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# **THE PRIMACY OF PRAXIS**

## CLERICAL AUTHORITY IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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# CONTENTS

- \* SUMMARY
- \* KEY POINTS
- \* 1 INTRODUCTION
- \* 2 CONTROLLING THE FIRE
- \* 6 INTERNATIONAL JIHAD
- \* 10 JIXADI PRAXIS AS AUTHENTICITY
- \* 12 CONCLUSION
- \* 15 ENDNOTES
- \* 17 ABOUT THE AUTHOR
- \* 18 ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

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## SUMMARY

A close look at the competing claims, actors, and movements for authority within the Syrian civil war reveals three distinct periods of political and religious influence: that of Syrian scholars, who were the first to inject religious language into the revolution; that of Salafi scholars predominantly from the Gulf; and lastly, that of jihadi organizations like ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, who were active on the ground.

This paper focuses on which figures relied on action—rather than theoretical abstraction—to establish legitimacy and authority on the ground in Syria. Tracing the conflict from the first clerical attempts to coordinate the Syrian opposition to the conflict's regionalization, and, later, internationalization, this paper demonstrates that the words of actors on the ground are more likely than those of far-off figures—however popular—to resound effectively.



## KEY POINTS

- \* The initial exile of clerics during the Syrian conflict's early stages gave rise to a second wave of Gulf Salafi clerics who internationalized the conflict.
- \* As the influence of domestic and regional religious scholars faded, a vacuum of clerical authority in the conflict emerged. This space became dominated by brutal jihadi actors.
- \* The international community has miscalculated the credibility of moderate actors on the ground and has favored organizations that have grown detached and disconnected from the conflict. Brutal organizations have capitalized on this crisis of authority.
- \* More than scholarly merit or standing, it is the ability of an actor or group to deliver through action that becomes the ultimate marker of authenticity, and in Syria's case, piety.

# INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 2011, the Syrian conflict has presented a carousel of actors, movements, and propositions to the outside world. While well-known jihadi organizations arrayed against the Syrian government captured the most international attention, such groups were among a much broader cast competing for authority within the opposition. In order to understand how and why political groups rose to prominence at different times, this paper explores the manner in which clerical authority is derived from praxis. Put another way, this paper demonstrates how a range of actors on the ground tried to establish authority through action, rather than theoretical abstraction.

Examining competing claims by different scholars and groups in the Syrian conflict shows three distinctive periods of authority during which the influence of particular groups rose and fell. A group of indigenous Syrian scholars first injected religious language into the revolution, followed by Salafi scholars predominantly from the Gulf along with countries like Egypt and Jordan, and lastly came then-millenarian jihadi organizations such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. This paper will account for why these actors lost support in the conflict when they did, and why differing constructions of theology came to triumph at specific moments.

The Dutch scholar Roel Meijer has previously explored the role of praxis—understood here as the process by which

theoretical ideas are actualized in the pursuit of social change—with regard to the Saudi jihadi Yusuf al-'Uyayri, a topic which remains vastly understudied.<sup>1</sup> Within the Syrian context, contestations of religious authority borne of praxis have produced a heavily splintered and fragmented Sunni opposition. This is true for Sunni Islam in general but is particularly evident among the constellation of Salafi actors who have, at different times, aligned themselves with the Syrian cause.

In the broadest sense, three phases of established clerical authority can be identified. The first instance took place as parts of the uprising transitioned from peaceful protest to armed resistance in the form of groups like the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At this time, indigenous Syrian clerics who supported the uprising tried to establish a strict framework of military law to govern the armed opposition, for example by codifying rules of engagement. As the crisis persisted and conflict worsened, most of these clerics found themselves forced into exile, issuing edicts from abroad and losing the support of those actually fighting on the ground. This gave rise to the second wave of mainly Gulf Salafi clerics—supported by others in countries such as Egypt and Jordan—who internationalized the conflict and precipitated the unprecedented wave of foreign fighters who flooded into the country. Much like their predecessors, however, these clerics suffered from the same problem of remoteness, having limited themselves to inciting others to jihad from the relative comfort of Riyadh, Cairo, or Doha.

