Foreign Jihadism in Syria
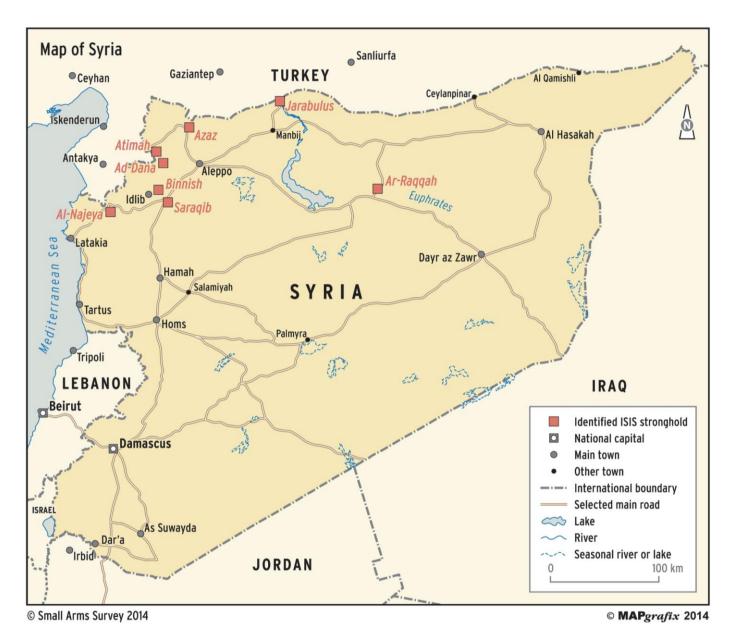
The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

Map of Syria showing strongholds of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) as of December 2013.

Introduction

As the war in Syria began to intensify in late 2011, the exhortation to go to Syria to fight or help was seen on Islamic Internet forums and heard in mosques all over the world. Since then Syria has proved a magnet for foreign volunteer fighters from a range of countries. Though their numbers are not conclusively known, it is believed that at least 8,000 and perhaps as many as 11,000 'international jihadists' are currently in Syria.[1]

Although the conflict in Syria started as an internal uprising, the 'revolution' currently appears to have been co-opted by international players. Prominent among these are militant Sunni jihadists, in particular members of the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).[2] Given the high profile assumed by truly Islamist

groups like ISIS, outside observers commonly think of them as being the dominant forces in the conflict. This perception is trumpeted by the Syrian government, which casts itself as the last rampart in the fight against al-Qaeda and its brand of violent international terrorism.

The reality on the ground, however, is more nuanced than either the Syrian government or most outsiders describe. ISIS is usually said to be well organized, well armed, and well funded. This is partially true and explains why it has managed to assume a significant role in the conflict. On the other hand, the backlash launched by previously allied militant groups against ISIS at the beginning of January 2014 is evidence that its prominence should not be conflated with leadership.

This *Dispatch* intends to offer a snapshot of the engagement of foreign fighters in Syria at the end of 2013, with an emphasis on assessing ISIS's strengths and weaknesses. In so doing, it seeks to answer the following questions: How did the foreign fighters come to ISIS? What was ISIS's operational impact? Does the example of ISIS in Syria offer evidence about the future of transnational jihadism?

The information in this *Dispatch* is drawn from a series of interviews held by the author in Istanbul, Antakya, Reyhanli, Gaziantep, and Kilis from 13 to 25 September 2013. These interviews were with Syrian doctors, logisticians, journalists, lawyers, and judges, as well as non-Syrian activists (especially from the Caucasus region) involved with humanitarian organizations in the region.[3] Key findings of the *Dispatch* include the following:

- Recruiting networks outside Syria do not appear to be structured. Instead, a largely bottom-up voluntary recruitment and routing process is in place.
- Foreign fighters in Syria are most concerned with the political context of their home countries set in a regional perspective. The special place of Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria) in Islamic doctrine and the fight against the Syrian government's injustices are lesser motivations.
- ISIS's strength should not be overestimated. While it has some comparative advantages, it does not maximize them, or they are outweighed by its weaknesses.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: objectives, strengths, and weaknesses

ISIS is an Islamist group led from Baghdad by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group is made up of Sunni Muslims drawn mainly from Syria, but with significant numbers from foreign countries, particularly Iraq, the Gulf States, and the Arabian Peninsula. Though it professes close ideological ties with al-Qaeda, it is not formally affiliated with the group.

