

# The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front

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Articles & Testimony

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**Although Washington and Saudi Arabia have increased their support for the mainstream Syrian opposition, jihadist factions and their Qatari and Egyptian backers are asserting themselves as well.**

**H**ezbollah's victory in Syria in the Battle of Qusair was a wake up call for many pro-Islamist actors in the Arab world. In response, Qatar -- through Yusef al-Qaradawi and Al Jazeera as well as key Egyptian Islamic leaders -- has gone on the offensive. These players have publicized key Islamist factions, especially the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), as well as called for jihad as a necessary duty for all. Through these actions, one of the key winners has been the SIF, a Salafi umbrella formation, which is arguably the best fighting force within the opposition.

The SIF, led by its principal constituent force, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (HASI), coordinates extensively with the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (and though skeptical of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, coordinates with it in Aleppo), but also with all other Syrian rebel groups. While it is more than willing to fight alongside groups loyal to the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Coalition, it expressly rejects their rights to represent the entire Syrian opposition. The SIF's insistence in a future Syria becoming an Islamic state ruled by sharia contradicts the objectives expressed by the wider moderate opposition. Although it has not issued any direct threats outside Syria, the SIF is opposed to any external intervention in Syria by any Western state, and its leader has threatened attacks on any foreign military force entering Syria, supportive or opposed to President Bashar al-Assad.

In the past two weeks, the SIF's leader, Hassan Aboud Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, has publicly appeared for the first time in an Al Jazeera interview, attended a conference of senior Muslim clerics in Cairo calling for jihad (the only Syrian rebel leader present), and spoke on the Egyptian Salafi TV station al-Nas. It appears that key players with

vested interests in Qatar and Egypt's clerical community are attempting to anoint the SIF as the leaders of the Syrian revolution.

The SIF announced its formation in a video on December 22, 2012. In it, its senior spokesman Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Suri framed the SIF as "a comprehensive Islamic front, representing Islam as a religion, a creed, a guiding path, and a conduct." Upon formation, the SIF consisted of 11 distinct militant Islamist groups dispersed across 12 of Syria's 13 governorates. Through two mergers and two other outside Islamist factions joining the SIF, it has consolidated into eight forces.

HASI, whose principal armed force first emerged in January 2012, has since become arguably the most powerful individual armed group in the entire Syrian opposition. Its leader, Aboud, is also the SIF's commander-in-chief, and several of its senior figures have all maintained leading roles in the SIF command structures.

According to the SIF's political charter, released a month after the front's formation on January 20, 2013, it seeks "to construct a civilized Islamic society in Syria, ruled by God's law." The SIF's position on democracy is complex. While it has expressly rejected the idea as a concept, its charter does maintain the idea of using a voting system to elect political leaders "as long as it is regulated by sharia" and only candidates whose policies "are bound by sharia" are involved. This suggests they are okay with voting so long as it does not lead to leaders then creating legislation, which contravenes God's law.

Placing the SIF in the current context of ongoing conflict, it expressly rejects any political solution and any form of international intervention. As such, at the June 13 Cairo conference, Aboud called for jihad, stating, "Any invading force that sets foot on Syrian territory under any pretext, whether to support the regime or to allegedly stop aggression, will be treated as an occupying force." Though he later qualified it when speaking to al-Nas as it related to potential U.S. military support: "We look at its decision to arm the opposition with suspicion...but we are happy that there will be an extra force to fight against the criminal Assad. But we want to warn our brothers not to let America interfere with what we want for our own country."

Aboud's presence in Cairo at the jihad conference and the al-Nas TV interview on the heels of his first public appearance on Al Jazeera a few days earlier speaks volumes to the respect he and his group have garnered from key outside power brokers. Over the past half-year, the SIF and HASI have proven themselves as not only crucial elements on the battlefield, but also showing signs of competence in governance. These factors are likely an important appeal for what appears to be the crowning of this movement as the face of the revolution by some in the region.

HASI is arguably the most strategically powerful individual player in Syria today. Its forces have been involved in every major rebel victory since at least September 2012, including leading a tightly-commanded coalition of Islamist forces in seizing the only governorate capital to be taken in the whole revolution so far: Raqqa, on March 4.

Militarily, HASI is amongst the best-armed insurgent groups in the country, regularly deploying tanks and mobile artillery (T-72s, T-62s, T-54s, and 2S1 Gvozdikas), anti-tank guided missiles (AT-3 "Saggers" and AT-5 "Spandrels"), and occasionally 1990s-era Croatian rocket and grenade launchers. While its initial operations in early 2012 were primarily sporadic improvised explosive devices (IEDs) -- among the first to utilize Iraq-style IED tactics -- and small-arms ambushes, the group quickly assumed a lead role in large-scale sustained assaults on multiple fronts (Hama, Idlib, Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, Deir al-Zour and Daraa). More recently, it has formed a "Technical Division," which has been responsible for cyber attacks on websites affiliated with the pro-Assad Syrian Electronic Army and Addounia TV.