A vacuum of authority had then begun to emerge for the new international jihadis gathering in Syria and Iraq, who soon comprised the third wave. This space was quickly dominated by the most brutal jihadi actors operating in that conflict: ISIS and, to a lesser extent, al-Qaeda. Members of the former even underscored how their authority was derived from actions by chanting the group's popular refrain: "*baqiyya wa tatamaddad*," meaning "remaining and expanding."<sup>2</sup>

## CONTROLLING THE FIRE

Although the Syrian conflict is far from resolved, it is already the subject of fierce revisionist history. Supporters of the Assad regime, among others, have attempted to portray the entire uprising as extremist in nature, an attempt by Sunni radicals to revive the Muslim Brotherhood's agitations of the 1970s.<sup>3,4</sup> These accusations either misunderstand or deliberately misrepresent the nature and dynamics of the original uprising. As was commonplace across the Middle East, mosques became the starting point for many of the so-called "*ayam al-ghadab*," or "days of rage," providing a concentration point from which popular unrest became manifest. This is hardly unsurprising and should not necessarily be taken as an indicator of religious sentiment, let alone extremism. The centrality of mosques as a focal point of gatherings is best understood as a reflection of political realities in the Middle East, a region where public congregations of any kind are heavily

restricted. The only way for large numbers to gather naturally is during prayer, making mosques natural starting points for the protest movements that swept the region. Syria was no exception.

The idioms of defiance are important here. Syria's uprising was initially defined by the same language that framed anti-regime opposition in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, with generic calls for the overthrow of the regime like "*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*," meaning "the people want to overthrow the regime." The language of Syria's revolution was indisputably secular during its incipient phases, as each Friday was given a particular theme, such as dignity, glory, martyrs, steadfastness, persistence, greatness, or rage.<sup>5</sup> When the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's exiled leadership called for protests in April 2011, their calls went largely unanswered, even in the group's traditional strongholds of Aleppo and Hama.<sup>6,7</sup>

As the crisis persisted, however, Syrian Sunni clerics found themselves playing increasingly important roles in the uprising. Their mosques quickly became the front line of anti-regime agitation, with government forces frequently attacking the worshippers inside. On one occasion at the ancient Omari mosque in Daraa, one of the main centers of the uprising, soldiers fast-roped onto the mosque roof during prayer before opening fire. Many of the worshippers were trapped for more than 90 minutes, coming under assault from tank shells and machine gun fire. Four people

were killed, among them the imam's son.<sup>8</sup> The symbolism of the event was every bit as offensive as the assault itself.

The mosque was among Syria's oldest, built in the seventh century after forces commanded by the Prophet Mohammed's companion, Omar bin al-Khattab, conquered Daraa.

Episodes such as this began to unravel the delicate accommodation Bashar al-Assad had reached with some Sunni groups since coming to power in 2000.<sup>9</sup> He had hoped to reverse some of the animosities created by his father, leading to a number of delicate engagements with groups and Islamic traditions that the Syrian state had traditionally been uncomfortable with, although the precise contours of this arrangement are beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>10</sup> For present purposes, what matters is that when the pressures of the uprising took hold, an indigenous and restless body of clerics was already within the country, injecting a language of religion that eventually replaced that of revolution.

As the military campaign against Assad's regime took hold, clerics who had backed the rebel movement sought to control the newly emerging armed groups. Arab experiences throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries—from the Lebanese and Algerian civil wars to the war in Iraq and Libya's revolution—suggested that

anything other than a tightly controlled armed opposition would quickly descend into chaos. To an extent, this was inevitable. The decentralization of the Syrian uprising, with its lack of national coordination, ensured that highly localized characteristics dominated the behavior of different groups in different areas.

The first serious attempt at creating a national umbrella movement to coordinate the opposition, the first wave of praxis in the Syrian conflict, came from the former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Moaz al-Khatib. He had vocally backed the opposition and was subsequently detained by the regime several times before fleeing the country in July 2012. Along with others, including secular activists, he helped create the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, often referred to as ETILAF, and served as its first president.<sup>11</sup>

Another prominent member of Syria's clergy is Sheikh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, who comes from a celebrated family of Islamic scholars. He took a strident line against the regime from the earliest days of the uprising and condemned the government's heavy-handed treatment of protesters, the killing of innocent people, and its assault on mosques, particularly after Friday prayers. Yaqoubi also issued a series of fatwas for rebel





fighters that counselled against extremist interpretations of jihad, including a prohibition on the use of suicide bombers and land mines.<sup>12</sup> These injunctions might seem ridiculous when examining the trajectory of the Syrian conflict today, but they had an important role to play in 2012 before groups like ISIS emerged. For a while, it certainly seemed as though the message of Yaqoubi and others managed to hold the line against millenarian militancy. For example, in the first two years of Syria's conflict only 22 suicide bombings were conducted,<sup>13</sup> compared with 247 during the first two years of the conflict in Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

