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Can (*Salafi*) *jihadi* insurgents politicise and become pragmatic in civil wars? Social movement restraint in Ahrar al-Sham in Syria

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ABSTRACT

Most research on *jihadi* groups examines their violent radicalisation. Insurgents that politicise in civil wars and become more pragmatic without renouncing violence are less understood. This article defines *jihadi* groups' politicisation as the development of realistic tactical and strategic objectives, durable alliances with other actors including foreign states and non-state armed groups, and normalisation of their interactions with the population. This article argues that politicisation is not merely the outcome of armed groups' independent ideological revisions. Politicisation results from a combination of several factors that restrain *jihadi* insurgents in civil wars. In Syria, the empirical analysis of Ahrar al-Sham demonstrates that the group was restrained by (1) its decentralised organisational structures and (2) interactions with other actors including other insurgents, the population, and foreign states. This article is based on extensive field research conducted in Syria and Turkey with Syrian insurgents across the spectrum.

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Introduction

Most studies of *Salafi jihadi* groups (Maher 2016; Wiktorowicz 2006) are concerned with their radicalism. These studies are important to trace the evolution of this ideological trend in general and specific cases. They cover an array of issues ranging from these groups' franchising strategies, governance, leadership, organisational dilemmas, resort to foreign fighters and suicide bombings (Bacon 2018; Byman 2019; Lia 2015; Mendelsohn 2015; Moghadam 2008, 2017; Revkin 2020). The emphasis on *Salafi jihadi* radicalism is common in empirical studies of Syria and their extensive coverage of al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS) (Cafarella 2014; Hassan 2018; Hamming 2020; Kaválek 2015; Lister 2016a, 2016b). But the radicalism of the *Salafi jihadi* trend is only one side of the story. In Syria, major insurgent groups partially affiliated with this ideological trend have adopted increasingly pragmatic positions instead of radicalising further. They have not applied the most severe penal punishments associated with some dimensions of Islamic Law like AQ and IS. Externally, they have fostered tactical and strategic ties with foreign countries like Turkey, which is denounced by the *Salafi jihadi* opposition to any alliance with states

and non-states not considered 'Islamic'. This new development is less understood than ideological and behavioural radicalisation. It is nonetheless critical to understand the evolution of *Salafi jihadi* groups after 2011.

Ahrar al-Sham (AaS) is one of the most important actors that distanced itself from *Salafi jihadi* radicalism during the Syrian conflict (Abazeid 2015; Abazeid and Pierret 2018; Drevon 2021; Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019; Lund 2013; Pierret 2015a). The group was one of the largest insurgent groups active in Syria. It initiated most insurgent-led alliances, developed strong regional support and gathered the largest number of foot-soldiers. AaS is rooted in the *Salafi* approach to Islam. AaS has gathered many Islamist trends including former proponents of the *Salafi jihadi* trend (Al-shami 2013; Tarsha 2018). Prominent group members previously participated in several armed conflicts before 2011, including in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Iraq. AaS epitomises several prominent features of the Syrian conflict such as its localism, complex alliance-making, and ideological evolution. The group's main idiosyncrasy was to build relatively strong internal resilience, which eased its survival after the killing of most of its leadership in September 2014. AaS engaged in explicit ideological revisions during the conflict. The group openly disassociated itself from core *Salafi jihadi* ideological tenets by developing a more pragmatic approach to the conflict that strongly contrasts with both AQ and IS's. AaS was ultimately marginalised by a former AQ affiliate *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JaN), which formed *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) before embracing its own pragmatic trajectory despite lasting divergences between the two groups (Drevon and Haenni 2021). The analysis of AaS's trajectory is critical to understanding how armed groups partially associated with *Salafi jihadi* insurgents can become more pragmatic in armed conflicts.

