The Salafi-Jihadi Syrian Trend & The Takfiri Ideology of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham

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EMERGENCE OF NEO-TAKFIRISM

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By virtue of having represented the hotbed for both its birth and growth, the starting point to all of today's analyses anent Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham – loosely translated as the 'Organization for the Liberation of the Levant' – has been the Syrian civil war. While the focus of this reflection is the groups' theological condition specifically, I will likewise commence my analysis from a brief overview of the Syrian conflict. Once sketched its profile, it will become clearer which role, and specific point-in-time, has been, and currently is being held and represented, by Haya' at Tahrir al-Sham. An eminently multi-side and multi-dimensional conflict, the Syrian civil war is fought between the Ba'athist Syrian Arab Republic led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, along with domestic and foreign allies, and various domestic and foreign forces.

These, however, are opposing both the Syrian government and each other in varying combinations. The ever-changing coalition dynamics have thus thrown the country in what can be only be described as utter chaos. Indeed, the unpredictability of the war has been one of the main reasons behind its incredibly high death toll, now running into hundreds of thousands – estimates vary between 380,636 and 585,000 as of January 2020[1]. On the 26th of May 2019 the *Encyclopedia Britannica*[2] officially classified the conflict as the second deadliest in the 21st century, making the Syrian civil war a grim reality difficult to ignore.

With regards to the *casus belli*, it suffices here to say that the unrest in Syria is part of a wider wave of the 2011 Arab Spring protests and grew out of discontent with the Syrian government. It then escalated to an armed conflict specifically after protests calling for Assad's removal were violently suppressed. The war, which began on the 15th of March 2011 with major conflict hubs in Damascus and Aleppo, is being fought by several factions. While it is not practical to list their entirety herein, there are several actors which have been significantly more engaged in the clashes.

The Syrian Armed Forces and its international allies, as well as a loose alliance of mostly Sunni opposition rebel groups, such as the Free Syrian Army, represent the major players in the war. However, other, less prominent actors have also been heavily involved. Amongst them I wish to single out the Salafi-jihadist groups, including Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, the mixed Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Following the killing of their Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on the 27th of October of last year, however, the latter group has seen a significant decrease in their influence and power projection in the region.

I have only voluntarily sketched the salient aspects and dynamics of the Syrian civil war as the aim proper of this paper is that of individuating, analysing, and assessing the way religion has informed the ideologies of the extremist Islamist groups involved in the conflict. More specifically, I wish to address the Salafi-jihadi ideology and the ways its main theological tenets have been interpreted, and warped, by Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham. As an eminently Salafi-jihadi organisation, this group perfectly illustrates the interpretational shift that has recently taken place amongst Sunni fundamentalist organisations regarding the ways the five religious tenets of *tawhid, al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, *bid' ah*, *takfir*, and *jihad* have been understood and made use of in the programmatic manifestos of the aforementioned organisations.

While I will dive into these concepts with greater depth in the following chapters, it is important to remember that "Salafi-jihadism, the foundation of many of today's (most notorious) terrorist organizations, has achieved a significant impact on world affairs within less than three decades.[Indeed] it has given rise to many organizations such as al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Yemen and North Africa."[3] For this reason, there is no denying that this ideology represents a serious threat which must be confronted. In order to do so, it is vitally important to firstly understand the religious dimension behind it. This reflection thus finds space, and legitimacy, in the scarcity of literature available exclusively dedicated to the interrelation between the

[1] نحو 585 ألف شخص استشهدوا وقضوا وقتلوا منذ انطلاقة الثورة السورية المطالبة بالحرية والديمقراطي,4 January, 2020 (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights): http://www.syriahr.com/?p=353886 [Consulted 31 January 2020].

[2] Michael Ray, "8 Deadliest Wars of the 21st Century", 26 May, 2019 (Encyclopedia Britannica): https://web.archive.org/web/20190526191400/https://www.britannica.com/list/8-deadliest-wars-of-the-21st-century [Consulted 31 January 2020].

[3] Eli Alshech, 'The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A Historical and Doctrinal Analysis', *Islamic Law and Society*, 21 (2014), 419-452 (p. 491).

theological and legal aspects of Islam, and the ways this interplay has shaped the ideologies of some of today's extremist Islamist groups.

I wish to dedicate the conclusive part of this introductory chapter to a brief overview of the specific topics I will consider throughout the rest of the paper. While this initial section has served the purpose of broadly contextualising this analysis, I will make use of the second chapter to introduce Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham. Although it does not represent the focus of my reflection per se, it will be important to understand the ways in which this organisation has emerged and has successfully imposed itself in the Syrian regional landscape as one of the major armed actors of the conflict. By the end of the second chapter I will also introduce the group's two main religious scholars. Their work, in terms specifically of the ways in which they have absorbed and reshaped the Salafi-jihadi ideology, will then represent the focus of my third chapter. Finally, the fourth section of this paper will seek to show how Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's ideology is the product of a foregoing doctrinal crisis within the Salafi-jihadi ranks, the result of which has been the emergence of *neo-takfirism.* I will thus ultimately argue that Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham rightly fits this new category.

As Lister reports in his study of the evolution of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, "late one night in August 2011, seven jihadi commanders crossed from Iraq into north-eastern Syria seeking to take advantage of that country's increasing instability to establish a new Syrian wing of the recovering Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)."[4] By order of the latter's then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a Syrian known as Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani led six accomplices through the border in order to quickly set about establishing connections with the ISI's well-entrenched Syrian jihadi networks. In a matter of weeks, the necessary foundations had been laid for the birth of 'Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahidi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad', or 'The Support Front to the People of the Levant by the Mujahideen of the Levant on the Fields of Jihad'.