However misplaced it may now seem, there was an optimism in the early stages of the war that fighters in the battlefield could be relied upon not only to restrain themselves but also to refer to clerical authorities for guidance. "I urge everyone in the war to remember their [pure] intentions," argued another prominent Syrian scholar, Sheikh Abdul-Hadi al-Kharsa. "You should refer to the scholars to see if what you are doing is valid in Islam."<sup>15</sup>

Although many of these clerics were forced into exile, they still hoped to exert some influence over the armed opposition as the crisis spiralled out of control. Even influential Salafi-jihadi theorists of Syrian origin repeatedly condemned the emergence of avowedly jihadi organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and urged Syrians to support the FSA.<sup>16</sup> Among them was Abu Basir al-Tartusi, whose real name is Abd al-Mun'am Mustafa Halima. Tartusi is even known to have entered Syria on short trips

Sheikh Abdulhalik Shamiyye, a second-hand book seller looks at a book in front of his store in Aleppo, Syria. *Stringer/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

alongside the FSA to advise its fighters in Homs, rather than align himself with extremist jihadi groups. He did, however, later develop relations with more austere groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham.<sup>17</sup> In 2011, Tartusi told Point of Order, a show on Gulf satellite TV channel Al-Arabiya, that the FSA was an “arm of the revolution” of which he was “proud.”<sup>18</sup>

With the exception of Tartusi, the presence that these clerics had inside Syria invested their opposition to the regime with authority. Their hopes of inserting religious scholars in each of the revolutionary military councils were dashed as the potency of their influence faded along with their detachment from the conflict. For example, for those on the ground, Moaz al-Khatib eventually came to exemplify the kind of pragmatism that only those divorced from the everyday privations of the conflict could allow themselves. While the exiled leadership was already causing resentment because of their relative security and proclivity for conferences in comfortable hotels, Khatib issued a statement on Facebook in 2013 saying that he was ready for dialogue with the regime to bring the crisis to an end.<sup>19</sup> The statement was met with immediate and widespread uproar. Even the National Coalition, whose presidency Khatib had resigned by that stage, issued a statement distancing itself from his remarks for fear of losing their support base inside the country.



A Syrian rebel fighter reads the Qur'an as he sits in a fortified position held by a rebel group. AMER ALHAMWE/AFP/Getty Images

# INTERNATIONAL JIHAD

With much of the original Syrian leadership exiled from the country, the conflict took on an international dimension among predominantly, though not exclusively, Salafi clerics from the Gulf. This happened for two reasons. The first relates to the audacity of the Assad regime, which had unleashed a barbarous assault against protesters. Cases such as Hamza al-Khatib, a 13-year-old boy from Daraa who disappeared into the bowels of the regime's dungeons in April 2011, exemplified this. After a month of being held incommunicado, his badly mutilated corpse was eventually returned to his family. Covered in bruises, his family discovered bullet wounds in his kneecaps, which his tormentors had filled with cigarette butts and ash. Khatib's penis had also been cut and mutilated.<sup>20</sup> This was hardly an isolated case. The regime's loyalist apparatchiks flooded social media with horrific videos of state-sanctioned abuse from across Syria, spawning sympathy for the nascent armed opposition that had emerged. The systematic nature of Assad's killing machine was later confirmed by a Syrian army defector,

known as Caesar, who documented more than 50,000 deaths of those held in Syrian detention centers.<sup>21</sup>

While news of such atrocities inflamed domestic opposition and caught the attention of international observers, it did not adequately account for the internationalization of the conflict that took place, first to others in the region and later further afield. After all, it was hardly news to anyone that the Syrian regime tortures its political opponents. That much was well known for years and was, of course, already a significant motivating factor for the original uprising. Moreover, for Arabs in neighboring countries, repressive tactics used by the Syrian regime against its opponents did not differ in any meaningful way from the types of repression they would have faced in their own countries. Why, then, did Syria so dramatically capture the imagination of jihadi actors abroad?

