



PROXY WAR IN THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR

How Urban – Rural Divides &
Inequality Shaped the Syrian
War: The Case of Mare'a

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Jeremy Hodge is an independent...

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Introduction

In the Syrian revolution, no city has attracted the attention of the international community more so than Aleppo. As the country's second largest urban center, the city served as a hub for a Sunni business elite that profited following Bashar al-Assad's partial liberalization of the economy in the 2000s. Many observers predicted that the Assad regime's pact with this merchant class would ensure that Aleppo would remain a pro-regime stronghold. At first, this proved correct, as Aleppo did not witness a homegrown revolutionary movement strong enough to contest for power, even as other Sunni-majority areas were swept up in the revolutionary tide.

Ultimately, it took the invasion of external rebel forces, from rural towns like Mare'a, Tal Rifa'at, and 'Anadan, for parts of the city to fall to the insurgency. Like Aleppo city, these towns had witnessed powerful anti-regime movements in the late 1970's and early 1980's during the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood-inspired uprising. However, unlike Aleppo city, they had largely been neglected and denied the sort of investment, services, and economic opportunities extended to Aleppines in the 1990s and 2000s, which had proved pivotal in reconciling the Aleppo's Sunni middle and upper-middle class with the state. This urban-rural divide is one of the key under-reported features of the Syrian conflict, and perhaps plays an even more important role than issues like sectarian identity. A striking example is a 2012 statement issued by 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Salama, the commander of Aleppo's largest Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel faction, directed towards Aleppo city residents as the regime prepared an assault on Heiratan and his hometown of 'Anadan¹:

A message to the people of Aleppo...today, tanks have mobilized near Heiratan and the Artillery Academy, to launch an assault on the countryside...we demand that the people of Aleppo support the countryside... Today, the [countryside] is being slaughtered, while you all remain seated...I say to the [religious] scholars of Aleppo, by God you all are more unjust than the regime. Your silence, forsakenness and abandonment of

your religion is harder for us to bear than the regime's tanks...Those of us in the countryside, with Almighty God's permission, will sacrifice our lives, and slaughter the regime out of our pure and honorable countryside.

After the 1980s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) was crushed in Aleppo, while much of the Sunni religious establishment in Aleppo city was co-opted by the regime. But in the Aleppo countryside, a residue of the SMB survived among the families of former members, who were close to a coterie of rich landlords.

The combination of a disenfranchised population, a tight-knit class of landlords, and SMB-linked networks gave towns in the Aleppo countryside the personnel and resources to finance protests and create Free Syrian Army groups that would become the most powerful in the country. In the early days of the revolution, many of these individuals gathered in Mare'a, a town of no particular pre-war prominence, to form the vanguard of Aleppo province's civil and military uprising. In this study, we will trace the unlikely story of how a small town that few Syrians had heard of pre-2011 would become one of the most important locales in the entire conflict. By examining the history of Mare'a, we will shed light on how urban – rural divides and socioeconomic inequality shaped the Syrian war.

The Free City of Mare'a

With a pre-war population of roughly 30,000, Mare'a was like other rural towns caught up in the rage that swept the Arab world in Spring 2011. In addition to grievances aired around the country, locals in Mare'a were also moved by the memory of their historical marginalization when they took to the streets.

Mare'a was so marginalized that the regime lacked an institutional presence in the town—which meant it could not contain the city's revolutionary activity without diverting precious resources from areas it perceived as more strategic. The result was a protest movement in Mare'a that took to the streets in far greater numbers than its counterparts in cities across the region. From early on, Mare'a became something of a safe haven, leading to an influx of activists fleeing regime crackdowns in their hometowns.

¹ Freedom 'Anadan 2011, April 4th 2012, "Statement number ((I)) of the Aleppo and it's Countryside Revolutionary Council Leadership 2012-4-5": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWqyJfxQ67U>

In December 2011, Mare'a officially declared its independence from the Assad regime; unlike opposition movements elsewhere that devolved into rivalries and infighting, Mare'a's revolutionary leadership managed to exert control over the city and preserve civil cohesion—despite sitting atop a much larger and more diverse grassroots movement than elsewhere. Mare'a's leaders were therefore able to assemble cohesive FSA factions willing to go to great lengths—and at great personal risk—to battle regime security forces. These armed groups worked closely with Mare'a's civil governing bodies. Mare'a therefore began to stand out amid the chaos of the Syrian battlefield as a potentially attractive partners in the eyes of foreign patrons seeking clients.

Diversity within the ranks of Mare'a's opposition movement—which drew from the most committed revolutionaries across the region—also gave the city's leadership access to a diverse set of networks of local and foreign patrons. Connections to large, transnational Islamist movements such as Jama'at al-Da'awa wa al-Tabligh (JTD) and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), in particular, helped facilitate these networks. By mid-2012, much of the foreign aid accruing to FSA groups throughout Aleppo province was being channeled through Mare'a and its most powerful armed faction, Liwa al-Tawhid.

The city had emerged as one of decision-making nerve centers of northern Syria. Many activists began to jokingly

refer to Mare'a as the “Qurdaha of the North”, a reference to the small 'Alawite hamlet in Latakia province that is the hometown of the al-Assad family, and through which resources and patronage often ran.

By 2014, the regime had been replaced by a new threat. In February of that year, ISIS, fresh of its successes in the east Aleppo countryside and Raqqqa, turned its sights on the town. Over the next two and a half years, Mare'a held off the invasion, sometimes living under siege, until ISIS eventually succumbed to the U.S., Turkey, and other powers.

This study is based on dozens of interviews with activists and local leaders that were at the center of Mare'a's revolutionary movement from its earliest moments to its most recent days. It is also based on a detailed review of relevant literature and open source materials that shed light on the nature of foreign and domestic aid to FSA groups in northern Syria. Mare'a's success as a revolutionary model is rare in the context of the Syrian conflict and reflects its revolutionaries' ability to utilize extant networks in order to present a united front to the outside world. These sources reveal a microhistory that forces us to look differently at the question of why the revolution in other parts of Syria lacked cohesion. With this cohesion, a no-name town managed to fend off ISIS and Assad and become, for a while, one of the most important centers of resistance in all of Syria.



Chapter 1: The History of Mare'a and the Aleppo Countryside

Background

The Ba'ath Fails the Aleppo Countryside

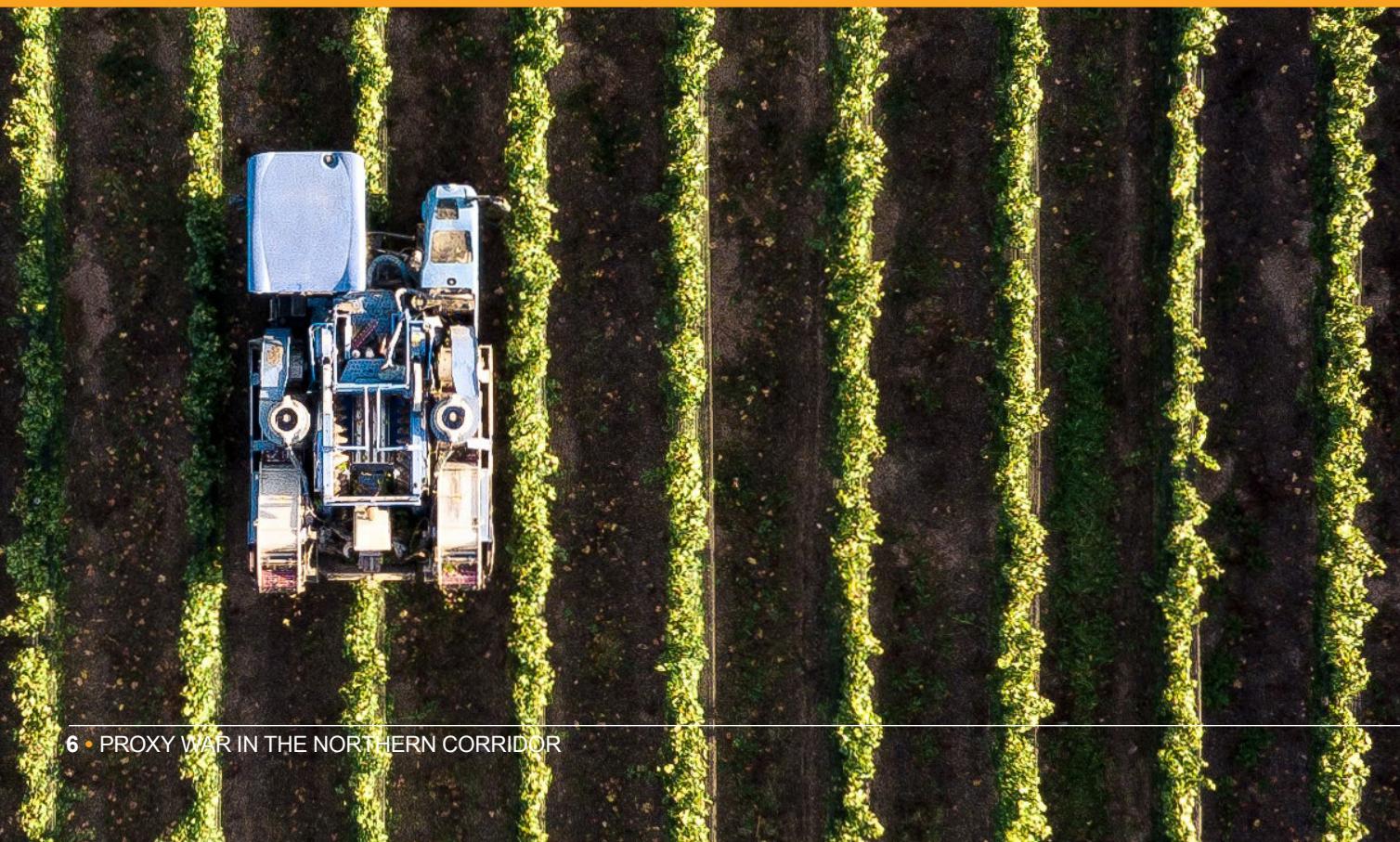
The roots of Mare'a's neglect stretches back to the 1940s and 1950s, when Syrians across the country began joining the Ba'ath Party. However, Aleppines joined the Party in far fewer numbers. This was partly due to the unintended consequence of factors that pre-dated the Ba'ath: The French Mandate favored rural religious minorities such as 'Alawites, Druze, and Isma'ilis for the officer corps, and these groups came to associate military service with social mobility. Many also came from families too poor to pay to exempt their sons from conscription, unlike their Sunni urban counterparts in Aleppo and Damascus.² As a result, these minorities were disproportionately represented in

the armed forces, from which the Ba'ath heavily recruited and derived much of its power. Despite making up 20% of Syria's population between 1963 and 1966, only 8% of the seats in the Ba'ath party's regional command were held by Aleppines. By 1976, this number dropped to zero. Furthermore, while Aleppines held on average more than 20% of total cabinet positions in the period from 1942-1963, by 1976 this number stood at just 5%.³

Aleppines' exclusion from Ba'athist patronage also stemmed from the party's self-proclaimed socialist framework, particularly with respect to land reform. The northern Aleppo countryside had been settled and cultivated by rich Aleppine merchants beginning in the mid 19th century following an international spike in cotton prices caused by the American civil war. This was followed by a post-WWII boom in the prices of labor-intensive products, including cotton and wheat, leading to investments in modern farming technology. In Mare'a, for example, the

2 Similarly, The Ba'ath also managed to obtain a large constituency in the multi-confessional Hama province, where a series of peasant revolts in the 1940's led by Akram al-Hourani led to the formation of the Arab Socialist Party that officially merged with the Ba'ath in 1952.

3 Raphael Lefevre, Page 74, "Ashes of Hama, The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria"



introduction of tractors, advanced water pumps, and new irrigation techniques encouraged the town's landowners to shift from watermelons to the more profitable cultivation of potatoes.

Agricultural plots in the north Aleppo countryside were smaller and more capital intensive—and therefore less feudal—than those in other parts of the country. In contrast, territory in the east Aleppo countryside and areas north of the Euphrates river in the provinces of Raqqa, Hasakah and Deir Ezzor—the so-called jazira region—underwent a very different trajectory. Bedouin areas in the jazira region remained uncultivated or state-owned until the 1920s. Beginning under the French Mandate, nomadic tribal leaders settled and amassed large landholdings—often in excess of 100,000 hectares. The breakneck speed by which this process took place—effectively a privatization of commons and state-held land, aided by the rapid injection of urban capital—meant that many tribal leaders became massively wealthy landowners in just a few years. The sheer size of holdings far surpassed that of the landowners in the more densely populated northern Aleppo countryside.

This had important consequences for Ba'athist land reform policy. The holdings in the east along the Euphrates valley were subject to expropriation and redistribution to poor and landless peasants. On the other hand, the landowners in the northern Aleppo countryside were not subject to the same level of expropriation, as their holdings were smaller. This made northern Aleppo something of an outlier in the early Ba'ath period, and unlike the Euphrates valley region, the Ba'ath regime was never able to cultivate a strong rural constituency in the area.

These rural constituencies—where the Ba'ath party message resonated—were also remote populations that had little exposure to the rhetoric of urban Islamist movements such as the SMB. This, too, would not be the case in Aleppo. In places like Mare'a, a combination of political marginalization and the presence of a landowning class that survived the Ba'athist land reforms created conditions ripe for the growth of an Islamist resistance.