ISIS began as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), founded by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. With the death of its leader in June 2006, AQI merged with some other Iraqi jihadist groups and by October 2006 had rebranded itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In this guise ISI served as the umbrella organization for most jihadist groups and their fighters in Iraq at the time (Caillet, 2013). Although ISI nominally started as an al-Qaeda 'franchise', it never claimed to be part of the organization. Despite its ideological and even close operational links, ISI always maintained a formal autonomy.

In April 2013 ISI moved to open another front in its 'operations', calling itself ISIS and unilaterally declaring a merger with the Syrian-led Islamist opposition group Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN).[4] This declaration was immediately rejected by Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, the leader of JAN.[5] The merger was also criticized by the 'emir' of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri.[6] The response of ISIS and al-Baghdadi was a public refutation of al-Zawahiri's arguments and indicated an explicit break between ISIS and al-Qaeda (Moos, 2013).[7] As of late 2013 ISIS was considered by some to be a rival of JAN. Though it came late to the fight, ISIS has gradually assumed a higher profile among the Syrian opposition as a whole and the Islamist component of the opposition in particular (Sly and DeYoung, 2013).[8]

Recruiting foreign fighters

Few foreign volunteers arrive without prior contact with people or organizations in Syria. Most seem to have been referred to contacts inside Syria by others: friends already in Syria, casual acquaintances from home (from

the mosque or the workplace, for example), or people contacted via online social networks (mainly Facebook, and usually after a process of referral by 'friends of friends').[9] Thus far, the recruitment of foreign fighters has been more a function of a bottom-up ideological process than a managed one, i.e. although recruiting 'networks' functionally exist, they do not appear to be structured.[10]

Box 1 **Anatomy of recruitment**[11]

In practice, much of the recruitment is tied to local mosques, although not necessarily organized by mosque authorities. A given mosque may prove fertile ground for both recruitment and fundraising. The latter may be formally encouraged: in popular mosques in Fatih (the historic conservative quarter of Istanbul), for example, believers are regularly and strongly reminded of the third pillar of Islam: zakat or compulsory charity. The groups receiving donations may not necessarily be formally connected to the mosque and their charitable purpose may not be clear, e.g. donations taken to 'ease the suffering' of fellow Muslims in Syria may be used for travel expenses for volunteer fighters and even the purchase of weapons. The same 'charity' organizers (or people affiliated with them) may also provide volunteers with contacts in Syria and even 'recruit' interested young men to go and fight. Nevertheless, the presence of fundraising organizations–even informal recruitment by people associated with these organizations– should not be understood to equate with the existence of a formal recruiting network.

At the front lines and in the Turkish border cities, all fighting groups (ISIS in particular) have established coordinated border-crossing schemes to help foreign fighters to enter Syria.[12] Syrian-based 'transfer coordinators' refer arriving volunteers for a particular group to that group's associated logisticians on the other side of the border. Each coordinator is in charge of a specific border region, moving the incoming foreign fighters across the border and into the ranks of the particular unit.[13] Once contacted by a prospective foreign fighter, the logistician collects him, drives him to a way station (usually a flat or rest house), feeds him, and helps him buy necessary supplies. When all the prospective volunteers in a given 'recruiting class' have arrived, the logistician will arrange for the group to cross the Syrian border. This crossing may be either legal or clandestine, usually depending on the volunteers' wishes.[14] Once in Syria the logisticians ensure that the volunteers in their transfer groups join the appropriate unit in the designated place. Recently there have been reports that ISIS-affiliated logisticians were more active than before and in comparison to others.[15] This may suggest that foreign volunteers are joining ISIS in increasing numbers.