For Salafi clerics across the broader Levant, North Africa, and Gulf, the Syrian tinderbox represented their worst fears. They watched the same videos of protesters being tortured that provoked widespread condemnation from Western powers but were witnessing with their ears—not their eyes. What mattered was not the torture itself, but what was being said to victims. Here, regime soldiers directed uniquely loaded sectarian insults against

normative Sunni beliefs and figures, such as the Prophet Muhammad's wife, Ayisha, or against his companions, known as the *sahaba*. In other cases, protesters were forced to commit blasphemy by answering "Bashar" when asked questions such as "who is your God," "who created you," or "who is better, Allah or Bashar?" Protesters were also made to prostrate and kiss Assad's picture while being asked: "Who is your Lord?"<sup>22,23</sup> The injection of sectarian framing into the conflict by the Syrian regime has been extensively documented in a study by Daniel Corstange and Erin York, revealing how the overriding notions of civic identity and unity that dominated the earliest stages of the revolution were overwritten by the indelible brushstrokes of sectarian distrust.<sup>24</sup> The result was that minorities were scared into retreat, while the passions of Sunni radicals were both ignited and unleashed.

Moreover, these sectarian insults inflamed the fears of those who had come to regard the deteriorating situation in Syria not as a struggle for human rights, but as one for the future direction of Islam itself. Those fears were only accentuated by the Iranian regime's unconditional support for Assad. In a not atypical statement from a Gulf Salafi cleric, the Kuwaiti preacher Sheikh Nabil al-Awadi slammed the Syrian Ba'athists and their supporters.<sup>25</sup> He repeatedly pronounced *takfir*, the claim that another is impure or a non-Muslim, against the regime and its allies because Assad belongs to Islam's heterodox Alawite sect and is backed by Shi'i Iran. He therefore concluded they had,

*...distorted Islam, in fact, they left Islam and did not even believe in it for a day. ... The Syrian crisis is not an issue of the poor or oppressed. Instead, it is a battle for survival, O nation of [Sunni] Islam! You*

*people of the true and pure religion, you must unite to support your brothers in Syria.*<sup>26</sup>

Awadi could not have painted a more desperate situation. Within months he was inciting jihad in Syria, offering advice to those participating in the fighting there, and praying for Allah to "accept the jihad of our people in Syria."<sup>27, 28</sup>

Open calls for jihad began shortly after. The highly influential Saudi cleric Mohammed al-Arifi, who has built a large following on social media, also echoed Awadi's message. During a sermon in June 2013 at the historic 'Amr bin al-As mosque in Cairo, Arifi declared that Muslim scholars had agreed on the necessity of jihad in Syria.<sup>29</sup> Within days of Arifi's speech, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi attended a large public rally alongside popular Salafi scholars such as Muhammad Hassan, from the northern Dakahlia governate, who also declared jihad in Syria to be an obligation.<sup>30</sup> When Morsi took to the podium after Hassan, he began by declaring to an already enraptured crowd, "Here I am [at your service], Syria."<sup>31</sup>

A flood of Salafi scholars began declaring jihad in Syria. Salman al-Awda, a prominent Saudi Salafi who was active in the kingdom's *sahwa*, or "awakening," movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, has enjoyed a large following both at home and abroad for decades. Awda wrote a book called "Revolution Questions" in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings and encouraged Arab citizens to seek their rights through social engagement rather than revolutionary change.<sup>32</sup> Yet, even in the Syrian context, Awda reasoned that jihad was necessary. When asked on Twitter about whether the fighting in Syria is jihad, he replied, "Fighting in Syria for