Neglecting Mare'a

In 1964, during the first wave of Ba'ath Party purges of the armed forces, a mid-ranking Air Force officer from Mare'a

named Salih al-Hafiz was ousted due to his affiliation with the Nasserists and his refusal to join the Ba'ath. Having graduated from the Air Force Academy during the Egypt–Syria union, Salih hailed belonged to the al-Hafiz household, one of the richest families in Mare'a, which had derived its fortune mostly from agricultural landholdings.

Salih's exit is remembered by leading figures from Mare'a as one of the first indications of the Ba'ath Party's intent to alter the status quo in the countryside and deny local elites access to regime patronage. Mahmoud al-Najjar, an opposition figure in Mare'a, long-time member of Riad al-Turki's opposition Syrian Communist Party, and signatory to the 2005 Damascus Declaration, recalled:

After Salih's removal, the regime closed ranks and scaled back the number of officer candidates from Mare'a and the north Aleppo countryside in general who were accepted to serve in the military. We viewed this as an attempt to impose collective punishment by certain figures within the regime. Meanwhile, while Mare'a residents were denied access to institutions outside the city, government agencies that did expand in our town, such as the Agricultural Bank, which was crucial for farmers in Mare'a, were staffed primarily by loyal cadres from other provinces.

'Abd al-Rahman al-Hafiz, doctor and director of Mare'a's field hospital after 2011, and a relative of Salih's, claimed the latter possessed connections to Ibrahim al-Safi, a high-ranking Ba'athist who took an active role in ensuring his removal, which carried with it broader ramifications:

Salih was part of the same graduating class as Ibrahim al-Safi, an Alawite officer from Jableh whom he became close with and regularly visited in Damascus. By 1963, al-Safi had become a Ba'athist and was among the conspirators involved in the coup. According to what Salih often told us, after the Ba'athist takeover he was given an ultimatum by Ibrahim and others he served with: switch party allegiance or step down. He chose the latter.

Ibrahim al-Safi would go on to become a core member of Hafiz al-Assad's security apparatus, eventually earning appointment in 1985 to lead Syria's First Armored Division, and then in 1994 as Commander of Syrian Arab

Army (SAA) forces in Lebanon.⁴ In 2011, Ibrahim's son Jowdat Ibrahim al-Safi commanded the 154th regiment of Maher al-Assad's 4th Armored Division, and was accused by Human Rights Watch of carrying out massacres against protestors in the Damascus suburbs.⁵

According to locals, it was after this rift that Mare'a became one of the most "hated" towns in Aleppo in the eyes of the regime. Locals began to feel that Mare'a was denied services and development projects that were extended to other regions, such as the 'Alawite-dominated coastline and the multi-confessional province of Hama.

"Even by the early 2000s, dozens of villages in the north Aleppo countryside still hadn't been hooked up to electricity grids or provided proper paved roads," Najjar noted. "In the 1960's and 1970's, almost no effort was made to provide basic services. Meanwhile, cities on the coast like Latakia and Tartus were expanding and absorbing 'Alawites who previously had been living in villages in the mountains. We felt there was bias."

This sense was heightened by regime efforts in the late 1960s to invest in new irrigation projects in the central Euphrates region around Raqqa, that were aimed at improving the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton and wheat. The north Aleppo countryside by contrast, despite its reliance on agriculture for more than a century, did not receive comparable state investment.

In 2004, Aleppo's provincial government began considering the construction of a canal linking the new 'Afrin Dam, 12 miles west of Mare'a, with the Euphrates river, thereby providing irrigation to Mare'a and other surrounding towns. "A team of us, including local politicians and engineers, not just from Mare'a but also Bab and other large cities in the area who stood to gain, spent more than a year drafting a proposal for how best to pay for and implement the project, outlining the benefit it would bring to the region," recalled a defected intelligence officer from Mare'a, who consulted for the project, and who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "Our goal was to create a strip running through the region that irrigated 100 hectares of farm land adjacent north and south of the proposed canal. By that point, Mare'a was supplying 25% of all potatoes in Syria, just relying on rain and ground wells. Imagine what we could accomplish if we had more resources."

But the plan was scrapped at the last second. The dam

4 Nikolaos Van Dam, Pg. 174, "The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba'ath Party"

5 Pro-Justice, "Criminals/Jawdat Ibrahim Safi": <https://blacklist.pro-justice.org/criminal/jawdat-ibrahim-safi/>



water was diverted to irrigate developing suburbs near Aleppo city. Well-connected contractors were seeking to benefit from a boom in real estate prices during the period of economic liberalization. Locals in Mare'a began to feel a shift in the pattern of marginalization, from favoring the coast and Euphrates region under Hafez al-Assad to favoring the capitalists of Aleppo city, who were now close to the regime.

Farmers in Mare'a were left to rely on rain and well water, putting lucrative water-intensive cash crops such as cotton out of reach. Furthermore, the success they did achieve in potato cultivation was often contingent on navigating the seemingly arbitrary restrictions enforced by the state through illicit cooperation with regime officials. Muhamnad al-Najjar, an activist with the Syrian opposition and a member of the Khalil family, which has owned large estates in Mare'a for generations, explained the role of the shabiha:

Everyone lived off agriculture in Mare'a, however we couldn't always depend on rain—which was unreliable—and risk seasonal drought, so farmers with large estates would dig ground wells operated by generators. By law, these were illegal. Legally operating a well required a series of permissions that were beyond most people's ability to acquire. Attempting to navigate the application process would open oneself up to exploitation from bureaucrats looking for bribes. It would often be easier to just go to the source: identifying the most powerful and relevant security official in the area who could turn a blind eye, and pay him.

Local corrupt officials found numerous opportunities to exploit locals' reliance on agriculture, particularly following the rise in the availability of cheap credit from the 1960s onwards with the rapid expansion of new branches of the Syrian Agricultural Bank. The bank, which ostensibly offered affordable loans to farmers at rates ranging from 3%-5%, also enjoyed a monopoly on the provision of essential products such as seeds, insecticides, fertilizers and certain types of farming equipment. In Mare'a as in other towns throughout Syria's agricultural heartland, local security chiefs and well-connected regime officials utilized their status to simply purchase the entirety of the bank's stock in products and cash available for loans before reselling and lending out both, at exorbitant markups.

"Locals learned not to rely on the Agricultural Bank," according to the defected intelligence officer, "and people developed their own illicit networks for products—including smuggling—and reverted to private credit." However the reversion to private credit was in practice a privilege that only accrued benefits for those who were already rich and therefore deemed "credit worthy", i.e., individuals with enough social capital to secure low-interest loans from banks, acquaintances or other sources. For poorer borrowers without strong connections, interest rates on private credit were usually just as usurious and untenable as those offered by Agricultural Bank branches held hostage by corrupt officials.

This created a system whereby small farmers were either unable to obtain loans, or forced to go into long-lasting debt in order to acquire capital, while those with large estates possessed the means to expand their already sizable holdings in Mare'a and surrounding towns. In the ensuing decades, most people in Mare'a and in other towns throughout the north Aleppo countryside existed in poverty with the exception of a small coterie of exceedingly wealthy families that managed to carve out a position as a provincial bourgeoisie.

The Rise of the Opposition

The Emergence of Political Islam

Against this backdrop of marginalization, informal taxation, and lack of access to economic opportunities, local elites in Mare'a and similar towns were predisposed to be suspicious of—or downright hostile to—the regime. Primarily landlords and merchants, some of these elites developed a natural affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic movements, whose conservative, anti-socialist message resonated with their economic interests and outlook.

In the 1950s, charities such as Nahda al-Islamiyya (Islamic Renaissance) promoted by the cleric Muhammad al-Nabhan, known for his fiery sermons against secularism, began to proliferate in Aleppo and its countryside.⁶ Other

⁶ Thomas Pierret, Page 148, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni

urban Aleppines such as Muhammad Yassin al-Najjar also spent time in this period in the north Aleppo countryside offering free education services to peasants.⁷ (His son and grandson would become prominent national figures within the Syrian Brotherhood). The SMB and Nahda opposed the statist economic intervention proposed by the Ba'ath, Communist and Nasserist parties of the day, while encouraging private charity and providing vocational training courses and workshops, and free religious education.⁸

In the mid-1960's, SMB founder Ahmed 'Azz al-Din al-Bayanuni opened the Aleppo chapter of the Sufi Zayd Group, a network of mosque-based charities and religious education centers.⁹ In 1964, Muhammad al-Nabhan formed the Dar Nahdat al-'Ulum al-Shari'a (Shari'a Sciences Renaissance House), a body that aimed to teach courses in Shari'a law to rural peasants in the Aleppo countryside, whom al-Nabhan felt had been underserved by Aleppo's religious institutions. In order to appeal to his new rural base, al-Nabhan went so far as to abandon the teachings of the Hanafi jurisprudence that dominated in the city in exchange for the Shafa'i school prevalent in the countryside.¹⁰

In 1973, al-Nabhan was also among the first to sign a petition drafted by SMB leader S'aid al-Hawwa opposing Assad's constitutional changes to abolish the requirement

that Syria's president be Muslim. The petition was part of a larger movement, but was especially strong in small northern Aleppine towns like Mare'a. Pressure against the move grew so strong that in 1974 Assad reinstated the clause, and then coaxed Musa Sadr, a Twelver Shi'a religious leader in Lebanon and later founder of the Amal movement, to release a statement formally recognizing 'Alawites as Shi'a Muslims in order to justify Assad's tenure as president.

Further support for Islamists came in response to the regime's foreign policy interventions. In January 1976, at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, the Assad regime backed Christian militias against the Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization.¹¹ Assad's goal was to reign in the PLO, which was behaving increasingly independently and risked dragging Syria into an entanglement with Israel, which he wanted to avoid.

But in backing the Christian militias, Assad was effectively putting his regime on the same side as Israel. By August of that year, the Israeli-Syrian backed Christians massacred at least 1,000 Palestinians at the Tal al-Za'atar refugee camp in northeast Beirut. The image of Christian forces backed by Jewish and 'Alawite regimes killing Palestinians did not sit well with conservative Sunnis and SMB sympathizers. By the late 1970's, they had developed an image of Assad as an anti-Muslim tyrant.

The Response in Mare'a

In 1979, as the SMB-led insurgency gathered steam, members of Mare'a's most prominent families took up arms against the state. Youssef al-Hafiz, a distant relative of Salih al-Hafiz, joined the SMB and began to help the organization smuggle weapons from Lebanon. Within a year he was caught by security forces, who detained him along with the vehicle he used to transport weapons, which allegedly belonged to his brother Subhei. Both Youssef and later Subhei disappeared into the maze of regime prisons and were never seen again.¹²

⁷ 'Ulama from Coup to Revolution"; Thomas Pierret, Page 137, "Syria from Reform to Revolt, Culture, Society and Religion, Merchant Background Bourgeois Ethics, The Syrian "Ulama' and Economic Liberalization"

⁸ Markaz al-Sharq al-'Arabi, July 30th 2012, "Profile of Professor Ghassan Najjar": <https://web.archive.org/web/20120730012413/http://asharqalarabi.org.uk/ruiyah/b-sharq-128.htm>

⁹ The al-Najjar household, whose members can be found in cities across the country, also predominate in Mare'a, where the local Khalil branch is the largest and most powerful of the city's prominent families. Yassin al-Najjar's son and grandson, Ghassan and Yassin al-Najjar, respectively, would become prominent leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The SMB's Islamic Socialist Front would actually make calls to nationalize public services companies owned by foreign firms, but generally speaking it adopted the "socialist" moniker merely as a means of competing with the leftwing parties.

¹⁰ Thomas Pierret, Page 60, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni 'Ulama from Coup to Revolution"

¹¹ Thomas Pierret, Page 48, 49, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni 'Ulama from Coup to Revolution" Though al-Nabhan was among those who would reconcile with the increasingly pragmatic Assad regime by the late 1970's, the stringently secular platform promoted by the Ba'ath in the 1960's ran counter to al-Nabhan's agenda at the time.

¹² These included the Kata'ib Regulatory Forces, Guardians of the Cedars, National Liberation Party's "Tiger" militia and the Lebanese Security Forces

¹³ Rumors circulated years later by then newly released political prisoners that Subhei had been seen at the Tadmur prison clashing with guards alongside other detainees during the 27 June 1980

The disappearance pushed their brother, Zakaria al-Hafiz, to join an SMB sleeper cell conducting guerrilla attacks throughout the country. For a full year, his family had no contact with him. “We learned about his death the same way anyone else in the country would have, when members of our family caught a glimpse of his corpse by chance while watching television,” said ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Hafiz, cousin of Zakaria and at the time a student at Aleppo University’s Faculty of Medicine. “The segment claimed he had been killed in a shootout in Damascus after security forces raided an SMB safe house somewhere in the city. The state never officially reached out to confirm or deny rumors or provide us any closure regarding his or Youssef and Subhei’s fate. In retrospect that was probably a good thing. If they had reached out it probably would have only provoked new acts that would have continued the cycle.”

