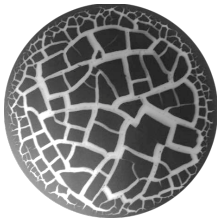
Things Fall Apart -
Alliance Formation and Rebel Fragmentation in Syria's Civil War



SDU

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Student name: Patrick Steen Pedersen
Date of birth: 160587
Supervisor: Olivier Walther
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Abstract:

In rebel-held Syria, an array of rebel organisations are nominally allied in their fight against the Syrian government and yet they remain internally - and sometimes bitterly - divided. Rather than being a rare occurrence, fragmentation within rebel movements is a common phenomenon with wide-ranging consequences for its chances of success. Despite the prevalence, the causes of rebel fragmentation remain poorly understood. What has caused it to occur in Syria? Secondly, some rebel organisations seem to thrive in a fragmented rebel landscape, while others struggle adapt to the strenuous conditions of protracted intra-state conflict. How can we understand the divergent organisational trajectories of the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nusra?

Through an exploratory single case study design and using Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour's three-dimensional conceptualisation of rebel fragmentation, the study finds that rather than being the result of purposive action on the behalf of the individual organisations, the splintering of the Syrian rebel movement is a second-order effect of historical, structural and geopolitical factors outside the immediate control of the non-state actors. Furthermore, by employing Staniland's theory of insurgent cohesion and collapse, the study finds that ideologically coherent rebel organisations with strong central structures and weak ties to patron states are superiorly equipped to embed themselves into a fragmented rebel landscape, while weakly structured rebel organisations with strong ties to foreign states are more susceptible to devolve and fragment.

The study then discusses how the findings of the analyses relate to existing research within the field, arguing the further scholarly attention should be paid to how pre-war politics of the conflict-ridden state affects the ability of rebel movements to coalesce at civil war onset. Lastly, the thesis concludes by connecting the findings of the study to the future prospects of the civil war and the bleak possibilities for Syria to reconstitute itself as a territorially, socially and politically coherent unit.

Acknowledgement

During the process of writing this thesis, Syria's civil war continued to grind unabatedly on, constantly taking unexpected twists and turns. In what - at times - felt like a somewhat daunting task, Associate Professor Olivier J. Walther provided me with constructive criticism as well as competent advice throughout the process. Working with Olivier has been an absolute pleasure and I want to extend my deepest gratitude for his input and commitment. Furthermore, I would like to thank Troels B. Henningsen, Assistant Professor at the Royal Danish Defence College's Institute for Stategy, for his consultation and encouragement as the the overarching puzzle of the thesis was conceived in the winter of 2017.

"A civil war is not a war but a sickness. The enemy is within. One fights almost against oneself"

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

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Map of Syria and adjacent states[1]:

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[1] University of Texas Libraries, available at: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/syria_rel-2007.jpg

I. The puzzle

In 'Homage to Catalonia', George Orwell describes his sense of perplexity when learning of the internal cleavages that divided the Spanish Republicans into incoherent factions. Upon arriving in Spain with a preconceived notion of the Spanish Civil War as a struggle between a united Socialist front and Fascist Nationalists, he characterised the mosaic of political parties and their respective militias – P.O.U.M., F.A.I., C.N.T, U.G.T, J.C.I, J.S.U., A.I.T. – as a *"plague of initials"*[2]. *"Aren't we all Socialists?"* Orwell asked a militia leader, wondering why people who were fighting for their lives against a common enemy would remain divided by party lines and ideological abstractions. Eventually, the lack of cohesion would devolve into internecine fighting between the nominally allied communists, socialists and anarchists factions, fundamentally undermining their ability to concentrate the use of violence against Franco's forces[3].

Orwell's account of the incoherence and fragmentation of the Spanish Republicans serves to illustrate this puzzling and yet common phenomenon; a quantitative study conducted by Findley and Rudloff shows that roughly 44% of the armed opposition movements engaged in 114 civil wars since 1989 experienced fragmentation[4]. This was the case in the Algerian Civil War between 1991 and 2002 in which the Islamist opposition block splintered into two competing factions, causing fratricidal violence and – eventually – failure to topple the Algerian regime[5]. It happened during the latter phase of 'The Troubles', in which the Irish opposition movement fragmented into a flurry of indistinguishable acronyms, souring inter-rebel relations and spurring blood feuds[6]. And during the Sri Lankan civil war, the Tamil self-determination movement fragmented into five major rebel organisations. Seeking to exterminate all contending organisations within the movement, the Tamil Tigers attacked and defeated all of their nominal allies in a somewhat pyrrhic victory, which eventually crippled the self-determination movement beyond repair[7].

Similarly, in today's war-torn Syria, the rebel movement battling the incumbent regime in Damascus consists hundreds of factions operating under dozens of separate organisational command structures. Despite the concerted efforts by internal as external parties to (re-)establish intra-

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[2] Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia,* The University of Adelaide, 2014, p. 39. See also: Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 265.

[3] Beevor, Anthony. *The Battle for Spain - The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939,* Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2006, p. 236.

[4] Findley, Michael G. & Rudloff, Peter. "Combatant Fragmentation and the Dynamics of Civil Wars"*, British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 4, 2012, p. 881.

[5] Hafez, Mohammed. "Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremety and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars", forthcoming 2017, p. 5.

[6] Staniland, Paul. "Explaining Cohesion, Fragmentation, and Control in Insurgent Groups", Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, 2010, p. 8.

[7] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 276.

movement coherence, deep divisions and widespread infighting between nominal allies continue to debilitate the rebels.

Maps illustrating the territorial expansion of the Syrian rebel movement may give off a veneer of unity and coherence; however, the rebel-held enclaves and provinces can more accurately be characterised as a complex web of nodes, comprised of countless, hyper-localised geographical zones of influence[8]. Inter-rebel alliances remain inherently fluid and unstable and as new alliances form and organisations coalesce, other frameworks of cooperation dissolve and collapse. Often, the breakdown of alliances and the subsequent reconfiguration of the inter-rebel balance of power culminates in territorial skirmishes, assassinations and out-right inter-rebel civil war[9]. Rather than coalescing into a unified rebel front, the groups continue to contend for power amongst themselves, thus failing to develop lasting and effective structures of governance and political authority that cut across factional divides, rebel-held enclaves and provincial boundaries.

Indeed, fragmentation – and subsequent infighting – are costly affairs that can have potentially catastrophic implications for materially inferior rebel movements, which – in theory – makes retaining coherence all the more important. As Huntington argues, *"Numbers, weapons, and strategy all count in war, but major deficiencies in any one of those may still be counterbalanced by superior cohesion and discipline"*[10]. Those traits of organisational control are not only essential to the armed forces of a state but also to non-state actors battling counterinsurgents. A high degree of organisational cohesion within a rebel movement fosters discipline among the rank and file, lowers the risk of unregulated and predatory violence against civilians, enhances its ability to influence peace negotiations and postwar state-building, while minimising the risk posed by potential 'spoiler' problems posed by radical splinter cells within the movement[11]. Thus, increased cooperation and the careful fostering of institutional ties between rebel organisations within a movement markedly increases its chances of success in the fight against the incumbent regime[12].

In contrast, fragmented rebel movements tend to suffer from a swath of crippling problems. Disunity increases the risk of resource-sapping infighting, which diverts energy away from the fight against the incumbent regime; it heightens the level of wanton violence employed against civil-

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[8] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 75.

[9] As was the instance in the rebel-held enclave of Eastern Ghouta in which the killing of a rebel leader, Zahran Alloush, unraveled years of cooperation and culminated in an outright inter-rebel civil war. See also: Lund, Aron. "Into the Tunnels - The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Easter Ghouta" *The Century Foundation*, 21 December 2016.

[10] Huntington, Samuel P. *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press, 1968, p. 23

[11] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014 p. 2-3. See also Jeremy M. Weinstein: *Inside Rebellion – The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 43.

[12] Akcinaroglu, Seden. "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes", Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 56, no. 5, 2012, p. 885-886.

ians[13]; it erodes political legitimacy home as well as abroad[14]; it enables regimes to employ "divide and conquer" strategies[15]; it increases the chances of rebel defections to the state[16]; and it severely complicates civil war negotiations[17].

Seen in that light, the degree of fragmentation and the regular occurrence of internecine, fratricidal violence within the Syrian rebel movement seems almost incomprehensible. And nested within this empirical puzzle is also theoretical one; despite the fact that inter-rebel violence is a common phenomenon and its consequences are clear, the mechanisms causing fragmentation and infighting within rebel movements still remain poorly understood[18]. Within the last couple of years, several positivist studies have studied the phenomenon[19]. Nonetheless, there remains an outspoken demand to move beyond the quantitative framework and instead provide systematic case-studies of rebel fragmentation and infighting between nominally allied rebel organisations[20]. By examining the ongoing conflict in Syria, this thesis seeks to contribute to the expansion and development of the growing body of intrastate conflict research, which revolves around the phenomenon of rebel fragmentation and how it affects the inner workings of rebel movements battling incumbent regimes.

[13] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2012, p. 67.

[14] Krause, Peter. "The Structure of Success - How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behaviour and National Movement Effectiveness", *International Security*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2014, p. 40.

[15] Hafez, Mohammed. "Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremety and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars", forthcoming 2017, p. 2.

[16] Staniland, Paul. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries", *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* vol. 56, no. 1, 2012, p 16.

[17] Cunningham, David. "Veto Players and Civil War Duration", *American Journal of Political Science,* vol. 50, no. 40, 2006, p. 876.

[18] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "E pluribus unum, ex uno plures: Competition, violence and fragmentation in ethnopolitical movements", *Journal of Peace Research,* vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, p. 3.

[19] See Chapter III: *Literature Review* for a comprehensive list of studies.

[20] Fjelde, Hanne & Nilsson, Desiree. "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups"*, Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2012, p. 622.

II. Motivation and research question

A key insight from the classical sociology of intra-state conflicts is to regard inter-sectarian or inter-ethnic violence as a phenomenon, which hardens identities and increases in-group cohesion and interdependence[21]. This tendency to partition social groups into sharply distinct, monochrome entities, separated by ethnic, racial, national or sectarian traits, has historically dominated the study of social conflicts[22]. It follows from this 'groupist' logic that the existence of a rigid collective identity also facilitates strong collective action[23].

The tendency to think in terms of coherent blocks of armed actors is logically appealing since it can help us make sense of the convoluted, social phenomenon that intra-state conflict is. Indeed, during the first years of Syria's Civil War, the conflict was often popularly characterised as an armed struggle between two unitary actors; an Alawite regime under the control of Bashar al-Assad and his urban power-base and a largely coherent rebel movement consisting of disenfranchised, rural Sunni-Arabs[24]. Soon, however, that binary conception began to shatter. As the war wore on and intensified, the inherent complexity of the conflict became more and more apparent, muddling the neat image of a two-sided conflict revolving around macro-political cleavages of antagonistic sectarian and social identities. Currently, the conflict revolves around four different blocks of actors; 1) the Syrian state, its armed forces and paramilitary loyalists; 2) the rebel movement consisting of a multitude of anti-regime organisations; 3) Syrian Kurdish organisations such as the YPG/YPJ; and 4) the so-called Islamic State. The organisations within the second analytical category – what I, for the purpose of this paper, will call the Syrian rebel movement – are the primary units of analysis in this study.

At a glance, the Syrian rebel movement seems largely homogenous. It mainly consists of people of Arab descent; it predominantly helms from the poor and underdeveloped rural provinces of Syria; and it is overwhelmingly Sunni-dominated[25]. There is, so to say, a relatively high degree of socio-cultural, sectarian and ethnic homogeneity within the movement. And yet, despite the fact that the rebels appear to be mobilised around a clear collective identity and fight a common enemy, claims of inter-rebel unity has remained a mirage for the entire duration of the conflict. Being

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[21] Pishedda, Constantino. "Wars Within Wars: Understanding Inter-Rebel Fighting", forthcoming 2017, p. 3. See also Georg Simmel: *Conflict: The Web of Group Affiliations*, Free Press, 1955, in which he characterises social conflict as *"a form of socialisation"*.

[22] Brubaker, Rogers. *Ethnicity without groups*, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 163-164.

[23] Cunningham, Kathleen G. & Pearlman, Wendy: "Non-state Actors, Fragmentation, and Conflict Processes", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2012, p. 8.

[24] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria*. Polity, 2016, p. ix. See, for instance: Max Boot & Michael Doran. "Obama's Losing Bet on Iran", op-ed, *The New York Times*, 15 January 2014.

[25] SANA Dispatches. "Syria's Armed Opposition: A Spotlight at the 'Moderates'", S*ecurity Assessment in North Africa - Small Arms Survey Geneva*, 2016, p. 4.

Sunni-Arab and subscribing to related, albeit varying, visions of a future political order[26] for Syria does not guarantee intra-movement coherence. And while shared identities and group interests may shape and structure the primary actor blocks of a conflict, such commonalities do not constitute a safeguard for the exercise of violence within a movement. As Kalyvas notes, civil wars are rarely binary, but rather "*complex and ambiguous processes that foster an apparently massive, though variable, mix of identities and actions"*[27]. Rebel fragmentation is a manifestation of this inherent ambiguity. So what is it that causes the phenomenon to occur?

Furthermore, fragmentation within a movement is inextricably tied to shifting dynamics among the organisations that constitute it. While fragmentation and infighting may seem both counter-intuitive as well as counter-productive to the objectives of the movement *as a whole*, some Syrian rebel groups seem to possess the required adaptability and resilience to not only survive but actually flourish under these chaotic conditions. As the rebel landscape has widened, a range of resilient and organisationally superior new-comers have profited from the chaotic conditions, successfully embedding themselves as indispensable components of the Syrian insurgency. Meanwhile, formerly powerful organisations such as the Free Syrian Army have failed to adjust to the competitive war-time political order. Outfought, outgunned or out-governed by nominal allies, several organisations have been destroyed, absorbed or have faded into obscurity as new, more powerful organisations have risen. How can these vastly different organisational trajectories be understood? On the basis of these considerations, this thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

What has caused the Syrian rebel movement to fragment? And why do some organisations thrive in a fragmented rebel landscape, while others struggle to adapt?

The answers to that two-pronged research question are highly relevant to our understanding of why Syria's civil war has developed into a Gordian knot that no one, so far, have been able to solve. The extreme fragmentation of Syria's rebel movement is likely to have played a significant role in deterring the international community from effectively intervening in the conflict[28]. Despite hav-

[26] See Chapter IV: *A brief typology of ideological underpinnings within Syria's rebel movement*

[27] Kalyvas, Stathis. "The Ontology of Political Violence: Action and Identity in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics,* vol. 3, 2003, p. 475.

[28] Pearlman, Wendy. "Rebel fragmentation in Syria and Palestine." *Foreign Policy*, October 10 2013.

ing funded and armed vetted rebel organisations within Syria for several years, the sheer complexity of the inner-workings of Syria's rebel movement has left Western governments in confusion as to who's who, effectively leaving them without reliable partners on the ground as inter-rebel allegiances continue to remain murky and fluid[29]. This empirical puzzle is the motivational driver behind the thesis.

Furthermore, exploring the causal mechanisms of fragmentation within Syria's rebel movement may also reveal important insights into to how we can make sense of the complex and often paradoxical nature of inter-rebel relations in on-going as well as future intra-state conflicts. Breaking with the scholarly tendency to regard the non-state side as a unitary actor with largely homogenous preferences, an emerging body of research has sought to reverse this trend, thus attempting to diversify our understanding of the fragmentation phenomenon[30]. By analysing the Syrian case of rebel fragmentation and determining its likely causes, this thesis seeks to generate new knowledge that can contribute to the budding theoretical body of knowledge, which deals specifically with rebel fragmentation.

Lastly, gaining insight into why some types of rebel groups are able to build efficient and coherent war-time organisations while others falter, devolve and collapse is not only empirically and theoretically interesting; it may also carry valuable policy lessons for how states choose to support rebel organisations in future conflict scenarios.

[29] The abject failure of Pentagon's $500 million train-and-equip programme, which sought to train 5.000 vetted Syrian sunni-Arab rebels to fight the the Islamic State, illustrates this point. Only 120 trainees were deemed sufficiently "moderate" to pass the vetting process; nonetheless, more half of them handed over their weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra - al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate - within days of deployment. See for instance, Liz Sly. "The last remaining Pentagon-trained rebel group in Syria is now in jeopardy", *The Washington Post*, May 27 2016.

[30] See Chapter III. *Literature Review.*

III. Literature review

This section explores how the emerging body of alliance formation and rebel fragmentation research has developed as a reaction to dyadic civil war studies studies in which the non-state-side is often regarded as a homogenous actor.

In the wake of the ethnic intra-state conflicts of the 1990's, the scholarly interest in the study of civil wars rapidly surged. Gradually developing into an array of different theoretical approaches, these civil war scholars primarily focused on *macro*-level analysis of state- and country-level attributes[31]. Most of these studies – often based on large-*N* research – focused specifically on how and why civil wars start and end. Some opportunity-based studies examined how the financial feasibility of waging insurgency in a specific country affects the onset, duration and termination of civil wars[32]; other prominent macro-level studies examined to which extent factors such as economic growth levels, geography, skewed demographics and ethnic heterogeneity affects the likelihood of civil war outbreak[33]. A substantial part of this research has been exclusively state-centric, while a range of dyadic studies have focused on the antagonistic relationship between the state and *a* major rebel group[34]. While both of these approaches have greatly contributed to our *macro*-sociological understanding of civil conflict, they – like all analytical approaches – are inherently limited and are consequently ill fit to make sense of intra-rebel-movement dynamics.

On the other end of the analytical spectrum, an array of *micro*-level theories developed throughout the 2000's, focusing specifically on individuals as the primary unit of research. Weinstein, for instance, argues that a rebel leader's access to natural resources and external patronage determines the pattern of violence his group employs[35]. In a similar vein, Kalyvas shows the causal mechanisms behind the exercise of violence against civilians in civil wars; individuals, he finds, often employ violence selectively and rationally – as part of a *process* –, rather than as an *outcome* in itself[36]. These seminal studies have developed and nuanced our understanding why violence is employed the way it is. However, the intricacies of intra-movement dynamics and inter-rebel interactions escape the narrow focal point of *micro*-level analysis.

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[31] Yankelevich, Tatsiana. "Divide et Impera? The Effects of Inter-Rebel Fragmentation on the Types of Concessions in Civil War Negotiations", Master's thesis submitted to Leiden University, 2014, p. 7.

[32] See for instance Collier, Paul & Hoeffler, Anke. "Greed and grievance in civil war", *Oxford Economic Papers*, vol. 56, 2004, p.563-595.

[33] See for instance: Hegre, Havard & Sambanis, Nicholas. "Sensitivity Analysis of Empirical Results on Civil War Onset", *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* vol. 50, no. 4, 2006, pp. 508-535 and; Fearon, James D. & Laitin, David D. "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War", draft paper for the 2001 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, 2001.

[34] See for instance: Cunningham, David, Gleditsch, Kristian Skrede & Salehyan, Idean. "Dyadic Interactions and Civil War Duration", draft paper for the 46th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (2005), Honolulu, HI.

[35] Weinstein, Jeremy M.: *Inside Rebellion – The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 7.

[36] Kalyvas, Stathis. *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Rebel fragmentation and infighting are phenomena that occur *within* a movement and *among* the organisations that comprise it. Sandwiched in between *macro*- and *micro*-level of analysis lies the *meso*-level; its primary units of analysis are groups, local elites and communities and in order to understand the mechanisms causing fragmentation and infighting, focusing on this layer of analysis is likely more fruitful than the other two scopes[37]. Recent quantitative *meso*-level studies have turned their attention to how rebel fragmentation affects patterns of violence, indicating that a lack of intra-movement cohesion heightens the level of violence directed not only against the incumbent government, but also against civilians who increasingly fall victim to rape, kidnapping, looting and murder[38]. Relatedly, some quantitative studies have examined how an increasing number of veto players prolongs the duration of multiparty civil wars[39], while others have investigated how decreased interdependency and cooperation between rebel groups their chances of success against their common enemy[40]. The conclusions of these studies underscore the paradox described in the puzzle; fragmentation and disunity is risky, destructive and resource consuming. And yet, as Fjelde & Nilsson note, *"different organisations often spend as much time fighting one another as the government"*[41].

Fjelde & Nilsson's quantitative study of intra-state conflicts 1989 and 2007 show that the probability of infighting between rebel organisations is significantly higher when they are engaged in areas with drug cultivation; when they exercise territorial control vis-à-vis the state; when groups are either weak or strong; and when groups receive material support from foreign states[42]. While Fjelde & Nilsson findings are interesting, their study deals specifically with the exercise of inter-rebel violence, which can be understood as a side-effect of fragmentation rather than its cause[43].

Despite the prevalence of the phenomenon, the theoretical understanding of *why* fragmentation occurs remains relatively underdeveloped. As one of the few researchers to tackle this issue in a comprehensive manner, Christia argues that rational power considerations drive the formation and fracturing of rebel alliances. By applying the core concepts of neorealist structuralism to in-

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[37] Christia, Fotini. *Alliance Formations in Civil Wars*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 42.

[38]Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2012. See also Metelits, Claire M. "The Consequences of Rivalry: Explaining Insurgent Violence Using Fuzzy Sets", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol 62, no. 4, 2009, pp. 673 - 684.

[39] Cunningham, David. "Veto Players and Civil War Duration", *American Journal of Political Science,* vol. 50, no. 40, 2006, pp. 875-892.

[40] Akcinaroglu, Seden. "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes", Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 56, no. 5, 2012, pp. 879-903.

[41] Fjelde, Hanne & Nilsson, Desiree. "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2012, p. 605.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Relatedly, they explicitly highlight the need to move beyond quantitative research and into qualitative analysis in order to make sense of the more intricate, context-specific mechanisms of rebel fragmentation. See Fjelde, Hanne & Nilsson, Desiree. "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2012, p. 623.

tra-state conflict scenarios, she largely dismisses the importance of identity and ideology in shaping and structuring intra-movement relations[44]. Instead, she argues that rebel organisations will attempt to establish or embed themselves in what she dubs a 'minimum winning coalition' possessing *"enough aggregate power to win the conflict, but with as few partners as possible so that the group can maximise its share of post-war political control"*[45]. Christia's book constitutes an impressive mix of exhaustive case studies and elaborate data analysis of multiparty civil wars. Nonetheless, a preliminary analysis of how organisations within the Syrian rebel movement have chosen to align themselves indicates that ideology does actually play a significant role in alliance building[46]. This does not mean that these frameworks of cooperation are immune to splits, that infighting doesn't occur between ideologically aligned organisations or that organisations of different ideological beliefs do not cooperate in Syria. However, Christia's *minimum winning coalition*-theory suggests that fragmentation is a result of deliberate calculations rather than a complex set of causal mechanisms that may be outside the control of the individual organisations and their leaderships. Unlike states in a structural neorealist world, rebel organisations do not operate independently in a closed system but are rather subjected to a wide range of influences that may affect and limit their behaviour. Consequently, the theoretical vantage point for an analysis of the fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement must be more open-ended.

Taking a more holistic approach, Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour suggest that internal divisions within a rebel movement can be explained by examining three interdependent variables: the number of organisations within a movement; the degree of institutionalisation between these organisations; and the distribution of power among them[47]. They argue that the risk of violent fragmentation is most likely when many factions – with weak institutional ties between them – distribute power diffusely among them. This institutional approach does not in itself portend to uncover the causal mechanisms of rebel fragmentation as such; rather, their three-dimensional conceptualisation provides a useful prism through which the complexities of the conflict can be described and analysed in an organised fashion. The study represents an important step in expanding our knowledge of how to approach further research into the paradoxes of inter-rebel dynamics as well as how variations in the overall degree fragmentation affects the likelihood and character of infighting. Consequently, the first analytical chapter of this thesis builds on their insights.

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[44] Christia, Fotini. *Alliance Formations in Civil Wars*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 8.

[45] Ibid., p. 240.

[46] Take, for instance, the almost simultaneous establishment of the Syrian Islam Liberation Front - a coalition of conservative Islamists organisations - and the Syrian Islamic Front, which brought together seven Salafi-oriented organisations. While the ideological and doctrinary differences may, at a glance, seem relatively insignificant, they nonetheless remain a structuring force among Syrian rebel organisations.

[47] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, pp. 265-283.

As for understanding the differing trajectories of rebel organisations in Syria, Staniland argues that the structure of pre-war social bases and political networks determine the nature of organisations once war breaks out[48]. Institutions such as political parties, religious associations and charities and student networks, Staniland argues, underpin the organisational network of different rebel groups. He identifies four distinct types of insurgent organisational structures – integrated, vanguard, parochial and fragmented groups – that emerge from the preexisting social networks and illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of these different ideal-types. By *"taking history seriously in order to understand how armed groups emerge"*[49], Staniland's social-institutional approach provides a new theory for understanding why some rebel groups manage to adapt to the attritional hardship of civil war, while others fail. By testing his theory through cross-case comparisons in Southeast Asia – Kashmir, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka –, Staniland offers a theoretically plausible and empirically convincing argument through which the nature of Syria's fragmented rebel landscape can perhaps also be understood.

[48] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 2.

[49] Ibid., p. 5.

IV. Concept clarification

Before the theoretical framework used for the thesis is presented, it is necessary to define and clarify some of the key concepts that will be used in the following study.

Key concepts

Rebel organisation: First of all, it is necessary to explicate what a rebel organisation is since they represent the constitutive units of a rebel movement. For the purpose of this thesis, a rebel organisation is defined as a non-state armed group with identifiable command-and-control structures, which challenges the sovereignty of the state through the employment of violence against its infrastructure and its armed forces from a territory under rebel control[50]. The thesis thus excludes terrorist organisations that solely rely on attacking civilian targets. That does not - as the subsequent analysis will illustrate - entail that rebel organisations do not deliberately target civilians, but rather that its organised military activity is mainly directed against the state.

Rebel movement: What, then, constitutes a rebel movement? Drawing on the insights of social movement theoreticians such as Zald & McCarthy, this thesis defines a rebel movement as a body of rebel organisations that share relatively similar goals, opinions and beliefs that represent preferences for changing some element of the social structure in which they operate[51]. While Zald & McCarthy refer to the collection of organisations that share these overarching goals - in this case toppling the Assad regime - as a 'social movement industry', this thesis will, for the sake of simplicity, refer to that body of non-state actors as 'the rebel movement'.

Rebel fragmentation: In this thesis, rebel fragmentation is the primary phenomenon under investigation. In short, it can be understood as *"the breakdown of cooperative equilibrium"* between organisations within a rebel movement[52]. It is the ability of rebel organisations to cooperate towards common interests within the confines of the movement that counteracts fragmentation dynamics, while the individual pursuit of private advantages undermines cooperation and exacerbates fragmentation. Consequently, a rebel movement can consist of a range of individual organisations without being fragmented - conversely, a rebel movement can consist of only two organisations and be fragmented. This thesis builds upon Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour's multi-dimensional conceptualisation of fragmentation as being determined by the *number of organisations* within the

[50] This is the author's own definition.

[51] Zald, Mayer N. and McCarthy, John D. "Social Movement Industries: Competition and Cooperation among Movement Organisations", *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change,* vol. 3, 1980, p. 3.

[52] Woldemarian, Michael H. "Why Rebels Collide: Factionalism and Fragmentation in African Insurgencies", Ph.D. dissertation submitted for Princeton University, 2011, p. 37.

movement, the *distribution of power* between them and the *level of institutionalisation* among them. Chapter V. will contain a full description of their conceptualisation.