SIF activity, though, is not limited to military operations. It has also pumped extensive resources into humanitarian and other social activities. Part of this has been subsidized in cooperation with government-funded NGOs from

Turkey (Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation) and Qatar (Qatar Charity). The SIF has acknowledged this in video releases highlighting such patronage.

HASI currently runs extensive networks of food, water, and fuel provision across northern Syria and even operates Raqqa's largest water pumping station, several dams, and also a road and bridge repair "company." SIF also places significant emphasis on the free provision of Islamic education to children and often releases videos showing such schools operating in Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama.

On June 8, Aboud took part in a 48-minute interview with Al Jazeera's Tayseer Allouni. This was the first time that Aboud's real name and identity had been revealed. Prior to that, his identity had been shrouded in secrecy. This alone made the interview a significant development in the SIF's evolution, not to mention his concluding line in which he expressed his determination "to destroy by our hands the walls of the Sykes-Picot [Agreement]."

Unsurprisingly, Aboud denied any structural links between his forces and those of al Qaeda, although consistent with previous statements on Twitter, he noted that "we do a great many joint operations" with Jabhat al-Nusra and "we only see honesty in their work as well as toughness and bravery...The US designation [of JN] will not stop us continuing to work with them." However, there are key differences between JN and HASI. Aboud, in the interview, points out "we agree with them that Islam is our primary order of business, but we may disagree on some of the provisions."

Unlike JN, HASI is more locally oriented and is also distinguished by not being involved with attacks on civilian areas, not embracing suicide attacks, and not disseminating its media releases through al Qaeda-authenticated forums, but rather through its independent website, Facebook page, and Twitter account. Most importantly, Ahrar al-Sham is not calling for a global Caliphate like Jabhat al-Nusra and is only focused on establishing an Islamic State within Syria.

Aboud also claimed that while "there are no secular groups" in Syria and while the SIF "is not a component of any joint leadership or of the Free Syrian Army, we take part in joint operations with the FSA." He was however scathing regarding the representative nature of the Syrian National Coalition, which he described as "an opposition coalition largely based abroad, which lacks internal depth or popular support."

Underlining the well-organized nature of the SIF's structure, Aboud claimed to operate a number of training camps across Syria where recruits are provided with both educational and military instruction, as well as several additional "camps specializing in elevating individuals toward being qualified commanders." Perhaps auguring further front expansion, Aboud claimed, "we have dozens of requests from other battalions" to join SIF.

In addition to explaining SIF's provision of "services and medical assistance" to "the vulnerable," Aboud also outlined his forces' involvement in multi-group policing units, "especially in Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama." With regards to SIF's sources of weaponry, Aboud claimed, "we rely primarily on the spoils of the military...[but we also get] donations from individuals abroad." The most prominent donors abroad include money received from the Kuwaiti Salafi preacher Hajjaj al-Ajami's network, Saudi-based Syrian preacher Adnan al-'Arur, Kuwaiti Salafi politician and ideologue Hakim al-Mutayri, as well as individuals from Qatar.

Aboud's interview with Al Jazeera provided him with an international stage onto which he could openly advocate the case for his group's prominence in Syria. Combined with his appearance in Cairo and on the Salafi al-Nas TV, it seems clear that Aboud, with some extent of foreign backing from Sunni leadership and from regional states, is launching a move to assume a role as an Islamist alternative to rebel groups linked to the Syrian National Council.

The SIF appears comfortable with this new role. During the al-Nas interview, for the first time, the SIF introduced the head of its external affairs office Muhammad Mustafa. It is apparent what his main role will be based off of his comments on al-Nas: "We don't need anything from anyone except help in arming the mujahidin to be able to free

our country and take our resources into our own hands."

In addition to Aboud's interview with Al Jazeera, in the subsequent week it has also granted 30-minute interviews to the respective leaders of four other pivotal Islamist groups -- Liwa al-Tawhid, Suqur al-Sham, Kata'ib al-Farouq, and Liwa al-Islam -- suggesting a general move is underway by Qatar to present such groups as well-organized, regionally-supported rivals to the unorganized and so-called "FSA." Intriguingly, on June 23, Al Jazeera televised official HASI-produced video footage of a large car bombing in Aleppo before HASI released footage of the attack via its own channels.

This power play by Qatar and sympathetic Egyptian Salafis highlights that even though the United States (which has never even commented on non-FSA or JN rebel groups) and Saudi Arabia are becoming even more involved with arming and supporting the opposition, they are not the only actors. It also contradicts recent reports that Qatar has handed over the Syria portfolio to Saudi Arabia, highlighting that the competition for influence among these Gulf States is still alive. This bidding war between Gulf rivals could further hinder the future prospects of the Syrian opposition in a post-Assad scenario.

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