ISIS's advantages: internationalization

ISIS's rapid growth among Syrian opposition movements is partially attributable to its failed merger with the Syrian-dominated JAN in April 2013. JAN's rejection of the merger was in part linked to its reluctance to engage in a transnational project, preferring to concentrate on the conflict in its homeland, Syria. JAN's reaction may have prompted the departure of the foreigners who had joined it in 2012, when JAN was perceived to be the most radical and most internationally oriented movement of the Islamist opposition.[16] After leaving JAN, these fighters joined ISIS, swelling its ranks. Thus, al-Jolani's 'principled stand' cost him much in practical terms: ISIS gained new fighters and capacities, which likely gave it victories and territory it might otherwise not have had.[17] JAN's loss also caused its own decline as a fighting force, which lasted until the end of summer 2013.

JAN's fortunes have recovered since the last quarter of 2013. It does not appear that this recovery was made at the cost of any organization. Nevertheless, it is apparent that JAN has gradually restored its former strength, both in terms of men and materiel. JAN is also resuming its position as a credible alternative to ISIS; in September 2013 some secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups in and around ar-Raqqah allied themselves with JAN (OE Watch, 2013, p. 23).

ISIS's advantages: funding

ISIS's recruitment efforts have continued to increase its numbers of foreign fighters. Its solid funding—based in part on its own activities, primarily refining oil drilled in Syria's 'liberated' areas (Hubbard, Krauss, and Schmitt, 2014), and in part on sums that volunteers bring with them (often derived from the Muslim custom of *zakat*)—is rumoured to allow it to pay its fighters a salary.[18] In a sense, ISIS's increasing visibility and wealth have become self-sustaining: the more foreign fighters it has in its ranks, the more newly arrived foreign fighters seek to join, preferring to fight for a well-funded and consequently well-armed organization. As the ranks swell, the more educated and wealthy foreigners also gravitate to ISIS, taking up leadership positions in the field and bringing yet more money and networks of contacts to the group. This in turn has had the effect of forcing Syrian-born militants into a Faustian choice: in the struggle to liberate their homeland they can fight for pay under foreign leadership (which may or may not share their ultimate goals) or fight for free Syrian leaders with uncertain prospects.[19]

ISIS's advantages: weapons

At present, all significant opposition groups are able to provide basic weaponry to volunteers for an estimated average price of USD 2,000, e.g. a Kalashnikov-pattern rifle.[20] Each group has developed its own armoury, with weapons acquired in various ways.[21] In addition, the FSA and some Islamist groups (including JAN) have benefited from arms and ammunition transfers from Qatar and Saudi Arabia.[22] These transfers are likely made through either Turkey or Jordan, whose governments maintain tight control of their distribution.[23]

In comparison to its competitors, ISIS is far less reliant on others for its arms and ammunition. Based on their own stable funding schemes, ISIS units can afford to buy arms from private traders, particularly in the well-stocked Iraqi markets, where weapons have accumulated during the past ten years.[24] Its financial strength gives ISIS a flexibility and choice that most of its rivals among the opposition lack.

ISIS's disadvantages: numbers and focus

ISIS lacks sufficient numbers to be widely effective as a fighting force. The group is largely made up of foreign fighters, with numbers estimated in the thousands.[25] Other units affiliated with the FSA or 'moderate' Syrian Islamists, e.g., among others, Liwa al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, and Liwa al-Tawhid, have greater numbers.[26] In fact, in all regions of Syria other factions outnumber ISIS militants.

Beyond numbers, ISIS's diverse membership may be a source of weakness. Though it attracts foreign fighters in greater numbers than other groups, the latter groups often have a more homogeneous make-up, e.g. Libyans fighting with Libyan groups or Russian-speaking militants (mainly from the Caucasus) fighting with fellow Russian speakers.[27] These nation-based groupings often fight independently of oversight, seizing and controlling their own territory under their own commanders.[28] Up until the end of 2013 these groups only coordinated their efforts with other opposition forces on an ad hoc basis, depending on which groups were available or willing to join operations and which capacities were missing from the proposed joint force. From the beginning of 2014 and the increase in infighting among opposition groups, however, such alliances have tended only to be with ISIS.[29]