Alliances: When this thesis speaks of alliances, it refers to formally established networks through which cooperation and coordination between rebel organisations can be cultivated. As will later be illustrated, Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour use formal alliances as the measuring stick for the institutionalisation variable in their three-dimensional conceptualisation of fragmentation. It follows from this logic that the cultivation of positive affiliations between rebel organisations through the construction of credible alliances empowers the movement vis á vis the state[53]. Alliances create interdependency through the optimisation of resource and intelligence sharing, while offering tactical support to each other in the fight against their common enemy increases the chances of survivability for smaller organisations[54]. It should be noted that this study only includes formal alliances. Informal, undeclared alliances between rebel organisations undoubtedly exist but they are difficult to identify due to their informal and often covert character.

A brief typology of ideological underpinnings within Syria's rebel movement

While the main objective of this thesis is not study ideology per se, it is nonetheless an unavoidable factor in Syria's civil war. Consequently, the following section provides a short typology over ideological groupings within the Syrian rebel movement. While the overwhelming majority of fighters within the Syrian rebel movement are Sunni Arabs[55], they nonetheless remain divided by ideological lines. Blunt as it may be, this typology identifies the four primary politico-ideological categories in Syria.

The secularists: The secularist segment of the Syrian rebel movement does not advocate a distinct ideology but rather envisions the construction of secular, democratic state in Syria. Often referred to in the international media as the "moderates", the rebel movement's secularists - most of whom were part of the Free Syrian Army - have been gradually sidelined over the course of the war. Today, the only area in which the secularists maintain a strong presence is in Dara'a province in southern Syria[56]. From the conflict's onset up until this day, the primary backers of Syria's secularist factions have been the United States and Saudi Arabia[57].

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[53] Akcinaroglu, Seden. "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes", Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 56, no. 5, 2012, p. 886.

[54] Ibid., p. 900.

[55] Ostovar, Afshin and McCants, Will. "The Rebel Alliance", *CNA Analysis and Solutions,* 2013, p. 13. Highly localised Turkmen and Kurdish sub-factions do exist but they constitute an absolute minority within the movement.

[56] Cafarella, Jennifer and Casagrande, Genevieve. "Syrian Armed Opposition Powerbrokers", *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 29, 2016, p. 6.

[57] See for instance: Schanzer, Jonathan. "Saudi Arabia Is Arming the Syrian Opposition." *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2012; Chulov, Martin: "Saudi Arabia plans to fund Syria rebel army." *The Guardian*, 22 June 2012; Reuters. "U.S., Saudi Arabia to bolster support for moderate Syrian opposition." *Reuters*, 25 October 2015.

The political Islamists: This segment of the Syrian rebel movement is closely affiliated to the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been banned from political life in Syria since the Baathist coup in 1964. The exiled members of the Muslim Brotherhood are closely connected to political Islamist organisations within Syria who advocate for the establishment of a democratic state loosely guided by Islamic principles. While originally strongly represented within the Free Syrian Army, the political Islamist segments gradually broke off the Free Syrian Army command structure, eventually crystallising as autonomous organisations such as Liwa al-Tawhid and Ajnad al-Sham[58]. Throughout the conflict, the political Islamists have maintained a significant presence in western and north-western Syria. Those organisations with strong links to the Muslim Brotherhood have primarily been funded by Qatar[59].

The Salafists: The Salafist segment of the Syrian rebel movement want to see the establishment of a Sharia-based Islamic state within Syria's existing borders - if possible through a negotiated political process. Salafist rebel organisations, such as the powerful factions like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, often carry a strong social component as the fundamentalist ideology is perceived as a complete system, which must pervade most levels of society, including education, political decision-making bodies and judicial institutions[60]. Salafist organisations are strongly represented in and around the Damascene suburbs - Jaysh al-Islams' turf - as well as in north-western Syria, where Ahrar al-Sham dominates the Turkish-Syrian borderlands. Unlike the Jihadist, the Salafists often enjoy very close ties to an array of state patrons in the region who, nonetheless, remain divided as to who and how to support the different Salafist organisations.

The Jihadists: Strictly speaking, Jihadists are also Salafists but - unlike their more nationalist-oriented co-ideologues - they solely seek to overthrow the Syrian state through armed struggle, thus rejecting negotiated solutions to the conflict. The primary Jihadist organisation within the Syrian rebel movement is Jabhat al-Nusra[61]. Their transnationalist, cosmopolitan outlook as well as their practice of excommunicating fellow Muslims as apostates sets them apart from the less fundamentalist co-ideologues. The Jihadist organisations are not officially recipients of state support, but rather rely on funding from financier-networks in the Persian Gulf.

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[58] Cafarella, Jennifer and Casagrande, Genevieve. "Syrian Armed Opposition Powerbrokers", *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 29, 2016, p. 27.

[59] See for instance: Lefèvre, Raphaël. "Islamism within a civil war: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's struggle for survival", *Brookings Institution*, 2015; Kirkpatrick, David D.: "Qatar's Support of Islamists Alienates Allies Near and Far." *The New York Times*, 7 September 2014; Khalaf, Roula: "How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution." *The Financial Times*, 17 May 2013.

[60] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. XX.

[61] Jabhat al-Nusra has undergone two re-branding manoeuvres over the course of the last year. First they changed name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and subsequently, in January 2017, it changed into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. For the sake of simplicity, the organisation will most often be referred to by its original name.

V. Conceptual framework

This thesis will examine two distinct and yet inextricable units of analysis, namely the Syrian rebel movement as whole as well as the individual organisations that constitute the movement. As the first part of the research question ask *what has caused the Syrian rebel movement to fragment*, the thesis will primarily employ the research of Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour in order to analyse which factors have shaped and influenced the fragmentary dynamics within the movement. Secondly, the thesis seeks to answer *why some organisations thrive in a fragmented rebel, while others struggle to adapt*. By employing Staniland's social-institutional theory on how pre-existing network structures determine the individual organisations' ability to convert social bases into wartime organisations, it is explored why some Salafist and Jihadist organisations have proven to be extremely resilient, while Syria's secular organisations have been practically decimated over the course of the conflict.

Rebel fragmentation as a multidimensional concept

As previously mentioned, this thesis defines rebel fragmentation as the break-down of cooperation within a rebel movement. Relatedly, Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour have sought to develop a multidimensional conceptualisation of rebel fragmentation, which encompasses the inherent complexity of the phenomenon.

As a reaction against the tendency to regard armed rebel movements as coherent challengers to the state, Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour instead propose to view rebel movements as being comprised of a shifting set of actors who share a central identity but may also engage in malleable allegiances and possess diametrically opposing interests[62]. Consequently, the organisations that constitute a movement will all claim to share the same overarching identity – a collective sense of being bound together by a common fate – but will also possess and pursue their own particular interests. It is in this nexus between common purposes of the movement and private interests of its constituent organisations that fragmentation occurs as a direct consequence of this tension. As organisations compete for leadership and influence among the same constituency, dual contests within a movement can erupt and lead to infighting[63]. Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour propose that fragmentation can be conceptualised by examining the three constitutive, interconnected

[62] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 266.

[63] The fragmented state of the Palestinian national movement is an illustrative example of how different organisations – *Fatah* and *Hamas* – may share a common goal, namely the establishment of a Palestinian state, and yet remain internally divided over their own particular ideological and strategic preferences to such an extent that they eventually engage in armed conflict. Kurz, Anat. "A Conflict within a Conflict: The Fatah-Hamas Strife and the Israeli-Palestinian Political Process", *Institute for National Security Studies*, 2015, p. 81.

dimensions of the phenomenon, namely the *number of organisations* within the movement, the *level of institutionalisation* between them and the *dispersion of power* among them[64].

1. Number of organisations

The first and most easily observable variable that affects the overall level of fragmentation is the number of organisations that exist within the confines of the broader rebel movement[65]. Only rebel organisations with clear leadership structures who recognise no higher command authority count as truly independent organisations, while subordinate factions, non-violent political parties or trade unions are excluded. Secondly, in order for an organisation to belong to a broader movement, it must actively make demands and claims related to the collective aims or overarching goals of the movement[66]. While the different organisations will often - if not always - possess some divergent interests or strategies, membership of the movement depends on the existence of an overlapping, collective identity and set of shared interests particular to that identity, which the organisations within the movement pursue in concert.

Although the existence of many organisations within a movement indicates the existence of a multitude of internal differences and divergences, numerically fragmented movements may - as will be exemplified when accounting for the next two variables - still be internally balanced if they manage to pursue their collective interests in concert[67]. And conversely, a rebel movement consisting of only two organisations may suffer from crippling conflicts of interest and strategy, which may devolve into internecine infighting between competing two centres of gravity[68].

2. Level of institutionalisation

The second variable in determining the degree of fragmentation within a movement is the level of institutionalisation that exists between the organisations. Cohesive movements are characterised by the existence of strong, durable institutional links that tie the organisations together and coordinate their behaviour, while fragmented movements lack the networks and structures that makes coordinated military and political action possible. As pointed out in the above section, the existence of multiple organisations within a movement indicates the existence of internal difference

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[64] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 268.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] For instance, the Jewish resistance movement to the German occupation of Poland consisted of a wide array of organisations that managed to cooperate across deep political and ideological divides during the Warsaw Uprising. See Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands - Europa Mellem Hitler og Stalin*, JP Forlag, 2010, p. 358.

[68] The fratricidal conflict between Hezbollah and the Amal Movement - the two primary Shiite factions of the Lebanese Civil War - illustrates that a relatively limited number of organisations within a rebel movement is no guarantee for intra-movement cohesion. Avon, Dominique & Khatchadourian, Anaïs-Trissa. *Hezbollah - A History of the "Party of God"*, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 34-35.

and potentially divergent interests. The careful fostering and cultivation of institutional ties between organisations regulate the extent to which their own, particular interests come to dominate their behaviour.

As Huntington points out, superior cohesion and discipline are essential traits of organisational control in regular armed forces[69] - and the same is the case with armed rebel movements. Overarching institutional structures such as intra-organisational alliances, the formation of central committees and coordination with exiled rebel-governments have a cohesive effect on the entire movement, required that the institutional structures possess the required breadth and depth to produce political synchronisation, coordinate strategic efforts and constrain the actors included in the institutional framework. Movements that manage to establish a strong institutional web will develop state-like attributes, sometimes event resulting in a complete amalgamation of the constituent organisations[70].

If organisations within a movement fail to foster institutional ties of sufficient breath and depth, coordinating action and managing the behaviour of the individual organisation and their members becomes increasingly difficult[71]. A relatively weak degree of institutionalisation will typically take form as make-shift alliances that only incorporates a subset of the organisations within the movement, leaving the actors outside the framework to operate without the institutional mechanisms and constraints that ensure synchronised political and military action[72].

The ability of a rebel movement to foster strong institutional ties depends, at least partially, on factors endogenous to the conflict[73]. In an authoritarian state, the government's low tolerance towards political opposition parties, independent institutional structures and civil society organisations is likely to produce a less conducive environment for intra-movement institutionalisation once civil conflict breaks out[74]. If there are no pre-existing institutional structures through which

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[69] See section I: Puzzle.

[70] As was the case with the Algerian nationalist movement *Front de Libération Nationale*. In the latter half of the 1950's, the FLN and its military wing, *Armée de Libération Nationale*, succeeded in integrating and absorbing three fourths of all Algerian nationalist groups across the entire ideological and religious spectrum, thus rising to unrivalled hegemony among the country's resistance movements to the French occupation forcesKrause, Peter. "The Structure of Success - How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behaviour and National Movement Effectiveness", *International Security*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2014, p. 112-113.

[71] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 269.

[72] A recent example of how weak institutionalisation negatively affects intra-movement coherence is post-Qaddafi Libya where attempt to unify the victorious rebel forces under the *Supreme Security Committee* collapsed as the contingent organisations de-facto continued to operate autonomously, even attacking the government ministries they were supposed to protect. See Chivis, Christopher J. & Martini, Jeffrey. "Libya After Qaddafi - Lessons and Implications for the Future", *RAND Corporation*, 2014, p.

[73] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 270.

[74] Ibid.

widespread discontent and grievance can be vented, organised and coordinated, those links will have to be established during the chaos and hardship of war.

Furthermore, exogenous factors may also affect the relative degree of institutionalisation within a movement. State sponsorship of rebel movements may both positively and negatively affect their ability to form alliances and networks of cooperation. Offering sanctuary to rebel governments-in-exile may facilitate inter-organisational cooperation and diminish the risk of splits. Conversely, third states can also exacerbate fragmentation and undermine the creation of overarching institutional links by supporting and using individual non-state armed groups as proxies that can be used to advance the patron state's own agenda in the conflict[75].

3. Distribution of power

The third variable that - in conjunction with the number of organisations and the level of institutionalisation - affects the overall level of fragmentation is how power is distributed among the organisations within the rebel movement. In movements dominated by one powerful, hegemonic organisation, the consequences of being internally divided into numerous organisations are diminished as the ability of subordinate organisation to affect the overarching, collective goals of the movement is limited[76]. Conversely, when power is dispersed across numerous organisations, the risk of fragmentation rises as it opens up windows of opportunities for individual factions to pursue their private interests, thus exacerbating the risk of violent inter-organisational competition[77].

The concept of power needs to be further explained here. Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour employ a relatively holistic conception of the term, which encompasses both material as well as ideational factors. Material resources include financial revenue - whether through taxation, exploitation or foreign patronage -, the size of the recruitment base and the individual organisations' capacity to access this resource as well as its access to arms. Ideational factors include ideology, popular support and perceived legitimacy, different levels of organisational efficiency and structural coher-

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[75] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 270. In 2000, during the Second Congo War, several local rebel organisations in the Ituri region converged to create Union des Patriotes Congolais. The politico-military movement primarily consisted of ethnic Hema tribesmen with close ties to the Rwandan and Ugandan governments, whose external support initially helped shape the movement's institutional framework. Subsequent shifts in regional dynamics and internal rivalry over the leadership of the movement – exacerbated by the external patrons who each supported their own client – fragmented Union des Patriotes Congolais and triggered a bloody inter-rebel battle over the control of the regional capital. See: Tamm, Henning. "UPC in Ituri - The External Militarisation of Local Politics in North-Eastern Congo", *Rift Valley Institute,* 2013, p. 8-10.

[76] See, for instance, Krause, Peter. "The Structure of Success - How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behaviour and National Movement Effectiveness", *International Security*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2014.

[77] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 271. See also Wood, Reed M. & Kathman, Jacob. "Competing for the Crown: Inter-rebel Competition and Civilian Targeting in Civil War", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2015, pp. 167-179.

ence as well historical legacies and the individual organisations' abilities to form and maintain alliances[78]. In concert, variations in access to these factors can explain fluctuating patterns of intra-movement power distribution.

Mapping fragmentation and cohesion

When combining the three variables - the number of organisations within the movement, the level of institutionalisation between them and the distribution of power among them -, it becomes possible to form a three-dimensional conceptualisation of fragmentation[79]. If a movement consists of *1)* numerous organisations with *2)* weak or no interconnecting institutional links and *3)* power is diffusely dispersed among the groups, the movement is extremely fragmented and will form a large triangle along the extremities of the three legs. In contrast, a movement consisting of *1)* few organisations that are *2)* tied together by strong institutional links while *3)* power is concentrated in one hegemonic organisation, the movement will be extremely cohesive and will form a small triangle close to the center of the three legs. Note that both illustrations are examples of extreme cases that rarely reflect the reality of intra-movement dynamics; more often than not, the triangle will take on an asymmetrical shape.

Figure 1A: Extreme fragmentation on three dimensions

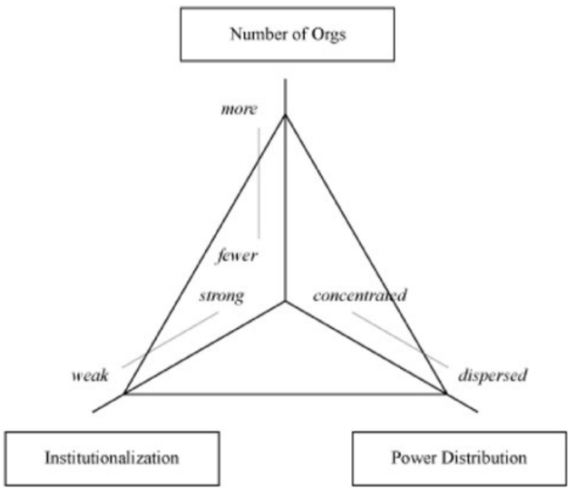
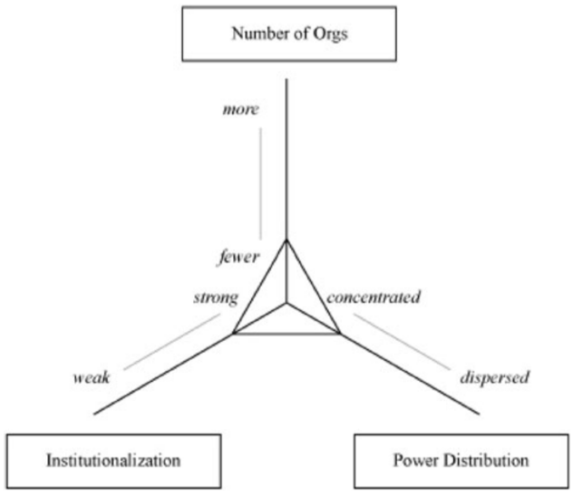


Figure 1B: Extreme cohesion on three dimensions



Source: Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour: "A Plague of Initials", Perspectives on Politics, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 273.

As noted in the description of the three variables of fragmentation, the internal make-up of a rebel movement is constantly subject to change along all three dimensions. New groups will emerge while others are swallowed or eliminated; alliances form as other frameworks of cooperation break

[78] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 271.

[79] Ibid., p. 272.

down and dissolve; power fluctuates among the organisations as the conflict evolves and a flurry of factors shape how influence is distributed in the rebel landscape. These different configurations will lead to different propensities and patterns of infighting within the movement. For instance, a movement consisting of many organisations with power dispersed among the actors, which simultaneously is highly institutionalised, carries a relatively low probability of infighting. If infighting does occur in this configuration, it will likely involve new organisations that arise to challenge the organisations within the institution or involve existing organisations that defect from the institution[80]. Conversely, movements consisting of many organisations with a weak degree institutionalisation, but where power is concentrated around one hegemonic organisation, infighting - if it occurs - is likely to involve the strongest organisation as it is either challenged or it targets others in order to remain hegemonic[81].

In the subsequent analysis of what has caused the Syrian rebel movement to fragment, Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour's three-dimensional conceptualisation will be used as a prism through which the intra-movement dynamics of the Syrian rebels will be analysed. By dividing the conflict into four different temporal phases, it becomes possible to identify, describe and analyse the cases of fragmentation as well as to illustrate the development of various patterns of fragmentation throughout the conflict.

[80] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 277.

[81] Ibid.

Staniland's theory of organisational cohesion and collapse

Why do some rebels possess the ability to build structurally resilient, ideologically cohesive and militarily effective organisations while others are hampered by poor central control, political fractionalisation and poor tactical proficiency? That is the overarching puzzle, which forms the basis of Paul Staniland's social-institutional theory of insurgent cohesion and insurgent collapse. Staniland's theory of how pre-existing social networks influence the organisational composition and overall proficiency of a rebel organisation applies to insurgent groups that originate as irregular guerrilla forces in opposition to a capable central state, who are faced with consistent pressure on their survival and who seek to politically governs territory, thus making the theory well-suited to apply on the Syrian case in which all the parameters are met.

Insurgent origins

The vantage point of Staniland's theory is based on the premise that *"knowing how institutions were constructed provides insight into how they might come apart"*[82]. Rather than identifying ideological framing[83], the availability of resources[84] or grievances caused by repressive state policies[85] as the determining factors of why rebel organisations are created, Staniland focuses on the ability of individual organisations to transform their distinct pre-war social bases and organisational structures to war-time insurgent groups as the decisive factor. As he notes, *"insurgents go to war with the networks they have, for better and worse"*[86], and examining the composition of the social bases from which they grow may prove fruitful in understanding the performative disjunction between different rebel organisation that one can observe in Syria.

Social bases are the context-dependent and historically determined structures of collective and social action that exist in any society. Think, for instance, of political parties catering to an electorate, religious organisations representing its constituency or revolutionary adventgardes seeking to prime the 'proletariat' for revolution; their goals vary wildly but are all enmeshed in complex patterns of cooperation and interactions with the social bases they claim to represent[87]. Insurgent organisations grow from this social terrain as they attempt to draw upon their pre-war networks in order to survive in a new and violent conflict environment. For the purpose of theory-

[82] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 17.

[83] See Snow, David & Benford, Robert. "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilisation", *International Social Movement Research,* vol. 1, 1988, pp. 197-217.

[84] See Collier, Paul & Hoeffler, Anke. "Greed and grievance in civil war", *Oxford Economic Papers*, vol. 56, 2004, pp. 563–595.

[85] See Gurr, Ted: *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton University Press, 1970.

[86] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 20.

[87] Ibid., p. 17.

building, Staniland divides the types of pre-war networks through which armed opposition to the state can manifest itself into two blunt categories; non-violent politicised opposition networks and underground networks of revolutionary plotters.

Revolutionary organisations such as underground student movements, networks of anti-regime activists and autonomous religious organisations are prepared for violent action before war even breaks out. Even though their pre-war activities are decidedly non-violent, they carry the ideational resources to mobilise quickly. However, while these types of social bases may form the prewar core of future insurgencies, they aren't necessarily well-suited for waging war once it actually breaks out. Revolutionary organisations that may have prepared for a quick putsch will find themselves struggling when the conflict turns into a protracted civil conflict, thus lacking the required flexibility to effectively transform the nature of their engagement. Furthermore, their overt revolutionary nature may attract unwanted attention from the state, thus making their destruction a top priority once war erupts.

Conversely, non-violent politicised social bases are not specifically attuned to waging war even if their pre-war function has been in opposition to the state. These include organisations such as the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the French Communist Party or, for instance, the British Trades Union Congress. They are imbued with the preferences that may transform them into wartime organisations in case a civil conflict breaks out, but it is not their default organisational setting and consequently, their non-violent pre-war activities reduces the likelihood that they will be preemptively wiped out by state repression[88]. Staniland argues that it is exactly because their political beliefs represent broad societal cleavages that these essentially non-violent networks are particularly useful for future insurgencies provided that they are able to make the transition to an effective wartime organisation[89].

Horizontal ties

Horizontal ties are the linkages that connect leaders and organisers across different geographical and social spaces. Strong and durable horizontal ties enhance the ability of an organisation to perform synchronised action across territories and social spheres, making it possible to consolidate shared political visions at the regional or national level. Think, for instance, of a cadre-based political opposition party consisting of local chapters dispersed across the territory of a state; the

[88] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 20.

[89] Ibid., p. 21.

existence of a strong horizontal network facilitates the flow of information and the coordination of collective action[90].

By contrast, weak horizontal ties severely inhibits communication and coordination across different localities, making it difficult to synchronise political and military action. Consequently, organisations with weak horizontal linkages may manifest themselves as disjointed factions ruled by local strongmen or warlords who possess loose links to other organisers in different localities who share similar ambitions. They may want the same thing, but lack the required horizontal ties for them to actually cooperate effectively to meet that goal[91]

Vertical ties

Building an effective insurgent organisation, however, not only depends on its ability to foster strong and durable horizontal ties. It must connect the organisers and leaders vertically to the local communities that they claim to represent. Being socially anchored is essential to the organisation's ability to extract resources and recruit members from the local peasantry and working class and if these bonds of trust are not nurtured, the local community can quickly undercut the elites attempting to mobilise them, thus severing the cord that provides them with popular legitimacy, local supplies and human resources. As a consequence, cultivating strong vertical ties to the community is an essential task that most rebel organisations face. If those ties do not already exist - think, for instance, of local chairman of a party who has strong pre-existing ties to his community -, they must be carefully fostered[92].

Weak vertical ties exist where the social relations - feelings of mutual trust, shared norms, common rhetoric - between an organisation's leaders and the community, that they are supposed to represent, are lacking, thus making it increasingly difficult for the organisation to achieve its goal. While the organisation and the community may well be on the same side of the overarching political cleavage of an ongoing civil conflict, the social gap between, for instance, the radical marxist intelligentsia and the peasantry[93], will leave the upper echelons of the organisation suspended in

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[90] Consider Mao Tse-Tung's transformation of the Chinese Revolutionary Army from a poorly-armed peasant militia to a highly efficient revolutionary force exemplifies the power of political mobilisation - *"the most fundamental condition for winning the war"* he wrote - through strong central organisation and *"iron discipline"*. See Tse-Tung, Mao: *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung - Volume II,* Pergamon Press, 1965, p. 155.

[91] For instance, during the American occupation of Iraq, Moqtada al-Sadr gradually lost the control of his Mahdi Army - a large militia with close ties to Iran - as splinter groups in various Shiite majority cities began to act autonomously, thus undermining al-Sadr's attempt forge a political bargain with American officials and the Iraqi government in Baghdad. See: Johnson, Scott C. "War Within a War - Who Control's the Mahdi Army?" *Newsweek*, 21 August 2006.

[92] In Iraq, for instance, the so-called Islamic State has co-opted the sons and grandsons of exiled village elders in an attempt to imbue the organisation with legitimacy, while it has developed an intricate system of social service provision, offering medical services, enforcing price control and upholding law and order in the areas under its control. See: Byman, Daniel. "The Six Faces of the Islamic State", *Brookings Institution*, 21 December 2015.

[93] See Scott, James C. "Revolution in the Revolution - Peasants and Commissars", *Theory and Society,* vol. 7, no. 1, 1979, pp. 97-137.

thin air, unable to connect to the base that is supposed to feed it with legitimacy, money and manpower[94].

Staniland's rebel organisation typology

As mentioned earlier, building an efficient insurgent organisation is a difficult and strenuous process which depends on its ability to transform the pre-war social networks into a war-time organisation through the mobilisation of its social ties. The pre-existing vertical and horizontal ties fuse to create the social foundation upon which the rebel organisations begin that transformative process once civil conflict breaks out. Staniland identifies four organisational archetypes; *integrated* organisations, *vanguard* organisations, *parochial* organisations and *fragmented* organisations. While the structural origins of rebel organisations create powerful tendencies of path dependency, they will nonetheless attempt to transform and reform in order to reach the strongest possible organisational configuration, namely the integrated organisational archetype[95].

Table 1: *The four organisational archetypes of insurgency*[96]

	Strong vertical ties	**Weak vertical ties**
Strong horizontal ties	*Integrated organisation* - Robust central processes - Robust local processes	*Vanguard organisation* - Robust central processes - Fragile local processes
Weak horizontal ties	*Parochial organisation* - Fragile central processes - Robust local processes	*Fragmented organisation* - Fragile central processes - Fragile local processes

Integrated organisations

The strongest and most durable organisational archetype are integrated organisations. They are characterised by a high degree of unity and discipline within the horizontally dispersed leadership ranks as well as high levels of compliance on the local level. Leaders, who are embedded in pre-war social bases with strong horizontal and vertical ties, possess the optimal inclination to build resilient insurgent organisations. Strong, pre-existing horizontal networks streamlines decision-

[94] After his failed attempt to export the Marxist revolution to Congo, "Ché" Guevara departed to Bolivia, seeking to train and arm local peasants and dissidents in the fight against the Barrientos regime. The poor and intensely parochial farmers – *"many of whom are turning into informants"*, he wrote in his field diary – were inherently skeptical of his avant-gardist guerrilla theory, which prioritised military over political struggle. As the gulf between his revolutionary idealism and the practical realities of rural Bolivian life widened, "Ché" and his closest guerrilleros were forced to flee through the jungles until they, in October 1968, were captured and killed by the Bolivian Army. See: Lamberg, Robert F. "Che In Bolivia - The "Revolution" that Failed", *Problems of Communism,* vol 19, no. 4, 1970, p. 27.