While Jabhat al-Nusra does not nominally exist anymore – the rebranding process that ultimately led to the birth of Hay' at Tahrir al Sham was completed in late 2017 – the group has come a long way from those early days. Indeed, it has been able to successfully transform itself from being an unpopular outsider accused of introducing alien ISI-like brutality into a nationalist revolution in early 2012, towards being something close to an accepted or even leading member of the Syrian revolutionary opposition from late 2012 onward.

The organisation's opportunistic approach, paired with their pragmatism on the ground, have allowed them to become one of the most powerful armed actors in the Syrian crisis. Through a grand-strategy largely consisting of embedding itself within revolutionary paradigms and dynamics and rooting its whole existence and activities into opposition societies, Jabhat al-Nusra then, and Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham today, has successfully established solid roots in a country that looks likely to suffer from instability for years to come. By adopting a gradualist strategy, by means of which the group's theological conservatism is applied to the Syrian society in a systematically limited, yet methodologically ever-expanding, way, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham has attempted to persuade the population into first accepting, and then eventually supporting and defending, an al-Qaida-like movement within their core. Hence, there is no mistaking the fact that the group's foundational ideology was borne out of the al-Qaida Cause, and their initial indebtedness towards the latter was manifest in the appointment of an exclusively al-Qaida-affiliated senior leadership.

The Cause of al-Qaida I have recently mentioned differs radically from that of other Islamist extremist organisations in that it showcases a highly sophisticated operational methodology. This was "developed within top levels of al-Qaida's strategic thinking in the late-2000s,"[5] and then formalized within al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's September 2013 'General Guidelines for Jihad'[6]. Put simply, the group seeks to gradually build localised bases of influence in which eventual zones of territorial control will present

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[4] Charles Lister, 'Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra', *The Brookings Project on U.S: Relations with the Islamic World*, 24 (2016), 1-55 (p. 5).
[5] Katherine Zimmerman, "The Khorasan Group: Syria's Al-Qaeda Threat", 23 September, 2014 (American Enterprise Institute): https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-khorasan-group-syrias-al-qaeda-threat [Consulted 02 February 2020].
[6] The original manuscript has been removed from all online channels. See https://alminara.wordpress.com/2015/04/20/shaykh-ayman-az-zawahiri-general-guidelines-for-jihad/ for an English transcription of the document.

opportunities for launching both close and far reaching attacks against Western proxies in their immediate vicinities and against the Western world at large. This typically gradualist and localist approach to the concept of transnational *jihad* was adopted by Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham who became its first successful test case. So much so, in fact, that al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) later attempted to replicate this model in their operations in Yemen.

To this day, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham has been able to demonstrate the full potential and value of its 'long-game' approach. Its strong Syrian focus, paired with its ability to reshape the organisation's ideology based on the ever-changing needs and contingencies of the conflict, have ensured that this trans-nationally minded movement still has an incredibly effective launching pad for carrying out attacks worldwide. They however do not only represent a danger for Western societies. Through the exploitation of the Syrian revolution, characterised by an evidently controlled pragmatism, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham has trapped the opposition into a vicious relationship of short-term tactical convenience but long-term danger. Indeed, in January 2019 Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham was able to seize dozens of villages from opposition forces in the north-western Syrian city of Idlib. The group was then able to reach a deal according to which the civil administration of the whole rebel-held Idlib Governorate would be led by Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham. While this paper is not directly interested in the evolution of the conflict in the Idlib pocket, it is important to point out that, as of today[7], the battle for its control keeps intensifying, and it is simply not possible to tell how the conflict will evolve.

Notwithstanding, I now wish to move onto the consideration of the ideological dimension of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham. Since the aim proper of this paper is to make clarity on its theological content, we must firstly turn to the religio-political objectives identified by the organisation as early as 2012. Put simply, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham aims to epitomize "the realization of al-Qaida's evolved thinking under al-Zawahiri."[8] Practically, this translates into the group's attempt to enter local wars and to ingrain itself within popular revolutionary dynamics in order to achieve a durable presence in the area. This serves the purpose of helping Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham achieve its long-term vision of establishing Islamic Emirates that serve as the foundational pillars for the emergence of a Caliphate. Hence, the Syrian revolution represented the perfect opportunity to implement the group's vision. At the time, Jabhat al-Nusra saw the civil war as a socio-political development emerging out of a failed secular rule and in need of an Islamic solution, that is, *jihad* and the establishment of the Islamic rule. The group thus originally identified itself as a movement devoted to *nusrat ahl al-sham* (support for the people of the Levant). Indeed, Jawlani himself stated[9] in a 2013 interview with Al-Jazeera that he saw the exploitation of the Syrian instability in his homeland as a God-given opportunity.

The symbolic importance of *Bilad al-Sham* – this term broadly indicates the whole Levantine region – should not be underestimated. According to numerous *hadiths*, in fact, Syria in particular is the much-prophesised land loved by Allah. Hence, Jawlani announced that Jabhat al-Nusra's mission was that of "bringing the law of Allah back to His land."[10] As per the orders of al-Zawahiri, the goal of *jihad* is to establish an Islamic system of government in Syria and, through consultation with other Islamic factions and the *ulema*, successfully implement the *Shari' ah* in the whole would-be Caliphate. At this point, I wish to briefly point out al-Zawahiri's use of the term 'Islamic'.

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[7] Bethan McKernan, "Turkish soldiers killed as battle for control of Idlib escalates", 03 February, 2020 (The Guardian): https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/turkish-soldiers-killed-as-battle-for-control-of-idlib-escalates/ar-BBZB7ro?ocid=spartanntp [Consulted 03 February 2020].