ISIS's disadvantages: territorial control

Perhaps recognizing the limitations that the relatively small numbers of its fighters impose, the ISIS leadership has focused on seizing opposition-held territory by attacking specific FSA commanders in charge of defined territories. These attacks are usually in areas as close as possible to border-crossing points. The aim appears to be to destabilize the FSA presence. The fighting in the city of Azaz, close to the Turkish border, is an instructive example of this.[30] In mid-September, under the pretext of arresting a German doctor based in a refugee camp near the Turkish border, ISIS troops attempted to take over the city from the Northern Storm (Asift al-Shamal), an FSA-affiliated unit. By 18 September ISIS units controlled large parts of Azaz and guarded all entrances to the city, leaving only the border crossing at Bab al-Salamah and the city's hospital under Northern Storm control. On the

following day a third and much more powerful unit allied with the Syrian opposition, the Aleppo-based Liwa al-Tawhid, was called in to mediate. ISIS was obliged to retreat and surrender half of its positions.[31]

These limitations are also reflected in the number and nature of areas under ISIS control. It must be said that ISIS does not exclusively control any significant territory, either urban or rural, apart from a few places.[32] Where it has gained control in places like ar-Raqqah, Atimah, and Binnish, ISIS has done so in loose coordination with actions taken by the FSA or other Syrian Islamist groups.[33] And despite its concerted efforts, it still does not control any border-crossing posts. Effectively, ISIS must coordinate with other opposition units to effectively exercise unilateral control over any specific territory; it is too small and (relatively) weak to control territory on its own.[34]

Numbers alone do not explain ISIS's lack of success in maintaining exclusive control of territory. ISIS fighters' aggressive enforcement of their notions of Islam on local populations has not been welcomed—Syrian teachers, for instance, are reluctant to work in ISIS-managed schools.[35] Furthermore, according to some observers, ISIS has been largely unsuccessful in running simple, but vital public services, such as bakeries or electrical grids.[36] Its commanders have also reportedly failed to keep some of the factories they have seized working efficiently.

ISIS, foreign fighters, and global jihadism

Rhetoric versus reality

As a transnational Islamist group inspired by al-Qaeda's ideology and practices—and despite the formal break with al-Qaeda—ISIS carries the banner for global jiahdism in the Syrian conflict. This public stance appears to have made ISIS a key umbrella group for foreign fighters in Syria. A detailed examination of its ideological, operational, and political features belies this appearance, however. First, at an ideological level, despite a clear message promoting Islamic jihadism and the strict implementation of sharia law, ISIS has failed to implement these policies on the ground. As noted above, some ISIS groups have alienated local populations in their attempts to force on them ISIS's version of sharia law.

Conversely, ISIS's rigid interpretation of sharia has served as a recruiting tool among foreign fighters. It appears that its successes has also pushed the general tone and tenor of the rhetoric used by other Syrian Islamist groups towards its more radical publicly espoused views. As a result, where initially ISIS had a near monopoly on recruiting foreign fighters, this is no longer the case. Moreover, the support that ISIS's radical views has engendered among other militant groups cannot be said to be unqualified, though powerful and relatively homogeneous foreign groups—for example, Libyans or fighters from the Caucasus (led by Abu Umar al-Shishani)—*have* pledged allegiance to ISIS. This pledge does not likely mean allegiance to any eventual transnational Islamic state, the ostensible goal of ISIS (FI Syria, 2013). Indeed, when al-Shishani was appointed by ISIS's emir, al-Baghdadi, to be the group's northern region commander, he publicly hesitated for months before officially professing loyalty to the ISIS leader (Kavkaz Center, 2013).[37]

The power and prestige of ISIS is limited by realities on the ground. A violent backlash against the group in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, and ar-Raqqah demonstrates its limited capacities in what remains a mainly Syrian conflict (Morris, 2014). When ISIS oversteps—as it was perceived to have done in September 2013 in the Azaz district—it is 'put back in its place' by other, larger and more powerful groups (Landis, 2014).[38] Intra-opposition hostilities are reported to have occurred in over 40 separate locations, resulting in ISIS losing control of as many as 24 of them (Lister, 2014).[39]

Bringing politics from home

As a transnational and global framework, ISIS has not had a significant impact to date. It remains one group among others, attracting certain foreigners with specific political views and from a few regions: primarily Iraq, the Gulf States, and the Arabian Peninsula. The political motivation of its volunteers can be described as the establishment of a strong, Islamist-oriented Sunni state in Iraq and the region to serve as a bulwark against Iranian influence. As such, ISIS targets Shia groups fighting in the region as much as the current Syrian regime.