Al-Hafiz’s death was part of a pattern in Mare‘a, where many others were similarly disappeared, or forced to flee the country. ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Najjar, from the al-Khalil family, was arrested and disappeared in Aleppo city in 1981 after visiting the home of an SMB member who had been serving as an informant for the regime. ‘Abd al-Rahim’s cousin, Talib al-Najjar, a Ba‘ath Party officer who nonetheless was accused of harboring covert sympathies for the insurgents, was also arrested and disappeared. An SMB member who was a distant relative of both men turned out to be an informant, and fled the country shortly thereafter. Decades later, the children and other direct relatives of these men helped take up arms and become pivotal leaders within Mare‘a’s opposition movement.

Even after the SMB insurgency ended in 1982, the regime continued to sporadically arrest suspected SMB members in Mare‘a and nearby towns. For years, stories circulated of entire mosque congregations being rounded up and interrogated by security forces. In the neighboring town of Tel Rifa‘at, where dozens of families took part in the uprising, regime forces are remembered for storming the homes of suspected militants and then publicly dragging their corpses from the back of trucks through the city’s streets. In 1982, a regime force of 16 tanks and armored vehicles, along with several hundred soldiers, encircled and besieged Tel Rifa‘at before moving in and carrying out mass

arrests of remaining oppositionists, effectively putting an end to insurgent activity in the north Aleppo countryside.¹³

As time went on, residents claimed the regime relied on ‘Alawite officers from other provinces to fill security, education and other government posts in Mare‘a, Tel Rifa‘at and neighboring towns. Similar to Salih al-Hafiz, stories emerged of Mare‘ans who, upon joining the officer corps, were fired or removed after attaining a certain rank.

The inability of locals to penetrate the highest ranks of the party and state was perhaps best reflected by the fact that no Ba‘ath Party recruitment offices, or political, military, criminal or intelligence security branches—common features in towns throughout Syria’s—were built in Mare‘a. Following the outbreak of the revolution, this would prove beneficial as protestors could gather in the city free from the watchful eye of security forces.

Instead, crackdowns on protests in Mare‘a required security forces to mobilize in neighboring cities such as Aleppo and A‘zaz, allowing locals to get wind of regime movements in advance. Eventually, Mare‘a’s Local Coordinating Center (LCC) cooperated with other LCCs in neighboring towns to set up a string of watch posts along the roads linking A‘zaz, Mare‘a, Tal Rifa‘at, Hayyan, Heiratan, and ‘Anadan to provide an early warning system for demonstrators mobilizing across the region. Mare‘a would be the first among these towns to declare itself liberated from the decades-long clutch of the Ba‘ath Party. It was then that the city shot from obscurity to become one of the most important locales in the Syrian revolution.

Tadmur massacre that led to the death of more than 1,000 inmates, however nothing confirming the account has ever emerged.

13 Osama Hadba Interview 1



Chapter 2: The Syrian Revolution in Mare'a

The Civil Period

Protests Erupt

The first protest in Mare'a occurred in conjunction with several others across the country on April 22nd, 2011, in solidarity with a large students' demonstration in Dara'a. Muhammud al-Najjar, one of the city's first activists, was taken by surprise when he heard anti-regime chants in the city's main market.

A few friends and I followed the sounds of the chants until we came across the small group of protestors, and we decided to join in. The whole thing was so spontaneous and without warning that some people later would suspect that the regime planted that initial group in order to gauge the overall receptiveness of Mare'a residents to demonstrations. Nevertheless, even if this was the case, they would soon get their answer: within twenty minutes several hundred people had joined in. Mare'a officially rose up and joined the ranks of the revolution.

In the days and weeks after, residents became increasingly

bold, taking to the streets during the day and sometimes under the cover of darkness to voice their opposition to the regime. From the beginning, relatives of Salih al-Hafiz (the ousted air force officer) and others who had disappeared during the 1970s and 1980s played a lead role in organizing, inspiring, and bankrolling the protests.

"When we first started demonstrating, anti-riot units from A'zaz would often harass us, driving by and shooting at protestors before skating off and leaving the city," said Sheikh 'Ali al-Hafiz, Imam at Mare'a's al-Insaf mosque and a first cousin of the disappeared al-Hafiz brothers. Sheikh 'Ali al-Hafiz was one of only two imams in Mare'a willing to protest against the regime. The other, Zakaria al-Hafiz, the son of the disappeared martyr of the same name, also led Friday prayers at a mosque in the small town of Herbel just south of Mare'a. The rest of the city's religious establishment adopted a unified stance of opposition or neutrality towards the protests, preferring to remain in the good graces of the state to which they owed their status. Muhammud recalled,

Our revolution was an uprising against the entirety of the old order, not only political but also religious, despite

people's common perceptions. Many of the sheikhs in Mare'a were proponents of the Rifai Sufi order, which had spread throughout the area in the decades prior to revolution. We felt that this had been encouraged by the regime, as much of Sufism, in particular the Rifai school, puts heavy emphasis on the authority of its sheikh, whom followers must submit to on all matters. These sheikhs in turn would often preach that Assad was Wali al-Amr [Protector, Custodian], of a legitimate Muslim state, against whom rebellion was a form of sin or even apostasy. However, after the revolution, we stopped listening to them.

In one instance, Muhamad and a group of demonstrators passed by Sheikh 'Abdullah al-Hafiz, the town's most influential Imam with links to the Ministry of Endowments. "They stood and watched silently as we passed. When we saw them, some of us began chanting, 'man la yusharik ma 'andu namus!' [those who don't participate have no honor!], to which they didn't respond. Some of us approached the sheikhs aggressively and even spit on them. For us, this was the sort of major transgression we never expected to ever take part in. The sheikhs walked off briskly and we continued our march. After that, protests got larger".

As Ramadan approached, the protests (often held after Friday prayers) began to number in the thousands, and were growing more organized. This allowed Mare'a to distinguish itself as home to a movement that rivaled much larger cities. In addition, without a regime presence in town, troops had to be sent from elsewhere to forcibly put down the protests.

Muthanna al-Nasser, a lawyer and founder of the Free Lawyers Collective in Aleppo, recalled the massive day-long demonstration on August 19th, 2011 to hold off regime attempts to penetrate the city; "There were several thousands of us in the streets when security forces from Aleppo and A'zaz arrived and cordoned off the city from all directions. All roads leading in and out were blocked off, effectively putting us under siege." The troops opened fire; he received birdshot to the leg and back.

This was the first instance where locals responded en masse to regime violence against demonstrators. Several thousand protestors, some armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails, marched from four directions, as regime troops rained fire

upon them. "At one point, soldiers hijacked a bus which they used to try to ram us down," recalls Hussein al-Nasser a local activist who would later become active with Liwa al-Tawhid, "but we managed to set it on fire with Molotovs. The driver was forced to get out and flee, and he left a burnt vehicle skeleton on the side of the road."

Eventually, regime forces retreated after deciding that the violence required to disperse the marchers would be too excessive. Al-Nasser recalls,

The chiefs of the security force were Khalid al-Khudr from Aleppo and Khalid al-Jassim from A'zaz, who sent a delegation to negotiate with us for a joint withdrawal: they would leave Mare'a if we agreed to disperse. For us, we had already been demonstrating for hours and considered our stance until that point a victory, and it was. We did as they asked, and they left.

From this day on, Mare'a was de-facto liberated.

Birth of the Local Coordinating Committee

Mare'a's protests were successful in part due to the efforts of Musa al-Musa, a sympathetic police chief from the Idlib countryside and head of the city's modest police force, the only security body in the city. Musa regularly attended Local Coordinating Committee (LCC) meetings, warned protestors before regime forces arrived, and used his influence to help those who had been arrested. Days after the August 19th protest, a delegation of security officers from A'zaz visited Mare'a's police station with a list of wanted people from the local LCC—including Muhamad al-Najjar and Muthanna al-Nasser.

According to both, al-Musa contrived a fake story absolving Muhamad, Muthanna, and others of responsibility for their role in the demonstration. All walked free.¹⁴ At the same time, the regime attempted to convince LCC leaders to abandon their activity in exchange for promises of funding for new development projects in the city. Figures such as Aleppo Governor Ahmed Khaluf al-Hussein, A'zaz's

¹⁴ In early-2012, al-Musa was arrested, interrogated and replaced as Mare'a police chief. However, by that point the utility of his role had decreased as the protest movement had morphed into an armed uprising that treated Mare'a as liberated territory to be administered independently.

Ba'ath Party General Secretary Abu Ahmed, Head of Political Security Hilal Hilal, and others visited the home of another prominent protest leader, Muddar al-Najjar, to discuss potential compromise.¹⁵ Muddar, the son of Abd al-Rahim al-Najjar, forcibly disappeared by the regime in 1982 in Aleppo city, by this point had become a lead organizer and financier of the LCC. He, along with members of other wealthy families in Mare'a, contributed and organized donations to finance the purchase of placards, posters and film equipment for a planned local media office in the city.

During the meeting, regime officials allegedly made a series of promises to locals to help calm tensions, including the provision of new government jobs and the construction of a local hospital -- something that still did not exist in Mare'a. Mahmoud al-Najjar, signatory to the Damascus Declaration and long-time opposition figure, claimed that Muddar and others feigned interest in accepting the concessions on the condition that the regime provide information about their missing relatives.

"Muddar demanded that the regime either point him in the direction of where his father 'Abd al-Rahim was being held, or provide a death certificate that explained how and where he died and when," he recalled. "Members of the Hafiz house demanded the same regarding Youssef, Zakaria and Subhei. This was an embarrassing request for the delegation as the regime had still never acknowledged the disappearance of these or any other political prisoners from that period and never would, as doing so might inspire new requests from thousands of others across the country whose relatives had also been killed or arrested."

Several rounds of meetings with regime officials ended with no agreement. Meanwhile, the pace of protests across the region was escalating rapidly, with the coordination across towns becoming more sophisticated. By this point, in TK-month Mare'a's LCC was officially chaired by a grain, cumin and agricultural products merchant named 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh, a member of Mare'a's middle class Hajji household whose relatives owned several small retail stores across the city. Saleh was a religious man who throughout the 2000s conducted several missionary trips with Jama'at

al-Tabligh wa al-Da'awa (the Outreach and Proselytization Group), a South Asian Sufi Muslim evangelical organization whose membership numbers in the tens of millions and has been described as the largest Islamist organization in the world.

Both al-Saleh's missionary work and expanding business obligations had taken him, prior to the revolution, on trips to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Lebanon, and non-Arab countries such as Turkey and Bangladesh, where he both preached personal piety and engaged in commercial ventures exporting Syrian potatoes and other agricultural goods across the region. Numerous other figures in Mare'a were also members of Jama'at al-Tabligh wa al-Da'awa (JTD), including al-Saleh's business partner, Lu'i al-Na'ama, who, like Saleh, helped finance local activists and military factions in Mare'a during the revolution. During this period, 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh earned renown as a charismatic and inspirational role model for local youth whose religious leadership had abandoned their cause. Al-Nasser, recalled:¹⁶

His personal discipline and piety, combined with a light-hearted nature, constant smile, and tall frame—made him instantly popular with the young men who risked their lives demonstrating on the street to be free. He never let his instant status within the movement translate into arrogance. His modesty made him accessible; he ate, slept and marched alongside the youth, exposed himself to the same dangers all while paying out of his own pocket to ensure we had the materials we needed for protests. Later, as a military commander, he was always on the frontlines, exposing himself to the same conditions as his soldiers, while continuing to use his own money to purchase weapons and equipment. His experience as a missionary made him a gifted orator who could quickly rally large groups of men and youth towards a goal. Without him the revolution in Mare'a, and in turn northern Syria, might not have played out the way it did.

Under 'Abd al-Qadr al-Saleh's leadership, Mare'a's LCC quickly became a model for those in nearby towns such as Tel Rifa'at and 'Anadan, whose leaders increasingly

¹⁵ Muddar was Muhammed's brother in law and son of 'bro al-Rahim al-Najjar, who had been arrested and disappeared in 1982.

¹⁶ Al-Hanan would later go on to join Liwa al-Tawhid, Mare'a's local FSA franchise

traveled to Mare'a to seek refuge and coordinate joint marches between cities. "Mare'a was becoming a safe haven for oppositionists elsewhere who were afraid of being arrested in their hometowns," recalled Muhammed. "They would come to Mare'a and we would often put them up in our own homes for weeks at a time. That was the atmosphere back then, solidarity." Among those who traveled to Mare'a was 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Salama, chairman of the LCC in 'Anadan which he fled due to the strong security presence in the city. Like many in Mare'a, several of 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Salama's relatives had fled Syria or were disappeared during the SMB led uprising against the regime in the 1970s and 1980s.

On December 21st, 2011, 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Salama and LCC leaders from towns across the north Aleppo countryside announced the formation of the Revolutionary Council for Aleppo and its Countryside (RCAC), with Mare'a as the de-facto capital. That day, in a triumphant display, demonstrators celebrated in front of the town's municipality building, climbing atop its roof and hoisting the flag of Syria's opposition, while those in front

held a massive placard that read, "Free Men of Mare'a".¹⁷ Protests in solidarity were held that same day in towns throughout the region.