[8] Lister, *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

[9] "Syria's Al-Nusrah Front leader interviewed on conflict, political vision", December 22, 2013 (BBC Monitoring): https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/12/al-qaeda-leader-syria-speaks-al-jazeera-20131218155917935989.html [Consulted 03 February 2020].

[10] *Loc. Cit.*

As with the case of other extremist organisations, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham is an eminently Islamist movement. It is important to remember that the terms 'Islamic' and 'Islamist' are by no means synonyms, and to use them interchangeably is wrong[11]. The fact that al-Zawahiri choses to speak in 'Islamic' terms is telling of his belief, and Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's belief consequently, that his actions are legitimized, indeed, supported, by the *Qur'an*. This aspect of legitimacy is extremely important to movements such as the one founded by Jawlani. A great part of their struggle, in fact, consists in winning over popular support. The only way to do so then becomes that of attempting to show that their actions, no matter how brutal or arbitrary, are in some way legitimated by evidence found in the *Qur'an* and in the *Hadiths*. On the whole, it will be of use to remember that the main difference between the term 'Islamic', the adjective proper of the term 'Islam' and 'Islamism' is that the former eminently refers to faith and religion while the latter refers to the idea of "religionised politics."[12]

I wish to conclude this section by introducing two lesser-known ideologues whose works have deeply influenced and shaped Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's religious dimension. In addition to abiding by the tenets espoused by al-Qaida's leader al-Zawahiri, the then Jabhat al-Nusra also tied itself closely to a particular "Syrian brand of Salafi-jihadism"[13] developed and taught by Marwan Hadid and Nasar – I will hereafter refer to him by his *nom de guerre* Abu Mus'ab al-Suri. While my interest lies in their works, it is worthwhile contextualising these two figures. Marwan Hadid still enjoys the reputation of founding-father of modern-day Syrian jihadism, having led the armed uprising against Hafez Assad in the late 1960's and 1970's. Abu Musab al-Suri, on the other hand, was a famed al-Qaida strategic ideologue. To this day, the influence of the latter's writings can be seen throughout Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's nuts and bolts. Their ideological contribution, regarding particularly the ways it has informed the two theological tenets of *jihad* and *takfir*, will be analysed in depth in the following chapter.

Before diving into the analysis of *tawhid, al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, *bid' ah*, *takfir*, and *jihad,* it is necessary to consider the Salafi-jihadi trend as a whole. As a whole, the latter serves as the theoretical framework to which this analysis refers, as it broadly encapsulates Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's specific religious orientation. As a variation of Salafism, Salafi-jihadism has undergone important regional deviations in itself. Local actors, such as religious scholars as per the case of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, have placed a different emphasis, or provided an altogether original interpretation, on and of religious tenets that in themselves represent the foundational characteristics of a distinct religious movement. I have already alluded to the fact that Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham adheres to a particular Syrian variation of Salafi-jihadism in the previous chapter. For this reason, I will only consider the interrelation between Salafism and Jihadism as two distinct phenomena insofar as it serves the purpose of contextualising the more peculiar Salafi-jihadi movement. Further, my approach will differ from that of Shiraz Maher's ground-breaking study of Salafi-jihadism[14]. The focus herein will be placed exclusively on the 'Syrian doctrinal variation' brought about by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and Marwan Hadid, as opposed to Maher's more comprehensive analysis, devoid of specific regional deviations.

As Adraoui explains in the opening chapter of his *Militant Islam: Today and Tomorrow*, Salafi-jihadism has been able to assert itself as a somewhat original and compelling religious movement in the twentieth century due to its doctrinal heritage, shared by Salafism and Jihadism respectively. For centuries, the Muslim tradition had understood and interpreted *jihad* as an attempt to bring the letter of Islam in line with

[11] Christoffel Anthonie Olivier van Nieuwenhuijze, 'Islamism: A Defiant Utopianism', *Die Welt des Islams*, 35 (1995), 1-36 (p. 27).
[12] Bassam Tibi, 'Why Islamism is not Islam', in Tibi, *Islamism and Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 1-30 (p. 1).
[13] Lister, *Op. cit*., pp. 23-24.
[14] Shiraz Maher, *Salafi Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016).

its spirit. This struggle yielded to the emergence of modern-day groups entirely dedicated to fighting against those – it is important to note here both inside and outside Muslim-majority countries – who were presented as the enemies of Islam. This attitude evolved "in parallel with the growing visibility of an ethics based on a necessary return to the earliest days of Islam."[15]

This ethics then forms the basis of a doctrinal heritage which is common to both Salafism – the name derives from *al-salaf al-salih*, or 'the pious ancestors' – and Jihadism. There is, however, one important clarification to be made. Most adherents to Salafism do not endorse the use of violence. Indeed, "the geographical context and human resources of the jihadists who support religiously motivated violence differ from those of most Salafists who are likewise religiously fundamentalist but politically opposed to violence."[16] It is a mischaracterization to associate those who adhere to the Salafi creed with those who promote indiscriminate use of violence for the achievement of political goals.

Regardless, this mischaracterization has been possible due partly to the fact that Salafism as a whole is not a coherent school of thought. In time, its doctrinal incongruity has made way for the emergence of new interpretations of some of its key theological tenets. This has resulted in the emergence of new and hybrid forms of Salafism, amongst which is Salafi-jihadism. Clearly enough, this variation emphasizes the role of *jihad* to the extent that this has successfully become the *raison d'être* for those who adhere to it. The Salafi interpretational openness can be better understood, I believe, at the doctrinal level.