In contrast to ISIS's transnational focus, other foreign volunteers are in Syria to further the 'fight' in their own countries. Fighters from the Caucasus, for example, are unable to effectively fight the Russian Federation at home. They have thus turned to fighting Syria as a Russian client, while also coming to the aid of 'their Syrian brothers'. Most of them hope that, after Assad's removal, their fellow fighters—especially foreigners—will join them in the Caucasus and take the fight directly to the Russian Federation. This is likely true for many other foreign fighters in Syria, who are in the country because it does not make sense to rebel in their home countries.[40] Although their respective dictators fell early in the Arab Spring, Tunisians and Libyans hope to also punish Assad for all his injustices. 'Winning' in Syria could reinforce the Islamist awakening back home.[41] Given this, one may generalize and say that the motivation for many—if not most—foreign fighters operating in Syria is primarily to mirror the political context in their home countries in a regional context: Arabian Peninsula nationals oppose Iran, those from the North Caucasus oppose the Russian Federation, and the Islamist North Africans oppose the secular North Africans. In this reading, ISIS is one movement among many, with its focus on Iraq and the Gulf.

Embarrassing relations: jihadi ties to the West

Though the fight against the injustices of the Assad regime is a compelling narrative for the Western media and a good recruitment slogan for Islamist groups, no true global jihad is taking place in Syria today. Foreign fighters remain rooted in their original regional backgrounds and no overarching ideology has yet been able to overcome those political divisions. This is not to say that such a consensus might not emerge within a few years or a decade, only that it does not exist now. This puts the Islamist factions in Syria in an awkward public position. On the one hand, they are calling for Western intervention and reproach Western states for doing nothing, while on the other hand, they fear being targeted alongside the regime.[42] They are certain that, should the United States engage in hostilities in Syria, it will take the opportunity to 'destroy everyone'.[43] The capture of an al-Qaeda operative in Libya in the first days of October certainly reinforced the Islamist factions in such views (*The Telegraph*, 2013).

Conclusion

The territory of Bilad al-Sham is the latest front of international jihad, occupying a position similar to Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and the Sahel, and formerly occupied by Libya. This process of international jihad has not really overlapped with the indigenous Syrian uprising against the Assad regime as embodied by the FSA and local Islamist fighters. The establishment by seven Islamist groups of the Islamic Front (al-Jabhat al-Islamiya) is evidence of this, as both the FSA and the ISIS were excluded, at least formally (Heras, 2013). For Syrians in the opposition, the struggle against the Assad regime remains the priority, regardless of their political stripe; the transnational aspects exist, but often resemble more of a rallying cry than a real military and political undertaking.

Despite its apparent wealth and allure for foreign fighters, ISIS appears to be one group among equals. It does not dominate, and where it has strategic strongholds in secondary cities it must share control with organizations often more powerful than it is, e.g. the Islamic Front. Perhaps more critical is that ISIS does not maximize its position as the most popular group for arriving foreign fighters by allying, formally or tactically, with critical foreign battalions such as those from Libya or the Caucasus. Pledges of 'allegiance' to ISIS have tended to be more ideological than practical in nature.