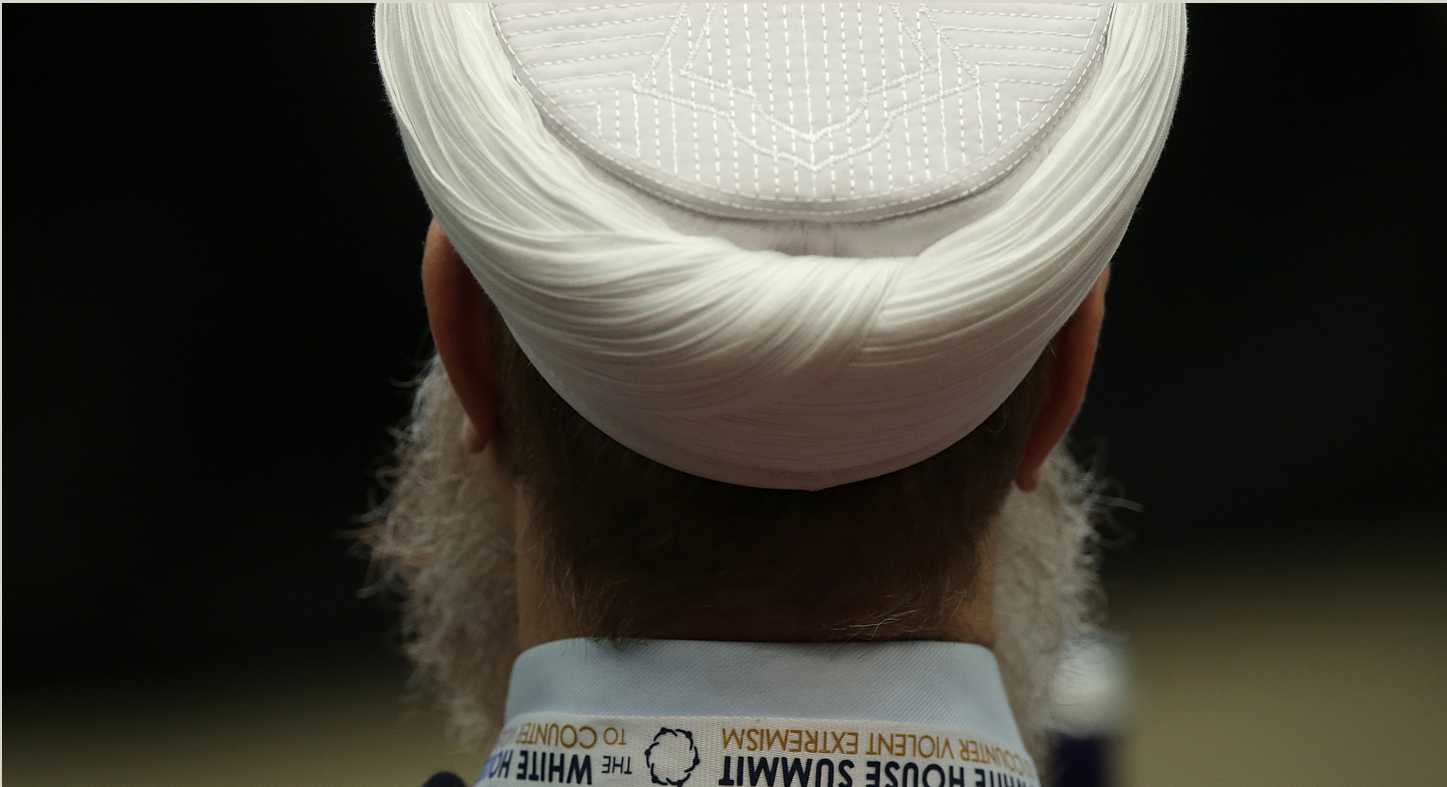
Smoke plumes rising during regime bombardment in the rebel-held town of Arbin in the Eastern Ghouta enclave. AMER ALMOHIBANY/AFP/Getty Images

the Syrian people is jihad and is resistance to a tyrannical regime and whomever stands with it.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most wild-eyed denunciation of the Syrian regime came from an exiled cleric, Adnan al-Aroor, who had left the country after the failed Islamist uprisings of the early 1980s, which were primarily led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Aroor was another Salafi cleric who had been based in Saudi Arabia since leaving Syria and declared the need for armed opposition to the regime from the earliest stages of the attempted 2011 revolution. During a particularly boisterous appearance on the Islamic TV channel *Wesal*—whose regional office in Saudi Arabia was closed by the authorities in 2014 for its promotion of sectarian content—Aroor famously declared that those from the Alawite sect would be subjected to a “harsh and painful” punishment.<sup>34</sup> “By Allah,”

he said, “we shall mince them in meat grinders and we shall feed their flesh to the dogs.” Like Tartusi, Aroor also tried to bolster the FSA with support, but he spoke in much more intemperate and unguarded language than his counterpart.