The common assumption of the Salafist belief is that "Muslims have deviated in time from the "original" Islam and thereby ended up with various groups that have differently and aberrantly interpreted the normative sources of Islam."[17] Accordingly, to be a true Salafist believer requires a three-fold movement in time. Firstly, one must go back to the early 'pristine' period of Islam in order to explore the footsteps of the *salaf*, which are considered to be the first three generations of Muslims – in the *Qur' an* these are referred to as the Prophet and his *Sahaabah* (Companions), the *Taabi'een* (the followers of the companions), and the *Tabaa'at-Taabi'een* (the followers of the followers of the companions). In turn, the Salafist adherent must come back to his own time with a newly-found puritanical ethic within which he must cognitively filter modern-day problems and, finally, to move further into the future with the sole aim "of engendering forms of socialisation which are based on the perpetuation of an allegedly revitalised Salafist path."[18] In this blueprint, Salafi-jihadists are those who resort to violence to make the deviant interpretations and unlawful practices compatible again with the Salafist orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

The essence of Salafism is thus the believer's quest for authenticity. The reader will remember I have previously mentioned such concept when speaking about al-Zawahiri and Jolani. What, then, intimately links Salafism and Jihadism is the impetuous research of purity?

It follows that the Salafi-jihadi movement is, in essence, nothing more than the extremization of the quest for authenticity initially elicited by the Salafi school and later hastened by the devotees of armed *jihad*. Further, the Salafi-jihadists are indebted to the Salafi movement in that they share with the latter a common logic of restitution whereby the heritage of the *salaf* is maintained consistent and whatever contradicts it is traced down and set apart. If one thinks about the importance that the idea of socialisation has amongst Salafist circles, the importance of the concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* then becomes readily obvious. For

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[15] Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, 'Salafism, Jihadism and Radicalisation: Between A Common Doctrinal Heritage and The Logics of Empowerment', in Adraoui, *Militant Jihadism: Today and Tomorrow,* ed. by S. Pektas and J. Leman (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), pp. 19-40 (p. 19).

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[17] Henri Lauzière, 'The Triumph and Ideologization of Purist Salafism', in Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by K. Barkey (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 199-230 (p. 200).

[18] Adraoui, *Op. cit.*, p.22.

centuries, Salafist communities had proclaimed the importance of restoring the true understanding of Islam, with regards particularly to that of *al-tawhid*, without which there can be no spiritual revivalism. However, ideological rifts within the Salafi school have started to emerge over differences on how to identify and follow the rightful ways to recreate the original Islamic society. This has ultimately led competing factions to label respective practices and innovations as *bid' ah*, and subsequently proclaiming *takfir* on one another.

Al-wala' wa-l-bara'

The strictness of the Salafi-jihadi *aq'dah* – this term generally refers to the set of Islamic dogmas that all good Muslims must follow – can probably be seen at its clearest in the concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*. As Wagemakers states, "this term refers to the undivided loyalty (*wala'*) Muslims show to God, Islam and their co-religionists over all other things on the one hand and the disavowal (*bara'*) they must show to anything deemed un-Islamic on the other."[19] Although the concept has pre-Islamic roots, and was only initially adopted by marginalised early-Islamic groups and Shiites, Salafis claim it is traceable back to the *Qur'an*[20]. While the concept of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* in Salafi discourse proper consisted in the call to Muslims to show their loyalty to Islam by means of shunning Judeo-Christian influences in worships, it was later altered by the Salafi-jihadi movement.

What had started as a pious instrument to ward off religious innovation became a duty for all Muslims, according to the latter school of thought, to disavow anything even remotely un-Islamic. In their work, both Marwan Hadid and Abu Mus'ab al-Suri understand this theological tenet as a litmus test to separate the "true" Muslims from the rest[21]. The judgemental arbitrariness of Salafi-jihadism thus stems from the dichotomy established by this modern-day version of *al-wala' wa al-bara'*. The clear dualist approach that differentiates between "pure" Islam and everything else becomes an easy and immediate operational launching pad through which it suddenly becomes easier to recognize "true" Muslims and apostates. The latter, in the words of Hadid, "weaken the *ummah* from within, and let its enemies overcome it."[22] However, the discourse of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* rests first and foremost on the concepts of *bid'ah* and *tawhid*, to which it is indissolubly linked.

Bid'ah and Tawhid

Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, just as much as any other Salafi-jihadi-inspired movement, operates according to what has come to be known as the "*tawhidic* paradigm". According to the study of Halimi and Sudiman[23], these groups make use of Sayyid Qutb's writings to shape their understanding of the *tawhidic* nature of governance. According to Qutb, the theory of government in Islam is wholly based on *tawhid* – this term refers to God's Unity and Uniqueness – for which "any other theory is considered *shirk* (idolatry) and *kufr* (unbelief or rejecting the tenets of Islam)."[24] This means that anyone who does not implement *Shari'ah* becomes an unbeliever. Accordingly, a government applying laws other than *Shari'ah* is also considered guilty of unbelief. The concept of *bid'ah* thus fits this narrative in that it is used in a derogative sense to refer to "all forms of historical, cultural and non-Islamic influence, which are considered unlawful religious

[19] Joas Wagemakers, 'Framing the "Threat to Islam": Al-Wala' Wa Al-Bara' in Salafi Discourse', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 30 (2008), 1-22 (p. 3).
[20] Etan Kohlberg, 'Bara'a in Shi'i Doctrine', *Jerusalem Studies of Arabic and Islam*, 7 (1986), 139-175 (p. 144).
[21] M. W. Zackie Masoud, An Analysis of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's "Call to Global Islamic Resistance"', *Journal of Strategic Security*, 6 (2013), 1-18 (p. 7).
[22] Itzchak Weismann, 'Sa'id Hawwa and Islamic Revivalism in Ba'athist Syria', *Studia Islamica*, 85 (1997), 131-154 (p. 141).
[23] Mahfuh Bin Haji Halimi and Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman, 'Debunking Jihadist Ideological Misinterpretations and Distortions' *Counter Terrorist Trend and Analyses*, 12 (2020), 87-91 (p. 88).
[24] *Loc. Cit.*

innovation."[25] It follows from Qutb's argument that those governments who have not implement *Shari'ah* are culpable of *bid'ah*. The issue herein is that both Hadid and al-Suri have later adopted Qutb's narrative to justify their call for armed resistance towards these type-governments, which today are, even within Muslim-majority countries, the rule, not the exception.

