

# Rebels Consolidating Strength in Syria: The Islamic Front

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Dec 3, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

---

## The latest umbrella organization for key rebel factions in Syria may not include U.S.-designated terrorist groups, but it does oppose many U.S. objectives.

The recent merger of several Syrian rebel groups into the Islamic Front (IF) is one of the war's most important developments. Although the political and military opposition has long been fragmented, the new umbrella organization brings seven groups and their combined force of 45,000-60,000 fighters under one command. It also links the fight in the north and the south. Most notably, though, it affirms the troubles Washington will have setting policy in Syria going forward.

## WHO ARE THEY?

Formally announced on November 22, the IF includes groups from three prior umbrella organizations: the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), and the Kurdish Islamic Front (KIF). From the SIF, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (HASI), Kataib Ansar al-Sham, and Liwa al-Haqq joined, as did the KIF as a whole and former SILF brigades Suqur al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, and Jaish al-Islam. None of these groups has been designated by the U.S. government as a foreign terrorist organization.

Although these groups previously kept their individual names under the SIF and SILF, they will no longer do so under the IF, though it may take time to phase out the original names. This was confirmed the same day as the IF announcement, when SIF leader Hassan Aboud put out a directive dissolving his organization.

The IF's leadership positions have already been distributed among five of the seven groups:

- Shura Council leader: Suqur al-Sham's Abu Issa al-Sheikh
- Deputy Shura Council leader: Liwa al-Tawhid's Abu Amr Zaydan Hajji al-Hiraytan
- Chief of the Political Office: HASI's Hassan Aboud

- Chief of the Sharia Office: HASI's Abu al-Abbas al-Shami
- Chief of Military Operations: Jaish al-Islam's Zahran Aloush
- Secretary-General: Liwa al-Haqq's Sheikh Abu Ratib

Although HASI -- likely the largest group -- did not take the top leadership role, its control over the Political and Sharia Offices will give it important say over key issues.

The IF has also been able to gain endorsements from a variety of key local actors:

- November 22: Leading Damascene cleric Sheikh Usama Rifai
- November 23: Head of Syria's General Authority of Clerics, Sheikh Ahmed Najib
- November 23: President of the Association of Syrian Clerics, Sheikh Mamduh Junayd
- November 23: President of the Front of Clerics in Aleppo, Abdullah Muhammad Salqini
- November 25: President of the Group of Clerics of the Syrian Revolution in Idlib, Abd al-Munim Zayn al-Din
- November 29: Head of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), Salim Idris

These endorsements give the IF important local religious backing from each of Syria's major city centers. And Idris's congratulation was issued from a position of weakness -- his feebly Western-backed SMC has become more irrelevant since the Obama administration decided not take action following the Assad regime's blatant use of chemical weapons in late August.

## WHAT DO THEY WANT?

Four days after the IF was announced, it released an official charter. Much of the document's basic architecture is similar to that put out by the SIF in January, but the new version is filled with more generalities, likely to accommodate differing ideas among member groups. A few of these points are worth highlighting.

First, the charter calls for an Islamic state and the implementation of sharia, though it does not define exactly what that means. The IF is firmly against secularism, human legislation (i.e., it believes that laws come from God, not from people), civil government, and a Kurdish breakaway state. The charter states that the group will secure minority rights in post-Assad Syria based on sharia -- this could mean the *dhimma* ("protected peoples") system, or de facto second-class citizenship for Christians and other minorities, but this remains to be seen. The IF also hopes to unify other rebel groups so long as they agree to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. There are already rumors that the southern-based Ittihad al-Islami li-Ajnad al-Sham could join.

The IF's number-one goal is "the toppling of the regime," which includes "bringing an end its legislative, executive, and judicial authority along with its military and security institutions, and the just and fair prosecution of all involved in shedding innocent blood and those who supported them." This signals that the group has no intention of participating in the Geneva negotiations process. Likewise, six of the seven groups in the IF signed a joint statement with other factions in late October declaring Geneva II a conspiracy and warning that any rebel participants would be tried for treason in rebel courts.

At the same time, the charter also notes that the IF is willing to deal with international actors as long as they "do not show enmity toward it." Many of the groups in the IF already have loose or informal relations with Saudi Arabia (most notably Jaish al-Islam) as well as Qatar and Turkey through NGOs such as the Humanitarian Relief Fund (IHH) and al-Khayriyya.

Lastly, the charter supports the presence of foreign fighters in the Syrian rebellion: "These are brethren who have supported us in the struggle, and their support is appreciated and they are thanked for it. We are required to ensure

their safety." Therefore, the IF is unlikely to turn on these fighters or eject them from Syria when the conflict ends. In fact, some IF groups have foreigners within their ranks, most notably HASI.

## RELATIONS WITH GLOBAL JIHADISTS

It is difficult to determine how much weight to give to IF statements that refer to the entire Muslim world rather than just Syria, such as the group's main slogan "Mashrua al-Umma" (the Umma Project). Based on current information and the past actions of its member groups, there is no sign that the IF is interested in reestablishing the Caliphate -- the organization is simply concerned about solidarity with fellow Muslims and the issues that are important to them. In other words, the IF is quite different in outlook from global jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

Yet it would be a mistake to believe that the IF will break completely from the jihadists and become like the *sahwa* (awakening) movement in Iraq last decade. The IF has close working relations with JN and to a lesser extent ISIS, despite its skepticism about the latter group's intentions and tactics. On November 21, Aloush stated that JN members were brothers in arms to IF fighters, while Abu Ratib said the same about ISIS on December 1, affirming that the groups were not enemies. Yet IF's formation has created at least a minimal amount of concern within ISIS circles on social media, since they are competitors.

In addition, key global jihadist figures have made receptive comments about the IF's establishment. Syrian ideologue Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartusi posted a positive notice on his Facebook page "The Islamic Resistance to the Syrian Regime," while JN cleric Sultan bin Issa al-Atawi stated that he would support the IF so long as it does not establish relations with the West or "apostate" Arab regimes. On top of this, Muhammad al-Mohaisany -- a rising star in the jihadist community and a key financier of rebel efforts in northern Syria -- released a video message backing IF. And Jordanian ideologue Iyad Qunaybi now appears more favorably disposed to the group after expressing some skepticism initially.

## CONCLUSION

The Islamic Front is not a global jihadist force, nor is it a U.S.-designated terrorist organization like JN and ISIS. Even so, the group is too ideologically unseemly for the United States to engage or back: it refuses to participate in Geneva II, and it rejects democracy and minority rights. Yet U.S. allies in the Gulf may decide to back the IF anyway, further complicating both the rebellion itself and the Obama administration's hope that Geneva II will bring peace to Syria. Deciding how to approach the organization will be a major challenge for Washington.

*Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)