[95] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 37.

[96] Ibid., p. 9.

making processes, creates clear command and control structures and ensures that the upper echelons of the organisation are ideologically harmonised.

The strong vertical ties of an integrated organisation connect its leadership to the local communities and networks, through which the organisation can disseminate its ideology, raise resources through taxation, gather local intelligence, recruit new fighters and instil discipline within the existing rebel ranks. When combined, the strong horizontal and vertical ties makes it possible for promising foot soldiers, teachers or local administrators to rise through the ranks of the organisation, thus streamlining the internal recruitment processes.

As integrated organisations already possess the optimal combination of horizontal and vertical ties, this organisational archetype cannot advance further, but can only devolve. Staniland argues that there are two pathways to organisational degradation or collapse for integrated organisations; either by external pressure from comprehensive counterinsurgency campaigns or internal mismanagement in relation to organisational expansion[97].

By breaking down the central control of the organisation through what Staniland calls *leadership decapitation*, the state performing the counterinsurgency campaign can cut its horizontal ties, disrupting the ability of leaders to interact with one-another. Leadership decapitation, however, is not enough to degrade a strong integrated organisation. Shattering the vertical ties between the organisation and the local population necessitates displacing populations, implementing intense social control and using counterinsurgent forces to "flip" former militants in order to reestablish local control[98]. Consequently, dismantling an integrated organisation is a resource sapping, labour-intensive and time consuming task, which many incumbent regimes struggle to do effectively.

As mentioned, an integrated organisation's degradation can also be a result of internal miscalculations about its ability to incorporate and homogenise new leaders and foot soldiers from outside its original social base[99]. When attempting to merge with other organisations, incorporating its leaders into the existing central organisation can disrupt the horizontal ties that holds it together. Consequently, mismanaged leadership expansion can cause an integrated organisation to degrade into a parochial organisation. Furthermore, the social composition of an integrated organisation can become severely damaged as it incorporates new, socially distinct recruits in order to expand militarily. If the organisation fails to provide new foot soldiers with pathways into the organisa-

[97] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 39.

[98] Ibid., p. 40.

[99] Ibid., p. 41.

tional leadership ranks, tensions between local and central leaderships will rise. If these dynamics aren't carefully handled, sudden set-backs or shocks can trigger widespread local discontent and revolts, thus severing the horizontal ties and leaving the leadership suspended in thin air with severely diminished local control. Consequently, an integrated organisation can also degrade into a vanguard organisation[100].

Vanguard organisations

Vanguard organisations possess strong horizontal ties that connect party cadres, urban intellectuals, clerics, activists and organisers across the geographical landscape of the conflict. As is the case with integrated organisations, vanguard organisations can forge and streamline the ideological preferences throughout the ranks and build clear hierarchical structures from which orders can be effectively disseminated from the central leadership to the local commanders. They lack, however, the vertical ties needed to quickly organise the local communities in which they try to embed themselves.

Consequently, reliable local control and social support is in short supply, making recruitment and mobilisation efforts difficult. This organisational deficiency can be overcome by investing heavily in expanding their reach into the local communities. That is no easy feat, however. Even if a vanguard organisation succeeds in recruiting local fighters, lacking bonds of trust, incomplete channels of information and poor local knowledge can result in disobedience and dissent among the recruits.

When vanguard organisations change, they can either evolve into an integrated organisation or devolve into a fragmented organisation. As their key challenge is to mobilise local communities by fostering underdeveloped vertical ties, a vanguard organisation can follow two paths to becoming an integrated one; by making durable alliances with local groups or by imposing itself on a local area by taking advantage of power vacuums to establish local presence[101]. The first option - local alliance building - is a pragmatic way for the vanguard leadership to embed itself into a wider revolutionary movement. In order to succeed, the alliances it strikes must be based on shared political interests that align the local cleavages and the master cleavages of the conflict. This also entails a certain degree of flexibility when it comes to imposing its ideology locally - push too hard and the vanguard leadership risks alienating the population. The second mechanism to vertical integration - imposing the organisation on a local area - entails establishing local control by exploiting power vacuums as the control of the incumbent regime gradually recedes. Because of its

[100] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 41-42.

[101] Ibid., p. 43.

superior ability to coordinate collective, violent action, a vanguard organisation can outmaneuver local opposition. However, using these windows of opportunity to assume control is considerably more risky than local alliance building[102].

When vanguard organisations devolve, the process can be triggered by two mechanisms; *leadership decapitation* and *fratricide*. As is the case with integrated organisations, the strategic targeting of the leadership by either capturing or killing them can set off a process of organisational disruption and decay from which the organisation will never recover[103]. Secondly, the weak vertical ties of vanguard organisations make the leadership vulnerable to co-opted local strongmen and foot soldiers who may begin to act autonomously if tensions arise between the two strata. Coups and defections from below can trigger intra-organisational fratricide and leave it open to devastating attacks from the incumbent state or rival militant organisations.[104] Consequently, vanguard organisations must invest heavily in fomenting and cultivating the horizontal social links so it can evolve into a robust integrated organisation.

Parochial organisations

Parochial organisations draw on strong vertical links to the local communities they represent. Their local embeddedness stems from strong, pre-existing vertical ties between the organisation's local leadership - for instance, local business leaders, clerics or crime bosses - and its constituents, which makes the rapid recruitment and mobilisation of fighting forces possible. Shared norms, social expectations and mutual trust ensures that information and orders flow smoothly within the local factions of the organisation. Pre-war community leaders morph into local strongmen and power brokers under whose leadership a small but tightly-knit network of obedient loyalists who protect their own, local fiefdoms from the onslaught of the state's armed forces and other foes.

But in contrast to integrated and vanguard organisations, parochial organisations are horizontally isolated; while the local sub-organisations may well be aligned around the master cleavages of the conflict, they lack the centralised institutional strength to coordination and synchronise military, strategic and political action. Even though parochial organisations are held loosely together by a central leader, the inherent organisational deficiencies makes maintaining cohesion extremely difficult.

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[102] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 45-46.

[103] As the 10-year-long hunt for Osama bin Laden illustrated, this is easier said than done. Leadership decapitation requires an extremely extensive infrastructure, hermitically sealed security apparatuses and sophisticated targeting procedures. Ibid., p. 47.

[104] Ibid., p. 48.

While it is possible, developing a parochial organisation into an integrated organisation is difficult. The first option is what Staniland refers to as *factional fusing*. By strengthening the horizontal ties between local leaders of its sub-factions through interaction, negotiations and local power-sharing agreements, they may be inclined to reform the organisation from within and form more efficient leadership structures. Since establishing horizontal leadership ties in a war-torn country divided into enclaves and zones of influence is practically impossible, factional fusing is often facilitated in external sanctuaries where patron states offer safe spaces for the local leaders to cultivate these horizontal linkages. However, the involvement of international actors comes with a risk of being subjected to divide-and-conquer strategies employed by external state sponsors with varying and often competing objectives[105]. The second mechanism which can cultivate the integration of a parochial organisation is what Staniland calls *cooperation under fire*. When a counterinsurgency campaign is sufficiently indiscriminate and ineffective, mass violence can foment close cooperation between factions that create new bonds of trust, new lines of communication and bolsters leadership unity. However, cooperation under fire provides no guarantee for continued leadership unity once the storm has passed.

When parochial organisations devolve into fragmented organisations, they do so either as a result of a local counterinsurgency campaign that succeeds in establish pervasive social control on the ground or as a result of internal leadership feuds[106]. First, if the incumbent state manages to disembed the local leadership from its area of control, it looses its ability to effectively manage the local recruits under its command. Since parochial organisations lack the horizontal ties that tie the sub-factional leaderships together in an effective manner, local units can be isolated and picked off since the organisation lacks the organisational efficiency to mobilise new forces from other locales. Secondly, the risk of inter-leadership fratricide is high as weakly institutionalised organisations suffer from low degrees of trust and information-sharing. Without the robust horizontal bonds that characterise integrated as well as vanguard organisations, parochial organisations are vulnerable to infiltration, criminality, warlordism and dormant, pre-war feuds between tribes, families or businessmen that may develop into fratricidal infighting[107]. Other types of organisations may suffer from internal disputes, but unlike parochial organisations, they possess the central control required to deescalate and clamp down on infighting. Nonetheless, due to their deep local embeddedness, parochial organisations can prove extremely resilient.

[105] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 49-50.

[106] Ibid., p. 51-53.

[107] Ibid.

Fragmented organisations

Lastly, fragmented organisations are crippled by both weak horizontal and vertical ties, making this archetype the structurally most fragile of the four. Secluded from local communities and possessing fragile central control, fragmented organisations suffer from poor discipline and internal cleavages. Their possibilities for change are inherently limited due to their deeply dysfunctional structures. They may develop greater horizontal ties through intensive state patronage or by retreating to a sanctuary from which it reconstitutes itself as a proxy organisation working on behalf of another state[108]. The rise of a strong warlord within the fragmented organisation may cultivate stronger vertical ties from which a local network can be (re-)built. However, once an organisation has fragmented, the most likely trajectory is that it withers away as its cadres either give up their arms or join superiorly structured organisations.

In the second analytical chapter of this study, Staniland's theory will be used to analyse the vastly distinct organisational trajectories of the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nusra in order to understand why some organisations thrive in a fragmented rebel landscape while others fail to build sufficiently strong structures to withstand the strenuous conditions of prolonged civil war.

[108] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014., p. 54-55

IV: Methodology, research design and data collection

This section will proceed in three parts; first, it is argued that critical realism serves as a promising epistemological vantage point for an examination of the causal mechanisms of rebel fragmentation. In contrast to the positivist body of research on the subject, which almost exclusively deals with the consequences of the phenomenon and not its causes, it is argued that the holistic character of critical realist research is useful for examining convoluted social phenomena and inter-organisational relationships. Subsequently, it is discussed how this relates to the thesis' theoretical framework. Secondly, the merits and drawbacks of using the fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement as a single case-study is discussed. It is argued that analysing an *extreme* case can reveal important information about a poorly understood or under-researched phenomenon through an *exploratory* case study design. Lastly, it is described how the qualitative data - a rich collection of empirical evidence, which reflects the holistic character of critical realist research - has been collected and how it is operationalised in the subsequent analyses.

Critical realism as an epistemological foundation to understanding fragmentation

As previously mentioned, much of the literature on rebel fragmentation and its implications for conflict outcomes is based on quantitative research disaggregated from non-quantifiable, complex concepts such as social structures or identity considerations[109]. As a result, a substantial part of the research stemming from the two dominant journals within the field – *Journal of Peace Research* and *Journal of Conflict Resolution* – is positivist[110]. Rooted in the belief that the complexities of the world can be unshrouded and decoded by reducing the way we observe it to measurable and repeatable variables, studies within a positivist paradigm presumes that the data derived from the analysis of quantitative research can be used to test the validity of pre-conceived hypotheses[111].

However, it is necessary to move beyond the rigidity of positivism in order to answer the proposed research question. As noted by Kalyvas, ambiguity is a fundamental trait of civil wars – *"a matter of structure rather than noise"*[112] as he puts it –, which warrants the application of a more pluralist, holistic research approach. Understanding *what* has caused fragmentation among rebels in Syria and *why* some groups can adapt while others fail calls for the application of a flexible, philosophical approach suited for holistic, in-depth analysis of dynamic and complex social phenomena. To

[109] O'Sullivan, Keith: "Towards Deeper Engagement in Conflict Studies: A Critical Realist Approach to the Study of Civil Conflict", draft paper, 2010, p. 3.

[110] Jackson, Robert H. and Sørensen, Robert H.: *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 298.

[111] Aliya et al. "Positivist and Non-Positivist Paradigm in Social Science Research: Conflicting Paradigms or Perfect Partners?", *Journal of Management and Sustainability*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2014, p. 82.

[112] Kalyvas, Stathis. "The Ontology of Political Violence: Action and Identity in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics,* vol. 3, 2003, p. 475.

that end, critical realism serves as a promising meta-theoretical vantage point for this thesis; it is a paradigm concerned with how ontological phenomena come about and it grows from the central notion that events cannot be studied or understood in isolation from the environment in which they occur[113]. Consequently, critical realism is specifically attuned to making sense of the changes that can be observed in social entities and inter-organisational relationships[114].

In doing so, critical realists employ a holistic and multi-facetted understanding of how causal forces interact and counteract in order to shape events, processes and relations[115]. Based on the Aristotelean adage that 'nothing comes from nothing', critical realists believe that through deep ontological inquiry, the researcher can uncover the underlying, pre-existing causal context that hides beneath the immediately observable patterns. It might be helpful to look at the phenomenon, which the critical realist researcher wants to examine – rebel fragmentation in this case – as an observable symptom. Where a positivist would look at the effects of the phenomenon, a critical realist – not unlike a medical physician – is interested in understanding what causes it to occur by making an interpretation and a diagnosis.

Furthermore, while accepting the constructivist view that social structures are shaped by norms, rules and beliefs, critical realism also assumes the existence of an ontological reality, which affects and shapes the social relations that tie agents, such as rebel organisations, together[116]. While accepting the notion that social life is indeed complicated, critical realists believe that it is still possible to discern reliable, plausible conclusions from research activities[117]. In effect, this means that a critical realist conception of causation includes a wide array of ontological forces including material factors – for instance resources, geography, and access to arms –, social structures and norms as well as the agents' own reasons for doing what they do[118].

This double recognition of objectivist positivism as well as subjectivist constructivism has implications for the type of reasoning that the critical realist researcher applies to the field. Where an objectivist approach entails using deductive reasoning to test preconceived hypotheses through the analysis of quantitative data and a subjectivist would use inductive reasoning to observe pat-

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[113] Edwards et al.: "Critical realism as an empirical project", in *Studying Organisations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 8.

[114] Easton, Geoff. "Critical Realism in Case Study Research", *Industrial Marketing Management* vol. 39, 2009, p. 120.

[115] Kurki, Milja. "Critical Realism and Causal Analysis in International Relations", *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2007, p. 365.

[116] O'Sullivan, Keith: "Towards Deeper Engagement in Conflict Studies: A Critical Realist Approach to the Study of Civil Conflict", draft paper, 2010, p. 9

[117] Edwards et al.: "Critical realism as an empirical project", in *Studying Organisations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 2.

[118] Kurki, Milja. "Critical Realism and Causal Analysis in International Relations", *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2007, p. 366.

terns and construct probable explanations, critical realism provides an alternative middle-ground between the objectivist-subjectivist dichotomy[119].

By applying an abductive logic, critical realism combines empirical observations with selected theories to produce the most plausible explanations of the mechanisms which have caused of the phenomenon to occur. In effect, this mixed approach means that critical realist research may incorporate different sorts of data in order to uncover the likely causal mechanisms that the other approaches have difficulties examining[120].

A central ontological notion within critical realism is that social reality is stratified into three overlapping, stratified levels of reality; the *empirical*, the *actual* and the *real*[121]. The *empirical* domain refers to what we can actually measure and experience as observers of a concrete event or phenomenon. The *actual* refers to the domain in which the events unfold and how the events are experienced by the actors. Finally, the *real* is the realm, which contains the underlying mechanisms and structures that generate or cause the empirically observable events. It is this domain – the *real* – that critical realists seek to understand. Since critical realists accept that the knowledge derived from research is by definition fallibly since it can only uncover fragments of a complex social reality – therein lies the criticality –, the goal becomes to distinguish among a range of alternative explanations in order to understand the most likely generative mechanisms of the real[122].

Furthermore, a critical realist study of an organisation's internal dynamics will usually include multilevel descriptions of the vertical, horizontal and temporal relations that tie it together[123]. Consequently, the chosen theoretical framework for this thesis - Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour's holistic conceptualisation of fragmentation and Staniland's social-institutional theory of insurgent coherence and insurgent collapse - fit well within this scope they are both recognise multicausality and embrace the importance of material as well as normative factors. Thus, in examining how the existence of pre-war social networks has influenced the organisational structures of Syrian rebel groups, critical realism seems like an obvious meta-theoretical companion, which can help guide the analysis of the case at hand.

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[119] Edwards et al.: "Critical realism as an empirical project", in *Studying Organisations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 4.

[120] Ibid., p. 20

[121] Sayer, Andrew: *Realism and Social Science*, SAGE Publications Ltd., 2000, p. 12.

[122] Easton, Geoff. "Critical Realism in Case Study Research", *Industrial Marketing Management* vol. 39, 2009, p. 123.

[123] Edwards et al.: "Critical realism as an empirical project", in *Studying Organisations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2014., p. 21.

Research design - the fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement as an extreme case

In the concluding remarks to their large-N study of inter-rebel violence, Fjelde & Nilsson highlight the need to move beyond the quantitative framework in order to develop our understanding of what causes and motivates rebel fragmentation and violent infighting between nominal allies[124]. As pointed out in the literature review, the existing body of research on rebel fragmentation has examined the consequences - or the causal effects - of rebel fragmentation through positivist quantitative studies, but understanding what causes the phenomenon to occur in the first place remains under-researched.

Heeding the advice of Fjelde & Nilsson, this thesis examines the fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement as a qualitative single case-study in order to delve into the complexities of the phenomenon. The case study is the basic design for critical realist research, since it is particularly suitable for examining causal mechanisms at work[125]. A well-chosen and structurally sound qualitative case-study provides a very fruitful basis for developing concrete and context-dependent knowledge of complex social phenomena, which can subsequently be used to formulate plausible generalisations or hypotheses that may be applicable to similar cases[126]. Choosing an extreme case of the particular phenomenon that the researcher wants to examine can prove particularly useful in uncovering new knowledge, since it activates more actors and mechanisms in situation studied than would be the instance if the study was based on a typical or representative case[127].

While rebel fragmentation is indeed a common phenomenon in civil conflicts, Syria does represent an extreme case. According to Stanford University's *Mapping Militant Organisations* dataset, 19 distinct rebel organisations - some of which are now defunct - have operated within the same overarching movement[128]. Few conflicts have seen a similar degree of numerical fragmentation - the Chadian Civil War is a rare exception with more than 30 rebel organisations[129] -, which makes the fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement a somewhat exceptional instance and consequently particularly suitable for examination through a single-case research design. By applying the clinical-physiological analogy from the previous section, it can be regarded as a particularly

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[124] Fjelde, Hanne & Nilsson, Desiree. "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups"*, Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2012, p. 622

[125] Edwards et al.: "Critical realism as an empirical project", in *Studying Organisations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 5.

[126] Flyvbjerg, Bent. "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research", *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, p. 224-225.

[127] Ibid., p. 229.

[128] As will be discussed in the following section, Stanford's dataset is not complete and excludes several Syrian rebel organisations. The actual number is higher.

[129] See Woldemarian, Michael H. "Why Rebels Collide: Factionalism and Fragmentation in African Insurgencies", Ph.D. dissertation submitted for Princeton University, 2011, p. 24.

severe symptom of a recurring but poorly understood syndrome. The clearer and more abnormal the symptoms are, the easier it is for the physician to examine the nature and causes of the disease in question. Consequently, choosing an extreme case of rebel fragmentation is likely to provide significantly more information on the causes of the phenomenon than would be the instance with a more representative case in which the symptoms are less prevalent[130].

So how to put it to use? First, it is necessary to clarify whether the purpose of the thesis is to *describe*, *explain* or *explore* the phenomenon in question[131]. *Descriptive* case studies seek to mine for new, abstract interpretations of well known phenomenon with the goal of formulating generalisable theoretical propositions[132], while *explanatory* case studies pose several competing explanations by combining qualitative and quantitative methods in order to produce new theories[133]. Lastly, *exploratory* case studies are designed to explore what so far remains unknown, unrecognised or academically under-researched and are characterised by a lack of preliminary hypotheses[134]. When studying an extreme manifestation of a phenomenon, the type of case study that is to be conducted is - per definition - exploratory since it probes for the causes of a phenomenon in an open-ended manner[135]. Since there is a lack of comprehensive theoretical explanations for the mechanisms that cause rebel fragmentation to occur, conducting an exploratory case study is a logical vantage point for a thesis of this kind.

Furthermore, the flexible and adaptive character of this case study category fits well with cases where the possibilities for data collection and access to the research environment is limited. Since the scope of conducting critical realist research is to probe for the plausible causes of a phenomenon rather than reaching a logically certain conclusion by testing the explanatory validity of hypotheses through deduction - an exercise which requires vast amounts of data on which propositions can be formed -, the exploratory case study can be a fruitful starting point for future studies into the same phenomenon. To that end, the findings of this thesis could serve as the foundation for a subsequent cross-case analysis of conflicts with similar degrees of rebel fragmentation through which more sophisticated explanations on the causes of the phenomenon could be developed and refined.

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[130] Danermark et al. *Explaining Society - Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, Routledge, 2002, p. 104.

[131] Yin, Robert K.: *Case Study Research - Design and Methods*, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 4.

[132] "Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research", *Sage Publications*, 2009: Descriptive Case Study, p. 288.

[133] Ibid., p. 370.

[134] Ibid., p. 372.

[135] Gerring, John: *Case Study Research - Principles and Practices*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 105.

Qualitative data collection and data analysis

Syria's civil war is an ongoing, highly dynamic conflict fought between a wide array of actors in a dangerous and practically inaccessible environment. As is often the case when dealing with conflicts of this character, access to reliable data is, consequently, inherently limited. Not only does chaos and confusion create substantial uncertainty about seemingly basic information; the active parties may also have reasons to obscure the facts on the ground, which - due to the continued level of violence - remains inaccessible to researchers[136]. The fact that practically every single fighter belonging to every single organisation has the technological ability to disseminate their own distinct narratives and video recordings from the battlefield - often a prerequisite for raising funds from abroad[137] - only adds to the confusion. Cutting through the flurry of propagandised information is essential in order to obtain reliable qualitative data and doing that requires choosing sources with great care. To that end, this thesis primarily draws on two types of sources, namely Stanford University's *Mapping Militant Organisations* dataset, and a wide array of secondary sources such as journal articles and recently published books on Syria's civil war. Select primary sources will also be included albeit with significant caveats.

Stanford University's *Mapping Militant Organisations* dataset is used in order to map the different stages of fragmentation throughout the war[138]. The dataset maps the evolution and interactions of militant organisations in Syria by visualising how inter-organisational relationships change over time. It also contains profiles of the individual organisations, which will also prove useful in answering the second part of the research question, namely why some organisations thrive in a fragmented rebel landscape while others fail to adapt. Though the organisational profiles are well-sourced, they often lack substance and must be corroborated by in-depth reports and analyses conducted by researchers within the field. The uncertainties and pitfalls of conducting research on an ongoing conflict are also reflected in the *Mapping Militant Organisations* dataset, which lacks the inclusion of several small- and medium-sized Syrian rebel organisations that the researchers haven't yet been able to map. This is a substantial drawback that might have implications for the accuracy of the analysis and the validity of its conclusions. However, the Stanford dataset is - so far - the only one publicly available and since 'filling in the blanks' would be an extremely time-consuming task, this thesis uses the dataset and its included actors as the vantage point for the analysis. For the purpose of this study, the Stanford University map has been broken up into four

[136] Osorio, Javier. "Numbers Under Fire: The Challenges of Gathering Quantitative Data in Highly Violent Settings", *DSD Working Papers on Research Security,* vol 6, 2014, p. 2.

[137] Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)." *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2013.

[138] See *Appendix I*: *Organisational overview*, p. 104.

phases, each of which form the basis for the first analytical chapter, and re-illustrated by this author.

The secondary sources chosen for this thesis have been carefully and intentionally picked in order to provide a sound empirical foundation on which the analyses will be conducted. This pool of data includes Samer Abboud's *Syria*, which serves an excellent introduction to the oppressive state of pre-war politics, the socio-economic background of the conflict and its development from popular protest to protracted civil war. Charles Lister's *The Syrian Jihad - al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* as well as his reports on the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nusra conducted for the Brookings Institution provide an authoritative insight into the inter-organisational relations of the Syrian rebel movement. Likewise, Aron Lund and Sam Heller's numerous and extremely well-sourced reports for Carnegie Middle East Center and The Century Foundation lay bare the inner-workings of the rebel-held enclaves and provinces, including how organisations compete for local legitimacy. Christopher Phillip's *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East* examines how the external actors have influenced the development of the war and how the local is intractably tied to the regional. Furthermore, several of International Crisis Group's reports on Syria as well as reports on Syria's war economy conducted by London School of Economics are included in the data pool.

Finally, select primary sources are also included. These include journalistic accounts from earlier phases of the conflict such as Ghaith Abdul-Ahad's dispatches from the rebel-held provinces of Idlib and Aleppo[139] and excerpts from interviews conducted with fighters 'on the ground'[140]. Due to the increasing risks of kidnapping and murder, most foreign journalists left Syria in 2013 and 2014[141], severely inhibiting the non-Arabic-language coverage of the conflict. Consequently, the value of secondary sources such as in-depth reports conducted by well-connected, Arabic-speaking researchers is heightened significantly. Official statements and speeches published by the individual organisations will also be used to the extent that the material has been translated into English by a capable translator, while propagandistic YouTube videos may give important insights into how the organisations want others to perceive them.

[139] See for instance: Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)." *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2013.

[140] See for instance: Abouzeid, Rania. "In Syria, the Rebels Have Begun to Fight Among Themselves", *Time Magazine*, 26 March 2013.

[141] Dlewati, Hiba. "Fewer Journalist Deaths in Syria - Because There Aren't Many Left." *Syria Deeply*, 31 August 2016.

VII: Four phases of fragmentation

In order to explore the causes and consequences of rebel fragmentation in Syria, the following analysis is founded on the conceptualisation of *"war as an evolutionary system"*[142]. As noted by Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour, rebel movements are rarely coherent challengers to the state, but are rather comprised of a shifting set of actors who may share a central identity but also have malleable allegiances and potentially divergent interests that often change and develop during the course of the conflict[143]. By employing their three-dimensional conceptualisation of rebel fragmentation, this chapter identifies, describes and analyses the causes of rebel fragmentation in Syria and illustrates how those dynamics have influenced the internal composition of the rebel movement over the last six years of attritional civil war.

By dividing the conflict into four different temporal phases, this analysis seeks to disentangle and illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of the fragmentation phenomenon. Each phase is analysed through the scope of the three key variables identified by Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour, namely the number of organisations within the movement, the distribution of power among them and the level of institutionalisation between them. These three variables provide a useful set of lenses through which the convoluted causes of the conflict's fragmentary dynamics can be identified, analysed and mapped. Each phase will be chronologically analysed through this prism, after which the overall degree of fragmentation will be illustrated.

Phase I: March '11 – July '12: Formation

As this thesis seeks to answer what has caused the Syrian rebel movement to fragment, one might be tempted to believe that it had once been unified; that the fracturing of an otherwise coherent opposition movement has been triggered by the tough conditions of war and enduring chaos. However, the Syrian rebel movement was born as a numerically fragmented and ideationally divided mosaic of actors. This section explores how the seeds of division were already planted before the onset of the war and how internal as well as external attempts to forge inter-rebel unity not only failed, but exacerbated the fragmentation of Syria's budding rebel movement.

Fragmented origins

An obvious starting point for this analysis is to explore the pre-war state of the political opposition to the Syrian regime. As noted by Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour, strongly authoritarian

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[142] Findley, Michael G. & Rudloff, Peter. "Combatant Fragmentation and the Dynamics of Civil Wars", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 4, 2012, p. 881.