Further, both these ideologues have purposefully emphasised the importance of Qutb's discourse on *jahiliyyah*. According to the latter, following the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, which Qutb believes to be the last lawful Islamic government, the world has fallen into a state of ignorance and unbelief (*jahiliyyah*). Since divine sovereignty does no longer belong to Allah, Muslims' acknowledgement of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* can no longer be manifested; they no longer live according to the *Shari'ah*. In consonance with this framework, one's belief in Allah becomes questionable, and it may be said that here is where the line between belief and unbelief is drawn. Hadid and al-Suri have thus appropriated themselves with Qutb's "*tawhidic* paradigm" and have shaped the legitimacy of their armed *jihad* around the requirement of *tawhid al-hakimiyyah*. This concept refers to the fact that only God has the right to legislate, and has a profound political connotation, as Islam is conceived as both religion and State. By means of Qutb's argument, the political structure of the world becomes a binary system according to which the state of things is either Islamic or *jahiliyyah*.

It is precisely this black-and-white understanding of faith that is at the basis of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's ideology. However, the tenets of *tawhid*, *al-wala' wa la-bara'*, and *bid'ah* shape the conceptual framework within which Salafism as a whole operates and are thus not unique to the Salafi-jihadi movement. It is important to point out that what differentiates these two religious orientations is, in a way, not the questions they ask of the current state of things in the Muslim world, but the answers they provide. Both these groups are aware of the modern decline of Islam and the *ummah*. Hence, the rupture only really arises as a consequence of the different ways they propose to fight the Muslim community's decadence. As a result, Quintan Wiktorowicz argues that Salafism has broadly split into three internal trends[26]. Before diving into the third, and most recent, of these three orientations, I wish to spend a few words on the first two, that is, the *quietists* and the *politicos*. While the last, relatively recent, Salafi trend of Salafi-jihadism is the one often most talked about, due particularly to its association with terrorist organisations such as Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, the other two are, by far, the ones with the most adherents. It is important to point this out as the media, in the attempt to pursue sensationalism, has been guilty of greatly exaggerating the number of Muslims who identify themselves with the Salafi-jihadi movement. They remain, to this day, a minority within Salafism.

In line with Roy's study of the Salafi movement, "Purists are Salafists who focus on non-violent *da'wah* (preaching of Islam), education, and purification of religious beliefs and practices."[27] Also referred to as *quietists*, this trend characterises itself by its total dismissal of politics, which it claim to be a "diversion or even innovation that leads people away from Islam."[28] Hence, while the focus of this group is towards the inner aspect of faith, the Salafi activists, or *politicos*, base their whole activity on political engagement. As Mohammed Abdel-Rahman, the son of Omar Abdel-Rahman, once stated in a *Time* interview, the goal of Salafi activists can be summed up as follows: "It's very simple. We want *Shari'ah*. *Shari'ah* in economics,

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[25] Wagemakers, *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

[26] Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29 (2006), 207 -239 (p. 210).

[27] Olivier Roy, *Whatever Happened to the Islamists?: Salafis, Heavy Metal Muslims and the Lure of Consumerist Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 223.

[28] *Ibid*, p. 224.

in politics, in judiciary, in our borders and our foreign relations."[29] While the end-goal of this trend is, to a great extent, similar to that of the Salafi-jihadis, it differs from the latter in its total refusal of violence.

Marwan Hadid and Jihad

As the reader will remember, I have already talked about the importance of Qutb's work in regards especially to his interpretation of the discourse on *tawhid al-hakimiyyah*. Indeed, the first man to bring the former's radical teaching to Syria was Marwan Hadid, one of the two figures from which Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham has drawn ideological inspiration. Although little has been written on his life, Marwan Hadid is of fundamental importance to this analysis. His own interpretation of armed *jihad* is the one Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham applies to this day. The actions of Marwan Hadid can be traced back to the start of the Syrian Muslim Brethren's decline in 1963[30]. Soon after the rise to power of the Ba'ath party, "a new leadership had to organize the Islamic opposition."[31] Led by Marwan Hadid, whom had become the most militant representative of the new leadership, the Muslim Brethren became the first Islamist group in Syria to openly declare an uncompromising *jihad* against the Ba'ath regime. Marwan Hadid's indiscriminate promotion of violence would later cause a split within the Brethren, and, after his murder, "the violent turn that the Islamic struggle had taken in 1976 proved that Hadid's legacy would prevail."[32] Hence, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham places itself as the continuation of Hadid's armed struggle, and the 'Syrian variation' of *jihad* essentially consists in the clear regional prioritization over a global struggle. Indeed, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham differs radically form other Salafi-jihadi organisations, such as IS, in that its efforts are directed at purifying the Levant from un-Islamic rule first, and only then expanding the reach of its operations. Put simply, Hay' at Tahrir al -Sham has not formally proclaimed *jihad* on the West just yet, while most other extremist Islamist organisations do so from the get-go.