Social movement studies have become dominant in the study of Islamist movements since the publication of a milestone book advocating for their relevance (Wiktorowicz 2004). This body of research develops multilevel analyses of the interactions between macro, meso, and micro-level factors underpinning social movement mobilisation. Social movement studies provide a detailed understanding of the role of the state, and contextualise violence as part of broader repertoires developed by social movement actors in relation to their environments (Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015; Bosi, Ó Dochartaigh, and Pisiou 2015; della Porta 2013; Gunning 2009; Lefèvre 2021; Matesan 2020). Most studies of Islamist groups and movements based on social movement studies examine (1) the political participation of mainstream movements in their domestic systems, (2) the rejection of violence by former *jihadi* groups and (3) the radicalisation of armed groups (Ashour 2009; Cavatorta and Merone 2013; Clark 2004; Drevon 2015; Matesan 2020; Wickham 2004; Schwedler 2006, 2011). They demonstrate that Islamist groups adapt to their changing environments by balancing internal and external necessities, which account for their acceptance of political parties, ideological and behavioural rejection of violence and potential inclusion in political processes. Some of these groups' key ideological tenets can nonetheless remain, especially those more closely associated with their vision of Islamic Law. Violence is conversely explained by several causal mechanisms accounting for the adoption of new repertoires of violence, the diffusion of new ideological frames, and the interactions between factional competition, *jihadi* groups' ideological construction, and violence (Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015; Carezzi 2020; della Porta 2013; Hafez 2019, 2020; Hamming 2020; Wagemakers 2012). Existing research has not yet analysed the politicisation of armed groups as understood in this article.

Politicisation concerns armed groups that do not reject violence or join domestic political processes but develop more pragmatic positions during civil wars. These groups become more mainstream political actors by balancing political necessity, military objectives, and theological views. Although *Salafi jihadi* groups such as AQ and IS pursue political objectives, the concept of politicisation captures armed groups' development of more realistic tactical and strategic objectives beyond armed violence only. The politicisation of *jihadi* groups is reflected on three levels. These groups (1) develop more realistic tactical and strategic objectives, (2) foster external alliances with other actors including foreign states and other insurgents, and (3) normalise their interactions with the population by avoiding the imposition of harsh governance and looking for local acquiescence instead. This concept is more appropriate than 'moderation', which is less relevant to armed groups that remain engaged in violence that still uphold many of their core ideological commitments. Moreover, moderation is contingent on the sets of values and behaviour considered mainstream in specific societies, which is arduous to consider in absolute terms. The concept of politicisation reflects these groups' own discussion on political realism (Ahrar Al-sham 2017b; Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham 2018a), which they articulate in *al-siyasat al-shari'ya* ('Shari'a Politics'), an Islamic corpus that translates into Islamic 'Law-Guided Public Policy' (Hoover 2019, 39). One of the key differences between this approach to politicisation and the inclusion of mainstream groups in domestic political system or the rejection of violence by former *jihadi* groups pertains to their institutional contexts. Joining political parties and rejecting violence largely results from domestic institutional incentives presented by state authorities that do not exist in civil war contexts since these groups remain committed to replacing existing regimes.

Drawing upon social movement and civil war studies (della Porta et al. 2017; Wood 2003), this article argues that politicisation is the outcome of several multilevel factors that restrain *jihadi* groups in civil wars. Politicisation does not simply result from *jihadi* groups' own ideological cognition, even in the case of a group like AaS that has explicitly engaged in meaningful ideological revisions to distance itself from the *Salafi jihadi* trend. Understanding the factors underpinning *jihadi* groups' restraint is therefore key to the analysis of their ideological and behavioural evolution in civil wars. The focus on armed groups' restraint has already guided meso-level research in civil war studies with the assumption that insurgents are constrained by a range of pre-war and in-war factors that determine the range of possible actions (Drevon 2017a; Staniland 2014; Weinstein 2007). It has also informed recent research on armed groups' restraint (Busher and Bjørgo 2020; Bouhleb and Guichaoua 2021; McQuinn et al. 2021). This article similarly traces the multilevel factors underpinning *jihadi* groups' restraint in the specific case of AaS in Syria. Instead of focusing only on external political opportunities, this research contends that AaS was restrained by its organisational dynamics and interactions with other actors including other insurgents, foreign states, and the population. Notwithstanding the group's genuine desire to distance itself from the *Salafi jihadi* trend, organisational and external sources of restraint have determined the group's choices during the Syrian conflict more than a narrow focus on independent ideological change only. This approach balances more structuralist-leaning political process models, which are common in social movement studies, and research on specific groups that tend to focus on their leaders' decisions and ideological commitments more than the contexts in which they evolve.