[143] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 266.

states may provide a less conducive environment for the formation coherent rebel movements since the absence of pre-existing institutional frameworks hamper the capacity to coordinate action at civil war onset[144]. Thus, when nationwide protests broke out in mid-March 2011, it was as if a pressure cooker suddenly exploded. Within days after the first protest broke out in the south-western city of Daraa, the popular uprising against the Assad regime had spread to all Syria's provinces in which large portions of country's ethnically diverse and multi-confessional population expressed their discontent with a vast range of distinct and yet inter-connected ills[145].

As the incidental heir to his father's throne[146], Bashar al-Assad oversaw an extremely oppressive praetorian[147] central state apparatus built upon the far-reaching, monopolistic powers of the ruling Baath-party, the unquestioned and cult-like status of the al-Assad family[148] and the vast, Orwellian security apparatus, which sought to monitor and control all aspects of social, civil and political life[149]. For more than four decades, all forms of political dissent in Syria had been effectively contained and suppressed by the successive Assad regimes. Under the rule of Hafez al-Assad - Bashar al-Assad's father -, the Baath party had forged a vast patronage network extending throughout many layers of the socially heterogenous country. By co-opting tribal leaders and local businessmen, the Baathist elite benefited their followers and their respective communities by building infrastructure and creating public sector jobs for party loyalists, thus shaping the governmental institutions of Syria as a reflection of the party's self-image[150]. The spheres of society that opposed the party line were systematically oppressed, most notably the Syrian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was practically crushed during the 1982 uprising in Hama[151]. Bashar

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[144] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 270.

[145] These included deteriorating living standards following in the wake of failed economic reforms, longstanding neglect of the country's vital agricultural sector, unsustainable demographic shifts from the rural areas to the urban centres and widespread discontent with mounting political oppression following Bashar al-Assad's ascendance to power a decade earlier. See for instance; Shamel Azmeh: *The Uprising of the Marginalised - A Socio-Economic Perspective of the Syrian Uprising*, LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series (2014), vol. 6, London School of Economics, p. 16.; Rocchi et al. "Agriculture reform and food crisis in Syria: Impacts on poverty and inequality", *Food Policy*, vol. 43, 2013, p. 191.; Haddad, Bassem & Wind, Ella. "The Fragmented State of the Syrian Opposition", in *Beyond the Arab Spring*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 397.; Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 39.

[146] Bassel al-Assad - the first-born son of Hafez al-Assad and heir apparent to the Syrian regime - died in a car accident in 1994.

[147] According to Amos Perlmutter, a modern praetorian state is characterised by the fusion of military and civilian affairs aimed at upholding stability and preserving the ruling regime. See Perlmutter, Amos. "The Praetorian State and the Praetorian Army - Towards a Taxonomy of Civil-Military Relations in Developing Polities", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1969, pp. 382-404.

[148] For a comprehensive account of how the careful cultivation of Hafez al-Assad's image as Syria's 'father' was employed as a disciplinary tool, see Lisa Wedeen. *Ambiguities of Domination - Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

[149] Seale, Patrick. "The Syrian Time Bomb", *Project on Middle East Political Science*, POMEPS Briefings, 2011, p. 5.

[150] McHugo, John: *Syria: A Recent History,* Saqi Books, 2015, p. 212.

[151] Up to 10.000 people were killed as the Syrian army besieged the provincial capital, which had become a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold.

al-Assad inherited this deeply authoritarian state system, which continued to restrict political participation while exercising its authority with extreme retribution[152].

Huntington notes that when opposition to the ruling elites in a weakly institutionalised, praetorian state systems arises, it tends to do so in a diffuse and chaotic manner[153]. Since the venues of legitimate, political participation are extremely limited and the use of corruption, coercion and violence are deeply embedded within the practices of the state, popular discontent tends to exacerbate rather than reduce tension as is the norm in highly institutionalised societies in which new political actors are assimilated into the existing order[154]. Similarly, Syria's pre-war political opposition, which primarily consisted of intellectual, elite-centric dissidents, was deeply dysfunctional, bereft of organisational structure, political visions and democratic dialogue[155].

Due to the fact that civil-society groups and political associations were not allowed to form and operate without the approval of all thirteen branches of the security apparatus, no substantial, independent and organically-established institutional outlets, through which popular discontent could be vented, existed prior to the uprisings[156]. Operating under the constant pressure of the states' intelligence branches *"destroyed democratic culture within the opposition parties"* a dissident notes; *"it led them to contract and withdraw inward, unable to mobilise or grow"*[157]. Indeed, the ultimate goal of Syria's political opposition figures became to preserve their own status and livelihoods, essentially mirroring the praetorian nature of the Syrian state apparatus. The few active independent organisations that did exist - human rights advocacy groups and non-state sanctioned religious organisations - led a marginalised shadow-existence under the constant threat of state repression.

Consequently, the circumscribed state of Syria's pre-war civil society seems to have had vast implications for how the popular discontent would manifest itself once the widespread protests gradually transformed into an armed struggle during the summer of 2011. The absence of pre-existing institutions through which the popular uprising could be mobilised and organised severely

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[152] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. 44.

[153] Huntington, Samuel P. *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press, 1968, p. 196.

[154] Ibid. See also: See Perlmutter, Amos. "The Praetorian State and the Praetorian Army - Towards a Taxonomy of Civil-Military Relations in Developing Polities", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1969, pp. 382-404.

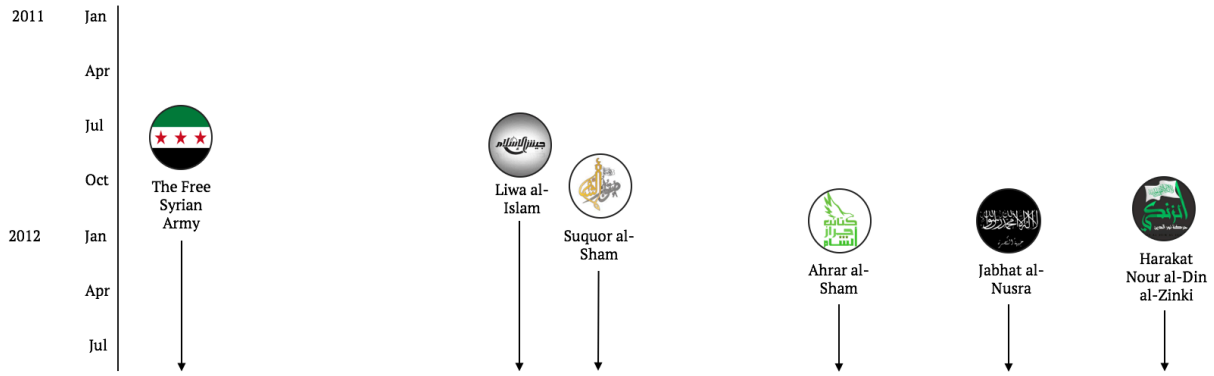
[155] International Crisis Groups. "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition", *Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 146*, 17 October 2013, p. 7. As Yassin al-Haj Saleh - a prominent Syrian intellectual - describes the state the political climate before the uprising; *"This country was politically drained for decades. The regime used to cut the heads of all political figures, respected notables, and independent authorities of the social scene, as well as the cultural, economic and religious leaders, even in sports. The only political figures this country has produced over half a century of Baathist rule are subjects, flunkeys and dwarfs"*. *See:* Syria Deeply. "Interview: Yassin al-Haj Saleh", *Syria Deeply*, 4 December 2012.

[156] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 41.

[157] International Crisis Groups. "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition", *Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 146*, 17 October 2013, p. 8.

thwarted the degree to which the opposition to the Assad regime could manifest itself. Instead of growing organically from pre-existing civil society institutions, trade unions or independent political parties, as usually is the case in non-authoritarian states[158], the armed rebellion sprouted diffusely through spontaneously formed neighbourhood militias, make-shift committees and small cell-based underground opposition networks that rarely had any ties to existing political groups[159]. The consequences of absent institutionalised oppositional leadership in Syria can be observed when consulting the Stanford dataset. All the rebel organisations active during the first phase of the conflict - six in total - were formally established after the beginning of the uprising[160]. As such, the Syrian rebel movement was structurally preconditioned to fragment from the onset of the conflict.

Illustration 1: Organisational overview, Phase I. *Source: Stanford University; Mapping Militant Organisations*



However, as Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour point out, organisational proliferation within a movement does not necessarily mean that they are not able to attain inter-organisational coherence. Nonetheless, the existence of multiple organisations tend to indicate underlying disagreements and diverging interests as to what the common goals of the movement are[161]. As the next section will illustrate, ideational and strategic differences did exist, but - for a time - those divergences remained subdued.

[158] Perlmutter, Amos. "The Praetorian State and the Praetorian Army - Towards a Taxonomy of Civil-Military Relations in Developing Polities", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1969, p. 389.

[159] Lund Aron. "Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions", *Uppsala: Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, Olof Palme International Center, 2012, p. 38.

[160] Mapping Militant Organisations, Stanford University, time-span: January 2011 - June 2012. These included the *Free Syrian Army*, *Liwa al-Islam*, *Suquor al-Sham*, *Harakat Nor al-Din al-Zinki*, *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham*, all of whom possessed their own leaderships, their own distinct organisational structures and all made demands on part of the wider revolution. Note that the organisations are not yet embedded in formal alliances or engage in splits or mergers as will be illustrated in the following phases.

[161] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 268.

The rise of the Free Syrian Army

As the level of violence employed by the Syrian state escalated rapidly during the spring and summer of 2011, the opposition to the Assad regime became increasingly militarised. The formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011 marked an attempt to form an organisational body that possessed the ability to effectively coordinate the armed struggle across the dispersed, but rapidly proliferating pockets of resistance[162]. During this formative phase of the rebellion, the FSA succeeded in absorbing the increasing amount of defecting soldiers and officers who resisted carrying out the orders of the Syrian regime[163]. By March 2012, most of the 60,000 army defectors had joined the newly formed organisation under the command of Col. Riad al-Assad[164] who - along with a range of other high-ranking defectors from the Syrian Army and intelligence branches - attempted to coordinate the armed struggle from an airbase in southern Turkey[165].

According to Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour, the adverse consequences of fragmentation can be counterbalanced by the existence of a hegemonic organisation within the confines of the rebel movement[166]. In order to estimate how power is distributed among its organisations, it is necessary to take both material factors - manpower, funds and arms - as well as non-material factors, including sense of legitimacy, popular support and leadership, into account. And in the early days of the conflict, the FSA was indeed an exponentially growing organisation. Self-established units and brigades emerged throughout the country, enlisting under the banner of the rebel "army". While never explicitly secularist - many of the locally formed civilian militias within the organisation had Islamist leanings[167] - the green, white and black 'Istiqlal' flag of pre-Baathist Syria symbolised the nationalist aspirations of the Free Syrian Army. As local units and self-established brigades - so-called *katibas* - spontaneously formed all over Syria, the leading commanders would typically announce their allegiance to the FSA, even though they rarely had any form of relationship to its exiled leadership[168].

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[162] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 83.

[163] Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army - A Decentralised Insurgent Brand", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2015, p. 5.

[164] Not related to the ruling Assad clan.

[165] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 2.

[166] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 271.

[167] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. 129.

[168] Lund, Aron. "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front", *UI Occasional Papers*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, vol. 17, 2013, p. 11.

Simultaneously with the ascension of the FSA, five smaller organisations - Liwa al-Islam[169], Suquor al-Sham[170], Ahrar al-Sham[171], Harakat Nor al-Din al-Zinki[172] and Jabhat al-Nusra[173] - were formed[174]. Lacking the recruitment capabilities, popular legitimacy and external ties of the FSA, these organisations of varying degrees of more overt political Islamist, Salafist and Jihadist leanings generally kept a low profile. Usurping the popular rhetorics of the uprising, the sprouting cell-based organisations ostensibly supported the FSA and accepted its tactical and strategic leadership in coordinating offensives throughout the country. Even Jabhat al-Nusra - al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate - accepted its subordinate role during a string of FSA-coordinated raids on army checkpoints in Damascus during the spring of 2012[175].

Indeed, for a time, the FSA appears to have possessed the required power - in material, ideational *and* relational sense - to function as a nearly hegemonic anchor within the numerically fragmented movement. While the FSA undoubtedly suffered from crippling structural deficiencies that would soon undermine it, the organisation did succeed in established itself as a popular, revolutionary firebrand[176]. Under its leadership, the rebel movement succeeded in capturing a number of rural regime bases during the spring of 2012, markedly expanding the territory under its control and increasing the amount of weaponry available to extend the rebel offensives to urban population centres such as Aleppo in north-western Syria and the Damascene suburbs[177]. However, the advance into the densely populated Syrian cities during the summer of 2012 would expose the structural deficiencies of the rebel organisation.

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[169] A Salafist organisation emanating from the suburbs east of Damascus. Lisa al-Islam would later become somewhat of a rebel powerhouse. See Phase II and III.

[170] Originally an Idlib-based political Islamist organisation with close ties to the Free Syrian Army, which would later merge into the Salafist organisation Ahrar al-Sham.

[171] Ahrar al-Sham is a Salafist organisation which - to this day - is strongly embedded in north-western Syria.

[172] An Aleppo-based Salafist organisation, which throughout the conflict has displayed an erratically opportunistic behaviour. At one point on the receiving end of U.S.-supplied arms, the organisation rose to notoriety when its commanders beheaded a Palestinian child on the back of a pick-up truck. As per January 2017, the organisation merged into Jabhat al-Nusra's newest incarnation, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

[173] Until July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra was the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

[174] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 61.

[175] Ibid., p. 73. Western journalists also reported to have witnessed Jabhat al-Nusra and FSA sharing bomb-making facilities in Idlib and Deir ez-Zour provinces. *"We meet almost every day,"* a Jabhat al-Nusra commander told a reporter; *"We have clear instructions from our [al-Qaida] leadership that if the FSA need our help we should give it. We help them with IEDs and car bombs. Our main talent is in the bombing operations"*. See: Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "Al-Qaida turns tide for rebels in battle for eastern Syria." *The Guardian*, 30 July 2012.

[176] For an illustrative compilation of screenshots taken from videos announcing the establishment of various FSA-brigades using the organisations' logotype and flag, see: *The original Free Syrian Army groups of 2011 & early 2012, their commanders, and what became of them.* Available at: http://imgur.com/a/kgQfo. Commenting on its ability to forge at least some degree of intra-movement cohesion, a defected officer described the FSA as a *"vision that was institutionalised in 2012. Everyone who believed in the revolution, believed in the FSA as a force to protect and to further the revolution's cause"*. See: Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army - A Decentralised Insurgent Brand", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2015, p. 5.

[177] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. 127-128.

Failing to build a functioning institutional framework:

While the rebel movement was numerically fragmented from the onset, the FSA wielded enough influence over the other organisations to give off a veneer of coherence during the first phase of the war. The lacking component to achieving durable intra-movement unity, however, was a functional institutional framework. Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour note that building institutional links between the organisations within a movement is necessary to outline cross-organisational rules, cultivate shared norms that regulate and constrain the armed actors on the ground and build effective and legitimate political structures[178]. Well aware of the need to lead and shape events on the ground rather than just reacting to them, the rebel movement - including activists within the country and exiled politicians outside it - attempted to build a framework through which cooperation could be cultivated and organised.

As the FSA was formed, dozens of so-called Local Coordination Committees (LCC's) sprung up all over Syria. These informal networks of activists and rebels sought to create local bodies of governance as the regime's power contracted while attempting to coordinate and streamline how the opposition movement communicated to the regional and global audiences[179]. Internally, however, the LCCs lacked strategic coordination. While some local councils were able to coordinate effectively with each other, successfully negotiating with the regime on matters such as electricity distribution and water provision to civilians, others became tools of power for local clans and emerging warlords ostensibly operating under the FSA banner[180]. Often riddled with corruption and engaging in conflicts between families from adjacent rural towns, the LCCs lacked the legitimacy as well as the funds to fill the governmental vacuum left behind by the contracting state[181]. Again, the intensely parochial and self-preserving manner in which many of the LCCs - and the FSA figures nested within the councils - operated during the first phase of the conflict seemed to mirror the praetorian nature of the Syrian state itself with its paranoid fusion of civilian and military authority aimed securing its own survival at any cost.

As the complex web of informal administrative functions and rudimentary governmental institutions continued to expand, the need to centralise local authority became increasingly apparent.

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[178] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 229.

[179] Hokayem, Emile. *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013, p. 69.

[180] Khoury, Doreen. *"Losing the Syrian Grassroots"*, *SWP Comments - Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politiks*, German Institut for International and Security Affairs, 2013, p. 5. In early 2012, a Syrian activist in exile described the local networks as being intensely parochial; *"they now have their own power struggles and local agendas. The idea of unity, a national network, and a theoretically well-grounded plan is not inherently attractive to them".* See: International Crisis Group. "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base", *International Crisis Group, Report No. 174*, 2 February 2017, p. 9.

[181] Abouzeid, Rania. "A Dispatch from 'Free' Syria: How to Run a Liberated Town." *Time Magazine*, 24 July 2012.

Earlier - in the fall of 2011 -, the Syrian National Council (SNC) had been established in Turkey under heavy Qatari influence. The political opposition body consisted of exiled Syrian secularists - most of them dissidents rather than politicians - and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamists, many of whom had been living outside Syria since Hafez al-Assad's crackdown in 1982[182]. While the SNC initially opposed foreign intervention, the opposition body - inspired by the fall of Moammar Gaddafi in Libya, in which Qatar played a significant role - began agitating for Western intervention while attempting to lay the groundwork for a future political transition process[183]. In March 2012, the FSA and the SNC agreed to formally join forces, thus transforming the armed organisation into the official armed wing of Syria's government-in-exile. Donations and weapons were supposed flow through this framework in order to ensure that money and material ended up in the right hands[184].

In theory, the attempt to establish a revolutionary triad by merging the military dimension of the Free Syrian Army with local governance networks of the LCC's and the national-political decision-making structure of the SNC made sense. As Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour note, a highly institutionalised movement will develop state-like features that constrain the actors within it through enforceable rules and functional structures of governance[185]. Furthermore, establishing an overarching political structure not only carries a practical function in centralising local governance and assisting in coordinating the armed struggle; it can also imbue the rebel organisation(-s) doing the actual fighting with an air of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community[186]. In practice, however, shaping an exiled opposition body with enough legitimacy to exercise political authority inside war-torn Syria while catering to the international community proved to be a virtually impossible undertaking.

One of the main reasons why the attempt to truly institutionalise the struggle failed during Phase I was the existence of an insurmountable credibility gap between the armed actors and the exiled political figures[187]. Often referred to as the *"five-star hotel opposition"* by the rebels on the ground, the SNC found itself in a precarious position as the increasingly autonomous and ideologically disparate FSA-factions would only give the diaspora-dominated opposition body a very limited

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[182] International Crisis Groups. "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition", *Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 146*, 17 October 2013, p. 11.

[183] Abboud, Samer N.: "Conflict, Governance and Decentralised Authority in Syria", in Beck et al. *The Levant in Turmoil*, Palsgrave, 2016, p. 59.

[184] Lund Aron. "Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions", *Uppsala: Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, Olof Palme International Center, 2010, p. 61.

[185] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 269.

[186] Schlichte, Klaus & Schneckener, Ulrich. "Armed Groups and the Politics of Legitimacy", *Civil Wars,* vol. 17, no. 4, 2015, p. 421.

[187] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. 106.

mandate. An FSA commander in Homs said: *"We organise inside and serve the revolution here. We look to the SNC to work outside on condition that it acts according to to the work done inside. The SNC does not have carte blanche to act"*[188].

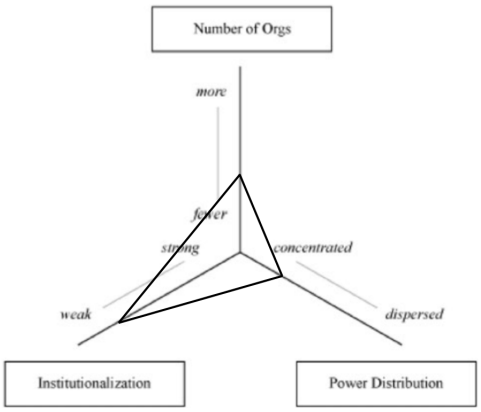
Meanwhile, the international backers of the SNC - especially its Western supporters - demanded that it had to present a *"coherent unified vision of the Syria they want of the future"*[189]. This balancing-act proved impossible to perform as the exiled SNC-members did not possess the required leverage to influence the internal politics of the essentially rudderless rebel movement. Meanwhile, inside the rebel-held areas, the conflict continued to escalate, setting off volatile dynamics that would soon cripple the legitimacy of the SNC and sideline the FSA as the amount of independent rebel organisations began to proliferate rapidly.

Mapping fragmentation in Phase I:

While numerically fragmented from the conflict's onset, the Free Syrian Army wielded significant influence over the other armed actors on the ground. However, while it succeeded in recruiting thousands of army defectors, enjoyed tactical and strategic leadership, winning popular legitimacy and becoming a globally known symbol of resistance against the Assad regime, its efforts ultimately due to the abject failure to form an institutional framework of the required strength to forge and uphold intra-movement cohesion.

Figure 2: Fragmentation in Phase I

Number of organisations: 6
Power distribution: Hegemonic - concentrated around the Free Syrian Army
Institutionalisation: Weak - deeply dysfunctional politico-military framework



Phase II: July '12 – July '14: Disequilibrium

Phase II saw a rapid proliferation of armed groups that either formed autonomously or splintered off from the FSA structure, thus challenging its position as the hegemonic anchor of the rebel

[188] International Crisis Groups. "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition", *Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 146*, 17 October 2013, p. 10.

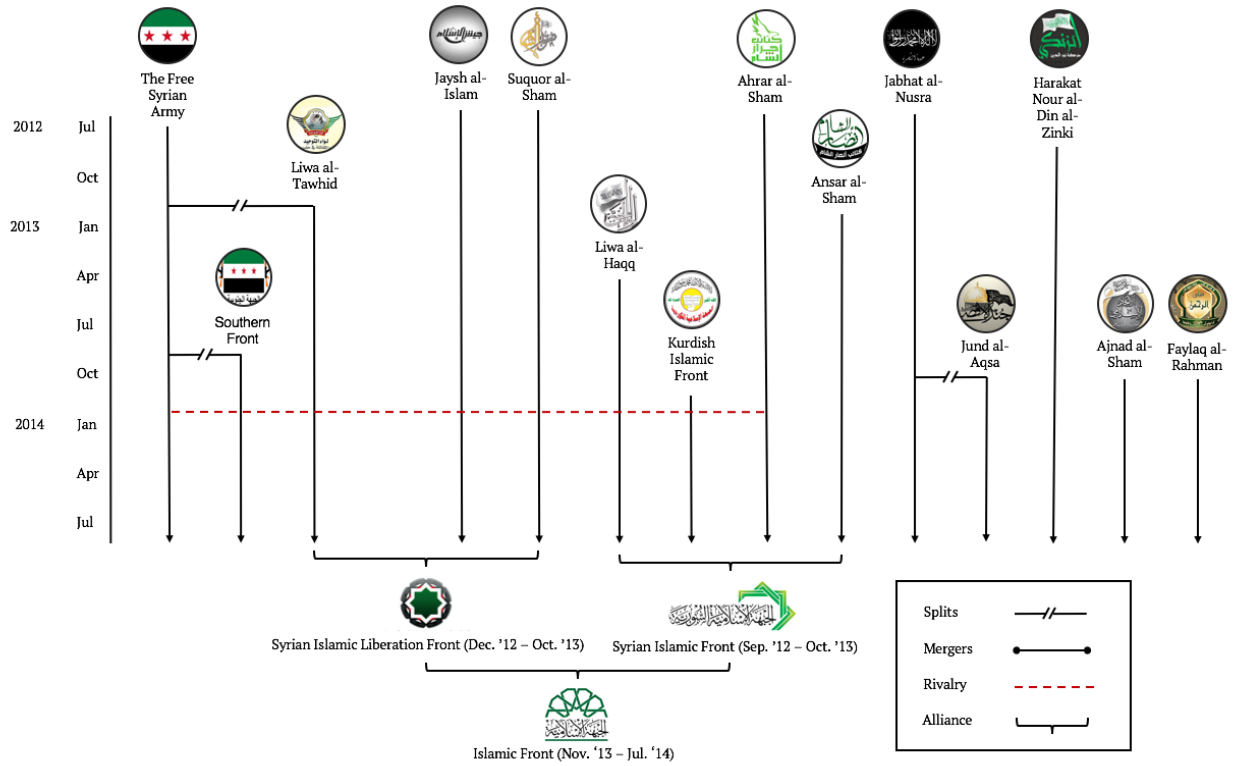
[189] As stated by a U.K. Foreign Office spokesperson. See: Oweis, Khaled Yacoub. "Eleven killed in Syria on eve of Arab deadline." *Reuters*, 18 November 2011.

movement. As the internal balance of power began to shift, isolated skirmishes broke out between FSA remnants and rising powers vying for control over the profitable crossings along the Turkish-Syrian border. In the vacuum left behind by the crumbling FSA framework, new, intra-movement coalitions were established, that - despite grande ambitions - failed to evolve into strong institutional structures capable of unifying the movement.

Proliferation:

When consulting the Stanford dataset, a noticeable increase in the number of autonomous rebel organisations can be observed from the summer of 2012 and onwards. What set off this rapid proliferation?

Illustration 2: Organisational overview, Phase II. *Source: Stanford University; Mapping Militant Organisations*



The following analysis of Phase II identifies at least two highly influential factors; the gradual collapse of the FSA as a centralised organisation and a changing patterns in financial and military aid provided to the rebel movement by patron states in the region.

First of all, the enlargement of territory under rebel control strained the FSA's already weak command and control structures. As more and more villages, towns and large swaths of rural land fell to FSA forces, it became increasingly difficult to exercise tactical control over the individual units and their operations. Many of the local brigades suffered from poor military discipline as large

numbers of untrained civilians from the newly-captured territories were enrolled into the FSA structure. Looting was widespread and extensive; kidnapping of suspected regime collaborators became a source of income and violence against civilians in the rebel held areas was used excessively[190]. The growing tendency towards criminality and warlordism severely tarnished the reputation of the FSA and gradually chipped away its popular legitimacy as the underlying, structural deficiencies of the wider organisation were exposed. The lacking capacity to effectively manage its units on the ground made room for sub-factions within the FSA to break out of the dysfunctional command structure, thus establishing themselves as independent organisations.

The formation of Liwa al-Tawhid in July 2012 provides an illustrative example of the organisational disarray within the FSA ranks. Formed by FSA sub-factions in Aleppo's northern countryside, Liwa al-Tawhid launched an offensive in Aleppo without coordinating with the FSA leadership in Turkey[191]. Until the summer of 2012, the large, north-western metropolis had remained largely untouched by the sweeping insurgency. Militarily, the offensive was initially successful. By effectively splitting the city into two parts, the rebels now controlled the poorer Eastern of the city, while the regime's army consolidated its control over the more wealthy Western part. But politically, the campaign to seize Aleppo proved extremely damaging as it exposed limits of the FSA leadership's ability to control the factions ostensibly operating under its authority. Liwa al-Tawhid's campaign to capture the strategically vital city had been commenced without its consent and as a consequence of the lacking coordination and preparation of the offensive, chaos, widespread looting and resource shortages spread throughout the densely populated rebel-held areas of Aleppo[192]. In an attempt to consolidate rebel control, Liwa al-Tawhid publicly welcomed help from their "brothers" in Jabhat al-Nusra, thus undermining the official policy of the FSA not to cooperate with the emerging Jihadist organisation[193] [194]. Liwa al-Tawhid's autonomous behaviour

[190] Whitson, Sarah Leah. "Open Letter to the Leaders of the Syrian Opposition Regarding Human Rights Abuses by Armed Opposition Members." *Human Rights Watch*, 20 March 2012. As Analysis II will explore in further detail, weak discipline often ails poorly organised rebel organisations that lack the structural capacity to excerpt control locally

[191] Hokayem, Emile. *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013, p. 90.