These clerics, and many others like them, enjoyed authority for two reasons. The first was due to their reputations, stature, and standing among an internet audience of millions. Arifi, for example, has more than 21 million followers on Twitter, more than 24 million followers on Facebook, and more than a million subscribers to his YouTube channel.<sup>35</sup> Although he is at the more popular end of the spectrum, he is not atypical, with many foreign scholars who called for jihad in Syria enjoying a support base in the millions. Both Awadi and Awda have more than 11 million followers on Twitter. Meanwhile, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, widely regarded as the most



Syrian scholar and Muslim cleric Sheikh Muhammad al-Yaqubi listens as U.S. President Barack Obama addresses the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism. *Win McNamee/Getty Images*

important spiritual influence on the Muslim Brotherhood, has a relatively modest following of just over 2 million, though his findings are amplified much more widely through organs of the Muslim Brotherhood around the world.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, the impassioned tones with which these preachers conveyed a sense of urgency about the conflict in Syria won them wide accolades during a phase of the conflict when praxis was primarily demonstrated through talking about the conflict and inciting passions against the Assad regime. After all, the flow of foreign fighters was only just beginning at this stage, and preachers who vocally denounced Assad could claim to be doing their bit as a result.

Yet the very thing that gave these scholars an opportunity to promote the Syrian cause—their presence outside the country and fame achieved through social media and satellite

television—also provided the means for their unravelling. As ever-growing numbers of foreign fighters flocked to Syria and Iraq throughout 2013-2015 to participate in jihad alongside militant groups, the inevitable question arose: If fighting the regime was an individual religious obligation required of every Muslim, then why weren't the scholars advocating such jihad also present on the battlefield? Although Tartusi and Aroor had made short, sporadic visits into Syria, this did little to protect their reputations. Aroor's own son Jaber pointed out the hypocrisy of his father's position on live TV, arguing that while he implored others to jihad he was himself sitting in comfortable television studios.<sup>37</sup> It was an awkward, deeply uncomfortable moment for Aroor, who was present on the same show when the remarks were made.<sup>38</sup> The clip undermined Aroor with all constituencies. For those who worried about his angry sectarian rhetoric, whether

they supported Assad's regime or not, the clip laid bare the hypocrisy of his position. It also served the same purpose among those who not only agreed with him about the necessity of jihad in Syria but who were also engaging in it themselves.

Arifi attracted similar criticism when he flew to London just days after giving his fiery speech in Cairo. Having arrived in the UK, he was photographed strolling casually along a high street in the capital wearing trousers and a shirt, rather than the flowing robe and headdress commonly worn in the Gulf. It provided a sharp visual metaphor for the divergence between the angry rhetoric that conveyed a sense of impending doom within the walls of the 'Amr bin al-As mosque in Cairo and the more sedate environment of a British high street. Widespread ridicule followed on social media with the hashtag "Arifi's summer residence in London."<sup>39</sup> Twitter users mockingly circulated images of him talking with a woman in the street, describing it as a "picture of the mujahid field commander of the Brigades of the Islamic nation's [umma] scholars."<sup>40</sup> The apparent hypocrisy was also widely reported in both the Arabic and English press at the time, again undermining Arifi's claims to authenticity.<sup>41</sup>

## JIHADI PRAXIS AS AUTHENTICITY

An unprecedented mobilization of foreign fighters occurred through 2013-2016 as tens of thousands of individuals from across the world migrated to Syria in support of jihadi organizations. The most prominent among these organizations were ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, with both groups establishing claims to

authenticity and legitimacy primarily through praxis, rather than scholarship.<sup>42,43</sup> While the scholars already discussed may have encouraged jihad or spread intemperate views which could be considered indistinguishable from those espoused by ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra, they nonetheless relied upon their scholarly credentials to establish their authority. This was not the case with the militant groups.

ISIS, for example, sought to ensure that its claims to authenticity were derived from military dominance on the ground. Consider the visual dynamics of this first. Whenever ISIS projected images of its key leadership figures, they almost always appeared in military fatigues, wearing tactical vests and surrounded by arms. The most vivid example of this came from Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the former spokesman of ISIS who was portrayed in precisely that guise on the front cover of the group's English-language magazine, *Rumiyah*, after he was killed in a drone strike.<sup>44</sup>

From a leadership perspective, the only significant exception to this was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, whose carefully choreographed appearance in the Nuri mosque of Mosul was designed for different ends. Baghdadi appeared not as a soldier, or even as a member of ISIS, but as the caliph of all Muslims. His claim to have revived this ancient Islamic institution therefore required a different form: a powerful man dressed in simple robes. Yet, even this orchestrated theater demonstrated the primacy of the practical. First was the sheer audacity of what was transpiring. Here was the hunted leader of a barbarous terrorist movement appearing so brazenly in public to deliver a sermon and lead congregational prayers. Of course, when Baghdadi finally

dismounted the pulpit to join the congregants, he was surrounded again by the imagery of ISIS with a row of AK-47s propped up against the walls around him as he led the prayer. That much had been spelled out in his sermon moments before. "This is the establishment of the religion," he said, "a book that guides and a sword that supports."<sup>45</sup> The corollary was clear: here is a group whose members don't just talk, they also get things done.