The distinctive local target-prioritization of the group's *jihad* can be seen as the result of Marwan Hadid's effort to blend Qutb's teaching to what was perceived to be the threat posed by the Ba'ath party in his own time. Indeed, while Qutb's "*tawhidic* paradigm" essentially outlines Islam's enemies, both internal and external, it does not properly specify who must be fought first, that is, whether *jihad* ought to be firstly waged against fellow Muslims who do not rise up against un-Islamic governments or, conversely, against the Western world at large. This lack of clarity allowed Hadid to argue that the Syrian Islamic struggle had to direct its attention towards its unlawful governance first, in the attempt to free the land of religious impurity. According to his argument, Jihadist Muslims must restore the rightful Islamic way through the application of *Shari'ah*. Only when the Caliphate is successfully re-established will Muslims be in a favourable position to wage global *jihad*. Hence, Marwan Hadid's understanding of *jihad* informs Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's grand-strategy to this day[33]. While the organisation's focus might be directed towards opposing Assad's 'regime', there is no mistaking that their goal ultimately remains that of waging global *jihad* against the rest of the un-Islamic world. However, if Hadid's influence on Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham can be seen in the group's prioritization of sensible targets and grand-strategy, it is only in the work of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri that the latter found legitimization for its indiscriminate use of violence towards fellow Muslims, both jihadists and non-jihadists. Here, then, I wish to introduce *takfir*.

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[29] Booby Gosh, "The Rise of The Salafis", 08 October, 2012 (Time): http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2125502,00.html [Consulted 06 February 2020].
[30] Weismann, *Op. cit.*, p.133.
[31] *Loc. Cit.*
[32] *Loc. Cit.*
[33] Sam Heller, 'The Strategic Logic of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11 (2017), 139-152 (p. 146).

Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and Takfir

In his *The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*[34], Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's 1600-page magnus opus[35], the latter systematically outlines his military theory of *jihad*. While this manifesto was initially only intended for the al-Qaida Central Command (AQC), Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, which the reader will remember finds its origins in al-Qaida and its ideology, quickly started implementing al-Suri's guidelines in their own manifesto. While to consider the entirety of its content is clearly not possible, I wish to analyse the more specific relationship between Jihadist and non-Jihadist Muslims, and how al-Suri's understanding of it has ultimately yielded to the abuse of the practice of *takfir* within and between extremist organisations. Throughout his manifesto, in fact, "there are 38 instances in which the Jihadists are depicted as being superior to Non-Jihadist Muslims, 20 of which reflect moral and spiritual superiority."[36]

Al-Suri thus draws a clear line of separation between those militant Muslims whom he refers to as the 'pure-hearted' and belonging to a 'noble elite' and non-militant Muslims who, in line with his argument, are no better than the unbelievers. The instrumentalization of this contrast is motivated by al-Suri's attempt to discredit, mainly through mockery and caricature, both religious scholars and all the 'cowardly Muslims' who refuse to take up arms. Talking about this inferior out-group, the latter depicts it as "an ummah that has slept for too long, has abandoned war for too long…in whose hearts the attachment of the world and fear of death have seeped in both its lay person and its elect, and its religious scholars have spent too much time at the tables of its sultans."[37]

As is clear from the passage above, al-Suri's manifesto leaves no place for misunderstandings. His belief of Jihadist Muslims' superiority vis-à-vis non-militant ones guarantees the justificatory base for the proclamation of *takfir* – this is a controversial concept in Islamist discourse, denoting the proclamation of apostasy, and thus excommunication, from a Muslim to another Muslim – that in turn allows for their sanctioned killing. Jihadist-Muslims' hostility towards fellow Muslims thus finds religious justification in the doctrine of *takfirism*, that can also be advocated against the state. Once again, it is through the work of Qutb that the practice of *takfir* has gained renewed prominence, for which the latter provided a thorough apology and laid out the legitimating groundwork.

Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham has, similarly to most other Islamist extremist organisations, made use of this doctrine, and has thus received harsh criticism from the Muslim community at large given that this doctrine is not sanctioned by Islam. Indeed, excommunication of those who profess their Islamic faith is majorly forbidden in Islam, and the ill-founded accusation of *takfir* constitutes *haram* – this term denotes majorly forbidden acts according to the Islamic religion. Qutb's advocacy of *takfirism*, which is completely devoid of any clear Qur'anic evidence, has opened up the way for its abuse. As shown with major terrorist organisations such as IS, al-Qaida, and Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, the use of *takfir* has quickly become a false pretext of religious lawfulness to attack any individual or group that represents a threat to such organisations.

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[34] An English transcription of the first three chapters of Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar's original دعوة المقاومة الإسلامية العالمية - بترجمة إنكليزية is available at https://archive.org/details/TheGlobalIslamicResistanceCall/page/n1/mode/2up [Consulted 07 February 2020].
[35] Masoud, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[37] *Loc. Cit.*

Put simply, the use of this obscure doctrine is but a façade that allows for the indiscriminate use of violence and represents a prerogative of Salafi-jihadism. It is worthwhile mentioning that the Constitution of Tunisia (passed after the Tunisian Revolution in 2011) officially criminalized *takfir* by placing a ban on all *fatwas* – these are nonbinding legal opinions on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified jurist in response to a question posed by a private individual, judge or government – that promote it[38]. The importance of *takfir*, with regards to its use and abuse within extremist Islamist organisations, does not lie so much in its doctrinal value, but rather in the dangerous precedent it creates due to its volatility. Indeed, once the necessary legal procedures and requirements to correctly evaluate cases of apostasy are brushed aside, *takfirism* becomes an all-too-easy justification for using violence against inconvenient rivals. Further, while the prerogative of proclaiming *takfir* originally belonged to selected panels of Islamic jurists and scholars, its appropriation on behalf of Jihadist Muslims has opened all members of the *ummah* to make use of this doctrine.