[192] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. 128.

[193] International Crisis Group. "Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War", *Crisis Group Middle East Report N°155*, 9 September 2014, p. 20. *"If he U.S. wants us to stop cooperating with Jabhat al-Nusra"*, a Liwa al-Tawhid official said, *"then give us an alternative! We have no choice but to cooperate with them for tactical reasons".*

[194] Note that the informal alliance between Liwa al-Tawhid and Jabhat al-Nusra in Aleppo is not included in the organisational overview of Phase II. Like Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour's definition of what constitutes measurable institutionalisation, the Stanford University dataset only includes formally established collaborative frameworks. See also: *Chapter IX: Discussion - Limitations of the study*.

became an omen for things to come for the FSA as sub-factions began to break off from the overarching command structure, seeking new partners on the ground[195].

Secondly, the increasing interference by the regional stakeholders exacerbated the rapid proliferation of organisations. Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour highlight that external support to a rebel movement can serve to unify it as well as splinter it[196]. And paradoxically, in Syria, the involvement of regional state actors has produced both effects. The politico-military framework established by the rebel movement's external state backers to coordinate the struggle against the Assad regime simultaneously became a venue of regional competition between Turkey, Qatar and Saudi-Arabia. As the inherent weakness and incapacity of the SNC to unify the proliferating number of organisations on the ground became apparent, Arab and Western leaders gradually withdrew their support to the organisation[197]. In November 2012, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the Coalition) was formally established, thus absorbing parts of the old, dysfunctional opposition body. This new politico-institutional framework sought to close the gap between the armed actors and activist networks on the ground and the exiled assembly members working the corridors of power in Istanbul, Riyadh and Doha[198].

Simultaneously with the creation of the Coalition, the upper echelons of the rebel command structure were also overhauled in an attempt to accommodate the new intra-rebel balance of power. The Supreme Military Council (SMC)[199] - a coordinating body tasked with centralising command over the increasingly disparate FSA-affiliated factions and independent non-jihadist Islamist organisations — sought to regain control over the flow of military supplies and funds from the regional powers and rebel movement's Western state backers[200]. In return for being on its payroll, the SMC-linked organisations were expected to obey the orders of the SMC-leadership and recognise the political legitimacy of the Coalition. With the SMC structure in place, large amounts of

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[195] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 96. The FSA factions' pragmatic relationship to the rising powers within the movement was described by a local FSA commander when asked about how it sought to overcome the ideological intra-movement divide between the nationalist "moderates" and the jihadist factions: *"We had only one objective back then: topple the regime. That was all that mattered. As long as they [the jihadists] wanted the same, then they were with us. They were brave and committed fighters and we needed that".* See: Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 98.

[196] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 270.

[197] Hillary Clinton characterised the SNC as which consisted of members, despite *"good attributes, have, in many instances, not been inside Syria for 20, 30, or 40 years".* Quinn, Andrew. "Clinton calls for overhaul of Syrian opposition." *Reuters*, 31 October 2012.

[198] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. 115. The newly appointed president of the Coalition, Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, visited rebel-held parts of Syria in an attempt to build the grass-roots legitimacy that the SNC had been severely lacking, even offering to *'sit down directly with representatives of the Syrian regime in Cairo, Tunis or Istanbul'*. The president's invitation to negotiate with the Assad regime prompted strong reactions among the old, Qatari-aligned, Muslim Brotherhood affiliated SNC members, who turned on Khatibi and ousted him after just 5 months after the formation of the Coalition. The last window of opportunity for a peaceful settlement had effectively closed.

[199] The SMC is not illustrated on the Stanford University map.

[200] Lund, Aron. "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center - CTC Sentinel*, 27 August 2013, p. 24.

weapons from Libyan stockpiles began flowing into Syria via Turkey[201]. Once in Turkey, the arms shipments went through Turkish and Qatari intelligence officers to a range of coordinating commanders linked to the SMC before being distributed among the SMC-aligned organisations[202]. However, not only were the arms shipments and financial contributions often earmarked to specific groups by the respective donor states in the region[203]; many organisations simultaneously continued to receive foreign state funding through backchannels while ostensibly supporting the the new politico-military institutional framework. Particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar kept funnelling money and weapons to select organisations[204] while cultivating inter-rebel alliances of their own that began forming inside the SMC-framework[205].

As mentioned, external support may create stronger incentives for inter-rebel unity by providing the movement with the institutional framework for cooperation and coordination that non-state actors have difficulty building themselves; meanwhile, external sponsorship also tends to introduce exogenous interests into the dispute, exacerbating dormant competitive dynamics between the organisations within the rebel movement[206]. Consequently, the SMC became a venue for inter-regional competition between state patrons who sought to strengthen their own preferred organisations and forge micro-alliances within the SMC structure. Fearing the potential blowback of Qatar's scattergun-funding of secularists, Islamists, Salafists and Jihadists alike[207], Saudi Arabia sought to increase its influence within the SMC in order to once again tip the balance in favour of the crumbling FSA[208]. For instance, the Saudi authorities urged clerics in the country's mosques to

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[201] The intricacies of the distribution network remain cloudy at best, although it has been established that Qatar funded large parts of the weapons purchases and that Qatari C-17 aircraft made hundreds of round trips between Libya and Turkey from late 2012 through 2013. See: Chivers, Schmitt & Mazzetti. "In Turnabout, Syria Rebels Get Libyan Weapons.", *The New York Times*, 21 June 2013.

[202] *"Any fighting group in Syria that wants weapons from Libya will go to the staff asking for the approval from the Turkish authorities involved in the transfer, then gets it, the weapons arrive in Syria, and everyone gets his due share,"* a SMC-commander told The New York Times in the spring of 2013. See: Chivers, Schmitt & Mazzetti. "In Turnabout, Syria Rebels Get Libyan Weapons.", *The New York Times*, 21 June 2013.

[203] SANA Dispatches. "Syria's Armed Opposition: A Spotlight at the 'Moderates'", Se*curity Assessment in North Africa - Small Arms Survey Genev*a, 2016, p. 4.

[204] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 125.

[205] Lund, Aron. "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center - CTC Sentinel*, 27 August 2013, p. 25. The most significant intra-SMC alliances was the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front which would later break out of its parent structure.

[206] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "E pluribus unum, ex uno plures: Competition, violence and fragmentation in ethnopolitical movements", *Journal of Peace Research,* vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, p. 6.

[207] Whether - and if so, to which extent - Qatar has directly funded or allowed private Qataris to fundraise money for Jihadist organisations is unclear. However, in December 2012, Qatar's foreign minister stated that *"I am very much against excluding anyone at this stage, or bracketing them as terrorists, or bracketing them as al-Qaeda… We should work on them to change their ideology"*. See: Dickinson, Elizabeth. "Qatar backs UN General Assembly push for Syria intervention." *The National*, 10 December 2012.

[208] Among several things, the Qatari-Saudi rivalry revolves around Qatar's strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood in both Egypt and Syria. Saudi Arabia's choice to give refuge to high-ranking Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who fled Gamal Abdel Nasser's purge of the organisation in the 1960's, is widely attributed with injecting political activism into the Saudi Arabia's highly conservative but otherwise non-politicised Wahhabist community. The intellectual cross-pollination between the Muslim Brotherhood's revolutionary agenda and Wahhabism's strict religious doctrine would give birth to the Salafi-Jihadist movement, which - since the armed take-over of the Grand Mosque in Mecca 1979 - has sought to topple the al-Saud dynasty. See for instance: Kepel, Gilles. *The War for Muslim Minds*, Belknap Press, 2004.

refrain from raising funds to rebel organisations in an attempt to centralise the influx of finances to the Syrian rebel movement[209]. Meanwhile, Qatar increasingly outsourced its fundraising measures to an expanding pool of middlemen[210], thus directly counteracting the Saudi attempt to strengthen the SMC and, consequently, exacerbating the proliferation of organisations operating on the battlefield[211]. As a result, the inter-regional rivalry undermined the coordinating body's legitimacy and its attempt to cultivate the institutional ties and cross-organisational interdependency that Akcinaroglu as well as Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour argue is essential for a numerically fragmented rebel movement to possess if it is to maintain a relatively high degree of internal coherence and optimise resource and information sharing[212].

Indeed, this model of raising resources from either regional patron states or from wealthy private donors in the Gulf became the standard during the second phase of the civil war. Whether or not regional state actors such as Qatar deliberately sought to set off the numerical fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement as part of a wider strategy or if it was an incidental side effect of inter-regional competition over the trajectory of the insurgency is difficult to assess. As for the potential strategic rationale behind forcing organisational proliferation, Akcinaroglu argues that the existence of multiple organisations allows a rebel movement spread out its relative capabilities, thus gradually depleting the government's forces by imposing a grinding war of attrition[213]. Consequently, it also becomes significantly harder for the government's forces to eliminate individual organisations, target their leadership ranks and disrupt their distribution networks. What is knowns is that the rapid proliferation of organisations coincided with significant territorial gains during a string of successful rebel offensives in the latter part of 2012 and early 2013[214].

Inter-rebel multipolarity:

The splintering of the FSA was a symptom of its degradation from a centralised organisation with a capacity to coordinate combat operations across Syria to a rather arbitrary franchise whose revo-

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[209] Al-Akhbar Media: "Saudi religious authority forbids 'jihad' in Syria", *Al-Akhbar*, 7 June 2012.

[210] Dickinson, Elizabeth. "The Case against Qatar." *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2014.

[211] The leader of a spontaneously-formed Aleppean faction told a reporter in early 2013: *'A very good man, a seeker of good deeds - he is from our town but he lives in the Gulf - told me he would fund my new battalion. He says he will pay for our ammunition and we get to keep all the spoils of the fighting. We just have to supply him with videos'.* See: Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)." *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2013. An exiled Syrian financier based in the Gulf described the loyalty of the local commanders as being solely dependent on source of income. *"The number of fighters each commander can summon wax and wane with his ability to arm and pay them and there families, so there is no particular leader with enough clout to bring the brigades together. All the other money comes from multiple sources and multiple channels. You can only unify these units with a unified sources of money."* See Borger, Julian. *"Syria crisis: West loses faith in SNC to unite opposition groups", The Guardian*, 14 August 2012.

[212] Akcinaroglu, Seden. "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes", Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 56, no. 5, 2012, p. 900.

[213] Ibid., p. 886. Similarly, studies on separatist conflicts have shown that *"internally divided movements are more likely to get concessions from their host states".* See Cunningham, Kathleen G. "Divide and Conquer or Divide and Concede: How Do States Respond to Internally Divided Separatists?" *American Political Science Review*, vol. 105, no. 2, p. 276.

[214] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 83.

lutionary iconography continued lived on as the organisational structure gradually came apart. As the battle against the Syrian regime intensified and expanded to larger cities such as Aleppo and Damascus, windows of opportunity opened for overtly Islamist organisations who, as an FSA commander in Hama stated, *"took advantage of the FSA's lacking ability to control territory effectively"*[215]. The Aleppo campaign had illustrated the FSA's failure to establish political authority and build local structures of governance in the rebel-held areas; this weakness would soon be exploited by superiorly structured and highly disciplined Islamist organisations.

The rise of Liwa al-Islam in the rebel-held enclave of eastern Ghouta - a poor, Sunni-dominated suburban area east of Damascus - incapsulates many of the dynamics at play during the second phase of the conflict. Before Liwa al-Islam's ascendance, the rebel-held enclave had been dominated by poorly organised, opportunistic FSA-factions who, according to a Syrian researcher, *"had no strategy and no vision; they were just fighting to be powerful"*[216]. Under the leadership of Zahran Alloush - a businessman and missionary from a prominent family of Salafi clerics - Liwa al-Islam grew rapidly during 2012 by drawing on pre-existing religious networks of local mosques, shura councils[217] and charities. An imposing and charismatic character, Alloush succeeded in centralising the executive power of the organisation around himself and his closest family members who had close ties to financiers in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait[218]. The combination of being able to draw on a pre-existing organisational structure, enjoying strong ties to the Gulf and possessing a clear religious-ideological identity was a potent mix. During 2013, Liwa al-Islam consolidated its position as Ghouta's hegemonic anchor as it succeeded in gradually sidelining and absorbing the lesser-organised groups in the enclave, thus creating a powerful center of gravity that would be known as Jaysh al-Islam[219].

Simultaneously, in the north-western Syria, two other organisations would absorb and usurp the crumbling FSA-factions; Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. Both organisations successfully integrated themselves into the rebel landscape during the second phase of the conflict as they transformed into competing and yet closely interconnected centres of gravity around which other organisations within the rebel movement would cluster throughout the rest of the conflict. Ahrar al-Sham - not unlike Jaysh al-Islam a nationally oriented Salafist organisation - had grown from rela-

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[215] Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army - A Decentralised Insurgent Brand", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2015, p. 9.

[216] Lund, Aron. "Into the Tunnels - The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Easter Ghouta" *The Century Foundation*, 21 December 2016, p. 13.

[217] Consultative religious councils led by scholars and clerics.

[218] Lund, Aron. "Into the Tunnels - The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Easter Ghouta" *The Century Foundation*, 21 December 2016, p. 13.

[219] Reuters. "INSIGHT-Saudi Arabia boosts Salafist rivals to al Qaeda in Syria." *Reuters*, 1 October 2013. *"We have formed this army"*, Alloush told the reporter, *"to achieve unity among the units of the mujahideen and avoid the effects produced by the divisions within the National Coalition".*

tive obscurity during the early days of the insurgency to a powerful local actor with very close ties to Turkey and Qatar[220]. During the beginning of Phase II, it had headed the formation of the Syrian Islamic Front - an alliance consisting of Salafist organisations that had remained outside the SMC-framework. Similarly, Jabhat al-Nusra had successfully integrated itself into the rebellion and had gradually become a reliable partner for most rebel organisations within the movement despite of its ties to al-Qaeda's international leadership[221].

According to Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour, a multipolar inter-rebel configuration is does not necessarily involve a heightened risk of infighting if there institutional links through which power and responsibilities can duly delegated[222]. Similarly, Akcinaroglu point out that the existence of multiple strong rebel organisations can be an advantage if their internal affiliations remain positive[223]. And indeed, despite the proliferating number of organisations and the emergence of powerful actors that circumvented the initial hegemony of the FSA, infighting rarely occurred during the second phase of the conflict. The capacity of these new super-groups to build functional alliances outside the dysfunctional SNC-FSA framework would soon be illustrated.

Ad-hoc alliance-building, part 1:

On November 22, 2013, seven of Syria's most powerful rebel organisations - including Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham - announced the formation of the Islamic Front. With up to 70.000 men under its control, the new Islamist alliance would become Syria's undoubtedly most powerful insurgent bloc[224]. At the time of the the Islamic Front's formation, it had become obvious that the Coalition and FSA-SMC-structure - much like the framework established during the conflict's first phase - simply wasn't able to forge internal coherence within the rebel movement. The nail that sealed the coffin was the reluctance of Western powers to intervene directly in Syria following the August 2013 sarin-attack in Ghouta. The perceived failure of the rebel movement's political extensions to muster international support for launching retaliatory strikes against the Assad regime irreparably damaged the credibility of the Coalition and the Western and Saudi-backed SMC among the rebel organisations on the ground[225]. Consequently, the most powerful organisations -

[220] According to a leaked document from the German Bundestag, Ahrar al-Sham are partially armed and funded by Ankara. See for instance: Flade, Florian & Müller, Uwe. "Gab die Linke der PKK geheime Regierungsdokumente?", *Die Welt*, 4 October 2015.

[221] The increasingly prominent role of Jabhat al-Nusra will be explored in further detail in the analysis of Phase III and IV.

[222] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 271.

[223] Akcinaroglu, Seden. "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes", Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 56, no. 5, 2012, p. 880.

[224] Lund, Aron. "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1: Structure and Support." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 14 January 2014.

[225] Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army - A Decentralised Insurgent Brand", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2015, p. 12.

with Qatari and Turkish backing - denounced the Coalition and broke out the SMC, thus attempting to build a functional alliance of their own[226].

Indicative of the reconfiguration of the rebel movement's internal balance of power, a SMC-owned arms depot and command center in the Turkish-Syrian border town Bab al-Hawa was looted by forces affiliated with the Islamic Front in December 2013[227].

Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour point out that coalition-building between organisations sometimes result in complete amalgamation of the old organisational structures[228]. Similarly, the motivation behind the creation the Islamic Front was that the alliance would gradually evolve into a single, centralised organisation aimed at establishing a theocratic rule; *"It is a political, military, social and independent formation that aims at fully toppling the Assad regime in Syria and at building a Righteous Islamic State where sovereignty is for Allah alone..."*, an Islamic Front spokesman stated, "*We call on our brethren in the remaining factions to be our partner in this great project"*[229]. However, despite the grande ambitions, the amalgamation never materialised. Rather, the Islamic Front remained a relatively weakly structured alliance, which proved unable to bridge the gap between the two dominant organisations within it; the Turkish and Qatari-backed Ahrar al-Sham and the Saudi-backed Jaysh al-Islam. Identifying the direct causes of the alliance's eventual collapse is difficult. However, the existence of two centres of gravity - each with different sources of funding - within one alliance is likely to have complicated the amalgamation[230].

Mapping fragmentation in Phase II:

Due to FSA's overreach and shifting funding patterns to organisations - some of who were outside the internationally established politico-military framework - set off an explosive proliferation of rebel organisations. The emergence and growth of new, powerful actors uprooted the FSA's hegemonic status, ushering in a period of multipolarity. While intra-rebel relations remained relatively

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[226] Bakr, Amena. "Defying allies, Qatar unlikely to abandon favored Syria rebels", *Reuters*, 20 March 2014.

[227] The exact chain of events remain unclear. What is known is that the local FSA-faction, which had been bestowed with the responsibility for guarding the precious facility, believed it was facing an imminent attack by an unknown group. Consequently, the SMC chief of staff requested the help of local Islamic Front fighters from Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam to assist with securing the arms depot as the FSA presence in the area was sparse. According to the Islamic Front, their fighters found the warehouse - full of U.S. and Saudi-supplied weapons - abandoned, while SMC-spokesmen claimed that the Islamic Front fighters had seized the compound by force. Whatever happened, the Islamic Front raised its flag over the compound, effectively assuming control of the lucrative and strategically important border crossing to Turkey. SMC had lost control of its most import asset in north-western Syria, irreparably damaging its already tarnished image. Two days after the event, the United States and Britain suspended all support to the SMC. See: Lund, Aron. "Showdown at Bab al-Hawa." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 12 December 2013.; Afanasieva, Dasha & Pamuk, Humeyra: "U.S., Britain suspend aid to north Syria after Islamists seize weapons store", *Reuters*, 11 December 2013.

[228] See the example of Front de Libération Nationale in Algeria, *Chapter V: Conceptual Framework*.

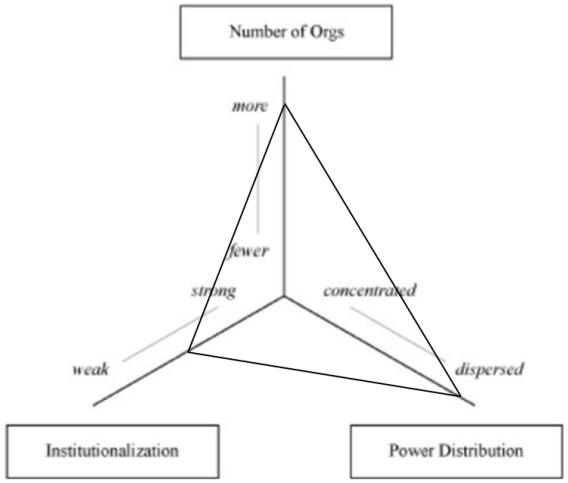
[229] Lund, Aron. "Say Hello to the Islamic Front." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 22 November 2013. See also: *The Islamic Front: Largest Rebel Group Merger Aims at Establishing Islamic State in Syria*, Youtube, published 23 November 2013.

[230] As will be illustrated in the analysis of Phase VI, the chances of successful amalgamation seems higher if smaller organisations can coalesce around one larger organisation.

amicable during Phase II, the rising powers were unable to form credible and durable alliances resulting in a relatively weak degree of institutionalisation within the movement.

Figure 3: Fragmentation in Phase II

Number of organisations: 15
Power distribution: Multipolar - dispersed between Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. FSA gradually devolves.
Institutionalisation: Relatively weak - alliances and collaborative frameworks are established outside the official framework.



Phase III: August 2014 – December 2016: Consolidation

Phase III of the conflict began with new-found unity among the rebel organisations as they profited from the creation of a new, strong alliance built around the twin-dominant organisations of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. However, as the conflict increasing became internationalised and external actors raised the stakes inside Syria, the collaboration between the organisations would also become strained, manifesting itself as wide-spread intra-movement infighting among ostensibly allied organisations.

The movement contracts:

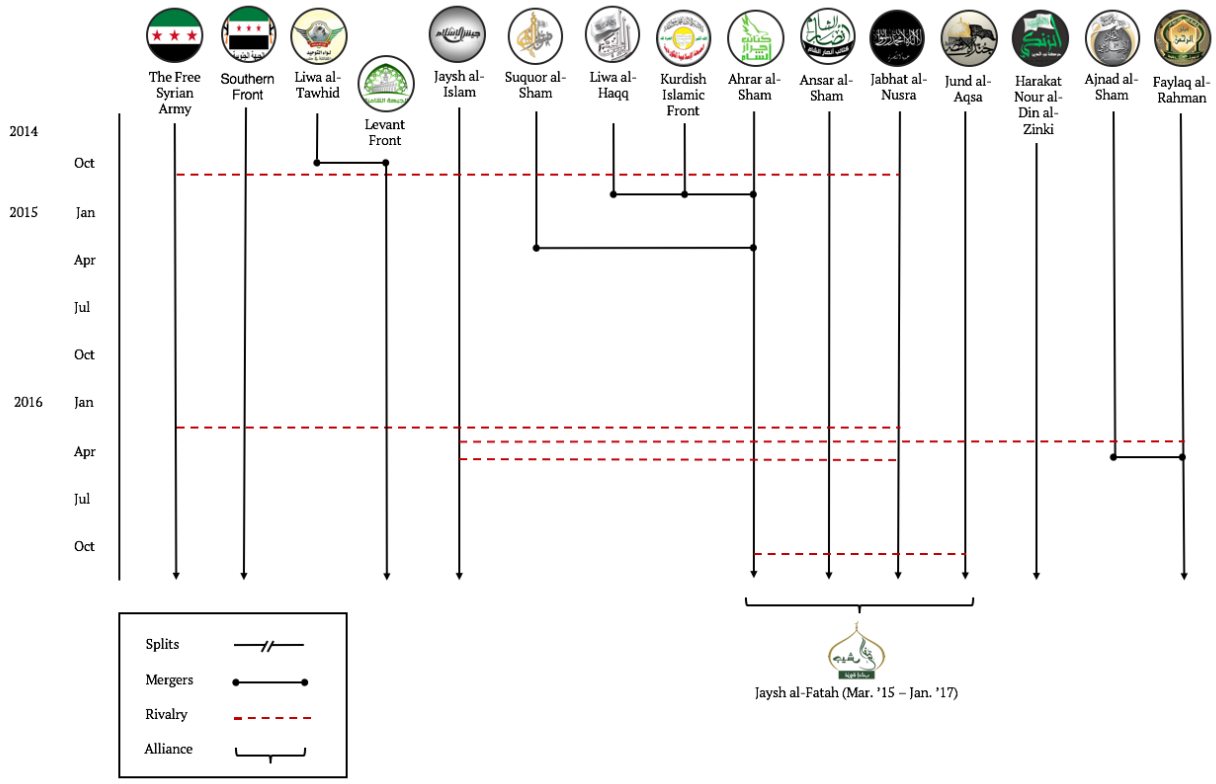
The first half of Phase III was marked by a long range of battlefield successes for the rebel movement as the forces of the Syrian government became increasingly thinly stretched across the many fronts of the war[231]. Simultaneously, new winds were blowing inside the rebel movement. On the 22nd of March 2015, Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham - two of Syria's largest and most well-established organisations - announced a complete merger of their forces[232]. Calling on all factions in Syria to unify their ranks, the announcement of the unification marked the latest in a series of mergers; during the fall of 2014, Ahrar al-Sham had absorbed Liwa al-Haqq and the Kurdish Islamic Front, both of whom - like the newly-absorbed Suqour al-Sham - had been part of the now de-

[231] The swift territorial expansion of ISIS contributed to applying pressure on the regime.

[232] Lund, Aron. "Islamist Mergers in Syria: Ahrar al-Sham Swallows Suqour al-Sham." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 23 March 2015.

funct Islamic Front alliance. The mergers was part of a deliberate 'mergers and acquisitions' policy implemented by the new leadership of Ahrar al-Sham[233], mirroring its constructive and pragmatic approach to cross-factional collaboration across the rebel movement's ideological spectrum. This expansive strategy of mopping up smaller organisations within its vicinity proved more fruitful than alliance-building with equally dominant partners, as the gradual collapse of the Islamic Front had illustrated.

Illustration 3: Organisational overview, Phase III. *Source: Stanford University; Mapping Militant Organisations*



Turkey and Qatar allegedly supported this policy in an attempt to counterbalance the influence of Jabhat al-Nusra on Turkey's border[234]; while Ahrar al-Sham had been cooperating very closely the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate throughout the conflict, it had nonetheless remained apprehensive towards Jabhat al-Nusra as it began employing increasingly harsh methods in the areas under its control, spurring Ahrar al-Sham's leader to denounce *"values that contradict those we started within the revolution"*[235].

[233] Most of the old leadership had been killed in September 2014 when a bomb went off during a secret meeting in rural Idlib in September 2014. The perpetrators of the plot remain unknown.

[234] Lund, Aron. "Islamist Mergers in Syria: Ahrar al-Sham Swallows Suqour al-Sham." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 23 March 2015.

[235] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 343.

By successfully embedding itself into the wider rebellion through a highly pragmatic long-term strategy, Jabhat al-Nusra began to assert its authority on weaker, Western-backed FSA sub-factions. In a show of force, Jabhat al-Nusra attacked two FSA-faction in Idlib province late October 2014 whom Abu Mohammed al-Jolani - the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra - regarded as corrupt American proxies intending to undermine the budding, cross-organisational Islamist collaboration between Jabhat al Nusra and the internationally accepted Salafi groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Suquor al-Sham[236]. A month before Jabhat al-Nusra's attack on the American backed FSA-factions in Idlib, the U.S. State Department had begun targeting Jabhat al-Nusra as an extension of the air campaign against ISIS due to its ties to al-Qaeda's leadership[237].

Ad-hoc alliance-building, part 2:

Once the merger between Ahrar al-Sham and Suquor al-Sham had been publicly announced in March 2015, preparations for a long-anticipated offensive on Idlib city began[238]. Jaysh al-Fatah was created as a so-called 'joint operations room' through which the offensive could be coordinated between the partaking organisations. The coalition allegedly materialised on the initiative of Ahrar al-Sham, which throughout the conflict had managed to bridge the gap between organisations of different ideological preferences[239].