At least Baghdadi could claim some pedigree standing within the broader jihadi movement. He had participated in the insurgency against Western troops after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and held a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from Baghdad's Islamic University, since renamed Iraqi University, with a speciality in sharia law.<sup>46</sup> That potency of praxis, however, resounded through the entire group. Even clueless foreign fighters, who unlike Baghdadi had no credentials to speak of, suddenly found themselves supremely empowered. Within months of arriving in Syria, an 18-year-old former butcher from Sydney named Abdullah Elmir appeared in a propaganda video aimed at his peers in the West. Released in October 2014, the video showed Elmir dressed in combat gear and surrounded by at least a hundred other fighters who were similarly attired and armed. Elmir proceeded to deliver an address to Western nations participating in the anti-ISIS coalition:<sup>47</sup>

Bring your planes, bring everything you want to us, because it will not harm us. Why? Because we have Allah, and this is something you do not have. Is it not apparent to you, how are these victories possible? These victories come only from Allah and that is how these small numbers of soldiers that we have, we take these massive victories.<sup>48</sup>

Countless videos like this appeared, most of which featured men dressed in combat gear performing military roles.<sup>49</sup> This is not limited to ISIS. The group's greatest rivals in the Syrian jihadi arena have been Jabhat al-Nusra or its various incarnations and, more specifically, its leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. While ISIS dominated international headlines and pulled focus with its actions in the eastern parts of the country, Jolani's supporters ensured their figurehead was not forgotten.

Aleppo had been the jewel in the rebel movement's crown ever since parts of the east fell beyond Assad's control in mid-2012. This was not for any strategic or military purpose but because of its symbolic value, the emblem of a movement with momentum on its side. For Assad, reclaiming Aleppo was an urgent priority and occupied his planning throughout most of 2016, not long after Russia formally entered the conflict. By the summer, Aleppo was essentially besieged, with the exception of a few short-lived revanchist rebel campaigns, and the likelihood of Aleppo falling back into regime hands grew increasingly inevitable.

By this point, Jabhat al-Nusra had rebranded to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and released a series of pictures showing Jolani along with the group's alleged military leaders sprawled over maps, presumably planning a way to break the siege.<sup>50</sup> Pictures like these had been clearly staged and designed to boost morale, but there was broader messaging at play too. These pictures were designed to show jihadi leaders as intrepid warrior-scholars, their names always prefaced by the honorific title of "sheikh," who were risking and sacrificing their lives on the front lines.





A member of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) carries his weapon after ousting ISIS jihadists from the town of Hajin. *DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images*

That became even more obvious when further pictures of Jolani were released in early 2018 almost immediately after Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—which Jolani led after Jabhat Fateh al-Sham ceased to exist—lost the Abu al-Duhur Military Airbase. Located in Idlib governorate, the capture of the base had been one of the group's (then Jabhat al-Nusra) most significant victories in the province. HTS had been widely criticized for not putting up enough resistance and withdrawing from the base, essentially gifting it back to Assad. Within days, pictures were released of Jolani on the front lines, talking to his men and rallying the troops for their next fight.

## CONCLUSION

The study of praxis within jihadi circles points to the much broader crisis of legitimate authority within Islam. Which scholars and, by extension, interpretations of Islam, receive traction? Why? These are questions that have dominated policy debates in Western capitals ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The topic is an iridescent one. Yet, what this brief essay demonstrates is that, even within militant or conservative contexts, there are intra-group competitions for authenticity and following. For those prioritizing action either through necessity due to the privations of war or for ideological reasons, it is those actors on the ground whose words are likely to resound most effectively. Herein lies the potency of praxis. More than scholarly merit or standing, it is the ability of an actor or group to deliver through

action that becomes the ultimate marker of authenticity, and, by extension, piety. Similar lessons are drawn from studies evaluating the success of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) movements, where those operating through credible interlocutors at the grassroots are often shown to be much more effective than those adopting more abstract approaches.