The failure of transnational jihadist groups to thus far control the fight in Syria may tell us more about the al-Qaeda 'franchises' that formed in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century. These al-Qaeda '2.0' groups have gradually become independent from the original al-Qaeda structure. To some extent the al-Qaeda franchises have strategically betrayed the group's primary objective and targeted the 'near enemy' rather than the 'far enemy'.[44] Acting against and striking directly at the West is not an immediate goal for all these groups, although it remains an option. Instead, they focus on the *kafir* (non-believer) states, i.e. states that 'skew' the law of Islam and compromise themselves by collaborating with European countries and the United States. Shia groups and states like Iran, as well as its proxy militias like Hezbollah, are included among the *kafir* states. For the present, based on the evidence of Syria, these are the narratives that frame international jihadist commitments.

History has shown that local conflicts can become breeding grounds for groups that do target the 'far' enemy. The longer the conflict in Syria rages and the more foreign fighters are drawn to its siren song, the more likely it is that their capacities to carry out attacks will develop and they will leave the immediate conflict zone for neighbouring countries or beyond. Even if the transnational Salafist-jihadist perspective is weak today, there are no guarantees it will still be so in the future.

List of abbreviations

AQI   Al-Qaeda in Iraq
FSA   Free Syrian Army
ISI   Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS   Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JAN   Jabhat al-Nusra

Notes

[1] This *Dispatch* defines 'international jihadist' as someone who seeks to use violence to establish the rule of Islam and its sharia law over a territory. The term is used interchangeably with 'foreign fighter', because Western media coverage of the Syrian conflict has made them commonly understood synonyms. Also 'national jihadists'—often labelled as 'Syrian Islamists'—exist in Syria, mostly comprising the Islamist Front. Note that the numbers referred to in this *Dispatch* are estimates based on the best available information (e.g. Zelin, 2013). Other, mainly Islamist-oriented groups often use larger estimates, including up to the generally accepted ceiling of 11,000 foreign fighters/international jihadists. Concrete and reliable data is not available.

[2] This *Dispatch* will be limited to a discussion of Sunni jihadists. The presence of Shia jihadists (from Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran) is undeniable in Syria, but is the result of a very different set of circumstances than those of their co-religionists.

[3] The author would like to point out that all sources consulted were either themselves trusted sources or persons who were recommended as both truthful and knowledgeable by trusted sources. Interviews with these sources were generally conducted with the aid of a translator, except where the source spoke English or Russian. All interviews were conducted in an open, non-directed style. Where possible, assertions made by sources were crosschecked with other sources. Given the fluid nature of the conflict and the information pertaining thereto, the information in this *Dispatch* is primarily derived from the field sources described above.

[4] See National Counterterrorism Center (2014).

[5] Little is known about Emir al-Jolani. He is thought to have fought in Iraq in 2003, but quickly returned to Syria and was imprisoned. One month after being opportunely released in December 2011 he founded JAN and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri. There are rumours of a link with the Assad regime, which might make sense if Damascus had decided to make things 'worse' as part of its oft-repeated justification for its own actions, i.e. that it is fighting against al-Qaeda and international Salafism (author interview with a Syrian journalist, Antakya, September 2013).

[6] No ISIS emir for Syria could be positively identified apart from al-Baghdadi, who is based in Iraq. Several ISIS 'field emirs' are known, however, including Abu Abdurakhman (a Kuwaiti) in Azaz and the Abu Lukman (an Iraqi) who serves as the emir for ar-Raqqah in eastern Syria. The formal position of Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, the ISIS spokesperson in Syria, is unclear, though it is possible that he is also the ISIS' 'general emir' in Syria (author interview with a Syrian logistician, Antakya, September 2013).

[7] Audio message by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; see Infidel Democracy (2013); Moos (2013).

[8] Notably, in the period between July and December 2013 ISIS's military capacity gained wider notice. This occurred concurrently with the increasing prominence of its proposed implementation of sharia (here used to describe the sociopolitical policies that ISIS purports to support and impose on territories under its control).

[9] Author interviews with Syrian logisticians and journalists in Antakya, Reyhanli, and Kilis, September 2013.

[10] Two sources posited that proper recruitment 'frameworks' theoretically exist in the Middle East, notably in the Gulf and the Maghreb. These 'networks' could be al-Qaeda affiliated, though this is not necessarily the case (author interview with a Syrian journalist and Syrian logistician, Antakya, September 2013).