The ideology of Salafi-jihadism requires the integration, and balance, of the five theological tenets I have discussed in the previous chapter. As reported by Alsech, however, "material published on jihad websites in the last few years reflects and imminent and noteworthy split within the Salafi-jihadi movement."[39] Indeed, evidence suggests that the split within the Salafi-jihadi community originated in Jordan and has resulted in the emergence of two distinct factions: the Salafi-jihadis and the Neo-Takfiris[40]. The newly emerged Neo-Takfiri trend embraces some of the ideas promoted by Sayyid Qutb, as well as other radical thinkers and leaders inspired by him. It is thus readily possible to see how Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham's profile fits this new category, albeit having only briefly sketched its premises. In order to capture the essence of the relatively new Neo-Takfiri trend and be able to see why Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham correctly fits the category represented by the latter, it will be worthwhile analysing the profound legal and ideological debate at the base of the fragmentation between these two movements.

While adherents to Neo-Takfirism clearly promoted an extremist interpretation of *takfir*, so much so that it resulted in their expulsion form the Salafi-jihadi Jordanian fighting camps, the difference between these two orientations is much more nuanced. The first disagreement arises in regard to the notion of 'collective' proclamations of *takfir*. Indeed, Salafi-jihadi reject this latter practice – in Arabic it is referred to as *al-takfir bi'l-umum* – and they maintain that the proclamation of *takfir* can only be made against specific individuals – this procedure is known as *takfir mu'ayyan*[41]. On the other hand, Neo-Takfiris allow "sweeping proclamations of *takfir* against entire groups of people."[42] In this, they resemble their Egyptian counterparts in the 1960's-1980's, such as Sayyid Qutb, Shukri Mustafa, and Abd al-Salam Faraj, whom had defined the entire Egyptian society as apostate. Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham, once again, mirrors these attitudes. While there remain nuances I wish to discuss, it is already possible to see how the Salafi-jihadi Syrian trend as a whole is more akin to the Neo-Takfiri movement than to the former. Indeed, it suffices to Neo-Takfiris that their co-religionists appeal to apostate rulers for them, in turn, to be deemed apostates. This view, once again, is at odds with the mainstream Salafi-jihadi understanding of *takfir*. However, there remains disagreement within the Neo-Takfiri movement itself as to how approach the notion of "collective" proclamations of *takfir*.

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[38] Mohammad al-Haddad, "Tunisia's new constitution criminalizes "takfir"", 03 February, 2014 (Al-Monitor): https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/tunisia-new-constitution-bans-takfir.html [Consulted 15 February 2020].

[39] Alsech, *Op. cit*., p. 420.

[40] "Prominent Saudi Preacher Calls to Denounce and Reject Salafi-Jihadis and Their 'Ignorant Leaders Hiding in Caves'", 06 October, 2009 (MEMRI): https://www.memri.org/reports/prominent-saudi-preacher-calls-denounce-and-reject-salafi-jihadis-and-their-ignorant-leaders [Consulted 18 February 2020].

[41] Joas Wagemakers, 'Reclaiming Scholarly Authority: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's Critique of Jihadi Practices', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34 (2011), 523-539 (p. 530).

[42] Alsech, *Op. cit*., p. 440.

Some Neo-Takfiri writers have adopted more moderate positions regarding this practice. Abu Maryam al-Kuwaiti, for example, accepts the idea of a sweeping proclamation of *takfir* in principle but prohibits the legal implications of *takfir* to the newly proclaimed apostate. In a passage of his *al-Radda 'ala shubuhat Abi Maryiya*, the latter states that he does "not permit today the blood and property of people even if they commit *shirk* (association of any deity with God) because of the lack of public announcement… His blood and property are not permitted until evidence is brought against him."[43] According to Abu Maryam, the issuance of a warning is a pre-requisite to applying all the implications of *takfir* against an individual apostate. Notwithstanding, this condition is hardly ever met by the more extremist fringes of the Neo-Takfiri movement. Amongst them, once again, is Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham. Over the course of their presence in Syria, this organisation has systematically refused to recognise Sunni Syrians as Muslims. This has led al-Tartusi to heavily criticise the group, claiming that "they entered Syria not in order to assist the Syrians… or to defend the oppressed among the Syrian people… but to proclaim *takfir* on Muslims, to classify them saying 'you are an apostate and you are not an apostate' and to spread chaos and the culture of extremism (*ghuluw*) among people."[44]

The disagreement surrounding the reach of the proclamation of *takfir* thus lies at the heart of the ideological debate between Neo-Takfiris and Salafi-jihadis. However, this is but the theoretical aspect of a disagreement that has much more concrete operational implications. Indeed, the notion of 'individual' or 'collective' proclamations of *takfir* finds a clear linkage with the debate surrounding *jihad* against the 'Near Enemy' and the 'Far Enemy'. As mentioned in chapter III, there is strong disagreement about the prioritization of enemies between different extremist Islamist organisations. Amongst them, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham maintains a clear focus on purging its land of un-Islamic elements first, that is, apostates, in order to then wage war against the infidels. Once again, this attitude is in line with the Neo-Takfiri belief that "in absence of an abode of Islam (a territory ruled and filled exclusively by Islamic law), *jihad* directed against infidels is prohibited and Muslims should focus their efforts on deposing Muslims rulers."[45] On the other hand, Salafi-jihadis view *jihad* against apostates ("the near enemy") and *jihad* against infidels ("the far enemy") as equally obligatory for Muslims today[46]. However, herein lies somewhat of a paradox.