For those who have watched the constant ebb and flow of the Syrian opposition's fortunes, the corollary is clear: only those on the ground can control what takes place there. Western officials who have sought to work with the opposition have consistently failed to appreciate this. As a result, they continued to support and bolster organizations long after they grew disconnected and detached from the unconscionable realities of Syria's brutal war. Such miscalculations were evident even during the early stages of the conflict when groups like the FSA remained a credible force on the ground, but were supported with only "non-lethal aid." Their jihadi competitors, by contrast, were better equipped and armed, and thereby able to project power and prowess to prospective recruits. In this event, these organizations grew like a hydra while a lack of support for moderate actors condemned them to obscurity.

Sunni Islam is particularly vulnerable to this crisis of authority because it has no established clergy or formally recognized system. As such, there are no inherent or structural firewalls inherent to the religion that could automatically undercut the claims to authority made by one actor or institution versus another. The Syrian crisis offers a perfect microcosm of this, demonstrating why arguments about the lack of religious learning or scholarly ability within an extremist movement does little to

undermine its support base. Thus, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stood up to declare himself a reluctant caliph in the Nuri mosque, tens of thousands from across the world accepted him as such. For almost two years afterward, both Baghdadi and the so-called caliphate he ruled over proved to have an almost hypnotic effect on people across the world, hopelessly drawing them in like Homer to the sirens. Entire families packed their bags and abandoned their lives in response to Baghdadi's message, acting on a belief that Muslims must obey the caliph and live in the caliphate wherever and in whatever circumstances it exists. The question remains—who could have ever convinced them otherwise?





People walk in western Mosul after the city was seized from ISIS. ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/Getty Images

# Endnotes

- 1 Roel Meijer, "Yūsuf Al-'Uyairī and the Making of a Revolutionary Salafi Praxis," *Die Welt Des Islams* 47 (2007): 422-59.
- 2 A simple transliteration method has been adopted here, broadly in line with the conventions outlined by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, but without diacritic markings. Names of people, groups, and commonly established words in the English language, such as jihad, are afforded their given renderings.
- 3 Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*. London: Hurst & Co, 2013.
- 4 Shiraz Maher and John Bew, "Syria's World War," *New Statesman*, Apr. 11, 2018.
- 5 A full list is painstakingly maintained at: <https://notgeorgesabra.wordpress.com/2013/10/18/every-friday-new-slogans-of-the-peoples-revolution/>.
- 6 "Scores killed on Syria's 'day of rage,'" *Al Jazeera*, Apr. 29, 2011.
- 7 Joshua Landis, "As quiet returns, Syrians ponder future," *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 5, 2011.
- 8 Alyssa Newcomb, "Syrian Troops Take Omari Mosque in Daraa, 4 Dead," *ABC News*, Apr. 30, 2011.
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**Cover photo:** People walk under heavy rain during a protest against a Syrian military operation in front of the Fatih mosque in rebel-held Idlib Governorate. *YASIN AKGUL/AFP/Getty Images*

**Photo 2:** Syrian fighters hold up their weapons during their graduation ceremony of a U.S.-led training program aimed at forming a security force to patrol territory captured from ISIS. *DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images*

**Photo 3:** Religious clerics standing at the ancient Umayyad mosque in Aleppo's old city. *LOUAI BESHARA/AFP/Getty Images*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Shiraz Maher is Director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London, and a lecturer in the Department of War Studies. He currently leads ICSR's research on the crisis in Syria and Iraq, and studies the use of Islamic jurisprudence by Salafi-Jihadi movements. He is also interested in how non-state actors seek to administer newly ungoverned spaces in the region. The BBC has described him as

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Maher's book, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, has been widely lauded as a groundbreaking exploration of the ideology behind contemporary Salafi-jihadi movements. It was picked by Foreign Affairs magazine as Book of the Year for 2017. The Economist described it as, “an excellent and original account of what jihadists actually think...a must read.” The New Statesman called it “a ground-breaking study...a masterclass in how to do intellectual history, and one that nobody with an interest in radical Islam should miss.”

Maher is an Adjunct Professor at Johns Hopkins University in the United States and was a Visiting Lecturer at Washington College in 2012. He has conducted fieldwork across the world, interviewing members of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and the Free Syrian Army. Most recently, he has conducted interviews with more than 100 western foreign fighters in Syria.

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