Within days after launching the offensive, the newly formed coalition had driven the regime's forces out of the provincial capital, demonstrating a level of inter-rebel coordination that had arguably not been seen before in Syria[240]. Gradually, Jaysh al-Fatah transformed from a being an operations room to a real, powerful alliance between north-western Syria's most powerful organisation. Inside Idlib city, the responsibility for providing governance, civil administrative structures, service provision and security was shared between the two domination organisations. In the lack of any supra-local organisations, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra each set up complimentary

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[236] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 303. The infighting, which cost the lives of dozens of fighters, resulted in a near-expulsion of FSA-presence in Idlib province and - for the U.S. - an embarrassing setback as American supplied anti-tank missiles fell into the hands of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. See Gibbons-Neff, Thomas. "Al-Qaeda faction in Syria claims to have U.S.-supplied anti-tank weapon." *The Washington Post*, 15 December 2014.

[237] BBC News. "What is the Khorasan Group?", *BBC*, 24 September 2014. While the airstrikes may have weakened their capabilities, they seemingly only continued to win popularity in the areas in which they operated. An activist in Idlib told a reporter from the Washington Post: *"When American airstrikes targeted al-Nusra, people felt solidarity with them because Nusra are fighting the regime, and the strikes are helping the regime. Now people think that whoever in the Free Syrian Army gets support from the U.S.A. is an agent of the regime,"*

[238] While large parts of the province had been outside the control of the Syrian regime since the summer of 2011, the army had doubled down its efforts to maintain control of the provincial capital.

[239] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016, p. 215. Included in the coalition was Jabhat al-Nusra, Jund al-Aqsa, Ansar al-Sham and several FSA-aligned sub-factions. There is no doubt, however, that the two most prominent organisations within the coalition were Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, who - in tandem - had controlled adjacent territories in rural Idlib for several years

[240] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 342.

and yet competing service institutions in order to control and co-opt existing local bodies of governance inside the rebel-held province[241].

Finally, the advantages of collaborating across organisational divides had been proved beneficial and the successes of Jaysh al-Fatah sparked similar attempts in southern Syria where the The Southern Front - an organisation comprised of FSA remnants -, tried to capture Daraa city supported by Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Islam[242]. The newfound unity within the resurgent rebel movement seemingly also led to a closer alignment among its state backers in the region who, for the first time since the onset the conflict, appeared to act in relative unison[243]. However, as the prospect of the fall of the Assad regime increased, outside forces would soon interfere in Syria's civil war, thus stress-testing the new alliance and increasing the pressure on its regional backers.

The Jabhat al-Nusra conundrum

In September 2015, Russia intervened on behalf of Bashar al-Assad, effectively resetting the military balance in Syria[244]. With Russia entering the fray, all organisations within the rebel movement suddenly faced a materially superior enemy, which was determined to push back the rebel advances. On February 26th 2016, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2268, which called for a cessation of hostilities between the Assad regime and its state backers and the rebel movement. For the first time since the beginning of the conflict, a period of relative peace lasted 6 weeks. The deal, however, did not include Jabhat al-Nusra, whom Russia as well as the U.S. considered a terrorist organisation and whose *"safe havens in Syria"* the UN Security Council in a previous resolution had called upon to be *"eradicated"*[245]. With Jabhat al-Nusra effectively isolated, airstrikes continued to target their forces and infrastructure in north-western Syria. The purposeful isolation of Jabhat al-Nusra served as an attempt to sever the institutional links that had been forged between the organisations within the negotiation framework and the Jihadist organisation outside it, thus weakening Jabhat al-Nusra's sway over the remaining rebel organisations.

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[241] Heller, Sam. "Keeping the lights on in rebel Idlib." *The Century Foundation*, 29 November 2016, p. 8. In concert, new alliance continued to force the Syrian army out of the Idlib province, thus threatening the adjacent province of Latakia - Syria's Alawite heartland and one of Bashar al-Assad's vital power-bases. In a striking admission, Bashar al-Assad publicly acknowledged that his army suffered from manpower shortages and that it had to withdraw from certain provinces such as Idlib in order to bolster the defences around areas deemed more important. See: Samaan, Maher and Barnard, Anne. "Assad, in Rare Admission, Says Syria's Army Lacks Manpower." *The New York Times*, 26 July 2015.

[242] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria - International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale, 2016., p. 216.

[243] Ibid., p. 217.

[244] Casagrande et al. "Syria 90-day Forecast: the Assad Regime and Allies in Northern Syria", *Institute for the Study of War*, 24 February 2016.

[245] United Nations Security Council, Res. 2254 (2015), paragraph 8.

While Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour exclude the processes around peace settlements as factor influencing fragmentary dynamics[246], international stakeholder do - at times - implement strategies of intentional fragmentation in order to minimise the set of demands to be incorporated in a potential peace settlement[247]. By isolating the elements of a rebel movement who are least prone to compromise, reaching a political settlement with the others who are willing to accept the premise of negotiated political transition may be easier. But the isolation of certain veto players[248] from an international conflict resolution effort is also a risky undertaking, which may derail the entire process since veto players - per definition - are sufficiently powerful to unilaterally block the settlement of a civil war[249]. Thus, when the subsequent peace negotiations in Geneva began in April 2016, the arguably most powerful actor on the ground - Jabhat al-Nusra - was not included in the talks, leaving it exposed to aerial attacks from American, Russian and Syrian jets[250].

Initially, the attempt by the international stakeholders to split the rebel movement appeared successful. Jabhat al-Nusra reacted violently to the deal, referring to the nominal allies who participated in the establishment of the cessation of hostilities agreement as *"traitors of the revolution"*[251]. When large numbers of civilians in Idlib city used the cessation of hostilities to take to the streets, they brandished the nationalist 'Istaqlal' flag while commemorating the five year anniversary of the conflict's onset. Jabhat al-Nusra and its surrogate, Jund al-Aqsa, violently dispersed the protests, beating several flag-bearing men while threatening to open fire[252]. In Maarat al-Numan, a near-by Idlibi town, fighting broke out between the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda and an American-backed FSA sub-faction - Division 13 -, which had organised a popular protest in the spirit of the uprisings' early days. Jabhat al-Nusra overran Division 13's headquarters, killed six of its fighters and emptied their stockpiles of U.S. supplied weapons[253].

Elsewhere, in the besieged Damascene enclave of eastern Ghouta, Jabhat al-Nusra and Faylaq al-Rahman attacked the positions of Jaysh al-Islam whose leader, Zahran Alloush, had been killed in a Syrian airstrike a few months earlier. Since late 2015, Alloush's cousin - Mohammed Alloush -

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[246] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 268.

[247] Cunningham, Kathleen G.: "Understanding fragmentation in conflict and its impact on prospects for peace"*, Oslo Forum Papers*, no. 6, 2016, p. 9.

[248] Veto players are actors in a conflict who *"have the capacity to veto peace and continue the war on their own even if the other groups involved sign a peace agreement and stop fighting"*. See Cunningham, David. "Who Should Be at the Table?: Veto Players and Peace Processes in Civil War," *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, p. 38.

[249] Cunningham, David. "Veto Players and Civil War Duration", *American Journal of Political Science,* vol. 50, no. 40, 2006, p. 883.

[250] First of all, Jabhat al-Nusra is a UN-designated terrorist organisation, automatically excluding it as a party with whom one can negotiate. Secondly, Jabhat al-Nusra

[251] Legrand, Felix. "The Strategy of Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fath al-Sham Regarding the Truces in Syria"*, NORIA*, 2016, p. 5.

[252] Zeid, Osama Abu. "Nusra deflects blame for protest suppression; 'mandate flag sows division'" *Syria Direct*, 8 March 2016.

[253] Beck, John. "Syrian Ceasefire Sees Popular Backlash Against Al-Qaeda", *Vice News*, 30 March 2016.

had been head negotiator of the rebel movement's Geneva-delegation. Inside the rebel-held enclave, rumours had been swirling that Jaysh al-Islam had facilitated the visit of a Russian military delegation, thus exacerbating the tensions between the local super-group and Jabhat al-Nusra, who - rightly, as the February 2016 cessation of hostilities agreement would come to show - had assumed that any peace deal with come at its expense[254]. Once widespread infighting broke out in Ghouta in April 2016, the inter-rebel civil war lasted for weeks and claimed the lives of several hundred fighters[255].

The cessation of hostilities and the attempt by the international stakeholders to sideline Jabhat al-Nusra had shown that it was willing to assert its dominance through the use of force against its nominal allies. It had come at a price, though; its antics had tarnished its name and spurred criticism from close allies, including Ahrar al-Sham. However, as the ceasefire gradually crumbled and the Geneva negotiations once again ground to a halt, Jabhat al-Nusra's view was, as one Syria analyst puts it, arguably vindicated[256]. Not only had it managed to position itself as the "real" protector of the Syrian revolution as it had continued its fight against the regime forces while the others had withdrawn from the fronts; the breakdown of the ceasefire also illustrated that the jihadist organisation had successfully rendered the rest of the rebel movement militarily dependent on its capabilities[257].

"Jaish al-Fatah has returned, but this time in strength, and our goal is to spread to the major fronts in Syria,", a triumphant Jabhat al-Nusra commander stated as widespread conflict against the regime's forces once again flared up[258]. Nonetheless, while Jabhat al-Nusra had weathered the storm, the ceasefire had also shown that its isolated position was unsustainable. In an attempt to integrate itself deeper into the non-jihadist segment of the rebel movement, the organisation, in July 2016, officially broke off its ties to the international al-Qaeda leadership in an attempt to rebrand the organisation as an explicitly Syrian organisation with *"no relationship to any external entity"*[259]. As Jabhat al-Nusra renamed itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, it commandeered a Jaysh al-Fatah

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[254] Lund, Aron. "Into the Tunnels - The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Easter Ghouta" *The Century Foundation*, 21 December 2016, p. 45.

[255] Al-Basel, Tadrous and Mahmoud, Zuhuor. "Ghouta Infighting Challenges Jaish al-Islam's Rule." *Syria Deeply*, 1 June 2016. The eastern Ghouta inter-rebel civil war was also spurred by a range of other factors set off by the killing of Zahran Alloush, including control over local institutions and access to underground smuggling routes. See Lund, Aron. "Into the Tunnels - The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Easter Ghouta" *The Century Foundation*, 21 December 2016.

[256] Hassan, Hassan. "Syria's peace plan is flawed and Jabhat Al Nusra knows it." *The National*, 8 May 2016.

[257] Legrand, Felix. "The Strategy of Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fath al-Sham Regarding the Truces in Syria"*, NORIA*, 2016, p. 3.

[258] Perry, Tom and al-Khalidi, Sulieman. "Jihadists mobilize in Syria as peacemaking unravels." *Reuters*, 19 May 2016.

[259] Hassan, Hassan. "Syrian war enters a new phase as factions realign." *The National*, 7 August 2016. Appearing in a video on al-Jazeera, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani explained that the rebranding manoeuvre was undertaken in order *"to remove the excuse used by the international community—spearheaded by America and Russia—to bombard and displace Muslims in the Levant".* John, Tara. "Everything You Need To Know About the New Nusra Front." *Time Magazine*, 29 July 2016.

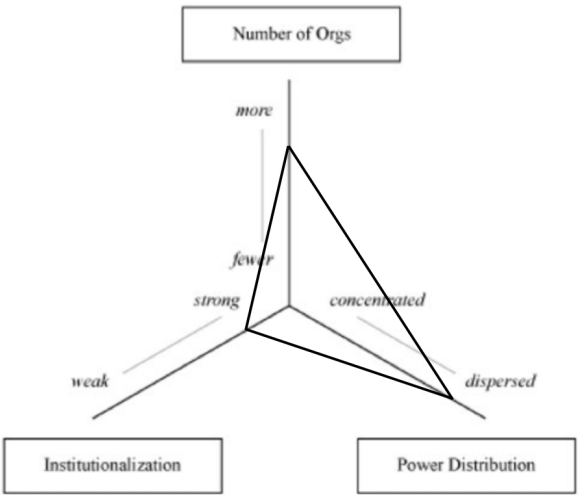
offensive to break the siege of the rebel-held part of Aleppo in what appeared to be a vital victory for the rebel movement. Once again, the fruits of cross-organisational cooperation had been harvested. An Aleppean woman stated *"As a Syrian, I give my blessings to the union of opposition groups whoever they are, whether they're from the Free Syrian Army or the Islamists"*[260]. Unity, however, would prove short-lived as the Russo-Syrian campaign to retake the city would deal a decisive blow to the rebel movement.

Mapping fragmentation in Phase III:

Summing up Phase III, the number of organisations dwindled as the amount of new-comers dropped significantly and smaller organisations began to merge with Ahrar al-Sham, which absorbed three other organisations during the winter and fall of 2015 as the Syrian government's control over north-western Syria began to crumble. The apparent weakness of the regime would also foster new institutional ties as old frameworks of cooperation dissolved. The creation of the Jaysh al-Fatah alliance marked the conflict's most successful attempt at institutionalising the struggle across the rebel movement's dominant organisations. The new-found unity manifested itself in the rebel-held areas as well as on the front-lines, where several significant victories were attained. However, increased interference by outside forces and mounting international pressure threatened to upend the increased intermeshing of non-Jihadist and Jihadist forces.

Figure 4: Fragmentation in Phase III

Number of organisations: 10
Power distribution: Multipolarity - shared between Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaysh al-Islam.
Institutionalisation: Relatively strong - the creation Jaysh al-Fatah as the most successful attempt at power-sharing.



[260] Al-Omar, Salaam. "Breaking the Siege of Aleppo Improves Jaish al-Fateh's Standing with Syrians." *The Atlantic Council*, 8 August 2016.

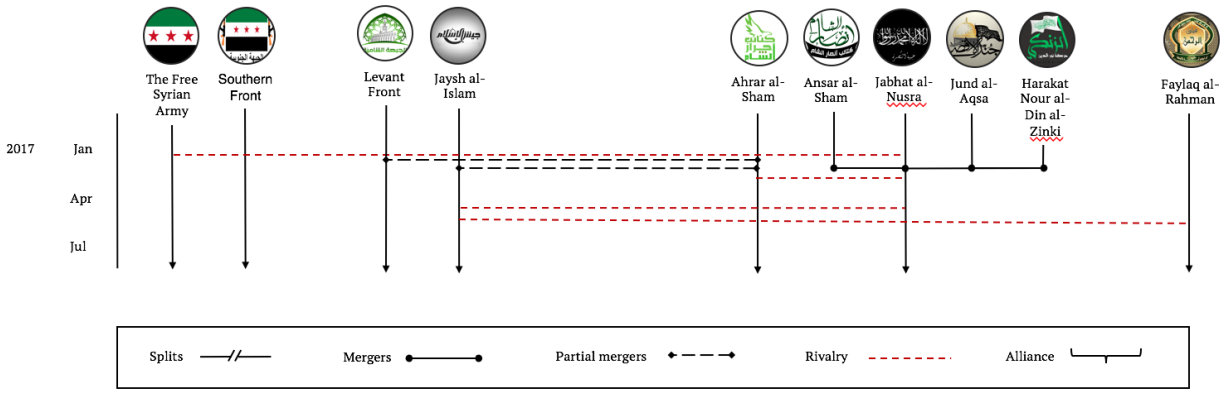
Phase IV: January 2017 -: Rupture

In Phase IV, the rebel movement fragmented completely. While the formation of Jaysh al-Fatah during Phase III had ushered in a period of intra-movement unity, cracks had begun to appear as external states attempted to isolate the Jihadist segments of the alliance. The fall of Aleppo became the catalyst that would sever the institutional ties between the organisations and fragment the movement into two competing blocs of actors.

Reshuffling the deck:

When looking at the Stanford map, a noticeable tendency can be observed in the beginning of the fourth - and final - phase; Syria's rebel organisations suddenly began to coalesce into larger units. Rather than being extremely numerically fragmented as was the case in Phase II, the number of organisations within the movement more than halved as smaller organisations began to cluster and merge into the organisational structures of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. What set off this sudden internal reordering of rebel landscape in Syria?

Illustration 4: Organisational overview, Phase IV. *Source: Stanford University; Mapping Militant Organisations*



In December 2016, the rebel-held eastern part of Aleppo was recaptured by the Syrian army and loyalist militias. The fall of Aleppo not only marked a crushing military defeat for the rebel movement; it was also a political catastrophe for the rebel movement, which set off a range of dynamics that upended the status quo and undermined the relatively high degree of intra-movement coordination that had been established during the spring of 2015.

Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour note that mergers and amalgamations are often enabled by external state patrons, who may attempt manipulate the internal composition of a rebel movement

in order to secure their own interests[261]. Thus, in order to understand the brutal reordering of the Syrian rebel landscape, it is necessary to view the post-Aleppo debacle through Ankara's lens.

During Phase III, an increased degree of interdependency between the organisations within the Jaysh al-Fatah alliance had gradually developed, tying non-Jihadist and Jihadist organisations together in a tight collaborative framework. However, while Turkey had ostensibly endorsed the creation of the alliance on its border in order to pursue its goal of militarily defeating the Assad regime by proxy, Russia's entry into the war and YPG's territorial advances in northern and north-eastern Syria gradually made Turkey change its calculus[262]. Following the crushing defeat in Aleppo, Ankara fully reoriented its Syria policy by reducing its commitment to the rebel organisations operating on its border, instead pushing for a negotiated settlement to the conflict in collaboration with Russia and Iran[263]. This rapprochement opened a wide rift within the movement, which set off the reordering of the rebel landscape.

A vocal minority within the Turkish-aligned Ahrar al-Sham had for some time pushed for a merger with Jabhat al-Fatah al-Sham, who - officially - had cut its ties to the al-Qaeda leadership five months earlier. Conversely, a majority within Ahrar al-Sham wanted to stay closely aligned to Turkey. This disagreement over the overall strategy of the organisation led to the formation of a splinter faction within the upper echelons of Ahrar al-Sham, which sought to unify the ranks of the rebel movement once and for all.

Unable to bridge the divide between the two competing factions within Ahrar al-Sham's leadership, the subdued tensions eventually came to the surface as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham suffered increasingly heavy losses as a result of continued U.S. airstrikes[264]. The catalyst that finally triggered the realignment of intra-movement relations was the new attempt by Russia, Iran and Turkey to relaunch peace negotiations in the Kyrgyz capital of Astana. Facing military defeat, the non-jihadist organisations - excluding Ahrar al-Sham who nonetheless supported the initiative and was accepted by Russia and Iran as a viable negotiating partner - agreed to participate in the rounds of negotiations on 23rd and 24th of January 2017. Once again finding itself excluded by international

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[261] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 269.

[262] Turkey's calculations changed significantly from 2015 and onwards as the Syrian Kurdish organisation YPG conquered large swaths of land along the Syrian-Turkish border, prompting Turkey's launch of Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016. The aim of the incursion into Syria was to disrupt the territorial amalgamation of the Kurdish-held areas by co-opting forces from Turkish-aligned rebel organisations, such as Ahrar al-Sham, to drive a wedge in between the YPG's two zones of control, while forcing ISIS' forces further south into central Syria.

[263] Lund, Aron. "The Jihadi Spiral." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 8 February 2017.

[264] Al-Tamami, Aymenn. "The Formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Wider Tensions in the Syrian Insurgency", *Combating Terrorism Center - CTC Sentinel*, 22 February 2017, p. 17. Following the bombing of a Jabhat Fatah al-Sham led training camp, few organisations offered their condolences to its "martyrs". A prominent Saudi-born cleric within Jabhat al-Fatah al-Sham's ranks stated: *"Has factionalism really afflicted us to the point that 100 martyrs should be martyred at the hands of the coalition, then we do not hear a statement of condolences?"*

actors in an attempt to isolate the terrorist-listed organisation, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham launched an offensive against a Western-backed FSA sub-faction in Idlib[265].

Openly criticising the attack, Ahrar al-Sham released a written statement in which they warned their jihadist ally to cease the infighting; *"We will join our brothers in the rest of the factions … to prevent the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham columns to go and attack Muslims and harass them and wrongfully take their blood and money,"*[266]. The statement further announced that the local Idlibi branches of Jaysh al-Islam and the Levant Front as well as several smaller factions[267] would merge into Ahrar al-Sham due to fears of being targeted next, warning that an attack by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham on any of them would be considered an act of war[268]. A decisive rift within the movement had thus been opened.

The Jihadist powerhouse

A second event would further influence the distribution of power within the movement. Inside the jihadist camp, a similar process of consolidation was taking place; on January 28 - two days after the Ahrar al-Sham-led merger - the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was publicly announced. By absorbing Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Ansar al-Sham and - perhaps most importantly - a large number of high-ranking defectors from Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham suddenly grew exponentially. Tripling the amount of fighters under the new command structure[269], the former al-Qaeda affiliate also underwent what a spokesperson of the new organisation dubbed *"an intellectual revolution"*[270]. As Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour note, organisations within a rebel movement often compete over winning the hearts and minds of overlapping constituencies in order to shape and determine the trajectory of the conflict once splits between common and private interests open up[271]. The rebranding manoeuvre should be seen in exactly that light; Hayat Tahrir al-Sham now openly pursued a more nationalist agenda aimed at *"protecting the precepts and principles of the Syrian revolution"*, as a Hayat Tahrir al-Sham spokesperson said, from what it perceived

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[265] Perry, Tom. "Jihadists battle moderate rebels in northern Syria." *Reuters*, 24 January 2017. Claiming that *"it was necessary for us to foil the conspiracies"*, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's actions estranged several allied organisations within the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition - including the Turkish-aligned segment of Ahrar al-Sham's leadership.

[266] MacDonald, Alex. "Analysis: Why Jabhat Fatah al-Sham Is Lashing Out at Syrian Rebels.", *Syria Deeply*, 27 January 2017.

[267] Not included in the Stanford Dataset.

[268] Petkova, Mariya. "Syrian opposition factions join Ahrar al-Sham." *Al Jazeera*, 28 January 2017.

[269] Allegedly, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has up to 31.000 fighters under its direct control. See Rowan, Mattisan. "Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham", *The Wilson Center*, 25 April 2017.

[270] Heller, Sam: "Syria's Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission." *The Century Foundation*, 1 March 2017.

[271] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 267.

to be treacherous elements within the movement wanting to secure a negotiated ending to the conflict[272].

In effect, the two expansion initiatives effectuated by Ahrar al-Sham and the former al-Qaeda affiliate split the movement into two camps; the Turkish-aligned organisations who had secured a seat a the table in Astana and the newly-established Jihadist supergroup, which remained isolated from outside support and left open to continued attacks from the air.

Collapse:

The rupture within the movement led to the collapse of the Jaysh al-Fatah alliance, leaving the rebel movement without any collaborative frameworks through which the continued struggle could be coordinated and actors within the movement constrained. As Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour note, institutional decay tends to trigger infighting among the dominant organisations as they increasingly begin to pursue private advantages as divergent interests pull them apart[273]. As the prospect of transforming Jabhat al-Nusra into an internationally accepted party to the conflict through its successive rebranding manoeuvres had failed, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham - its newest incarnation - began lashing out at its nominal allies, first - until cooler heads prevailed - by dealing isolated blows against Ahrar al-Sham. Secondly, and so far most notably, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and their rogue ally Faylaq al-Rahman once again confronted Jaysh al-Islam in the rebel-held enclave of eastern Ghouta where an almost exact reprise of the April 2016 inter-rebel civil war played out in early May 2017[274].

The fratricidal infighting claimed the lives of up to 170 fighters and civilians[275], spurring large numbers of the enclave's residents to take to the streets, protesting the wide-spread clashes. *"Why don't they think about what this infighting does to us?"*, an Eastern Ghouta resident said, *"If this infighting continues our fate will be death or forced displacement"*[276]. And rightly so, the Syrian army exploited the internal clashes by launching an offensive north of the Ghouta suburbs and succeed-

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[272] Al-Tamami, Aymenn. "The Formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Wider Tensions in the Syrian Insurgency", *Combating Terrorism Center - CTC Sentinel*, 22 February 2017, p. 18.

[273] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 273.

[274] As mentioned in the analysis of Phase III, the infighting between Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Islam was partially triggered by the latter's involvement in peace negotiations during the ceasefire in the spring of 2016, from which Jabhat al-Nusra had remained excluded. *"We refuse any reconciliations and truces that do not follow the rules of true Islam, which would return the revolutionary to being a slave of the criminal regime and stop the wheels of fighting and jihad against the criminals and tyrants,"* a Hayat Tahrir al-Sham spokesman stated as the new round of infighting ravaged the rebel-held enclave. See: Lund, Aron. "Syria: East Ghouta Turns on Itself, Again." *The Century Foundation*, 1 May 2017.

[275] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "A week of clashes kills about 170 civilians and fighters in the Eastern Ghouta." *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 5 May 2017.

[276] Nassar, Alaa. '"A stab in the back': New wave of rebel infighting in East Ghouta amidst siege, bombardment." *Syria Direct*, 1 May 2017.

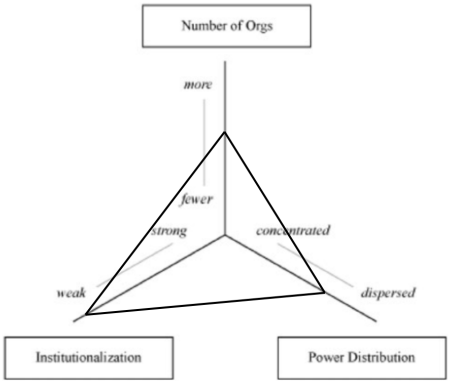
ed in recapturing significant territories as the dominant rebel forces continued to clash inside the besieged enclave.

Mapping fragmentation in Phase IV:

Provoked by outside forces, a rupture within the Syrian rebel movement opened up a fault-line, which effectively split the movement. At the time of writing, the movement consists of numerous organisations, no institutional links between them and power distributed between two competing centres of gravity - Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. As Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour note, movements suffering from an extreme degree of fragmentation are very likely to engage in widespread, localised infighting[277]. As an omen of what may will become a wider trend, the rebel-held enclave of eastern Ghouta once again broke apart in yet another bout of infighting, while the formerly close rebel allies in Idlib province tread a thin line between fragile peace and potentially devastating inter-rebel conflict.

Figure 5: Fragmentation in Phase IV

Number of organisations: 7
Power distribution: Bipolar - dispersed between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham.
Institutionalisation: Very weak - Jaysh al-Fatah collapses.



Findings of Analysis I:

The purpose of this analytical chapter was to identify and analyse the causes of rebel fragmentation within the Syrian rebel movement as well as to illustrate how these dynamics have influenced the overall degree of fragmentation throughout the four phases of the conflict. The analysis shows that the causal mechanisms of rebel fragmentation cannot be isolated to a single variable; rather, it appears that the causes are complex, manyfold and interrelated. They can be categorised into two blunt categories; endogenous and exogenous causal mechanisms.

[277] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 277.

Endogenous causal mechanisms:

- Structural preconditions: The circumscribed state of the pre-war political opposition, the absence of independent institutions and the state's co-optation of Syria's civil society organisations severely thwarted the way in which the widespread discontent with the Syrian regime could manifest itself in a coherent fashion at the onset of the conflict . In the absence of a pre-existing institutional output through which the uprising could be organised and synchronised, the rebellion sprouted diffusely and spontaneously through neighbourhood militias, cell-based rebel networks and make-shift committees riddled by parochial power struggles and local agendas.

- Credibility gap: The absence of trust between the rebels on the ground and the exiled politicians and dissidents within the SNC - often derided as the *"five-star hotel opposition"* - left the political opposition body with a weak mandate and insufficient legitimacy to exercise political authority within war-torn Syria. Unable to formulate a coherent vision for what a future Syrian state should look like, the SNC was sidelined as it failed to unify the increasingly disparate FSA sub-factions as they gradually broke off from the command structure. Despite attempts to revive the dysfunctional opposition body through the creation of the Coalition, the gulf between the rebel organisations and their political representatives in Turkey could not be effectively bridged, leaving the rebel organisations at the helm of external powers.

