

Reports

Islamist Movements in Syria: Dynamics of Schism, Prospects of Reconciliation(*)



[EPA]

Abstract

With their largely diverse attitudes, Islamist movements have taken advantage of the Syrian revolution for exercising activities inside Syria. After coming under pressure by the armed conflict, these movements attempted to reconcile their contradictory goals. While some of them ended up in inter-factional fighting, others remained in relative concord.

Syria, as well as the Middle East region and the international political platform, have experienced changes resulting from the developing Syrian conflict that ran in parallel with violent and bloody transformations in ideology, structure and alliances among various Islamist and Jihadist organizations.

***Please note that this report is a summarized version of the Arabic report which appeared here:**

<http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2016/09/160905105641550.html>

The Ideology Bang

The Syrian revolution broke out as a popular uprising supported by local communities in towns and villages. The Free Syrian army (FSA) has emerged as a spearhead for the armed movement that was later supported by most of the Islamist and Jihadist movements.

Several factors have led to the proliferation of the ideological or Jihadist ideology, including the following:

- The high human cost resulting from the so violent and repressive techniques adopted by the Assad regime.
- The inherently sectarian nature of the Assad regime that committed series of massacres against the majority of Sunni population.
- The growth of liberated districts in northern and eastern Syria in 2011, reached its climax in the first quarter of 2013. These newly gained swathes of land have provided opportunity for globalized jihadist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Stages of Change and Confrontation

- After the formation of the Free Syrian Army in July 2011, the organizations that had solicited an open ideological approach began to emerge as separate entities manifesting distinct attitudes from the mainstream revolutionary realm.
- Alliances at country level were also established with different factions in the last quarter of 2012, following the formation of major Islamist movements in Syria.
- The Islamic State: The establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which was announced in April 2013, posed a challenge for the global jihadist movement in general and for the local Syrian jihadist factions in particular. The symbolic discrepancy between ISIL and the Syrian revolution was further exacerbated.
- The Islamic Front: This front was composed of seven large revolutionary factions, along with several factions from the FSA, advocating national objectives that aimed at establishing an "Islamic State".
- Fighting ISIL: In January 2014, a FSA splinter group named "Jaish al-Mujahidin", supported by the FSA and the Islamic Front, declared war on ISIL in northern Syria and drove it out of most of Aleppo and Idleb outskirts.
- Reassessment Period: A group of major revolutionary factions, led by "Ahrar al-Sham", reaffirmed in May 2014 their patriotic objective to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a "state for justice, law and liberties". The movement continued its efforts to wage a campaign of reassessing and transforming ideology in a prelude to confrontation with ISIL.
- Riyadh Conference: The conference held by the Syrian opposition on 8-10 December 2015, aimed at forming a single political body and a higher commission to conduct negotiations with the regime. After the Riyadh conference, the Syrian peace process gained widespread international concern as it also sought to classify Syrian revolutionary factions.

- Jaish al-Fath: Formed in March 2015, the group comprised several factions, including Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra Front (Nusra Front).
- Disengagement: In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra was renamed as "Fath al-Sham Front". The statement has largely been perceived as a disengagement from al-Qaeda. The step has raised serious speculations about the future of the Jihadist movements in Syria.

Future of Islamist and Jihadist Movements in Syria

The Islamist movement in Syria has emerged from the crucible of conflict, chaos and relentless experimentation. The movement that has largely been characterized by flexibility, ongoing transformation and inter-factional conflicts, has never been tested in a stable environment or a political scheme. A distinct model of a rising local political, military, ideological and strategic experience is represented by Ahrar al-Sham movement which is well-organized and duly capable of sharing political power within an overall national accord. Regarding Jabhat Fath al-Sham, it represents the Salafist Jihadist movement and its persistent attempts to establish its own locally-based venture after its disengagement from al-Qaeda. The movement aims at applying the Sharia law that would put an end to the revolutionary goal for achieving political and democratic change in Syria.

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