In Heiratan, a local LCC organized a demonstration during which a sign proclaiming that activists in the towns of Bab, Manbij, Biza'a, Maskana, Safira, Qubtain Jabal and 6 others in the Aleppo countryside recognized the legitimacy of the newly formed RCAC, "because God's hand is with those who are unified". Though these towns remained effectively under regime control, a spark had been lit that would soon transform Mare'a into a lightning rod attracting impassioned youth from across the country who would emigrate to the newly freed city.¹⁸

¹⁷ freedom 'Anadan2011, December 21st 2011,
"Aleppo:Hraytan:Demonstration to Support the Revolutionary
Council 21/12/2011": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGWFEWIPEMU>; Mare0city, December 21st
2011, "Mare'a 21/12 Revolutionary Council Announcement
in Aleppo and it's Countryside J1": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjcGimSWdZI>

¹⁸ Mare0city, January 16th 2012, "Defection Sheikh Ammar al-Faruq Hamidu from the Religious Establishment": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSpOABMIGd0>



“The first weapons appeared in the hands of neighborhood watch groups...”





Militarization

The Protests Militarize

One week after the RCAC's formation, on December 28th, 2011, several thousand demonstrators from across the province gathered in Mare'a and marched towards Aleppo city, where they hoped to link up with protestors who had been organizing near the university and in other neighborhoods. Upon reaching 'Anadan, they were fired upon by security forces with live rounds, prompting them to flee and head back towards Mare'a.¹⁹ On the way, while passing through the town of Hayyan, the demonstrators were fired on again by members of the local pro-regime Bijji family, killing one demonstrator, Ahmed Ramzi Dada.

Dada was the first protester to die from Mare'a, and his funeral the next day was attended by thousands from the region.²⁰ In subsequent days, regime crackdowns in the area grew more intense, and locals began to arm themselves. The first weapons appeared in Mare'a in the hands of neighborhood watch groups that emerged in response to rumors that shabiha [pro-regime thugs] were planning to infiltrate the city in order to kill or kidnap activists or commit other crimes. "My father and each of his cousins each put down \$1,000, which was enough to buy weapons and ammunition to arm two members of our family," said al-Nasser. "The beginnings of these groups were modest, and didn't require any outside support. We would simply send someone north into southern Turkey to buy pump action rifles that were widely available for purchase at local gun stores."

Across Syria, the intensity of military action began to escalate significantly. By the end of 2011, FSA military councils appeared in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Dara'a and Damascus provinces. On January 28th, 2012, the Arab League officially withdrew its monitoring mission in Syria, citing the "critical deterioration of the situation." Five days later,

19 MareaOcity, December 29th 2011, "avi. Live rounds fired on peaceful protesters 'Anadan 12--28": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDPOfE5vsSs>

20 freedomaleppo, December 29th 2011, "Aleppo – Mare'a || Martyr Ahmed dada at the al-Furqan mosque 2011-12-28": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVwpWCINHqw>; MareaOcity, December 2011, "For the mediadhd death of the Martyr Ahmed Ramzi Dada Aleppo countryside Mare'a 12—29": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQA6ZCKsQtU>

on February 3rd, the regime launched a bloody assault to recover the liberated neighborhood of Bab ‘Amr in Homs city, which had been under the control of a rebel group calling itself the Faruq Brigades. Other liberated towns such as Zabadani in the Damascus countryside, Rastan in Homs province, and parts of Dara‘a city, were increasingly fending off violent regime attempts to wrest them back into its possession. That month, a new group calling itself the Abu ‘Ammara brigades began carrying out targeted assassinations of prominent elements of the security forces in Aleppo city. By March, FSA units began to appear in the north Aleppo countryside.

Mare‘a’s neighborhood watch groups provided the initial structure for the city’s first FSA faction, Qabdat al-Shamal (Fist of the North). Similar groups made up of armed men appeared in neighboring cities, such as ‘Asifat al-Shamal (Storm of the North) in A‘zaz, Qalb al-Shamal (Heart of the North) in Tal Rifa‘at, and the Abu Bakr al-Sadiq brigades in al-Bab. These groups began to use Mare‘a as a base of operations to plan attacks in their hometown. In March 2012, commanders from these groups, with the backing of sympathetic wealthy merchants, pooled their resources and formed Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal (Free Men of the North), an umbrella alliance of FSA groups across the north Aleppo countryside.

In al-Bab, a large city with a pre-war population of 100,000 and a well-developed manufacturing sector, pro-revolutionary families of wealthy industrialists such as the Kirz, Zemmar, ‘Afura, Shuwayh and others organized donations to Ahrar al-Shamal through Abdullah al-Kirz, a linens merchant who would later become Liwa al-Tawhid’s top commander in the city. In Mare‘a, other businessmen with ties to Abd al-Qadr Saleh, including Lu‘i Na‘ama and Ahmed al-Khattib—the latter also a veteran of the Jama‘at al-Tabligh wa al-Da‘awa (JTD) proselytization group—paid out of pocket to help purchase weapons for Ahrar al-Shamal fighters. Nearly a dozen other members of JTD were also active in the city and helped contribute resources to the militarization of Mare‘a’s opposition movement. Rich farmers and owners of large plots of real estate in the surrounding countryside similarly contributed funds to bankroll armed resistance to the regime.

Weapons for Ahrar al-Shamal were mostly seized from government facilities in the area or purchased on the

black market from officers in the security services who sympathized with the revolution or simply saw an opportunity to get rich. One such figure, Abu Shihab, an intelligence officer from Aleppo city, allegedly brokered arms deals allowing Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal to source arms from officers in Nubl and Zahra, two Shi‘a towns northwest of Aleppo city whose population was disproportionately represented in local officer ranks, giving them ready access to weapons.

Enter the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

In addition to donors from among the Aleppo countryside’s merchant elite, Mare‘a soon began to attract other individuals with ties to foreign donors, in particular the SMB, which by this point had begun to muscle in on key Qatari and Saudi weapons networks being organized abroad. One local figure crucial in facilitating the direct link between the SMB and Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal was ‘Abdullah ‘Othman, a Director of a Shari‘a Academy in Turkmen Berah, a small town five miles northeast of Mare‘a. ‘Othman had close ties to key members of the official Sunni religious establishment in Aleppo city, including Mahmoud Nasser al-Hut, director of the Dar Nahdat al-‘Ulum al-Shari‘a, which had been opened 48 years earlier by Muhammad al-Nabhan.

During these formative months, ‘Abd al-Qadr Saleh and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Salama also met with members of the SMB, in particular Ghassan Najjar, son of prominent Sunni proselytizer Muhammad Yassin al-Najjar, acting then as a representative for Ahmed Ramadan, Chairman of an SMB splinter faction known as the National Action Group and member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition “government” in exile. According to those with knowledge of the talks, organized by a Turkish intelligence agent known simply as “Abu Jassim”, Ghassan Najjar offered ‘Abd al-Qadr al-Saleh an influx of funding on behalf of Ahmed Ramadan to purchase smuggled weapons in exchange for pledges of loyalty to the SMB group, offers al-Saleh allegedly turned down.

Other leaders in Mare‘a such as ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Salama and Muddar al-Najjar, however, were rumored to have been more amenable to establishing ties with the SMB, paying lip service to their demands for allegiance in exchange for aid that could strengthen their individual positions within

the city. Before long, outside money began to trickle into Marc'a and the factions of Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal, setting the stage for a partnership later that would result in the formation of Liwa al-Tawhid.

Foreign Jihadists Make a Foothold

Around this time, the region also witnessed its first introduction to foreign jihadists, who emerged to help train local FSA factions. In addition to being solicited by the SMB, 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh was allegedly approached by members of al-Qa'eda, who unsuccessfully sought to recruit the charismatic new leader to their cause. Around this time, in early 2012, Abu Sattayf al-'Iraqi, an Iraqi national and a founder of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State of Iraq's Syrian franchise, established his headquarters in the neighboring town of Tal Rifa'at. A former Ba'athist intelligence officer under Saddam Hussein, Abu Sattayf al-'Iraqi had actually been living in Tel Rifa'at since 2006, fleeing his home country after being targeted by US coalition forces for his involvement with Al-Qa'eda in Iraq (AQI).

"Abu Sattyaf rented an apartment in Tal Rifa'at's northern

neighborhood, became a taxi driver and mostly laid low", according to Osama Hadban, former media spokesman for Liwa al-Fatah, previously Tel Rifa'at's largest FSA faction. "He barely spoke with or developed relationships with anyone in town, with the exception of a few of his neighbors".

According to Hadban, in the decade prior to the revolution Tel Rifa'at had become a center of Salafist recruitment in the north Aleppo countryside. "More than 300 young men from Tel Rifa'at traveled to Iraq to fight against the Americans", Hadban claimed.

"Many were influenced by Sheikh Ahmed al-Fayyad, a Shari'a law scholar and imam at a mosque on Tal Rifa'at's east side who also taught Arabic language and Quranic interpretation courses. Al-Fayyad specifically railed against the aberrant practices of local al-Qadariyya and Naqshabandiyya Sufi lodges such as saint worship and performing rituals at gravesites that had become popular in the area. By the early 2000's, al-Fayyad convinced nearly half of Tal Rifa'at's youth to turn away from Sufism and embrace Salafism".



Despite being directly adjacent to one another, Tel Rifa‘at presented a stark contrast to Mare‘a, whose opposition and regime-backed religious leaders remained staunchly Sufi in the years before and after the revolution.

Tal Rifa‘at’s history made it a welcoming environment for fleeing Iraqi insurgents such as Abu Sattyaf al-Iraqi. Many of those from Tel Rifa‘at who fought in Iraq after 2003 later became prominent FSA leaders after 2011, foremost among them ‘Ammar Hilal, a member of Tal Rifa‘at’s large Hilal family and founder of the Ghuraba al-Sham FSA faction that would later become one of Liwa al-Tawhid’s main rivals in northern Syria.

Like many others, Hilal was influenced by Abu Suri al-Qa‘q‘a, a firebrand Salafist cleric based in Aleppo city’s Sakhur neighborhood who had inspired hundreds of Syrians to perform jihad in Iraq, allegedly with tacit approval from Syrian intelligence agencies.²¹ It’s perhaps no surprise that ‘Ammar Hilal adopted Ghuraba al-Sham, the official moniker of Abu Suri al-Qa‘q‘a’s 2003 Salafist Da‘awa organization in Aleppo city, as the name for his own rebel faction nine years later.

In early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra slowly grew in Tel Rifa‘at and neighboring towns, with Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi instructing local FSA fighters on how to manufacture Improved Explosive Devices (IEDs) and homemade mortars while offering training in guerrilla tactics learned on the battlefield in Iraq. On April 3rd, in the immediate lead up to a massive regime assault on the north Aleppo countryside, a video emerged showing Abu Sattayf delivering a sermon to nearly fifty Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal fighters, including ‘Abd al-Qadr Saleh, before their departure for battle. Abu Sattayf’s rhetoric was far more overtly sectarian and regionally focused than the traditional nationalist rhetoric adopted by Syria’s early activists like the SMB.

For you all are the last hope of the Ummah [Islamic Nation]!” al-Iraqi proclaimed. “The people of Iraq,

the Sunnis of Iraq, have their eyes [fixed] on you all! The Sunnis of Saudi Arabia have their eyes [fixed] on you all! God has reckoned that [many] of the oppressed throughout the world would be unable to join their brothers [in the Levant]. [However] the cries of the women of Iraq have reached your [ears]...Brothers, we do not fight for some national council, or for nationalism, but rather for the religion of Islam!...No flag will fly over the Levant other than the [flag] of ‘there is no god but Allah’!²²

Over the next year and a half, both Jabhat al-Nusra (and later ISIS) would recruit heavily in Tal Rifa‘at. By the latter half of 2013, the city would become a headquarters for other senior Iraqi ISIS leaders such as Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifiawi, also known as Hajji Bakr, who oversaw an aggressive campaign to seize control of lucrative border crossings with Turkey and other revenue-generating infrastructure from FSA groups across northern Syria.

Eventually, ISIS would turn against Liwa al-Tawhid and all other FSA in Tel Rifa‘at and neighboring towns in a bid to establish its Caliphate stretching across Syria and Iraq. Before his death, ‘Abd al-Qadr Saleh became one of ISIS’ most potent adversaries, expelling the group from Mare‘a in July 2013 and helping to instill a culture of anti-ISIS resistance throughout rebel-held territory that has lasted until this day. However, in early 2012, both sides were united in the goal of liberating territory from the regime.

Escalation

On March 24th, 2012, Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal, the Abu ‘Amara brigades, and other factions in northern Syria managed to block the road leading from Aleppo city to A‘zaz in preparation for a broader assault on the city in the hopes of creating a corridor to the Turkish border.²³ The move provoked a violent regime response that marked the next stage of escalation.