This paper is based on extensive field research undertaken in Syria and Turkey for the past five years as well as extensive primary documents released by Syrian insurgents during the conflict. I have interviewed the leadership of the main Syrian armed opposition groups, including key leaders of AaS and an array of armed groups that have interacted with the group over the years. For the past two years, I have also interviewed the main leaders of the former Nusra Front, which became HTS in 2017, including Abu Muhammad al-Jolani in Idlib.¹ Relying on a large range of interviews conducted over time is important to examine these groups' changing positions in the conflict as events unfold and limit the range of subsequent reinterpretation. It was particularly important to interview armed groups that have allied and opposed one another to gather a representative overview of their changing positions overtime.

The successful ingredients for a militarised popular uprising

The Syrian conflict witnessed a proliferation of armed groups characterised by idiosyncratic features since its early days. The study of the specificities of the most successful insurgents helps to understand the domination of Islamist insurgents during the first years of conflict and the leading role taken by AaS more specifically. Many features that made some insurgents particularly successful indeed contributed to their politicisation by acting as sources of restraint. These characteristics largely explain AaS's trajectory during the conflict.

Insurgencies do not begin in a vacuum. Armed groups might believe in a set of violent ideas, but the timing and modalities of their embrace of armed violence are contingent on their environments. The adoption of violence by armed groups has been widely covered by civil war and social movement studies. The most comprehensive research on armed groups' radicalisation (Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015) suggests that armed groups can adopt violence in interaction with five different types of actors. These actors are (1) the state and political environment, (2) the security services, (3) their social movement, (4) the public, (5) a countermovement. Radicalisation with each of these actors is associated with one mechanism of radicalisation, which can be disaggregated and systematically analysed regardless of armed groups' ideological commitments. This approach suggests that the initial scope of mobilisation is informed by the type of radicalisation. Radicalisation in interactions with a group's social movement, the public, and a counter movement is more narrowly centred on a group's immediate social movement. Applied to *jihadi* groups, radicalisation with these three types of actors tends to limit these groups' mobilisation to sub-sections of the Islamist social movement. Radicalisation with the state and political environment and the security services, on the other hand, can enable a broader mobilisation, especially when state repression is indiscriminate and does not focus on the Islamist social movement or parts of it.

In Syria, the militarisation of the insurgency is rooted in the nature of the Syrian regime and its international alliances (Balanche 2018; Hinnebusch 2019; Phillips 2016; Van Dam 2017). Without undertaking a longer historical analysis already widely covered in existing research (Belhadj 2013; Van Dam 2011), the consolidation of the Syrian regime largely determined the rationales behind the mass protests that spread in early 2011, the reaction of the security forces and the militarisation of the opposition. These three elements are therefore not merely the outcome of the idiosyncratic choices of armed opposition

groups, or the leadership of the Syrian regime. The main factor underpinning the cycle of repression and militarisation is the nature of the Syrian elite and its security apparatus (Lawson 2015). The Syrian security establishment remained under tight control of the ruling family and Alawi officers (Van Dam 2011). It considered its survival tied to the regime. Moreover, the latter's reliance on a narrow elite increasingly centred around al-Assad and allied families limited the scope of previous patronage networks – including those of the Baathist party (Belhadj 2013) – especially in rural areas. The regime was disconnected from the population. It had only little ability to canalise popular demands (Hinnebusch 2012). Militarisation was compounded by Syria's external alliance with Iran and support to Hizbullah (Goodarzi 2009), which opposed political change in Syria. Russia also provided its own political, and later military support, to reinforce its presence in the region (Charap, Treyger, and Geist 2019; Goya 2017; Hamilton, Miller, and Stein 2020; Jones 2020). Although Syrian protests were informed by regional developments, which fuelled domestic discussions on the organisation of protests (Baczko, Dorransoro, and Quesnay 2018), only a longer historical contextualisation of the construction of the Syrian regime can explain the militarisation of the opposition.

The second issue concerns the dominance of Islamist groups in the insurgency. Two years after the beginning of the uprising, the largest armed groups were Islamists, which had marginalised the groups initially affiliated to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Lister 2016c). The ascendancy of Islamist armed groups is the combined outcome of the regime's historical construction and the role of Islamist groups in regional insurgencies. Insurgencies rely on pre-war social structures to mobilise. In most cases, they depend on pre-existing social movements, political parties, or civil associations to recruit their early members, whose cohesiveness ultimately affects armed groups' subsequent organisational cohesion (Staniland 2014). Civil society was virtually nonexistent in Syria. The Syrian regime had prevented the development of an independent civil society for decades. The informal economic, intellectual, and religious networks that existed in Syria before 2011 never formed cohesive structures that insurgents could exploit after the beginning of the conflict (Haddad 2011; Pierret 2013). The localism of the insurgency and the reliance of most groups on local communities is a direct outcome of these characteristics.