[11] This section is based on a variety of interviews and the author's own observations in Fatih, Istanbul, July 2013.

[12] Author interviews with Syrian logisticians and journalists, Antakya and Reyhanli, September 2013.

[13] Each region is represented—ar-Raqqah, Aleppo, Idlib, and Lattakia—and the logisticians are thus located in Akçakale for access to ar-Raqqah, in Kilis/Gaziantep for Aleppo, in Antakya/Reyhanli for Idlib and Aleppo, and in Antakya for Lattakia. For ISIS-affiliated groups, transfer coordinators are called 'emirs of the borders' (author interview with a Syrian logistician affiliated with ISIS).

[14] Some volunteers prefer to keep a low profile and not put their families back home at risk.

[15] Author interview with a Syrian journalist, Antakya, September 2013. He asserted that in July 2013 one of his contacts among ISIS logisticians in Antakya 'smuggled' around 300 al-Qaeda foreign fighters into Syria.

[16] Author interview with an Islamist ideologue from the Caucasus, Istanbul, July 2013. The information was later confirmed by an interview with Imkander, a Turkish humanitarian NGO based in Istanbul, Istanbul, July and September 2013.

[17] As an example, ISIS is now powerful in the ar-Raqqah region, controlling some factories, arsenals, and oil wells together with the regular income they generate (author interviews with an Islamist 'ideologue' from the Caucasus and Khalid Khoja, Istanbul, September 2013).

[18] Author interviews with Syrian journalists and a Syrian logistician, Antakya and Reyhanli, September 2013. At that time ISIS was said to be the only structure able to pay its fighters.

[19] As one interviewee put it: 'Unlike wealthy foreigners, many Syrians have nothing to offer but their lives' (author interview with a Syrian doctor, Reyhanli, September 2013).

[20] This information was received and corroborated during various interviews with Syrian logisticians, lawyers, and judges in Antakya and Reyhanli in September 2013. Informal exchanges (in French) between jihadist volunteers on Facebook also confirm this, as Aba Souleyman's Facebook page illustrates (Souleyman, 2013).

[21] Such methods include capturing weapons from regime arsenals, taking them after victories, buying them from the regime's soldiers, or making direct purchases on Turkish, Lebanese, and Iraqi black markets. Some suggest that sales on the Turkish black market may have involved Alevis (a Shia sect) in Antakya, though this information is unconfirmed (author interview with a Syrian journalist, Antakya, September 2013).

[22] Saudi Arabia is said to have sent weapons acquired from states of the former Yugoslavia (BBC News, 2013; Chivers and Schmitt, 2013).

[23] The alleged distribution, by Turkish security services, of weapons seized from a shipment that was purported to originate from Libya is instructive: if true, it shows both the level of state involvement and control and the desire of the security services to establish client relationships with opposition groups. The author was unable to independently confirm this alleged distribution (author interview with a Syrian lawyer, Reyhanli, September 2013).

[24] The ability to buy arms on the private market was mentioned during author interviews with Syrian lawyers and journalists, Antakya, September 2013. See also Laub and Masters (2014).

[25] ISIS's foreign fighters are primarily drawn from Tunisia and Iraq. It should be noted that a number of Syrians are also fighting with ISIS (author interview with Turkish humanitarian workers, Istanbul, February 2014).

[26] Liwa al-Islam is reputed to be the largest Islamist group fighting in Syria, closely followed by Ahrar al-Sham (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of al-Sham). Suqur al-Sham (the Falcons of al-Sham) and Liwa al-Tawhid can be considered 'moderate' Islamist groups. Liwa al-Tawhid was formerly affiliated with the FSA. All of them have subsequently joined the newly formed Islamic Front, which was publicly announced on 22 November 2013 (Heras, 2013).

[27] Russian-speaking groups include nationals from the former Soviet states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well from Russia (Tatarstan and Bachkortostan) and from the North Caucasian republics (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria). This information was obtained in author interviews with Syrian logisticians and confidential sources in Kilis and Gaziantep, September 2013 (Libyan groups) and author interviews with Caucasian activists, Istanbul, September 2013 (Russian-speaking groups). Information on the Russian-speaking groups was corroborated by Islamist websites with a focus on the Caucasus, e.g. Kavkaz Center and FI Syria.