On April 4th, 2012, the regime mobilized a force of several

21 Al-Jumhuriya, 13 March 2018, “Ghuraba al-Sham: Abi al-Qaqa wa Hassan Jizra”: <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/content/%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B9%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%BI%D8%A9>

22 Marea0city, April 3rd 2012, “Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal Special Operations Unit”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGJjIYlcT14>

23 freedom ‘Anadan 2011, March 24th 2012, “Anadan|Abu Ammar brigade blocks the international Aleppo Turkey road”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJZP4InrKs0>

thousand soldiers along with dozens of tanks outside the town of Heiratan. As described previously, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Salama beseeched the people of Aleppo city to not remain neutral during the assault. The day before, Abu Sattyaf al-Iraqi had delivered his sermon to 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh and 50 other Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal fighters. Over the next six days, regime forces moved north, town to town, from Heiratan towards Mare'a, attacking everything in their path. The most grievous assault came on April 9th, when regime tanks and helicopters entered Tel Rifa'at and killed 45 people, including 10 members of the Sakran family.²⁴

Having witnessed the assault over the previous six days, Qabdat al-Shamal fighters in Mare'a, along with the majority of the town's civilians, withdrew from the city, leaving regime forces to find the town empty. Qabdat al-Shamal fighters had dug up many of the roads to make it appear as if IEDs had been hastily planted, slowing the regime's advance through the city streets. Even without rebels present, the town managed to inflict losses on the invaders: a local baker named Ahmed al-Najjar, who ran

the Sultan Pastry Shop, left the door to his business open, hoping to lure in soldiers, who were known for looting. Al-Najjar in fact had laced the shop's entire stock of pastries with poison; in the days afterwards, reports emerged from al-Kindi hospital in Aleppo city that dozens of soldiers had died while many more were in critical condition after eating pastries stolen from his store.

But in the end, it was the regime that had the final say: hundreds of houses and buildings were destroyed using conventional shelling and white phosphorous, leaving many beyond repair. Qabdat al-Shamal fighters did not engage with the attackers, but instead waited for the assault to end before returning to the city. Despite their brutality, the regime made no attempt to occupy the city. Local FSA and the RCAC simply returned to Mare'a and continued their operations. The regime never again tried to recapture Mare'a. Nevertheless, Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal wasted no time resuming attacks on regime forces, particularly in the border town of A'zaz.

In early June, Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal and other factions in the north Aleppo countryside received their first large shipment of foreign arms: several hundred semi-automatic rifles that fired 5.5mm/5.6mm bullets that were known colloquially as "NATO weapons." Though light, these arms were known for their accuracy and their ability to

²⁴ Zaman al-Wasl, April 10th 2012, "Details of the 'Tal Rifa'at massacre...burnt corpses and 45 martyrs": <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/25881/>; Aljazeera Mubasher, April 10th 2012, "Tel Rifa'at Massacre": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCEdoQWw36w>



fire at long ranges. They were brought into Syria via a loose network of Gulf, Lebanese, and Syrian financers collectively referred to as the “Istanbul Group” that met in that Turkish city. Organized by Okab Saqr, a Lebanese politician and close associate of former Lebanese Prime Minister Sa‘ad al-Hariri, the “Istanbul Room” channeled weapons purchased by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to FSA factions inside Syria from sources in Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Greece, Georgia, Libya and elsewhere.²⁵

Weapons delivered to Ahrar al-Shamal arrived through Idlib province by way of the smuggler Ali Billu, who founded of Liwa Ahrar Suriya (Free Men of Syria), an FSA faction based in ‘Anadan. Billu was in direct contact with Okab Saqr and members the al-Hariri family in Lebanon. From ‘Anadan, Billu distributed the weapons to FSA groups in Mare‘a and factions in towns in nearby provinces of Idlib and Homs. As acknowledgement for Saqr’s role in helping to bankroll the FSA, local factions calling themselves the “Sa‘ad al-Hariri Brigades” soon emerged in ‘Anadan and other towns throughout Aleppo province.²⁶

The Birth of Liwa al-Tawhid

In early June, rebels and key financiers began to hold talks aiming to unite the more the hundreds of rebel groups in the Aleppo and Aleppo countryside. A key figure pushing the talks was Ahmed Ramadan, the influential SMB member and Syrian National Council (SNC) leader. On July 4th 2012, Ramadan managed to secure \$600,000 for the formation of a rebel alliance in Idlib which became known as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF). This

25 Zaman al-Wasl, February 9th 2015, “Those two officials that hold the most positions within the Syrian Opposition”: <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/57901>; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 7th 2013, “Struggling to Adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria”: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/05/07/struggling-to-adapt-muslim-brotherhood-in-new-syria/g2qm>; Washington Post, May 15th 2012 “Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbors’ money, U.S. coordination”: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-rebels-get-influx-of-arms-with-gulf-neighbors-money-us-coordination/2012/05/15/gIQAds2TSU_story.html?utm_term=.9a0cd0efa299; AP, May 24th 2012, “US poised to vet possible arms for Syrian rebels”: <https://news.yahoo.com/us-poised-vet-possible-arms-syrian-rebels-161312841.html>; Dar News, November 10th 2018, “The Syrian National Movement File Part 2”, <http://darnews.net/?p=2595>; Zaman al-Wasl, March 8th 2015, “Zaman al-Wasl addresses the opposition’s financials...where did the Libyan NTC’s LYD52m go?”: <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/58760>

26 Shams al-Horeyya, 20 January 2013, Issue 19, Page 2, “News”

soon proved unsuccessful, however, due to TK and TK, and quickly fell apart. Nevertheless, the influx of cash for the SRF helped strengthen one of its component factions, Ahrar al-Sham (AHS) (Free Men of the Levant), which went on to become one of the most powerful Salafist factions in Syria.²⁷ Less than two weeks later, Ramadan secured a second tranche of funding from Qatar to bankroll the formation of a merger between Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal and 30 other FSA factions of the north Aleppo countryside, under the name Liwa al-Tawhid—whose name translates simultaneously as “the Unity Brigade” and “the Monotheist Brigade.”²⁸ Not long after, the rebel movement stepped up its attacks against regime positions in the north Aleppo countryside, launching raids on police stations in Ghandura, Manbij, Tadif, Heiratan, al-Ra‘i, Menagh, A‘zaz, al-Bab and elsewhere.²⁹ It was in this last city, on June 24th 2012, that media activists from Mare‘a

27 Washington Post, 15 June 2013, “Private money pours into Syrian conflict as rich donors pick sides”: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-money-pours-into-syrian-conflict-as-rich-donors-pick-sides/2013/06/15/67841656-cf8a-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story.html; Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Aron Lund, 14 September 2012, Page 41, “Syrian Jihadism”; International Crisis Group, 12 October 2012, Page 29, “Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition”; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 07 May 2013, “Struggling to Adapt: the Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria”: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/05/07/struggling-to-adapt-muslim-brotherhood-in-new-syria/g2qm>; Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, DOI, 2017, Page 13, “Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War”

28 Harith Abd al-Haq, July 18th 2012, “Formation Statement of Liwa al-Tawhid 18/7/2012”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGIkY5lrRMo&t=7s>; Al-Jumhuriya, 06 Mach 2015, “Armed Factions Map in Aleppo”: <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33255>; Interview with Arif Hajj Youssef; source: Hajji Heiratan (don’t cite)

29 Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, “Qabdat al-Shamal brigades clash with the Ghandura police station”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMQtUjv1BMU>; Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, “Ghandura police station sergeant defects 24.06.2012”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-se2CJAhNY>; Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, June 20th 2012, “Joint operation [launched on] the Public Roads station in Manbij”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWcN3jeJHDw>; Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, June 20th 2012, “Tadif sector forces surrender to the Tawhid brigades”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swqjIDhJj_g; Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, November 17th 2014, “‘Abd al-Qadr Salih - released for the first time - clip from the battle of Hraytan filmed 2012/6/12”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLftFWJ8WMg>; Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, “Tawhid brigades besiege the Saraya building in Bab22.06.2012”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpvg9zR-n5U>; Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, “Tawhid brigades strike a plane in Bab22/06/2012”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDuyrX-G_n0; Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, June 23rd 2012, “Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal’s spoils from Assad’s shabiha 22/6/2012”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIcY2Uh9uo>



first used the moniker Liwa al-Tawhid to refer to the group that carried out an assault on the city's municipal building.

In each town where Liwa al-Tawhid maintained a branch, its leader became known under the moniker "Hajji" and the name of the area he represented. 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh became "Hajji Mare'a", and 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Salama became "Hajji 'Anadan." Other leaders emerging in this period included Hajji al-Bab (Abdullah Kirz), Hajji Tel Rifa'at (Hussein al-Assaf, also known as Abu Tawfiq), and Hajji Heiratan (Ahmed Zaydan). Liwa al-Tawhid's Hajjis soon become among the most well recognized figures of the Syrian revolution both at home and abroad.

For the time being, though, Liwa al-Tawhid was unparalleled on the battlefield. July 19th 2012, the day after its formal merger, Liwa al-Tawhid scored a major victory by liberating A'zaz and the Bab al-Salama border crossing with Turkey, which had been the target of rebel activities for four months. The liberation of A'zaz and Bab al-Salama allowed the opposition to more easily import arms from foreign donors, without having to rely on smugglers. Two

days later, Ahmed Ramadan and the SMB's Qatari and Turkish patrons delivered a new shipment of weapons and aid to Liwa al-Tawhid and gave the order for the group to open the boldest and most ambitious frontline in the Syrian war: Aleppo city.³⁰

Self-Governance in Mare'a

The Political Economy of Local Autonomy

Back in Mare'a, the thrill of living in newly liberated territory was tempered by the exigencies of having to govern a territory without a formal state presence. The revolutionaries did so by seeking to preserve, as best as possible, the regime institutions they took over. On the security front, 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh and Liwa al-Tawhid assumed responsibility for policing on August 19th, 2012, announcing the formation of a new "Amn al-Thowra"

³⁰ Al-Jumhuriya, 06 Mach 2015, "Armed Factions Map in Aleppo": <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33255>; Interview with author Arif Hajj Youssef; source: Hajji Heiratan (don't cite)

(Revolutionary Security) force tasked specifically with preserving local security rather than fighting regime forces.³¹

Meanwhile, Mare'a's civil governing bodies remained unchanged. Throughout most of 2012, Muhammad Dibū al-Najjar, Mare'a's former Ba'ath party mayor prior to the revolution, remained at his post and oversaw the operation of the town's utility departments, run by many of the same bureaucrats and civil servants that worked in the city prior to its liberation. Despite living amongst the rebels, al-Najjar made no bones about where his loyalties lay. "Bashar al-Assad is a democratic [leader], and he loves his people", al-Najjar stated to a BBC news crew that visited rebel-controlled Mare'a in October 2012. "Since coming to power he has instituted many reforms, [for example], salaries for state employees rose from LS4,000 to LS25,000 per month".³² By keeping al-Najjar in place, Liwa al-Tawhid commanders were able to exploit his connections to the regime to coerce the mayor to secure much-needed fuel and flour. However, the two sides did not pretend to be friends: around the time of the BBC news crew's visit, al-Najjar's son was kidnapped and held as collateral in order to keep al-Najjar in line.

The shipments of goods al-Najjar arranged were desperately needed in a town already long underserved and now almost entirely cut off from the outside world. The supply chains that locals had relied upon for basic sustenance were no more; gone were the days of farmers exporting potatoes to Doha, Dubai and elsewhere. Though merchants now had greater access to the Turkish market, cross border commerce was tightly regulated by Turkish authorities that sought to prevent an influx of cheap Syrian products from undercutting their own agricultural sector. While Bab al-Salama and other border crossings were ostensibly open to the free movement of goods and people, smuggling and black-market trade remained the primary means of acquiring and shipping goods.

The Politics of Bread

The biggest challenge was the difficulty of importing flour from regime territories, which was needed for bread, the staple of the Syrian diet. By the second half of 2012, the demand for bread in towns in the Aleppo countryside that possessed flourmills such as Dayr Jaml, al-Atarib, Manbij, and the newly liberated neighborhoods in Aleppo city outstripped the supply of flour, creating shortages in cities throughout the region. Previously, Mare'a, like all Syrian towns and cities, had a mix of private and public bakeries, with the latter offering bread at subsidized rates. Now, to weather the shortfall in flour, locals in Mare'a abandoned market forces altogether and adopt collectivist measures. The MLC "nationalized" flour procurement and bread distribution to ensure that all households received equal rations that could get them through the crisis.

Mahmoud al-Nasser, a retired Ba'athist intelligence officer who became a supporter of the revolution early on, took it upon himself to fundraise and unite the efforts of local military and business leaders to procure wheat shipments large enough to meet the needs of the entire town. This required organizing for the wheat to be transported and converted to flour outside the city and brought back to Mare'a. The process demanded that Mahmoud move fast, both to buy up local supplies of wheat before his counterparts elsewhere and to secure a spot at the front of the line at any of the flourmills scattered across the region.

In Mare'a, flour is processed at the town's factory bread furnace, a facility that is present in some cities and is capable of producing large quantities of bread. Distribution was handled through a centralized system whereby each neighborhood selected a "mu'atamid" (point man), responsible for registering the number of households in his area and assigning each one a weekly ration depending on the number of individuals in the home. Similar systems were adopted in liberated towns across northern Syria; however, Mare'a's dearth of infrastructure forced residents to collaborate in a way that closely bound them to one another and fostered broader political and social unity than elsewhere.