According to this binary categorization, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham clearly adopts a Neo-Takfiri stance regarding the issue of 'near' and 'far' *jihad*. Organisations such as IS and al-Qaida, on the other hand, have maintained equal prioritization of their targets, that is, they have conducted attacks on both infidels and apostates to a similar extent. How, then, is one to categorise these two latter groups? They are clearly more akin to the Salafi-jihadi understanding of *jihad*, but have, at the same time, been guilty of promoting an extremist interpretation of *takfir*, as seen particularly in their refusal to abide by Abu Maryam's principle of issuing a warning to the apostate. While the ever-changing ideologies of extremist Islamist organisations force us to continuously rethink and reshape existing theoretical categories, some have argued that organisations such as IS and al-Qaida, that blend features of Salafi-jihadism and Neo-Takfirism within their ideologies, can be thought to fit a new category Oliveti has referred to as that of the Salafi-Takfiris[47]. While

[43] *Ibid*., p. 441.

[44] Eli Alsech, "The Rise of a Charismatic *Mujahid*: The Salafi-jihadi Quest for Authority", in *Religious Knowledge, Authority and Charisma: Islamic and Jewish Perspectives*, ed. by D. Ephrat and M. Hatina (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2014), pp. 157-170 (p. 168).

[45] Alsech, 'The Doctrinal Crisis Within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks', p. 447.

[46] Steven Brooke, "The Preacher and the Jihadi", 16 February, 2006 (Hudson Institute): https://www.hudson.org/research/9888-the-preacher-and-the-jihadi [Consulted 19 February 2020].

[47] Vincenzo Oliveti, *Terror's Source: The Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences* (Birmingham: Amadeus Books, 2002).

this may appear as nothing more than a technicality end in itself, to understand the macro religious and political movements that inform the ideology of a particular group or organisation allows us to individuate and analyse the sources used therein to claim legitimacy. In turn, this helps us better understand the religious dimension of groups such as Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham and IS and provides us with the tools to counter their narratives. To adapt our theoretical categorization systems to the shifting profiles of these armed movements is thus paramount.

As the future for both Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham and Syria lies in uncertainty, it is by no means the aim of this paper that of making bold predictions on the evolution of either of these entities. There is no way of ascertaining how the religious and political dimensions of Jawlani's group will shift vis-à-vis the ongoing clashes in the Idlib pocket. Notwithstanding, to attempt to make as much clarity as possible on the analytical level is certainly a valuable and worthwhile endeavour; if anything, such has been the leitmotiv of my reflection. In light particularly of the lack of available literature on the nature of the Syrian trend of Salafi-jihadism, this paper is a first step in the right direction, albeit a modest one.

As revealed throughout, in fact, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham represents the epitomic case-study of the regionalization of such school of thought. Born as a self-proclaimed liberation movement for the Levant, the then-Jabhat al-Nusra had to fight for appeal and legitimacy to and from those same people it claimed to be fighting for from the start. And while this is somewhat paradoxical in itself, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham represents an exceptionally unique organisation from the standpoint of its ideological heritage. While situating itself within the al-Qaida Salafi-jihadi's continuum, the former also moulded itself around the works of both Marwan Hadid and Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar. While the group inherited Hadid's interpretation of *jihad*, that is, an armed struggle directed firstly towards Syria, and the Levant more generally, and only then to be exported worldwide, it looked to Nasar for help to establish its guidelines on *takfir*. Further, al-Qaida's Salafi-jihadi ideological heritage provided the comprehensive religious and political framework from which Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham moved its first steps, the effects of which can be seen in the latter's adoption of the *Qutbian* concepts of *al-wala'-wa-l-bara'*, *bid' ah*, and *tawhid*.

The dissection of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham' religious dimension essentially brings one back to these five theological tenets. Indeed, these act similarly to hinges around which the whole organisation revolves. Nonetheless, the indiscriminate use of *takfir* opened an analytical crisis. While Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham maintained most of the original Salafi-jihadi prerogatives, its trajectory in relation to *takfir* has taken a sharp turn. The abuse of proclamations of apostasy cast upon fellow Muslims on behalf of this extremist Islamist organisation has forced theoretical reconsideration.

For this reason, scholars such as Oliveti have started arguing in favour of the instauration of a new category: Salafi-Takfirism. As clear form the analysis carried out in Chapter III, then, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham can rightly be thought to belong to this somewhat new, and yet somehow ever-existing, category. Finally, it is my belief that, in light of what has emerged throughout this reflection, it is also possible to argue that the Syrian trend of Salafi-jihadism as a whole must start to be seen for what it is really becoming, and not what it used to be. Hence, my claim is that it has now become necessary to start talking about the emergence of a Syrian trend of Salafi-Takfirism, as opposed to the slowly fading Salafi-jihadi one. In a way, Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham stands at a crossroad between past and future, and for this reason represents a unique opportunity for learning. As a living testament to the centuries-old *Qutbian* extremist ideology, its current evolution clearly points towards the future of the Salafi-Takfiri movement, thus coexisting in both past and future.

If we are to find out what the future holds for Salafi-Takfirism, it is my strong belief that we will only know about it through the ongoing evolution of organisations such as Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham. Further, by virtue of being its biggest Syrian exponent, the group's transformation in the upcoming months will also be revealing of what connotations the Syrian *jihad* will adopt, thus giving way to new and ever-complex dynamics we will be forced to confront ourselves with. As for us, then, we have but to only keep watching in the right places.

ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.

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ITCT is UK based organisation and founded in 2018. It is a non-political and non-profitable organisation and is a unique think tank in itself. There is not a single organisation around that specifically counters the narratives of Islamist terrorism by using the tools of Islamic Theology. ITCT exposes the root causes of Political Islam and works hard to eliminate it through introducing the actual concept of Islamic Theology.

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