[28] A good example of this can be found in ad-Dana, which is apparently controlled by militants from the Caucasus (author correspondence with a confidential source in Gaziantep, September 2013; author interviews with Syrian journalists and logisticians, Antakya, September 2013).

[29] Author interview with Turkish humanitarian workers, Istanbul, February 2014.

[30] The city is north of Aleppo, on the road to Kilis (see Morris and Haidamous, 2013)**.**

[31] Further examples can be found in the assassination of Kamal Hamami (also known as Abu Basir, a member of the FSA's Supreme Military Council), who was killed by ISIS fighters in July 2013, and that of Abu Obeida al-Binnshi (another high-level FSA figure). In both cases ISIS managed to reinforce its positions, but failed to gain control of any border crossings or strategic positions inside Syria (author interview with Syrian lawyers, Antakya, September 2013; see also Reuters, 2011; Aljazeera, 2013).

[32] Examples of areas under ISIS control as of the end of 2013 include: in Latakia province, Ghassaniya and al-Najeya; in Aleppo, the town of Azaz and the village of Jarabulus; in Idlib, the town of ad-Dana and the village of Saraqeb (although other groups may also present in Saraqeb) (author interviews with Syrian journalists, Antakya, September 2013).

[33] Author interviews with various sources in Antakya, Reyhanli, Kilis, and Gaziantep, September 2013; see also Lister (2014).

[34] Examples of ISIS's dependence in August and September of 2013 could be found in Azaz, where the ISIS emir (Abu Abdurakhman, a Kuwaiti) is but one commander among many in combined control of the town, or in ar-Raqqah (an eastern urban centre under rebel control), where despite the presence of 200 fighters under the command of the Iraqi emir Abu Lukman, ISIS is dwarfed by Ahrar al-Sham (1,200 fighters) and the local FSA unit (2,000) fighters. These figures are as of September 2013, but subsequent events have changed the make-up of the rebel forces in ar-Raqqah, though ISIS forces still remain a minority (author interviews with Syrian logistician and a confidential source, Gaziantep, September 2013).

[35] Author interview with a Syrian logistician, Kilis, September 2013.

[36] Author interview with a confidential source, Gaziantep, September 2013.

[37] This public hesitation can be tracked through videos posted online, where al-Shishani appears to distance himself from the date of the 'appointment' in August 2013, until his public acceptance of the appointment in November 2013. It should be noted that al-Shishani's pledge of allegiance to ISIS and al-Baghdadi is more a formal gesture that does not translate into significant structural changes in the territories under his control.

[38] Hassan Aboud of the Islamic Front and head of its political bureau explains that ISIS 'refuses to go to independent courts; it attacked many other groups, stole their weapons, occupied their headquarters, and arbitrarily apprehended numerous activists, journalists and rebels. It has been torturing its prisoners' (Landis, 2014).

[39] Interestingly, forces from the Caucasus did not to take part in these conflicts, despite their recent pledge of fealty to ISIS and its emir, al-Baghdadi. They remain generally unwilling to engage in infighting between rebel groups.

[40] For example, fighters from Morocco, Algeria, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian countries feel constrained in this way (author interview with activists from the Caucasus, Istanbul, July 2013).

[41] Author interview with a Syrian logistician, Kilis, September 2013.

[42] Author interview with a Syrian logistician, Antakya, September 2013.

[43] This viewpoint was almost universally expressed in interviews carried out in the course of researching this *Dispatch*. For example, author interviews with Syrian logisticians, journalists, doctors, and lawyers conducted in Antakya, Reyhanli, Gaziantep, and Kilis in September 2013 all contained some version of this sentiment.

[44] Author interview with Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, head of the Regional Capacity Development Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva, 11 September 2013. During the interview he referred to his book *Understanding Al Qaeda: The Transformation of War*, where he develops the idea of al-Qaeda's franchises betraying the mother structure's primary objective (Mohamedou, 2011).

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