31 Ugarit News – Syria, 19 August 2012, "Ugarit Aleppo, Liwa al-Towhid forms the Amn al-Thowra Office led by Brigadier General Zaki Ali Lula with Ahmed Hamdu Sheikh al-Jib as his deputy 19.8 Aleppo": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zPe5CrjYMI>

32 Harith 'Abd al-Haq, 27 October 2012, "BBC Report on the Revolution in Mare'a English BBC Network": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA6w5s8iSr0>

By contrast, in other nearby liberated towns such as Manbij—home to 43 private furnaces in addition to some of the country's largest factory furnaces and flour mills—the



large scale infrastructure combined with a lack of central planning incentivized infighting between armed groups and criminal organizations seeking to lay claim to segments of the city's chaotic bread sector. Moreover, persistent aerial bombardment that damaged or destroyed the city's factory bread furnace and main groundwater wells, crucial for local agriculture, forced Mare'a's elites to mobilize to raise funds to repair, and eventually takeover, this infrastructure. At the same time, burgeoning international NGO and private development sector began to appear across the border in Turkey, and they sought to assist the development of local governance in liberated territories. All of these factors combined to help transform the political scene in Mare'a; locals' efforts to address the bread crisis ultimately laid the groundwork for cooperation that spurred the formation of an opposition governing council to replace the regime body led by Muhammad Dibu al-Najjar.

The Birth of the Mare'a Local Council

In December 2012, Mare'a's elite families gathered for negotiations on forming a new, independent local governing council. The communal landscape of the north Aleppo countryside is dominated by networks of kinship organized around deracinated urban provincial households made up of interwoven groupings of extended families. In Mare'a, seven large households dominated the city's

political, economic, and social scene, with nearly two-dozen other smaller, poorer families being less influential. When it came time to organize what would later be called the Mare'a Local Council (MLC), rather than hold a direct vote, the notables agreed to proportionally allocate seats within the MLC's cabinet to members of each of the town's households in accordance with their size.

Families were made responsible for deciding among themselves their representative for the council. However, in practice, the formation talks were largely carried out by 25 local elites and their relatives, who gathered in early December 2012 at Mare'a's al-Ansar mosque. In three separate rounds of deliberations carried out over two weeks, attendees argued over fair levels of proportional representation for each family. At the second meeting, representatives of the Najjar and Khattib households, the city's largest, demanded that each of them be granted 5 seats on what was decided would be a 30-person cabinet, a move opposed by other households that viewed this as an unjust power grab. The meeting ended with the Najjar, Khattib, Abbas and Nasser households each being granted 3 seats, while the Hafiz, Hajji and Faruh families each received 2. Twelve other smaller families that had representatives in attendance each received one seat.

Once the roster of MLC members was decided, internal

elections were held during the third and final meeting on December 15th 2012 to determine who would occupy which posts. Hazim al-Saleh from the Hajji family—a close cousin of ‘Abd al-Qadr al-Saleh—ended up beating out a member of the much larger Najjar family for the position of MLC Chairman.³³ Mare‘a’s status as the “Qardaha of the North” spurred by the ever-growing influence of Liwa al-Tawhid, which by this point had established chapters throughout northern Syria and was the faction leading the FSA assault in Aleppo city, afforded the MLC with widespread connections to foreign donors and NGOs that arrived in town to help support the new governing body. The MLC’s mandate focused on service provision, with decisions approved by a simple 50% + 1 majority. Serious disputes within the council were rare, and throughout 2013 Mare‘a witnessed an influx of funding and new development projects.

The MLC’s first act was to repair two electric pumps used to extract water from ground wells needed for local agriculture. This was paid for with a LS600,000 donation from two merchants with the Najjar and Abbas families. Before long, the private USAID-funded development firm Chemonics paid to install solar panels throughout Mare‘a and import flour from Turkey, eliminating the pressure on Mahmoud al-Nasser to purchase flour and convert it outside of the city. The MLC also hosted workshops with the Brookings Institution and IRI to promote good governance. World Fusion, Mercy Corps, Solidarity, Creative and other well-known NGOs also carried out projects in the city, and even adopted the burden of paying salaries to MLC employees and workers at local utility departments.

This quick influx of development cash helped strengthen the MLC’s perceived effectiveness and legitimacy among residents, helping to tamper the type of criticism directed against local councils in other towns. Internal opposition from trade unions, civil society, or local press was nearly non-existent in Mare‘a throughout this period. The outsized power, influence and success of Liwa al-Tawhid furthermore redirected the talents of many of the town’s most active and committed activists to Aleppo and other frontlines outside the city, reducing the scrutiny on the

MLC. The MLC, which was inaugurated on December 15th, 2012, continues to operate, surviving more than seven years of turmoil and near destruction at the hands of ISIS.

Mo’ Money Mo’ Problems

Despite success in preserving the peace within Mare‘a, across northern Syria Liwa al-Tawhid faced numerous challenges in its efforts to instill cohesion within its ranks. By late August 2012 Liwa al-Tawhid was running out of ammunition for its sub-factions in Aleppo city, leading to the loss that month of the Salah al-Din neighborhood to regime forces. One of Liwa al-Tawhid’s largest component factions, the Nur al-Din al-Zenki Movement based in the west Aleppo countryside, defected and joined a rival grouping, the Saudi-backed Authenticity and Development Front (ADF). Other factions that had previously pledged allegiance to Liwa al-Tawhid’s also began operating independently.

The threat of a regime counteroffensive in the autumn of 2012 spurred a new wave of SNC fundraising in Qatar that enabled Liwa al-Tawhid to consolidate its forces, halt the regime advance, and restructure its military institutions to bolster its rearguard. In September, the Revolutionary Security—the police force that Liwa al-Tawhid established in Mare‘a in August—received a funding boost and expanded its scope to administer internal security in all liberated towns throughout the north Aleppo countryside. The body relocated its headquarters to the border town of al-Ra‘i and was put under the command of ‘Abd al-Qadr Saleh’s cousin, Abu Ra‘id al-Hajji. Though the Revolutionary Security forces fell short in convincing many armed factions and local councils in the region to accept its authority, by early 2013 branches of the Liwa al-Tawhid backed force could be found in numerous liberated towns throughout Aleppo province.

Also in September, partial reconciliation occurred between Liwa al-Tawhid and key cohorts of urban Aleppines and defected army officers that the group had failed to win over in previous months. Chief among them was ‘Abd al-Jabar al-‘Okaidi, a defected colonel in the Syrian army who on July 3rd, 2012 had announced the formation of the “Aleppo Military Council.” At that time, shortly after the liberation of ‘Azaz, leaders of the so-called Aleppo

³³ No connection exists between the term “Hajji Mare‘a” and the fact that ‘Abd al-Qadr Saleh happened to hail from Mare‘a’s Hajji family, this is a pure coincidence.

Military Council—mostly based in southern Turkey—had been meeting and presenting themselves to foreign donors as a well-structured umbrella organization through which funds could be efficiently channeled to disparate rebel groups and monitored with accountability.

However, the Aleppo Military Council failed to assert itself as a relevant force on the ground.³⁴ Like rival commanders in Tal Rifa'at, 'Abd al-Jabar al-'Okaidi and others in the Aleppo Military Council refused to join Liwa al-Tawhid and subordinate themselves to Hajji Mare'a and Hajji 'Anadan. It was rumored that 'Abd al-Jabar al-'Okaidi himself was caught unawares by the launch of the FSA assault on Aleppo days later, learning about the attack after it began via the media like the rest of the world.

However by September 2012, circumstances had changed and Liwa al-Tawhid needed new allies that could help widen its appeal. On September 9th, 'Abd al-Jabar al-'Okaidi and Hajji 'Anadan, speaking as commander of Liwa al-Tawhid, announced their effective merger via the formation of an overhauled Aleppo Military Council. Though from the southern Aleppo countryside, al-'Okaidi's history as a ranking officer in Syria's armed forces meant he'd spend years living in Aleppo city before the

revolution and it afforded him the opportunity to cultivate relationships with many of its residents.

By partnering with al-'Okaidi, Liwa al-Tawhid sought to appeal to defected army officers throughout northern Syria, many of whom could attract support from Western countries. By this point, fears had already begun emerging abroad of the increasingly Islamized nature of the Syrian uprising. Partnering with al-'Okaidi served as a clear signal that Liwa al-Tawhid prioritized achieving results on the ground over imposing a radical brand of religion in areas they controlled.

On September 24th, two weeks after the formation of the Aleppo Military Council, Liwa al-Tawhid achieved another symbolic victory by securing the support of a group of 48 urban Aleppine businessmen calling themselves the Muslim Scholars of Aleppo Front. Though it did not exert much influence on the ground, the group was notable for whom it represented. Led by Abdullah al-Salqini, son of Ibrahim al-Salqini, Grand Mufti of Aleppo from 2005 until his death in September 2011, the father-son pair were scions of Aleppo city's traditional urban ulama establishment that cultivated close ties to the Ba'ath party regime in the aftermath of the SMB led uprising of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Following the outbreak of the revolution, Ibrahim al-Salqini remained visibly associated with the regime, ignoring pleas by his colleagues that joined the opposition to step down as

³⁴ The previous month, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established an operations room in southern Turkey aimed at monitoring ongoing developments in Syria's uprising and conducting vetting operations of FSA forces seeking to obtain material aid.



Grand Mufti. In July 2011, when the National Salvation Congress, an opposition body based in Istanbul, put out a press release listing Ibrahim al-Salqini as a signatory, he publicly condemned the statement and dissociated himself with all opposition activity. The willingness of his son to proclaim support for the revolution so soon after his father's death served as a major symbolic victory that helped legitimize Liwa al-Tawhid among a new layer of urban Aleppines. Following its formation, the Muslim Scholars Front of Aleppo announced its desire to help organize and bankroll a Liwa al-Tawhid-led political administration in liberated parts of east Aleppo. This occurred as the group received a new tranche of funding from Qatar.

While the injection of much-needed cash helped Liwa al-Tawhid keep its internal house in order, particularly in Aleppo city, the aid created problems for the group elsewhere. Among the groups that split from Liwa al-Tawhid early on was 'Asifat al-Shamal (Storm of the North), an outfit based in 'Azaz led by 'Ammar al-Dadikhi, a brutal FSA warlord who quickly asserted total control over his hometown. 'Azaz's strategic location next to the Turkish border and the Bab al-Salama crossing enabled al-Dadikhi to blackmail factions across northern Syria by threatening by force to limit their access to arms and weapons provided by foreign donors, or in some cases simply seize entire shipments for himself without releasing them to their intended recipients.

By October, 'Ammar al-Dadikhi went off the rails," claimed a former high-ranking leader within Liwa al-Tawhid who asked to remain anonymous. "That month, he seized control of a weapons shipment we needed to resupply our forces in Aleppo city, demanding we pay a tax to have it released. He even went so far as to threaten to build a wall at the Bab al-Salama crossing, thereby preventing all future foreign aid from coming into Syria. However, he overplayed his hand, as this didn't just piss us off but also our contacts in Turkish intelligence who were involved in setting up these deals. They had skin in the game as well. Eventually, he reached an agreement with Hajji Mare'a, and the latter set up a permanent office at Bab al-Salama with full-time staff to watch over all future arms shipments. After that, shipments became more consistent.

For a short period in late 2012 and early 2013, with a relatively stable safe haven in the Aleppo and Idlib countryside and steady supply of weapons coming from abroad, FSA factions in northern Syria were at their peak prowess. This allowed them to shift focus east and to liberate towns and cities in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces, including Raqqa city. By March 2013, nearly half the country was under Syrian opposition control. However, just when the regime's overthrow felt closer than ever, they began to be undermined from within by a new, unforeseen enemy.



Chapter 3: ISIS and the Siege of Mare'a

Jabhat al-Nusra Appears in Mare'a

The first public indication that the group later known as ISIS sought to make inroads into Mare'a came on January 13th 2013 when Muhammad al-Najjar, nicknamed “Buni” or “brown”, was filmed handing out free copies of a newspaper “Tuba lil Ghuraba”, or “Blessed be the Strangers,” outside a clothing store owned by Hajji Mare'a's former business partner, Lu'i al-Na'ama.³⁵ The newspaper, with its sophisticated design and glossy cover, praised the efforts of foreign fighters who had begun arriving in large numbers to northern Syria via the Bab al-Salama, encouraging locals to support them morally and materially, and match them in their levels of piety.

Buni's older brother, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Najjar, was the cameraman for one of Liwa al-Tawhid's official spokesmen, Harith 'Abd al-Haq, himself the brother of MLC Chairman Hazim Saleh and a cousin of Hajji Mare'a. Despite these connections to the city's top leadership, Buni, 'Abd al-'Aziz and Harith all later became ISIS supporters (with Buni himself dying on the frontlines on behalf of the group, and the latter two eventually being run out of town). A well-known soccer player who had a reputation for piety prior to the revolution, Buni first encountered Jabhat al-Nusra in December 2012 while praying at the Nur mosque near his home, across from which Nusra established its main HQ. Mare'a's neighborhoods are named after the various households that predominate within them; Nusra purposefully set up its headquarters in the Najjar neighborhood, in the hopes of attracting recruits from the city's largest household and cohort. However other than Buni, his brother, and a few others recruits, these efforts were a failure.

Though Jabhat al-Nusra had existed in Syria since January 2012, being led in the north Aleppo countryside by figures such as Abu Sattyaf al-Iraqi, the group's membership increased in towns around Mare'a only in late 2012. In December, a group of foreign fighters affiliated with Nusra established a rearguard headquarters at a farm just east

of Mare'a that was thereafter dubbed the “Saudi farm.” The farm's previous owner had been a Liwa al-Tawhid commander who was killed during the battle to liberate the Syrian Army Infantry Academy north of Aleppo city. After his death, other Liwa al-Tawhid commanders divvied up his assets, with one, Abu Tamim, acquiring ownership of the farm that he then leased to Nusra fighters.