Exogenous causal mechanisms:

- Lack of donor coordination: The sporadic manner in which the regional backers provided financial and lethal assistance to the rebel movement undermined the SMC's coordinating role and undercut the hegemony of FSA as the number of rebel organisations proliferated rapidly during the conflict's second phase. In north-western Syria, the lack of donor coordination manifested itself on the ground as a complex web of overlapping, hyper-localised zones of influence. Conversely, in southern Syria, where Jordan - with U.S. backing - strictly controlled its distribution networks, the rebel landscape remained relatively cohesive as exemplified by formation of the Southern Front.

- Intra-regional competition: Relatedly, the geopolitical context in which the conflict is embroiled injected external interests into the inner-workings of the rebel movement. Particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar's rivalry over the trajectory of the conflict opened rifts between the nominally allied organisations. While it would be inaccurate to characterise the rebel organisations as state proxies, their dependence on fluctuating funding patterns by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar undermined attempts to form credible alliances and govern the rebel-held areas effi-

ciently. This, in turn, opened a window of opportunity for Jabhat al-Nusra to embed itself deeply into Syria's social fabric.

- Reorientation of patron policies: As exemplified by Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and Iran after the fall of Aleppo, the interdependency forged between the non-jihadist elements of the Syrian rebel movement and Ankara lead to a near total collapse of intra-movement unity between the dominant organisations as Jabhat al-Nusra was politically and diplomatically sidelined. Divided over the contentious issue and effectively splitting the movement into to competing camps, Ahrar al-Sham and its allies aligned with Turkey as other organisations sided with the Jihadist organisation, leading to the creation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

A common denominator of the causal mechanisms of rebel fragmentation identified in this analytical chapter is that they are second-order effects of actions and dynamics outside the immediate control of the rebel organisations themselves. Thus, the analysis indicates that the numerical proliferation and contraction of organisations, sudden changes in power distribution and violent break-downs of alliances are not the result intentional actions pursued by the non-state actors, but rather that the dynamics that trigger fragmentation are embedded in the historical, structural and geopolitical context in which the conflict occurs. The following analytical chapter explores how different organisations possess varying propensities and abilities to manoeuvre within this fragmented rebel landscape and, to some extent, counteract the negative constraints the context of the conflict imposes on the armed actors.

VIII: Analysis II - Organisational trajectories in Syria

The above analysis of why and how Syrian rebel movement has fragmented throughout the conflict has not only explored the likely endogenous and exogenous causes of fragmentation but has also described the fluctuating relational patterns between the organisations within the movement. In particularly, the gradual demise of the FSA and the ascendence of Jabhat al-Nusra/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has shaped the trajectory of the conflict from a nationalist popular uprising to a protracted Jihadist insurgency. This analytical chapter focuses on the diametrically opposite organisation trajectories of the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra. By employing Staniland's social-institutional theory, it is analysed of the FSA has gradually devolved from a *parochial* organisation to a *fragmented* organisation, while Jabhat al-Nusra/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham successfully has evolved from a *vanguard* organisation to an *integrated* organisation.

The devolution of the Free Syrian Army

Staniland's theory is based on the premise that *"knowing how institutions were constructed provides insight into how they might come apart"*[278]. History, as Staniland notes, creates powerful constraints that tend to forge a high degree of path dependency, which can be extremely difficult to diverge from[279]. Thus, in order to gain insight into how the Free Syrian Army failed to materialise as a coherent, structurally resilient organisation, it is necessary to first analyse origins of the FSA and secondly to analyse the process of change the organisation has undergone through the duration of the conflict.

Parochial origins

As described in the first analytical chapter, the FSA was established during the July 2011 as a response to the increasingly violent crack-down on protesters by the Assad regime and a gradual militarisation of the uprising emanating from spontaneously organised, hyper-localised neighbourhood militias bolstered by defecting soldiers from the Syrian army. As explored, Syria's pre-war political opposition had been effectively circumscribed for decades. The combination of a crippled civil society and the fact that the Syrian state institutions effectively functioned as extensions of the Baath party meant that the popular resentment against the Assad regime had no organic, pre-existing outlet that could shape and control the sweeping rebellion.

Consequently, the popular mobilisation during the first phase of the conflict unavoidably took on a intensely parochial character. An Aleppean rebel explains: *"In the beginning of the revolution,*

[278] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 17.

[279] Ibid., p. 218.

nothing was organised. When the security forces began shooting at people, some people started carrying weapons to protect themselves."[280]. Consequently, the emerging armed opposition in the towns and villages of rural Syria clustered around local strongmen, clan elders, clerics and crime-families who held sway over their own distinct localities through strong vertical ties to the population. The intermeshing between the loosely structured Local Coordination Councils and local FSA commanders is a testament to how deeply socially anchored many of the FSA sub-factions were during the first phase of the war.

Despite possessing strong vertical ties to the local constituencies, the FSA suffered from extremely weak horizontal ties from the onset of the conflict. Since the organisation was formed as a reaction to the militarisation of the uprising, no pre-established organisational structure was in place to coordinate and synchronise military as well as political action across the nebulous sub-factions. As Staniland notes, parochial organisations are horizontally isolated; while the individual sub-factions may be positioned on the same side of the conflict's master cleavage - in this case the opposition to the Assad regime -, the absence of robust central control to severely inhibits the leadership's ability to exercise operational control and shape events on the ground[281]. And robust central leadership was, indeed, lacking as the Turkey-based leadership attempted to coordinate and unify an armed struggle within another state[282].

As Staniland notes, parochial organisations are prone to internal power struggles within the leadership ranks as contenders attempt to build and galvanise stronger central command structures[283]. This tendency was also prominent within the FSA; the leadership of Col. Riad al-Assad was often contested as more newly defected senior officers, such as Gen. Salim Idris who would later become the commanding officer of the Supreme Military Council, attempted to sideline or oust the exiled Colonel[284]. Whether or not a stronger leader than Col. Riad al-Assad could have contributed to strengthening the central organisational structure of the FSA is of course difficult to assess; however, given the sheer amount of structural obstacles and seemingly insurmountable organisational deficiencies the FSA faced, change within the leadership is unlikely to have had any noticeable effect. As a senior Syrian Islamist explained, Col. Riad al-Assad did attempt to play a poor hand well: *"Col. Assad did play a role in coalescing some of this effort via his officers in Turkey. But it was*

[280] SANA Dispatches. "Syria's Armed Opposition: A Spotlight at the 'Moderates'", Se*curity Assessment in North Africa - Small Arms Survey Gene*va, 2016, p. 3.

[281] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 31.

[282] An FSA official explains: *"We were fighting a real war, like nothing we had ever experienced before. Everyday we were learning new ways of fighting, of adapting, and of course, we never had the equipment we needed. We tried our best to keep communications with the officers in Turkey, but honestly, it was so difficult. Some councils had satellite phones purchased abroad, but we basically relied on cell phones and human messengers"*. Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 7.

[283] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 30.

[284] Hokayem, Emile. *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013, p. 83.

unrealistic to have expected him to communicate effectively with 120 battalions at once - revolutions are hard to centralise"[285].

Failing to integrate

One of the largest long-term obstacles facing the FSA was maintaining its continued ability to mobilise recruits. While it had succeeded in establishing itself as a revolutionary brand during the first phase of the conflict, it gradually lost its ability to attract man-power as new, superiorly structured and ideologically coherent organisations joined the fray. In fact, the absence of a clear political project and identifiable ideological underpinnings may have severely undermined the FSA's chances of transforming itself into an integrated organisation. Staniland notes that integrated organisations are characterised by their ability to use politics to mobilise people across territories and dispersed pockets of resistance through strong horizontal networks that facilitate the flow of information and synchronises political action[286]. Conversely, the lack of central unity within parochial organisations hamper ideological synchronisation and the dissemination of politics from top to bottom.

Commenting on the FSA's lacking ability to use politics to mobilise, a political officer from a FSA-held town said: *"The more ideologically driven forces are able to deploy fighters beyond their home areas. The majority of fighters stay in their own districts rather than fighting in other provinces. Unless someone is paying them to do so or unless they are ideologically driven"*[287]. This comment exemplifies the overarching problem that parochial organisations face; they tend to become bogged down in their own localities and when they try to extend their geographical reach, they often face difficulties embedding themselves into the new environment. The FSA's advance into urban areas such as western Aleppo and eastern Damascus illustrates how difficult it is for an organisation with weak horizontal control to uphold and enforce discipline locally. In Aleppo, stores, museums and factories were looted during the first months after Liwa al-Tawhid - the FSA-aligned conglomerate of rural, north Aleppean fighters[288] - took control over parts of the city during the summer of 2012. A disillusioned FSA captain said: *"It is extremely sad. There is not one government institution or warehouse left standing in Aleppo. Everything has been looted. Everything is gone"*[289].

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[285] Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army - A Decentralised Insurgent Brand", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2015, p. 8.

[286] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 21.

[287] SANA Dispatches. "Syria's Armed Opposition: A Spotlight at the 'Moderates'", Se*curity Assessment in North Africa - Small Arms Survey Genev*a, 2016, p. 10.

[288] See Section XX, p. XX.

[289] Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "Syrian rebels sidetracked by scramble for spoils of war." *The Guardian*, 27 December 2012. Similar displays of weak military discipline and rampant looting characterised the FSA's actions in eastern Ghouta until Jaysh al-Islam - the Salafist organisation under the leadership of Zahran Alloush - seized control of the city, not only by out-gunning but also out-governing the weakly organised, ill-disciplined FSA-factions in the area.

But how can it be that an organisation that is accepted by the international community as the armed wing of the exiled opposition, thus enjoying privileged access to arms and funding, nonetheless engage in rampant illicit behaviour? Staniland notes that organisations with weak central control are significantly more prone to misspend available resources through corruption or involvement in illicit behaviour[290]. Known as the "resource curse", wealth injected into horizontally crippled networks and ineffective institutions tend to encourage thuggishness and predation[291]. Similarly some studies indicate that illegal economic gains by rebels weaken lines of command within military organisations, making it difficult to instill discipline[292]. The same patterns of economic mismanagement and criminality crippled the FSA. In a 2013 dispatch from north-western Syria, a reporter visited an officer of the Aleppo Military Council - a sub-council of the FSA-aligned SMC - who had built a marble-floored villa with a swimming pool in the middle of an active war-zone. As the person in charge of distributing the influx of foreign support among Aleppean rebels, he had funded the construction of his personal fiefdom funded by siphoning funds and weapons off the resource flow, currying favours to certain commanders while deliberately starving others of ammunition[293].

By the time that the FSA leadership realised that it needed to build measures through which its fighters could be trained, disciplined and ideologically indoctrinated into some sort of political frame, a wide range of structurally superior, ideologically coherent Islamist organisations had already seized the initiative. The failure to develop a political agenda which extended beyond the rejection of the Assad regime left the FSA open to splits as new organisations began to crystallise around clear-cut Islamic frame of reference[294].

The half-hearted attempt by international donors to unify the command structure of the FSA in order to increase its ability to coordinate strategically and tactically across the territory under FSA control - but failed every time. The creation of the Supreme Military Council and its provincial

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[290] Staniland, Paul: "Organising Insurgency - Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia", *International Security*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2012, p. 147.

[291] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 228.

[292] Keen, David. *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 25.

[293] Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)." *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2013. *"They can't differentiate between their own personal interests and those of the nation"*, a local FSA fighter told the reporter. Similar stories of corruption within the upper echelons of the SMC sub-councils were reported in Idlib province; *"They have become princes of war; they spend millions of dollars, live in castles and have fancy cars"*, a disillusioned FSA commander explained. See: Sherlock, Ruth. "How the Free Syrian Army Largely Became a Criminal Enterprise." *Business Insider*, 30 November 2013.

[294] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015.

sub-commands marked a last-ditch attempt at creating a unified command structure with the capacity to activities among the FSA sub-factions. The damage, however, was already done[295].

Fragmentation

Rather than evolving into an integrated organisation by building a robust central control, the failure to centralise power resulted in the devolution of the FSA into a fragmented network of violent actors operating without central coordination, shared resources or sense of esprit de corps within its ranks[296]. By early 2013, the FSA had virtually ceased to exist as a centralised organisation[297], instead taking on *"a decentralised form in which the various nodes of the network operate independently from one another"*[298]. Thus, the idea of the FSA as a centralised organisation - an image still purported by some media - is a mirage. Its iconography and logotypes still live on but the organisation is truly fragmented and has - in many of the localities in which it originally was deeply entrenched - lost its appeal due to its failure to provide basic services; security, food, water, electricity.

This absence of hierarchy, central coordination and integration between the nodes is likely also the cause of the precarious shifts in some sub-faction's allegiances. This helps explain why FSA sub-factions can operate intimately with organisations such as Jabhat al-Nusra in one locality, while they are mortal enemies two towns over. An FSA officer explains: *"Loyalty is not complete in the armed groups. When fighters don't like the orders they are given, he is free to leave, especially since his weapon is his own property"*[299].

The lacking ability to coordinate military and political action undermined the FSA's internal standing among other rebel organisations as they succeeded in out-governing or out-gunning the local FSA factions. An Islamist commander explains: *"The fact that the Free Army failed to unite into a single entity provided an opening for Salafi-jihadis. The was the knife that sliced apart the future attempts to unite the Free Army and meant that the Free Army was virtually absent from the media and appeared quieter on the ground in 2013"* [300].

The failure to centralise command gradually undermined the FSA's otherwise strong horizontal ties, leaving windows of opportunity for superiorly structured Islamist organisations - among

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[295] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 91.

[296] Ibid., p. 87.

[297] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015.

[298] Abboud, Samer N. *Syria.* Polity, 2016, p. 91.

[299] SANA Dispatches. "Syria's Armed Opposition: A Spotlight at the 'Moderates'", Se*curity Assessment in North Africa - Small Arms Survey Genev*a, 2016.

[300] Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army - A Decentralised Insurgent Brand", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2015, p. 9.

these Jabhat al Nusra. Rather than evolving into an integrated organisation by building a robust central control, the failure of the leadership transforms the FSA into a fragmented organisation consisting of hundreds of small, localised groups. Consequently, its sub-factions began breaking off from the FSA structure, establishing themselves as independent organisations, leading to the degradation of the FSA into a fragmented entity which, today, is more a symbolic moniker than a centralised organisation.

The evolution of Jabhat al-Nusra/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

As the FSA underwent a process of degradation from being the anchor of the early rebellion to a fragmented collection of autonomous actors using the its symbolism as a symbolic moniker, Jabhat al-Nusra has succeeded in embedding itself deeply into rebel-held Syria, successfully transforming itself from a vanguard organisation to an integrated organisation with the capacity to absorb other organisations.

The vanguard

Contrary to the FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra grew out of a small, pre-established underground network of jihadists. The dormant cells had existed within Syria since the American invasion of Iraq, during which the Assad regime opportunistically had let Islamist fighters use the Iraqi-Syrian border as a supply line, deliberately fuelling the raging Iraqi insurgency[301]. While the Assad regime had subsequently cracked down on the jihadist networks due to mounting international pressure, jihadist cells and safe houses remained peppered throughout the poor, suburban neighbourhoods of Aleppo, Damascus and Homs[302]. Thus, when Jabhat al-Nusra - or "The Support Front" in English - was formally established in the fall of 2011 by high-ranking officers of the Islamic State of Iraq, a pre-established network structure was already in place[303].

Carrying the hallmarks of what Staniland defines as a vanguard organisation, the ideologically coherent and tightly knit core of commanders set out to reconsolidate the cellular structure that had been established almost a decade earlier. Led by its 'Emir', Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, his chief-cleric and deputy, Dr. Sami al-Oraydi, and a twelve-member senior Shura council[304] consisting primarily of al-Qaeda veterans, Jabhat al-Nusra was highly hierarchical[305]. And not unlike classic Leninist 'combat parties', ideology - and the belief that revolutionary vanguard, in Lenin's words,

[301] Roggio, Bill. "The Syrian End of the Ratline." *FDD's Long War Journal*, 9 June 2005.

[302] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 52.

[303] An earlier incarnation of what would later become ISIS.

[304] A politico-religious decision-making body.

[305] Lister, Charles: "Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2016, p. 29.

should "*raise the amateurs to the level of revolutionaries"*[306] - was deeply embedded into the structure of the organisation[307]. By linking the national leadership to seven provincial leadership councils, Jabhat al-Nusra swiftly and successfully built an organisation with strong horizontal ties that tied the cadres together in a robust central structure, which allowed them to coordinate military action and synchronise the political activities of the organisation in a highly efficient manner.

Since vanguard organisations, as Staniland argues, are initially short of popular support, forging durable alliances to other organisations is of vital importance if a vanguard organisation wants to transform into an integrated one[308]. This is exactly what Jabhat al-Nusra set out to do. In fact, this strategy of embedding a vanguard cadre into local revolutionary wars has, over the last decade or so, become somewhat of an al-Qaeda trademark[309]. And the jihadist organisation quickly became a prized ally due to its tactical proficiency. Unlike many of the spontaneously formed FSA sub-factions, Jabhat al-Nusra were able to draw on recruits with battlefield experience, many of whom had taken part in the Iraq insurgency. Assuming a supportive role by backing the FSA factions through sting operations and spectacular suicide bombings, Jabhat al-Nusra carefully began transforming itself into a militarily indispensable component of the armed insurgency against the Assad regime. And while the FSA was militarily forced to stand on the back of its heels due to poor central command and control, Jabhat al-Nusra's military strategy was clear[310]. With their guerilla-tactics in high demand, Jabhat al-Nusra's profile was on the rise as they gradually began influencing local dynamics[311].

According to Staniland, vanguard organisations use the alliance-building strategy in order to compensate for the constraints posed by their social origins[312]. By allying with local forces who possess stronger vertical linkages to the communities in and around which the fighting occurs, the vanguard organisation can then gradually begin to integrate itself into the civilian structures once

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[306] Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of our Movement,* Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961.

[307] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 28.

[308] Ibid., p. 43.

[309] Ayman al-Zawahiri - al-Qaeda's main ideologue - wrote in 2005 that *"our planning must strive to involve the Muslim masses in the battle, and to bring the mujahed movement to the masses and not conduct the struggle far from them."*. The catastrophic manner in which al-Qaeda in Iraq mismanaged its insurgency during the sectarian civil war between 2006 and 2008 by alienating the population it was supposed to represent has arguably affected this strategic reorientation. Al-Qaeda cells have also used this pragmatic approach to embed themselves successfully in the on-going civil wars in Yemen and Mali. See for instance: International Crisis Group. "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base", *International Crisis Group, Report No. 174*, 2 February 2017.

[310] Cafarella, Jennifer. "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria", *Institute for the Study of War,* 2014, p. 13. Abu Mohammed al-Jolani explained the military strategy of the earliest phase of the conflict to an al-Jazeera reporter: *"As a military strategy, we divided the enemy into three main parts. There was a strong emphasis on three main parts in attacking the enemy. The rest part was the security [intelligence] branches, which are considered the backbone of this regime. The second part was some divisions of the army. The third was some of the ruling heads."*

[311] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 80.

[312] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 44. In fact, Sayyid Qutb - the Egyptian ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood who is widely attributed with shaping the modern conception of Jihad - explicitly called for the creation of an Islamic vanguard who could awaken the Muslim masses who had sunken into what he perceived as a pre-Islamic state of ignorance.

bonds of trust have been formed. An analyst describes Jabhat al-Nusra as being *"able to flex and adapt to variegated local environments, often deliberately obscuring its long-term goals in pursuit of short-term strategic objectives"*[313]. A typical trait of vanguard organisation, the robust central structure allows the organisation to coordinate effectively across geographical space, adapting and adjusting to the dynamic changes in the conflict environment. Thus, paying attention to local dynamics soon began paying off as windows of opportunity towards deeper integration began to open up. Once Jabhat al-Nusra had penetrated the rebel ranks in the latter half of 2012, it began investing heavily in building vertical ties to the population in tune with Ayman al-Zawahiri's grand strategy.

Embedding into Syria's social fabric

Once Jabhat al-Nusra had won the loyalty of FSA sub-factions, it not only transformed its military strategy from guerrilla warfare to that of a more conventional, territorially embedded rebel organisation; it also began expanding its areas of operation by taking over service and aid provision efforts in the rebel-held areas while organising charities and contests for local children. The earliest example of Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy to embed itself into the local constituencies was in August 2012, when the organisation posted a video of a convoy giving cucumbers, tomatoes, rice, cooking oil and other commodities - wrapped in a brown paper bag with the organisation's logo printed on - to local civilians in Idlib[314].

Similarly, during the harsh winter of 2012, FSA factions were accused of stealing flour from the dwindling grain compound under rebel control. Jabhat al-Nusra - in some cases forcefully - assumed control of the bread-baking facilities and grain silos in the rebel-held part of the city from FSA forces, immediately halving the price of bread from 32 to 15 Syrian lira[315]. Cutting prices and increasing the availability of Syria's staple food won hearts and minds among the civilians, who were growing tired of the self-serving manner in which the FSA-aligned forces governed the city[316]. Jabhat al-Nusra even posted a video on youtube of a stray dog eating a fighter's lunch while the organisation's black banner waved in the background[317]. The message was clear; under Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership, even the strays would be provided for.

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[313] Abbas, Yasier. "Another "State" of Hate: Al-Nusra's Quest to Establish an Islamic Emirate in the Levant." *Hudson Institute*, 29 April 2016.

[314] Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed & Smyth, Philip. "How Syria's Jihadists Win Friends and Influence People." *The Atlantic*, 22 August 2013.

[315] Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad – al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Hurst, 2015, p. 102.

[316] McEvers Kelly. "Jihadi Fighters Win Hearts And Minds By Easing Syria's Bread Crisis.", *NPR*, 16 January 2013.

[317] Youtube: *Dog eats Jabhat al-Nusra's lunch*, published on 13 March 2013 by أنصار جبهة النصرة.

Aid, health care and security provision became central to Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy, thus building and cultivating the vertical ties that a vanguard organisation needs to forge in order to successfully transform into an integrated organisation, brandishing robust central and local processes. Where the FSA had failed to cultivate the bonds of trust with the civilians that they had enjoyed in the early days of the rebellion, Jabhat al-Nusra stepped in. An FSA commander explains; *"al-Nusra really took advantage of the Free Army's failure to control territory effectively and and the help the people justly - that's why we now have to deal with al-Nusra as a fait accompli"*[318].

The pragmatism with which the jihadist organisation had forged inter-rebel alliances and cultivated bonds to the local communities was also displayed in the pragmatic and flexible manner in which the local commanders were ordered to impose Jabhat al-Nusra's strict religious code[319]. Even though an insurgency may be bereft of any ideological rigidity, imposing an ideology upon civilians is, nonetheless, a delicate task for any vanguard organisation as it risks alienating the population[320]. As al-Jolani notes, imposing Jabhat al-Nusra's fundamentalist doctrines is a long-term endeavour, which requires a high degree of flexibility. Disseminating ideology in a synchronised and effective manner thus requires that the organisation is simultaneously able to accommodate local input and demands in a constant trade-off, which gradually strengthens the vanguard's sway over the constituencies[321].

Just how quickly Jabhat al-Nusra succeeded in transforming itself from a mainly urban, cadre-based vanguard organisation to an indispensable and deeply embedded actor in a largely rural insurgency was displayed in December 2012 when the U.S. State Department officially designated Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organisation due to its links to al-Qaeda's leadership. After Friday prayers, civilian protesters all over rebel-held Syria took to the streets under the slogan *"We are all Jabhat al-Nusra"*[322].

With deeper integration into the revolutionary dynamics of a conflict comes also increased possibilities for recruitment[323]. As one of the perks of having a large recruitment pool, Jabhat al-Nusra

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[318] Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army - A Decentralised Insurgent Brand", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2015, p. 9.

[319] A statement made by its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, in 2013 reads; *"Day after day, you are getting closer to the people after you conquered their hearts and minds and became entrusted by them… Beware of being hard on them, begin with the priorities and fundamentals of Islam and be flexible on the minor parts of the religion"*. See: Hassan, Hassan. "Jihadis grow more dangerous as they conquer hearts in Syria." *The National*, 13 May 2013.

[320] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 44.

[321] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 45

[322] Gordon, Michael R. and Barnard, Anna: "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations", *The New York Times*, 10 December 2012. Commenting on Jabhat al-Nusra's rising popularity among Syria's rural civilians, a Syrian journalist told American media: *"Jabhat al Nusra is not only providing a religious alternative, it is trying to provide an alternative for the government, an alternative for the transitional revolutionary council, and also an alternative for the international community"*. See McEvers Kelly. "Jihadi Fighters Win Hearts And Minds By Easing Syria's Bread Crisis.", *NPR*, 16 January 2013.

[323] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 22

only accepts fighters who carry a personal recommendation from an existing member of the organisation. Thus, Jabhat al-Nusra tend to enrol capable and ideologically observant fighters who are subjected to an eight-week tactical training and ideological indoctrination program before being allowed to engage in battle on behalf of the organisation[324].

The pitfalls of integration

When the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition seized control of the entire province of Idlib in the spring and summer of 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra's goal of establishing an Islamic emirate in Syria came into reach. Exercising control over Idlib city and several of the province's major towns, the jihadist organisation once and for all asserted itself as the dominant group in north-western Syria. But as Staniland points out, transforming into an integrated organisation also carries significant risks. As organisations rise to prominence within the rebel landscape, they tend to become prioritised targets for counterinsurgents who attempt to decapitate their leadership ranks and diminish their territorial control[325].

From late 2014 and onwards, Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership has been systematically targeted by American - and subsequently - Russian airstrikes[326]. While the July 2016 rebranding manoeuvre in which Jabhat al-Nusra officially cut its ties to al-Qaeda in order to *"close the gap between the jihadi factions in the Levant"*[327], as al-Jolani put it, he also emphasised the need *"to remove the excuse used by the international community—spearheaded by America and Russia—to bombard and displace Muslims in the Levant"*[328]. However, as Staniland notes, leadership decapitation strategies are much more effective in the early phases of an insurgency, when the vanguard organisation is still struggling to integrate itself by building vertical ties[329]. This may help explain why Jabhat al-Nusra - despite being targeted by not only Syrian but also American and Russian bombs - remains structurally coherent. As it merged with range of ideologically disparate organisations in January 2017, it bolstered its leadership ranks with a large number of high-ranking officers from the newly-absorbed organisations and defectors from the ideologically split Ahrar al-Sham[330]. Thus, as long as the Syrian army is too weak to reconquer and disembed the rebranded version of Jabhat al-Nusra

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[324] Lister, Charles: "Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra", *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2016, p. 35.

[325] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 39.

[326] For examples of recent airstrikes on Jabhat al-Nusra leaders, see for instance: Al-Jazeera: *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham: Abu Faraj killed in US air strike*, 4 October 2016; Lizzie Deaden: *Syrian war: Islamist rebel commander killed in air strikes*, The Independent, 9 September 2016; Jamil Mukkaram: *Commander of Al-Qaeda splinter group killed in US airstrike in Syria's Idlib*, ARA News, 2 January 2017, The Daily Telegraph: *Air strike 'kills Al-Nusra Front spokesman' in Syria*, 3 April 2016.

[327] Akkad, Dania: "Jabhat al-Nusra Rebrands After Split From Al-Qaida", *Syria Deeply*, 29 July 2016.

[328] John, Tara. "Everything You Need To Know About the New Nusra Front." *Time Magazine*, 29 July 2016.

[329] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 219.

[330] Rowan, Mattisan. "Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham", *The Wilson Center*, 25 April 2017.

from its territory - according to Staniland the second strategic component required to militarily degrade an integrated organisation - the organisation will likely remain deeply embedded within north-western Syria.

