and Raqqa Provinces). ISIS fighters withdrew from some of their positions in Idlib and Aleppo. In Raqqa the ISIS headquarters in the provincial administration building were besieged by JN and Ahrar al-Sham, with support from sympathetic local fighters. According to one account, al-Nusra cordoned off the eastern part of the town while Ahrar al-Sham blocked the west. Unexpectedly, Ahrar al-Sham fighters withdrew, allowing ISIS to break the siege and disperse the attackers. At the time of writing, the jihadi mix of ISIS, Ahrar al-Sham and JN remains combustible.⁹⁸

This paper has mostly focused on relations between the rebels. They are of course not the only players in the area, much less in Syria as a whole. As noted earlier, Raqqa's north divides Syria's northeastern Kurdish-majority area with a smaller pocket of Kurdish population in the northwest. Any form of Kurdish expansionism would need to pass through here.⁹⁹ The main Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is linked to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), clashed with rebel groups near Raqqa throughout 2013. The YPG's presence in Raqqa is peripheral, though, mainly in the province's northern Kurdish-majority villages both to the east and the west. The Kurds, that is, have not been a key player in the dynamics in Raqqa.

⁹⁶ "Akbar jara'im Da'ash 'alal itlaq, "Dawla al-Baghdadi" taslim al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya tabiban qiyadiyan b'ad qatlihi wal tamthil bi juthatihi," *'Aks al-Sir*, 31 December 2013.

http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=058e6dd8d4b2b4cd2c80c63d917868f0 (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁹⁷ Every Friday since March 2011 the Syrian opposition has given a name to the anti-regime activities of that day. The following Friday was called the Friday of "The Martyr Abu Rayan, Victim of Betrayal."

⁹⁸ Although ISIS retained control of Raqqa, there were reports that its leader, Abu Luqman, was killed and its main judge, Abu Ali al-Shari'ai, captured, though these cannot be verified. See: Firas al-Hakkar, "Hal takhsara al-dawla 'asimatiha?" *al-Akhbar*, 8 January 2013. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/198250> (Accessed 3/1/14).

⁹⁹ See: Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish militia aims to connect Kurdish enclaves in Syria," *al-Monitor*, 24 November 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/kurdistan-syria-militias-turkey.html> (Accessed 3/1/14).

Nonetheless, parts of Raqqa border what is now a Kurdish sphere of influence. In late July clashes between Kurdish militias and Sunni rebels and jihadis spilled into Tel Abyad in the form of kidnappings and murders of leaders and fighters. According to one account, after Kurdish fighters captured an ISIS leader ISIS fighters abducted 300 Kurds from the area, who were then exchanged for the leader.¹⁰⁰ Much of the fighting took place in villages surrounding Tel Abyad rather than the town itself.

The second point worth stressing is that the regime retains a two-fold presence in Raqqa. On the one hand, as noted earlier, much of the regime's administrative apparatus remains in the city. On the other, the regime maintains a military presence in the province. Since the fall of Raqqa rebels have regularly targeted the regime's three remaining positions in the province (the 93rd Brigade, the 17th Division Headquarters and the al-Tabqa Military Airport). The 17th Division, in particular, has been targeted by various rebel factions, and even some parts of it have been overrun by rebels.

Immediately following the fall of Raqqa, rebel fighters and opposition activists believed it was a matter of days before the 17th Division and the al-Tabqa Military Airport fell. Videos of rebel fighters striking these fortifications proliferated, and the base became permanently "on the verge of falling." That remains the case. The regime strategy appears to be one of avoiding direct confrontation with the rebels while maintaining control over the military facilities in the area. Much of Syria's food and energy (oil and hydroelectric) comes from this area, and, given what the country is going through, the disruptions in the production of either since the rebel takeover have been mild.¹⁰¹

ISIS's detractors have for some time questioned the relationship between ISIS and the regime, given the confluence of interests between the two. The fact that the regime has allowed Raqqa to

¹⁰⁰ See: "Itlaq abu Mus'ab muqabil 300 m'ataqil Kurdi," *Orient News*, 22 July 2013. http://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=4487 See also: Erika Solomon, "Islamist-Kurdish fighting spreads in rebel-held Syria," Reuters, 21 July 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/21/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE96J06D20130721>

¹⁰¹ See: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Syria's oilfields create surreal battle lines amid chaos and tribal loyalties," *The Guardian*, 25 June 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/25/syria-oil-assad-rebels-tribes> See also: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad "Syria's al-Nusra Front – ruthless, organised and taking control," *The Guardian*, 10 July 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/10/syria-al-nusra-front-jihadi> Local farmers have found it difficult logistically to sell their crops, but otherwise war markets appear to have emerged to trade goods across Syria.

emerge relatively unscathed is often furnished as the main piece of evidence of this circumstantial connection.

The important dynamics in Raqqa in 2013, though, occurred between three distinct rebel factions: the FSA (“secular opposition”), the Islamic Front (“moderate Islamists”) and ISIS (“radical Islamists”). As things stand now, neither of the three has a persuasive banner under which to unify the rebellion. As with Libya, it seems that many analysts have, amidst the Arab Spring fever, forgotten that Syria has been ruled for many decades by a highly ideological regime. Only through a strong unifying ideology will the country be put back together. Islam and the *ancien régime* appear to be the only options currently on the table.