Abu Tamim, like Hajji Mare'a and many other prominent figures in Liwa al-Tawhid, was a veteran of the Jama'at al-Tabligh wa al-Da'awa (JTD) organization, and he grew close with Jabhat al-Nusra through 2013, by way of Hussein Ayyad “Abu Ruwaha,” another JTD veteran and Salafist who was among Nusra's earliest recruits in the city. After ISIS emerged from the split with Nusra, it established a headquarters in Mare'a established in the Najjar neighborhood at the home of one of Abu Tamim's cousins. However, it would be in the neighboring town of Tel Rifa'at that ISIS established its largest presence.

Nusra Preys on Divisions in Tel Rifa'at to Grow

Liwa al-Tawhid had long faced challenges expanding beyond its initial collection of 30 or so component rebel groups. Commanders from other factions proved unwilling to relinquish their role as a node in the patronage network extending from foreign donors to local fighters—a position that offered opportunities for personal enrichment. Commanders who agreed to subordinate themselves and accept the authority of the likes of Hajji Mare'a and Hajji 'Anadan usually had to be convinced that by doing so they stood to gain more than if they ventured out on their own. Often, local elites were not convinced, as in Tel Rifa'at, where members of the Hilal and Qarandal households, the two most powerful clans in the city, resisted offers to merge with Liwa al-Tawhid because it meant subordinating their decision-making and revenue stream to Mare'a. Instead, they created a new formation, Liwa al-Fatah (the Conquest Brigade).

Within months, Liwa al-Fatah split; during the offensive to capture lucrative border crossings, 'Ammar Hilal and fighters under his command defected to form Ghuraba al-Sham. Ghuraba al-Sham became notorious for kidnapping,

³⁵ Harith Abd al-Haq, 13 January 2013, “Mare'a city - distributing the Tuba lil Ghuraba magazine 2013/1/12”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNYHCFNEIAk>

theft, the smuggling of valuable industrial machinery looted from factories, and the seizure of grain silos and other profitable facilities tied to Syria’s bread sector. ‘Ammar Hilal was rumored to have a brother living in a Gulf country who also helped bankroll his faction’s exploits. Eventually, Ghuraba al-Sham grew to be one of the largest factions in northern Syria, becoming a major rival to Liwa al-Tawhid. It, along with Liwa al-Fatah, dominated Tel Rifa‘at.

Opposition to Liwa al-Tawhid from Tel Rifa‘at’s large Qarandal and Hilal households forced Mare‘a leaders to recruit instead from within the town’s smaller Assaf, Dabso, Barburi and Jamal families. (In media interviews conducted with Liwa al-Tawhid leaders on the day of their formation, Hussein al-Assaf “Abu Towfiq,” owner of a small cement plastering company, appeared under the moniker Hajji Tal Rifa‘at).³⁶ Such divisions between the towns of Mare‘a and Tal Rifa‘at, and between families and households within Tel Rifa‘at itself, helped facilitate ISIS’ rise in the city and the region.

Among the influx of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters that arrived in late 2012 was Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khilawi, known colloquially as “Hajji Bakr,” a top commander of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Hajji Bakr had been ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s number two since 2010 when both men secured the latter’s rise to the position of ISI Caliph by carrying out a purge of senior leadership. Now, Hajji Bakr was in Tel Rifa‘at to oversee a similar effort within the ranks of Syria’s opposition.

According to Osama al-Hadban, former spokesman for Liwa al-Fatah, Jabhat al-Nusra (and later ISIS) recruited more than 500 fighters from the ranks of Tal Rifa‘at’s dueling families. These forces were supplemented by another several hundred foreign fighters, who often arrived with large sums of money, enabling them to help plug deficits in the Tel Rifa‘at Local Council’s budget and making them attractive marriage prospects for local families with young daughters. From their headquarters at Tal Rifa‘at, Jabhat al-Nusra (and later ISIS) fighters spread into the surrounding area to build up the ranks of the organization.

The Birth of ISIS

These efforts kicked off in earnest in Mare‘a in April 2013, after a conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra’s Syria-based leadership and their Iraqi superiors, resulting in a split that produced the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Upon formation, ISIS moved to seize control of much of Nusra’s assets. Throughout most of the Aleppo countryside and neighboring Raqqa province, the majority of Nusra fighters switched allegiances to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS. On the other hand, in Aleppo city, Idlib, and parts of Deir Ezzor, Nusra maintained much of its support.

In Tal Rifa‘at, Hajji Bakr and Abu Sattyaf al-Iraqi were joined by two other foreign ISIS leaders, Abu Suheib al-Iraqi and Abu Anas al-Saudi. This group helped lead the ISIS recruitment drive in Mare‘a. As elsewhere in Syria, ISIS recruited by hosting outdoor carnivals aimed at young people and children, organizing Quran memorization contests, running “Da‘awa” (proselytization) courses and attempting to get scholars loyal to the group appointed as imams at mosques throughout the city.

But the group’s efforts in Mare‘a ran up against opposition. In one instance, when an ISIS imam attempted to mount the podium to deliver a Friday sermon at the Ammar bin Khattab mosque, congregants assaulted him and threw him out of the building. The group was only able to make inroads among Mare‘a’s small, weaker households, who felt they had been denied opportunities in the MLC and Liwa al-Tawhid; a few individuals from lower-status families were moved by ISIS’ religious rhetoric and joined the organization during this period. Foremost among them was Abu Ruwaha, the former JTD veteran and well-known Salafist who initially was granted a mid-ranking position within the MLC’s Religious Affairs office, where he often bumped heads with superiors whom he felt were less qualified than him. Eventually, he was expelled from the MLC. Older and more well educated in Shari‘a law than most other Mare‘ans who joined ISIS, Abu Ruwaha became the group’s spiritual godfather, recruiting four of his sons, and his nephews and cousins.

Another leading figure was Muhammad al-Badr, a mid-ranking Liwa al-Tawhid commander whose brigade had helped lead the group’s successful assault on the Syrian Army Infantry Academy in December 2012, after which

³⁶ Harith ‘Abd al-Haq, 18 July 2012, “Meeting with Liwa al-Tawhid leaders 18/7/2012”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7aN09sdNxc>

he complained that his fighters were denied a fair share of the spoils by Liwa al-Tawhid's leadership. By mid-2013, Muhammad al-Badr joined ISIS and recruited three of his brothers and four of his neighbors and their relatives.

Lastly, 'Abd al-Rahman Baydun, a former member of Liwa al-Tawhid's Mortar Production Unit, who had developed an animosity for his superiors, was selected to be ISIS' Emir for Mare'a. 'Abd al-Rahman recruited a number of his relatives to join. Having won a solid social base among the marginalized families, by mid 2013 ISIS represented the only viable alternative to Liwa al-Tawhid in Mare'a. The group was quietly expanding its ranks while the Liwa al-Tawhid's leadership was distracted by regional and international developments. Yet ISIS was not able to avoid Liwa al-Tawhid's notice for long.

ISIS Moves to Block U.S. Aid to the FSA

The road to the inevitable clash between ISIS and the FSA began in May 2013, when Qatar scaled back aid for FSA groups significantly, while Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faysal bin 'Abd al-Aziz and Director General of Saudi Intelligence Agency Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin 'Abd al-Aziz became personally involved in negotiations with FSA leaders in Turkey and Jordan to form a "moderate Sunni army" that would turn its guns against both Assad

and ISIS. Prominent SMB leaders such as Farouk Tayfour, Nazir al-Hakim, Ahmed Ramadan and others, long anathema to Saudi Arabia, sensing the shifting winds, and even led several delegations to the kingdom. In a related effort, the U.S. was promising up to \$250 million in aid to FSA factions to combat "extremist groups." This was part of a broader U.S. push to force Qatar—responsible for having funded hardline factions including Ahrar al-Sham AHS—to relinquish its role as primary benefactor of the revolution in favor of Saudi Arabia, which shared American fears of a safe haven emerging in the region for Al-Qaeda-linked groups.

Drawing parallels to its experience with the American backed "Sahwa" (Awakening) movement in Iraq, ISIS launched an aggressive campaign in the summer of 2013 to eliminate or co-opt all other armed groups. ISIS hoped that by seizing the border crossings, the FSA would be unable to receive the U.S.-Saudi aid. In TK-month, ISIS seized control of the border town of Jarablus, home to the Qaraqamish crossing, in a series of bloody clashes with a local Liwa al-Tawhid franchise. Then in July, ISIS expelled the FSA from Adana, a town located next to the Bab al-Hawa crossing in Idlib province. It launched a violent push against the 'Asifat al-Shamal faction to seize the border town of A'zaz. The faction, under the control of 'Ammar al-Dadikhi, who had defected from Liwa al-Tawhid to rule





the town on its own, began desperately to call for rejoining Tawhid in order to fend off ISIS. ISIS launched operations further east, as well, establishing near total control over the Tel Abyad crossing in Raqqa. In Raqqa city, finally, ISIS moved against Jabhat al-Nusra.

FSA Factions are Initially Reluctant to Fight ISIS

On July 19th, 2013, locals in Mare'a organized the town's first anti-ISIS protest, accompanied by a large Liwa al-Tawhid military convoy equipped with heavy weapons. Shortly after, Hajji Mare'a issued a public condemnation of ISIS and expelled the group from its headquarters at the Saudi farm east of the city. (The group's headquarters in the Najjar neighborhood—disguised as a Da'awa missionary center—remained undiscovered.) Yet these events proved to be the exception: most factions were unwilling, at first, to fight ISIS. From the perspective of these factions, ISIS—despite its aggressive behavior—was simply too valuable for its firepower, and too dangerous, to turn on at this moment. In other words, these factions did not want to fight a two-front war, especially as the regime was launching a new assault on western Aleppo. Furthermore, the option of fighting ISIS was unpopular among the FSA rank and file, which had become increasingly Islamized throughout 2013. Even the most influential FSA commanders could hardly be expected to force their men to risk their lives for a battle they did not believe in. And so FSA negotiations for the release of the U.S. money stalled.

Despite the events in Mare'a, Liwa al-Tawhid as a whole was no exception to such considerations. While Hajji

Mare'a vocally opposed ISIS encroachment, Hajji 'Anadan was far more tempered in his critique, owing to the history and dynamics of his own family.³⁷ Abu Ibrahim al-Salama, a cousin of Hajji 'Anadan, was among the founding members of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and a confidante of its leader, Muhammad al-Jolani. Yazin al-Salama, Hajji 'Anadan's son, also joined Jabhat al-Nusra, becoming a media activist with the group. Such ties led him to hesitate declaring war against ISIS. Though Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS had already split, with Hajji 'Anadan's relatives electing to stay with the former, Nusra's leadership was still keen on repairing its relationship with its Iraqi counterparts, and certainly opposed any partnership with the U.S. to destroy the group. Nusra's leadership also likely recognized that any U.S. backed effort to combat "extremist groups" could easily expand beyond ISIS and include Nusra as well, which remained an official branch of Al-Qa'eda.

The FSA Prepares to Fight Back

But such considerations could not hold for long. In early September 2013, motivated in part by the Assad regime's chemical attack against FSA forces in East Ghouta that killed 1,729 people, the Obama administration released portions of its \$250 million aid package to the FSA. On September 13th, 2013, Syrian opposition media reported on a meeting in Paris, France between representatives of

³⁷ Despite having grown up in 'Anadan, Hajji 'Anadan and his relatives were emigrants from the small village of Babis, southwest of the town.

French, Emirati and Jordanian intelligence and Ahmed al-Jarba, President of the Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and close Saudi ally who was helping Riyadh's outreach to the FSA.

ISIS sensed the tide was turning and moved to seize the advantage. The group stepped up assassinations of FSA commanders it believed were working with foreign countries. On September 15th, 2013, sensing the impending threat, leaders from Liwa al-Fatah, longtime rivals of Liwa al-Tawhid, announced their formal incorporation as a sub-faction of the latter. Three days later, ISIS temporarily took over A'zaz and captured 40 'Asifat al-Shamal fighters, who were used as leverage in negotiations.

By October, Saudi aid finally began pouring into the country. Foremost among the beneficiaries was Jeish al-Islam, a large Salafist faction based in the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta. Under the command of its charismatic leader Zahran Alloush, Jeish al-Islam became one of the most potent anti-ISIS forces in Syria, expelling the group from much of the liberated territory of the Damascus countryside. Saudi aid also arrived that month in northern Syria to the Nur al-Din al-Zenki Movement (formerly belonging to Liwa al-Tawhid), the Fastaqim Union, and other factions, which united to form Jeish al-Mujahideen (Army of Mujahideen). Like Jeish al-Islam in Damascus, Jeish al-Mujahideen in northern Syria led the FSA's first coordinated assault against ISIS in January 2014, expelling the organization from vast stretches across Aleppo and Idlib provinces. According to well-placed sources within Liwa al-Islam who asked to remain anonymous, as Saudi aid was pouring into both factions throughout October,

Hajji Mare'a himself attended a meeting in Turkey with US representatives in an attempt to secure similar levels of support for Liwa al-Tawhid. However, these efforts failed, and the battlefield shift would mark the beginning of the end of Mare'a's dominance.