However, as Staniland notes, integrated organisations may also fragment from within it is mismanages rapid changes and expansions in its organisational structure[331]. While the great realignment of inter-rebel relations in the beginning of Phase IV may strengthen eventually Jabhat al-Nusra[332], integrating several organisations into an established organisational structure carries the risk of provoking internal competition and divisions, which can weaken the horizontal ties of the organisation to the extent that atomises and devolves into a parochial organisation[333]. Exactly how the organisational restructuring will play out remains to be seen as Syria's civil war continues to grind on.

Findings: Futile and fruitful insurgencies

The above analysis illustrates that different organisations carry vastly distinct organisational capacities to succeed within a fragmented rebel landscape. The FSA - born without a leadership able to exercise robust central control - never managed to connect the dispersed, hyper-localised nodes of the organisation, thus leading it to fragment. Conversely, - and perhaps as a direct consequence of the FSA's failure -, Jabhat al-Nusra's highly hierarchical and structurally coherent leadership succeeded in embedding a largely urban-based cadre into the social fabric of rural Syria through clever alliance-building, a high degree of pragmatism and a knack for establishing basic institutions of governance and service provision in rebel-held Syria.

As the two examples illustrate, rebel fragmentation opens up windows of opportunity for superiorly structured organisations to take root in a sweeping rebellion as others fail to exercise sufficient control to shape the overall direction of the movement. In the counterinsurgency literature, the basic adage is that when a country is being subverted, it is not being outfought; it is being outgoverned[334]. That may well be. But a fragmented rebel landscape is likely to foster similar competitive dynamics *within* the rebel movement and *among* the constituent organisations as they struggle to establish not only military but also - and perhaps most importantly - political control over

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[331] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 41.

[332] According to a U.S. State Dept. spokesperson *"an al-Qaeda ploy to bring as much of the Syrian opposition under its operational control as possible, thereby making groups that merge with HTS part of al-Qaeda's Syria network"*. See Heller, Sam: "Syria's Former al-Qaeda Affiliate Is Leading Rebels on a Suicide Mission." *The Century Foundation*, 1 March 2017.

[333] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 42.

[334] Fall, Bernard B. "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency", Naval War College Review, vol. XVII, no. 8, 1965, p. 34.

the communities[335]. To that end, Jabhat al-Nusra has proved to be organisationally and strategically superior as it has successfully out-governed - and at times out-gunned - interiorly structured allies.

[335] Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy essentially mirrors David Kilcullen's theorem on the basic mechanisms of competitive control in insurgencies: *"In irregular conflicts, the local armed actor that a given population perceives as most able to establish a normative system for resilient, full-spectrum control over violence, and human security is most likely to prevail within that population's residential area".* See Kilcullen, David. *Counterinsurgency*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 152.

IX: Discussion

This thesis set out to answer two interrelated questions, namely what has caused the Syrian rebel movement to fragment and why some organisations are better equipped to thrive in a fragmented rebel landscape while others fail to adapt. The key findings of the two analyses will be discussed below; first, the identified causes of rebel fragmentation are compared to Christia's findings[336]; secondly, the role of ideology - a factor that Staniland largely omits in his theory - is discussed in order to understand the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra.

Alternative explanations for the fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement

The findings of the analysis of the causal mechanisms of rebel fragmentation in Syria strongly indicate that the organisations themselves exercise little control over the dynamics that influence and shape their ability to cultivate intra-movement coherence. In fact, all the dominant rebel organisations have - at various times - attempted to forge a stronger degree of institutionalisation among them through alliance-building and mergers. In particular, the formation of the Jaysh al-Fatah alliance in the spring of 2015 illustrated that several dominant rebel organisations - in this case Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra - do possess the capacity and as well as the willingness to engage in cross-organisational collaborative frameworks. However, dynamics outside the immediate control of the organisations seem to have undermined and obstructed the inner-workings of the alliances in several ways. In the case of Jaysh al-Fatah, the Syrian army's recapturing of Aleppo caused Turkey to reorient its Syria policy, thus spurring Ankara to salvage their own rebel partners on the ground while leaving Jabhat al-Nusra isolated and open to continued attacks, thus fracturing the alliance.

These findings contrast Christia's case-studies of alliance formation and rebel fragmentation in Bosnia and Afghanistan. Her main argument is that rational power considerations drive the formation and fracturing of rebel alliances. Rebel organisations, she argues, want to be part of a coalition large enough to attain victory while small enough to ensure maximum political payoffs in a post-conflict scenario[337]. The implication of this dilemma, she argues, is that unless one organisation is sufficiently powerful to attain victory over the incumbent state on its own, the conflict will degenerate into a constant process of alliance reconfigurations as the rebel organisations manoeuvre in an effort to win the war while simultaneously ensuring *"that they do not get victimised at the hands of the strongest actor left standing"*[338]. Consequently, she argues that the inner-

[336] See: Christia, Fotini. *Alliance Formations in Civil Wars*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[337] Ibid., p. 6.

[338] Ibid.

workings of rebel movements are shaped by intentional actions by the individual organisations through what she dubs a *'minimum winning coalition'* logic. How can we understand this discrepancy in the findings of Christia's study and the causal mechanisms of rebel fragmentation identified in this thesis?

A possible explanation for the divergent results may be found in the nature and context of the civil conflicts themselves. Christia builds her theory upon meticulous case studies of intra-rebel-movement relations in the successive Afghan civil wars between 1978 and 1998, the Bosnian civil war spanning from 1992 until 1998 as well as the Bosnian civil war of 1941-1942. In the Afghan civil wars, four different ethnic groups with multiple cross-cutting cleavages of racial, linguistic and sectarian nature divided the organisations pitted against the successive Afghan regimes[339]. Similarly, in Bosnia, three different ethnic groups and significant sectarian divides separated the armed actors[340].

Thus, a common denominator in the conflicts chosen for Christia's case-studies is an extreme degree of ethnic and sectarian heterogeneity among the warring actors. On the basis of her study of these multiparty conflicts, she argues that ruling elites within these differing groupings manipulate identity narratives to accommodate the formation of new intergroup alliances based on relative power considerations[341]. This, she argues, explains why Shiite Hazaras and Sunni Pashtuns in Afghanistan may ally at one point during a conflict and find themselves engaged in all-out battle in the next moment as new alliance partners emerge and power distribution among the organisations shift. These anarchic conditions, in turn, sow an insurmountable fear of being betrayed by nominal allies of different ethnic or sectarian compositions, spurring organisations to turn on former partners[342].

But in contrast to the Afghan and Bosnian civil wars, the rebel movement in Syria is far more homogenous. As noted, it consists mainly of Sunni-Arab organisations with varying and yet remarkable similar and overlapping ideological preferences and visions of a post-conflict Syria. Consequently, while we can observe shifts in alliance preferences among the rebel organisations in Syria, they do not appear to be motivated by Christia's 'minimum winning coalition' logic. Rather, the pattern of alliance formation in Syria indicates that the organisations have sought to cultivate

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[339] Christia, Fotini. *Alliance Formations in Civil Wars*, Cambridge University Press, 2012., p. 28. As for Afghanistan, the rebel organisations were constituted of ethnic Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras of either Sunni or Shiite observance and a flurry of different tribal affiliations. Ibid., p. 47.

[340] In Bosnia, ethnic Croats, Bosnians and Serbs of either catholic, Orthodox Christian or Muslim observance engaged in rapidly shifting war-time alliances.

[341] Ibid., p. 240.

[342] Ibid., p. 34.

coalitions based on what may be dubbed a 'maximum winning coalition' logic encompassing several dominant organisations with relatively similar ideological preferences[343]. As the analysis of Phase VI indicated, the break-down of inter-organisational collaboration in Syria seems to have been triggered by shifts in the geopolitical considerations of the movement's state patrons rather than intentional power considerations among the non-state actors within the movement.

Does that mean that Christia's theory is without use in understanding what has caused rebel fragmentation in Syria? Not necessarily. The large Islamic Front alliance, which was formed in Phase II and - over the course of barely one year - gradually collapsed, spanned seven organisations, two of which were arguably the strongest organisations in Syria during that specific phase of the conflict[344]. As indicated in the analysis of Phase II and pointed out by other researchers of Syria's civil war[345], the failure of the alliance to truly materialise as a rigid and cohesive institutional framework can possibly be attributed to power-sharing disagreements between the two centres of gravity within the alliance.

Thus, while the formation of the Islamic Front was motivated by the ambition to maximise control between equally dominant organisations, the break-down of the alliance can possibly be attributed to Christia's theory that relative power considerations within Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam have shaped and determined the viability of the alliance. However, the empirical evidence on what exactly caused the otherwise promising coalition to crumble remains very sparse; generating new knowledge as to why the Islamic Front collapsed is thus a job for future researchers once the empirical foundation for studying the inner-workings of Syria's rebel movement has been strengthened.

A potential opening for criticism of the first analytical chapter's findings may be its focus on rebel fragmentation as a second-order effect of dynamics outside the immediate control of the individual organisations. One may be tempted to argue that the analysis renders the actors on the ground without agency; that they're portrayed as pawns in a game of chess, susceptible to the forces of history, structural constraints endogenous to the conflict and at the mercy of outside forces. This may well be. In contrast to Christia's very stringent theory, Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour's more loosely structured conceptualisation of rebel fragmentation does seem to favour an understanding of rebel fragmentation as a byproduct of forces that - only to a limited extent - can be influenced

[343] Again, the formation of Jaysh al-Fatah during Phase III of the conflict constitutes an example of pragmatic Salafist and more dogmatic Jihadist alliance building. While they do remain divided over issues such as to which extent social control should be enforced in the rebel-held areas, they nonetheless share very similar conceptions of how a strict Islamic system of governance should be implemented.

[344] Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam.

[345] See Lund, Aron. "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 2: An Umbrella Organization." *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 15 January 2014; Lund, Aron. "Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 6: Stagnation?" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 14 April 2014.

by the individual organisations within a rebel movement. Consequently, the endogenous and exogenous causes of rebel fragmentation identified and analysed in the first analysis may be affected by this inclination to magnify the effects of outside influences on the phenomenon. Nonetheless, the findings of the analysis are interesting and relevant to developing our understanding of why organisations within rebel movements struggle to cultivate cross-organisational frameworks of collaboration and why they so often turn inwards, ultimately triggering fratricidal infighting between nominal allies.

Alternative explanations for differing organisational trajectories in Syria

While the first analysis identifies rebel fragmentation as a second-order effect of dynamics largely outside the control of the armed actors themselves, the second analysis, however, shows that the individual organisations possess different capacities and inclinations to manoeuvre within this fragmented rebel landscape. Thus, while they may - to some effect - be at the mercy of the aforementioned historical, structural and geopolitical constraints, some organisations can counteract the debilitating consequences of rebel fragmentation by skilfully managing and developing the structure of their organisations as they navigate and influence the social terrain in which exist. By employing Staniland's theory of insurgent cohesion and insurgent collapse, the second analysis explored how the constraints bestowed upon the FSA rendered it unable to evolve from its parochial origins, causing the once-promising rebel army to disintegrate and fragment, while Jabhat al-Nusra successfully evolved from a cadre-based vanguard to an integrated organisation by successfully embedding itself deeply into rebel-held Syria's social fabric.

However, is it really a coincidence that a highly ideological Jihadist organisation successfully outmanoeuvres a non-ideological one? While Staniland's theory largely dismisses the role of ideology in explaining how strong and durable rebel organisations are built[346], Ahmad argues that rebel organisations espousing a global Islamist identity appeal to a wider identity framework than more narrow, parochial Islamist identities relying on pre-existing kinship networks[347]. Globally oriented Islamist organisations who imagine themselves as being part of an *ummah*[348], which exceeds ethnic, tribal or national boundaries, can successfully extend their influence across these divides, thus allowing the Jihadists to distinguish themselves from the parochial politics of exclusion[349]. This could help explain how an organisation such as Jabhat al-Nusra has become increasingly popular within rebel-held Syria, while parochial organisations have been bogged down in internal

[346] Staniland, Paul. *Networks of Rebellion – Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 25.

[347] Ahmad, Aisha. "Going Global: Islamist Competition in Contemporary Civil Wars", *Security Studies*, vol. 25, 2016, p. 355.

[348] The imagined borderless community of Muslim.

[349] Ibid., p. 358.

struggles. However, while Ahmad's study does complement Staniland's theory rather well, Jabhat al-Nusra - through its rebranding schemes - has increasingly sought to portray itself as a largely Syrian organisation on par with the rest of the organisations within the rebel movement. Perhaps a cosmopolitan Islamic identity is not as attractive as Ahmad's study implies? Future case studies on how and to which extent ideology influences popular support for rebel organisations in Syria could address this issue once the conflict environment once again becomes accessible to researchers.

Limitations of the study

The following section first discusses the potential theoretical limitations in Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour's three-dimensional conceptualisation of rebel fragmentation and how these may have affected the results of the analyses. Secondly, the methodological limitations of conducting case study research and how this affects the generalisability of the study's findings are considered[350].

While Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour's three-dimensional conceptualisation of rebel fragmentation is a highly valuable and intuitive tool for exploratory case studies of rebel fragmentation, it also has its limitations. In assessing the level of institutionalisation among rebel organisations within a movement, the model only includes formal institutional ties such as established alliances[351]. There is, of course, a good reason for this; informal, loose alliances are inherently difficult to identify - especially in a highly complex and inaccessible conflict environment. However, it also means that informal frameworks of cooperation that exist locally escape the narrow scope of what constitutes measurable institutionalisation. Consequently, this overlooks the constant emergence of so-called 'operations rooms' through which tactical coordination of rebel offensives is conducted across organisational divides despite the collapse of formal alliances[352]. This, however, is also an indication a wider issue with employing Bakke, Cunningham & Seymour's three-dimensional model to a conflict as complex as Syria's; there are almost too many actors with too many nodes between to fit into the neatly structured conceptual model. In the case of Syria, the modelling tool might prove more useful to map rebel fragmentation on the provincial level, where there are fewer actors and informal alliances are plentiful[353]. In other intra-state conflicts, where

[350] For a discussion of empirical limitations see *Chapter IV: Methodology, research design and data collection*, p. XX.

[351] Bakke, Kristen M., Cunningham, Kathleen. G., & Seymour, Lee. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, p. 269.

[352] For instance, in March 2017, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and several FSA sub-factions launched an offensive north of the city of Hama despite not being formally allied through a broader collaborative framework.

[353] The rebel-held enclave of eastern Ghouta could, for instance, be an obvious micro-case as several of the enclave's organisations set up an intricate judicial system and governance institutions with built-in power-sharing mechanisms, only for everything to collapse after the death of Zahran Alloush, Jaysh al-Islam's leader, in December 2015. See: Lund, Aron. "Into the Tunnels - The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Easter Ghouta" *The Century Foundation*, 21 December 2016

there rebel landscape is less complex, the model is very likely suitable to capture the evolving patterns of fragmentation on the national level.

As to the methodological limitations of the thesis, a well-executed qualitative case study can provide a very fruitful basis for developing new knowledge of complex social phenomena, which subsequently can be used to formulate plausible generalisations or hypotheses that may be applicable to similar cases[354]. Single-case studies are, however, also context-dependent. This limits the degree to which the findings of case study analyses can be generalised and applied to other cases. As the above discussion of the discrepancies between Christia's case studies and the findings of this thesis illustrates, context does matter. In the case of Syria, the geopolitical context in which the conflict has developed has significantly influenced the individual rebel organisations as they have become increasingly dependent on their state patrons as well as shifts in their respective policy calculations. While not unique, the degree to which regional actors have interfered by proxy in Syria's civil war sets it apart from many other intra-state conflicts in which the degree of outside interference is less prevalent[355]. That is not to say that lessons of theoretical value - or lessons for future policy making, for that matter - cannot be deduced from the study of Syria's civil war; as Flyvbjerg notes, extreme cases *"often reveal more information because they activate more actors... and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied"*[356].

Nonetheless, it is important not to overestimate the generalisability of the findings. In Syria, for instance, the policies of the regional patrons have been influenced and affected by a flurry of highly context-dependent events occurring at a specific place, in a specific time and for a specific reason. These include factors such as the wider Arab Spring; a gradual American disengagement from the Middle East region; heightened Saudi-Iranian rivalry; power struggles within the Gulf Cooperation Council; and an emboldened Turkish leadership. The exogenous causes of rebel fragmentation identified in the first analytical chapter - lack of donor coordination, inter-regional rivalry and reorientation of patron policies - cannot be dislodged from this specific context, but they can, however, prove to be helpful focal points in future studies of rebel fragmentation.

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[354] See Chapter IV: Methodology. See also: Flyvbjerg, Bent. "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research", *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, p. 224-225.

[355] Resembling that of Syria, the very high degree of interference by regional actors in the Congolese civil war has produced similar patterns of fragmentation between nominally allied Hema tribes became embroiled in intra-movement struggles as Rwanda and Uganda began competing over influence within the movement. See: Chapter V: Theory, p. 23. See also: Tamm, Henning. "UPC in Ituri - The External Militarisation of Local Politics in North-Eastern Congo", *Rift Valley Institute,* 2013, p. 8-10.

[356] Flyvbjerg, Bent. "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research", *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol. 12, no. 2, 2006, p. 223.

Avenues for further research

However, the arguably most promising - and perhaps most interesting - avenue for future studies on rebel fragmentation is how the pre-war regime type affects popular mobilisation at civil war onset. As the analysis of Phase I illustrated, the circumscribed state of Syria's pre-war political opposition, the regime's control over state institutions and its co-optation of the country's civil society organisations left the sweeping rebellion without pre-established outlets through which widespread popular discontent could be vented, coordinated and synchronised.

Why is this venue particularly prospective? Because while praetorian-authoritarian regimes are - naturally - also shaped and affected by the context in which they operate, they are nonetheless political systems founded upon a similar set of building blocks; weak state institutions, patronage networks and politicisation of the military establishment through which the incumbent regime employs its tools of self-preservation, namely co-optation, coercion, corruption, suppression and violence. Huntington notes that in the absence of legitimate intermediaries and political institutions capable of moderating conflict, power is fragmented by default and consensus-based methods for resolving conflict are absent[357]. The case of Syria illustrates that this also tends to seep into the culture of opposition politics; as a Syrian dissident noted, working under the constant pressure of Syria's intelligence apparatus "*destroyed democratic culture within the opposition parties"*[358]. Being shaped by a culture of oppression rendered them unable to cooperate efficiently both before and after the uprising as the armed rebellion began sprouting diffusely through neighbourhood militias and make-shift committees riddled by parochial power struggles, bereft of national ambitions and lacking the willingness to even attempt to unify[359].

There is an inherent paradox here, which warrants further scholarly attention; while fragile authoritarian states with praetorian structures are most prone to experience wide-spread civil conflict, they may also produce the least conducive environments for the mobilisation of coherent challengers to the state. In effect, this entails that even if a rebel movement should succeed in toppling the incumbent regime - a prospect that in Syria seemed likely until Russia's intervention in the fall of 2015 -, it may simultaneously be historically and structurally preconditioned to fragment into competing camps[360]. A future study of how pre-war politics affects the ability of rebel

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[357] Huntington, Samuel P. *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press, 1968, p. 196.

[358] International Crisis Groups. "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition", *Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 146*, 17 October 2013, p. 8.

[359] International Crisis Groups. "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition", *Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 146*, 17 October 2013, p. 9.

[360] See Findley, Michael G. & Rudloff, Peter. "The downstream effects of combatant fragmentation on civil war recurrence", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 19-32, for a quantitative study of how rebel fragmentation increases the likelihood of civil war recurrence.

movements to coalesce at civil war onset could take form as a comparative case study of conflicts in weak states controlled by praetorian regimes such as Libya[361], Sudan[362] and Chad[363]. In all three cases the rebel movements pitted against states designed to be coup-proof have undergone significant degrees of fragmentation and have displayed similar patterns of fratricidal violence as observed in Syria.

[361] Following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, the deeply fragmented Libyan rebel movement failed to cohere, resulting in the establishment of two competing governments seated in opposite sides of the country as more or less independent militia rome freely in the country-sides. See for instance Chivis, Christopher J. & Martini, Jeffrey. "Libya After Qaddafi - Lessons and Implications for the Future", *RAND Corporation*, 2014.

[362] The Darfuri rebel movement, the Sudanese Liberation Army, gradually broke apart into competing factions during the 2003-2005 civil war. Despite sharing a Darfuri identity, the commanders of the had no political experience and exercised an inherently opportunistic behaviour *"on the basis of what united them [at the moment], with little discussion of what divided them"*. See De Waal, Alex & Flint, Julie: *Darfur - A New History of a Long War*, African Arguments, 2008, p. 85.

[363] After a successful 2005 offensive near the capital of N'Djaména, the Chadian rebel movement began crumbling as the constituent organisation disagreed on how to share power in a potential new government. The infighting, in turn, spurred France to side with the existing Chadian government. See Tubiana, Jérôme. "Renouncing the Rebels: Local and Regional Dimensions of Chad–Sudan Rapprochement", Small Arms Survey, 2011, p. 17.

X: Conclusions

More than six years after hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets demanding political, economic and social reforms, Syria's civil war grinds unabatedly on. Marred by internal divisions stemming from and exacerbated by historical, structural and geopolitical constraints, the rebel movement has effectively split into two competing centres of gravity that - for the time being - tread a thin line between fragile peace and potentially devastating inter-rebel conflict. Reeled in by Turkey's seismic policy shift after its incursion into northern Syria and the fall of Aleppo, Ahrar al-Sham and its allies have seen themselves forced to accept a negotiated settlement in order to salvage what they believe is left of the rebellion. Meanwhile, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham - effectively isolated by the international community - remains defiant and stronger than ever before as Jabhat al-Nusra has successfully absorbed a range of medium-sized organisations, thus tripling the number of fighters in its ranks. The lacking ability of Syria's rebel movement - fighters and politicians alike - to coalesce during the early days of the insurgency has played into the hands of the Jihadist components of the movement to seize control of the uprising through superior organisational structures, cool-headed pragmatism and non-reliance on patron policies.

Where does this lead? What does the future hold for the Syrian uprising? Unless something radically unexpected occurs, the Syrian regime is likely to survive and it will prioritise rooting out the pockets of resistance in the densely populated areas of western Syria, including the internally atomised eastern Ghouta suburbs. However, Idlib province - the rebel's strategically vital stronghold - is likely to remain under shared albeit strained control by Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Whether the latter will turn on its formerly close allies in order to usurp the territories still under Ahrar al-Sham's control remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the degree to which Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has successfully integrated itself into the social fabric of rebel-held Idlib indicates that the organisation will remain a highly influential player in the years to come as it attempts to realise its vision of establishing a de-facto Islamic emirate in the Turkish-Syrian borderlands. Not unlike the way in which the Taliban in Afghanistan has successfully resisted more than 15 years of extensive counterinsurgency campaigns, the international community may - at some point - see itself forced to accepting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as a viable negotiating partner. For as long as the Syrian army remains too weak and too depleted to recapture the rebel stronghold by force and Turkey tacitly accepts the Jihadist presence on its border, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is not likely to disappear.

The Syrian tragedy serves as yet another stark reminder of the dangers and pitfalls of waging war by proxy. Not only has the concerted effort to arm Syria's rebels in order to install a Sunni client in Damascus descended into internecine rivalry between the nominally allied regional powers; the external backers also seem to have severely underestimated the difficulty of controlling the overall trajectory of the conflict as Syria's internal schisms continue to expand and the state violently disintegrates into separated zones of control. Will Syria ever be able to reconstitute itself as a territorially, socially and politically coherent unit? The prospects are bleak as its fragmented, ungovernable lands are likely to remain criss-crossed by sectarian, ethnic, social and geopolitical cleavages that, like a cobweb, will extend throughout the region and beyond for many years to come.

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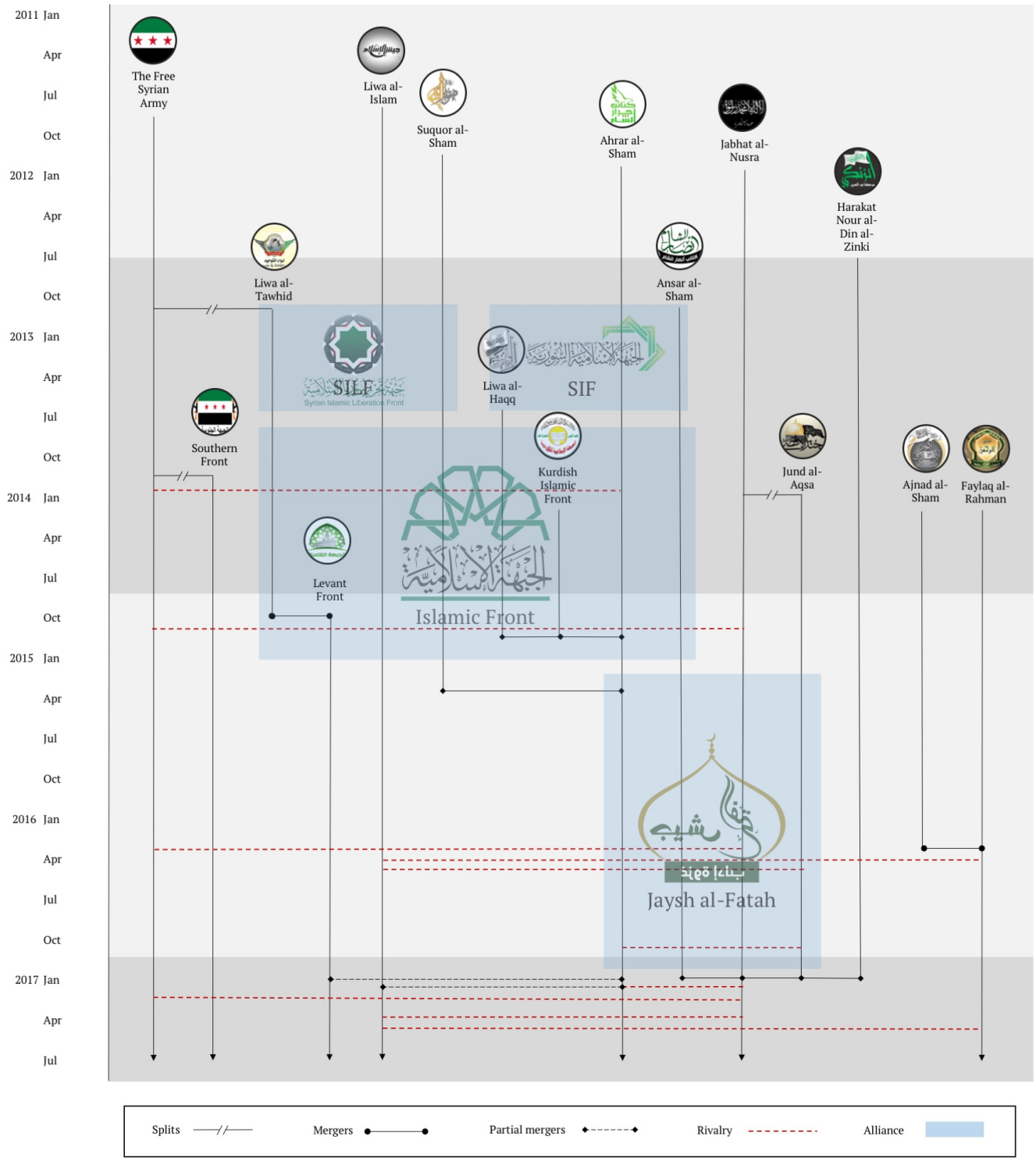
Appendix I: Organisational overview



Source: Stanford University; Mapping Militant Organisations