Dénouement

The Death of Hajji Mare'a

On November 17th, 2013, a Syrian regime airstrike on Liwa al-Tawhid's main headquarters at the Army Infantry Academy just north of Aleppo city killed Hajji Mare'a. At the time, it was reported that Hajji Mare'a was rushed to Turkey in an effort to save him, after which his corpse was flown to Qatar for a funeral. However, locals in Mare'a tell a different story. "After it was obvious that he couldn't be saved, a small ceremony was held for 'Abd al-Qadr Saleh back in Mare'a", said a high-ranking commander in Liwa al-Tawhid who asked to remain anonymous. "It was very lightly attended and not publicly advertised. Only his immediate relatives, some of Liwa al-Tawhid's top tier leadership, members of his own personal office, and a few select others knew about the event. We were under intense pressure on all fronts and wanted to avoid any large events that could eat up our energy or distract us from moving onto the next step in figuring out how to proceed".

His death sent shockwaves throughout Syria and abroad, as it robbed the opposition of its most well-known, beloved, and committed leader—whose star in the seven years since has yet to be eclipsed. Thousands poured out into liberated towns across the country to hold massive funeral



services, whose sacrifices from the earliest days of the movement inspired those who knew him and those who didn't. However, his death did more than simply impact morale. Though Hajji 'Anadan was technically Liwa al-Tawhid's supreme commander, Hajji Mare'a's star always had outstripped his. By the time of his death, Hajji Mare'a and his personal office in A'zaz were responsible for coordinating with foreign donors and securing most of the foreign aid. Hajji 'Anadan would have difficulty filling these shoes—his personal connections made Western and Saudi donors wary. The effect was immediate: Turkish intelligence ceased their correspondence with the group's leaders.

Then, three days after his death, Liwa al-Tawhid, Jeish al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham, and others announced a merger under a new formation calling itself the Islamic Front. The goal of the formation was to join Syria's largest Islamist factions in a coherent bloc that was clearly distinguishable from both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and whose unified structure could improve battlefield efficiency, making the body a more attractive for foreign donors. However, divisions between each of the group's component factions soon emerged, and before long the body was largely defunct. Despite the group's professed unity, they disagreed among themselves about what to do about ISIS, with Ahrar al-Sham and others hesitant to move against them.

The FSA – ISIS Battles

By December 2013, infighting between ISIS and most other FSA groups had broken out across Syria. In Tal Rifa'at, the first open clashes between ISIS and local FSA factions occurred when the former killed a Liwa al-Fatah fighter who had refused to stop at an ISIS checkpoint in the city. In Mare'a, Liwa al-Tawhid finally discovered the ISIS headquarters in the city's Najjar neighborhood, which had been disguised as a Da'awa center. Hajji Mare'a's replacement, Abu Hatim Bakur, sent a small advance team of fighters to the Da'awa center, where they uncovered large stockpiles of AK-47s, RPGs, PK machine guns and other heavy weapons, prompting those ISIS members present to detain one of the Liwa al-Tawhid fighters, Abu Ali al-Hur.

The standoff ended when Abu Hatim Bakur called off the Liwa al-Tawhid fighters in exchange for al-Hur's release.

This was merely an attempt to lull ISIS into a false sense of security. On January 3rd, 2014, Liwa al-Tawhid, alongside the Saudi-backed Jeish al-Mujahideen and select other FSA factions, launched a coordinated assault on ISIS positions throughout Idlib and Aleppo provinces, expelling the jihadist group out of the majority of towns and villages in the area within days.

Liwa al-Tawhid overwhelmed the ISIS Da'awa center in the Najjar neighborhood, killing several fighters and forcing the surrender of the group's most prominent figures, including Abu Ruwaha, the Mare'a Emir Abd al-Rahman Baydun, the Badr brothers, and numerous foreign fighters. Liwa al-Tawhid forces then turned their attentions south and east, liberating the towns of Sheikh 'Aissa, Kaljibrin, Sowran, Kafra, Ihtaymlat, Harbal, Um Howsh, Bartyan and Hardtanin. They open up the road to the Infantry School that had been occupied by the group. In Tal Rifa'at, Liwa al-Tawhid forces stormed the city's northern neighborhood and engaged in a shootout at an ISIS safe house after receiving a tip from a local resident that a "high powered ISIS commander" lived there. It wouldn't be until after the Tawhid fighters managed to kill those inside that they realized the identity of whom they had been clashing with: Samir 'Abd al-Muhammad al-Khilifawi, or Hajji Bakr, the Iraqi former Ba'athist intelligence officer who served as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's number two.

Battle lines between the FSA and ISIS moved continuously over the next six months. While ISIS withdrew en masse from Idlib, the west Aleppo countryside, and towns in the north Aleppo countryside such as Tal Rifa'at, Mare'a, and A'zaz, by late January ISIS reinforcements returned in force and took swaths of the east Aleppo countryside, along with the entirety of Raqqa province. From their eastern stronghold, ISIS advanced west and re-occupied the entirety of the north Aleppo countryside, until meeting fierce resistance by Liwa al-Tawhid and other FSA factions in Mare'a and A'zaz. For the next two years, Mare'a and A'zaz were frontline towns subjected to daily assaults, and frequent suicide attacks, by ISIS forces.

Defections, Infighting, and the Levant Front

The ISIS assault on Mare'a occurred just as Liwa al-Tawhid was beginning to crumble from within following the death of Hajji Mare'a. Important commanders were



defecting to form their own factions rather than remain in a group whose leadership's ties to foreign donors had become tenuous. The first serious post-Hajji Mare'a fragmentation occurred in March 2014, when dozens of Liwa al-Tawhid fighters and commanders defected to join a new rebel group based in Mare'a, Tel Rifa'at, and neighboring towns, called Fajr al-Hurriya (Dawn of Freedom). Formed by a former commander and defector from Tal Rifa'at's Ghuraba al-Sham, Fajr al-Hurriya later became close to American-backed FSA factions such as the Hazm Movement and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, who would engage in intense clashes with Jabhat al-Nusra in late 2014. Then, on December 20th, 2014, Hajji 'Anadan, in partnership with Jabhat al-Nusra, was invited to establish a headquarters in Mare'a. TK announced the launch of the "Redressing of Grievances" campaign to go after Fajr al-Hurriya and other defectors, in addition to renegade fighters who had resorted to criminality since Hajji Mare'a's death. For several weeks, there were clashes in the city, leading to the arrests of Fajr al-Hurriya, with many being held in a makeshift prison set up in Mare'a's municipality building.

Despite this, Hajji 'Anadan's partnership with Jabhat al-Nusra would frustrate attempts to build a truly cohesive post-Hajji Mare'a force in the north Aleppo countryside. On December 25th, 2014, as the Redressing of Grievances campaign was underway, a collection of FSA commanders met at the al-Carfour mall in the city of Hreitan to announce the formation of "al-Jabhat al-Shamia" (the Levant Front). The new group included some of the FSA's biggest names in northern Syria; commanders from Liwa al-Tawhid, Jeish al-Mujahideen, the Nur al-Din al-Zenki Movement, the Fastaqim Union, and the Authenticity and Development Front all appeared to pledge allegiance to

the group. Hajji 'Anadan, longtime commander of Liwa al-Tawhid, was elected to serve as its supreme commander. The formation of the Levant Front was spurred on by the Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi (MOM), a US-backed joint operations room based in Turkey, with funding from Qatar and Saudi Arabia that sought once and for all to instill cohesion within the ranks of FSA factions, which could then be redirected to resist ISIS.

However the election of Hajji 'Anadan as the group's commander undermined the Levant Front's image as a "moderate" faction. His ties to Jabhat al-Nusra—at a time when the group was already at war with other US-backed factions—made his selection as leader unpalatable to the United States. Over the next four months, the formal rollout of the Levant Front as a unified force stalled, held up by negotiations between foreign donors and local factions, with individual commanders shuffled to various positions in an attempt to appease the Americans while simultaneously accommodating commanders who possessed a real following on the ground.

By April 9th 2015, the parties failed to reach a compromise, so Hajji 'Anadan stayed on as commander of the Levant Front. That day, US negotiators cut off funding for the group, prompting a new wave of defections. These moves forced Hajji 'Anadan to step down in July 2015 in favor of Abu 'Amru Safira, another former Islamic Front commander viewed by foreign donors as more "moderate" and therefore trustworthy. However, Hajji 'Anadan's removal significantly reduced the popularity of the new formation and failed to attract those who had left. Instead, more sub-factions defected over the next several months. Liwa al-Tawhid was effectively finished.

Conclusion

The town of Mare'a's two-year battle with ISIS finally ended in September 2016, when a Turkish-led assault expelled the group from Dabiq and a string of towns east of Mare'a, thereby eliminating the frontline. Dubbed "Operation Euphrates Shield," the Turkish assault eventually liberated towns across the north Aleppo countryside, including Jarablus and al-Bab.

Meanwhile, in the five years since that pivotal summer of 2015, new-armed formations have emerged and dissolved in Mare'a and across northern Syria. In Mare'a, by two factions are now dominant: The Da'awa and Jihad Brigades and Liwa al-Muatasim. Meanwhile, the MLC continues to govern. MLC continues to consist of seven cabinet posts, with its chairmen peacefully transferring power through elections held among representatives of the town's families.

Despite the FSA's losses, Mare'a still maintains its reputation as "Qardaha of the North" and occupies a leading position within the Turkish-occupied zone of the north Aleppo countryside. Mare'a's unique status within Syria has its roots in the earliest days of the revolution, when the city's leaders became the favored recipients of domestic and foreign aid due to the unparalleled effectiveness and cohesiveness of their early protest movement. Mare'a's ability to mobilize such a powerful revolutionary movement stemmed from its residents shared, bitter experiences of institutional neglect. The relative lack of regime presence in Mare'a, combined with the presence of a vanguard of activists with grievances stretching back decades, and with elements of pure chance, like having a cooperative police chief, made Mare'a an ideal gathering spot for oppositionists throughout northern Syria. Protestors took to the streets in numbers that rivaled much larger cities such as Aleppo and Homs, and managed to ward off numerous regime incursions.

The existence of a tight-knit class of rural notables, organized around family ties, was also critical for the town's success. These notables, though they had carved out stature for themselves within their rural conservative society, were marginalized at a national level by various Ba'athist policies since the 1960s, with many having supported the 1979-1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising.

Throughout 2011, the city became a safe-haven for the most

committed opponents of the regime throughout the region. Among these were key figures belonging international Islamist networks such as Jama'at al-Tabligh wa al-Da'awa (JTD) and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB). As the city's opposition movement evolved, Mare'a's leadership managed to stitch together a coherent movement of otherwise disparate armed men whose energies could be focused towards specific regime targets. Finally, Mare'a was simply lucky to produce a charismatic leader like Hajji Mare'a, whose revolutionary commitment inspired many others to put their lives on the line.

Throughout 2012 and the first half of 2013, Mare'a's Liwa al-Tawhid was integral to the revolution's greatest battlefield achievements, including the assault on Aleppo city and the liberation of wide swaths of territory across northern Syria. However, as elsewhere, the emergence of ISIS in the latter half of 2013 proved to be major impediment in Liwa al-Tawhid's ambitions. The emergence of ISIS as a third side to the conflict helped devour the revolution from within and deny it support from abroad.

A second factor that hurt Liwa al-Tawhid was its lack of institutionalization. The group's foreign ties were primarily through Hajji Mare'a, which meant that once he was killed, the group soon fell apart. One early example of this lack of institutionalization is the case of al-Safwa al-Islamiyya brigades (The Islamic Elite brigades), a large component of Liwa al-Tawhid that did the lion's share of the fighting on the Aleppo old city frontline. In October 2013, the group split from Liwa al-Tawhid following a dispute over the distribution of weapons and ammunition. The al-Safwa al-Islamiyya brigades was formed as a sub-faction of Liwa al-Tawhid on January 18th, 2013 by Himam al-Najjar "Abu Yazin," the son of Yahya al-Najjar, a prominent Brotherhood member from Mare'a who fled Syria for Kuwait during the 1979-1982 uprising. Though highly integrated into Liwa al-Tawhid's structure, Abu Yazin's upbringing in Kuwait afforded him his own network of contacts within the SMB, Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafist groups throughout the Gulf. In late October 2013, as fighting in Aleppo's old city intensified, an al-Safwa al-Islamiyya brigade commander named Abu Hussein was sent to Liwa al-Tawhid's leadership at the Infantry Academy to request more ammunition. Liwa al-

Tawhid's leadership, which felt that the al-Safwa brigades consumed a disproportionate amount of the group's overall ammunition, turned down the request. Shortly after, Abu Yazin and other commanders, confident in their ability to fundraise on their own, officially defected. A string of similar instances occurred over the next two years.

In the end, the death of Hajji Mare'a, and Hajji 'Anadan's own complicated nature with Nusra, that helped derail the revolution throughout northern Syria. Nonetheless, Mare'a remarkably survives as a sort of self-governing republic—albeit under the thumb of Turkish occupation—which is a testament to the town's unique place in the history of the Syrian revolution.