A key difference between Syrian insurgents concerns the nature of their pre-existing networks (Gopal and Hodge 2021). *Jihadi* groups benefited from pre-existing informal networks that developed before 2011. Despite the regime's antagonism to political Islam before 2011, informal groups of students, activists, and preachers were already active on the periphery of the public sphere.² Some had been involved in networks of support of the Iraqi insurgency in the 2000s, which led to the incarceration of thousands of them. Although these networks evolved underground, they gathered individuals who were antagonistic to the regime. Many networks were already connected to insurgents active outside Syria, especially in neighbouring Iraq. Their mobilisation was facilitated at the beginning of the conflict by their pre-2011 interconnection and shared ideological leanings.

AaS's main peculiarity was to be the first Islamist group to congregate a wide range of local military units that began to appear in 2011. AaS stems from the early coordination mechanisms and discussions between many local groups, which were bolstered by the liberation of Islamist prisoners that started from Spring 2011

onwards. According to multiple interviews with several AaS founders and early members,³ the group gathered many pre-connected individuals who were involved in a plurality of social networks, including student groups, prison leaders, and veterans of previous armed conflicts. AaS was therefore different from the Islamist groups that previously spread in other contexts such as Algeria or Iraq. In Algeria, repression mostly affected Islamists and their broader milieu (Hafez 2003). This choice isolated the Islamists from the remaining segments of society, which largely impeded cross-sector mobilisation. In Iraq, the insurgency was primarily a reaction to foreign occupation that fuelled sectarianism between Sunni and Shia Muslims over power-sharing. In Syria, Sunni Muslims represent the majority of the population, and, aside from religious minorities, repression affected virtually everyone (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2018) notwithstanding regional divergences (Mazur 2021). Despite real socio-economic and geographic divisions within the Sunni community, Syrian Islamists had more space to mobilise individuals not directly connected to their social movement.

AaS was comparatively more successful than other Islamist groups, thanks to its bottom-up consolidation and reliance on pre-2011 networks. In contrast with most insurgents that (1) formed geographic military fronts at the beginning of the conflicts, (2) relied on a local charismatic figure or (3) primarily recruited foreign fighters (Abboud 2018; Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2018; Lister 2016b). AaS consolidated as a bottom-up process of amalgamation of independent – yet interconnected – military units that agreed to join their efforts and institutionalise their organisational structures over time (Lund 2013). This choice bolstered their resilience and positioned them at the forefront of the insurgency. This choice was also more conducive to mass-mobilisation, in contrast with a group like JaN that relied on more selective mobilisation at the beginning of the conflict.⁴

The group's early characteristics additionally informed its initial political positioning. Many AaS's early leaders were Syrian veterans of other armed conflicts, including Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Iraq. Some of them were already involved in ideological retrospectives in prison about the excesses that occurred in Iraq under AQ. In prison, sympathisers of the Iraqi insurgencies did not renounce their ideological commitments but started to reflect on their concrete application and the ideological radicalism that started to spread in Iraq. They understood that these excesses had turned the civilian population against them.⁵ Other veterans were affiliated to armed networks that were opposed to AQ and the monopoly that bin Laden's organisation had imposed on the direction of the *jihadi* movement (Drevon 2017b). For example, Iyyad al-Sha'ar, was a Syrian associate of Abdullah Azzam who played a notable role in favour of the group's politicisation and distancing from AQ.⁶ When they returned to Syria, these militants thought that the conflict presented an opportunity to change course, return to a non-transnational approach to jihad, and join a direction more in line with the popular movement.

AaS was therefore successful in the beginning of the conflict because it was a relatively inclusive Islamist armed group. AaS's success was not the inherent product of its ideology, but of the nature of its pre-war networks combined to its singular mode of organisation. These characteristics did not only facilitate AaS's success. They largely determined its subsequent trajectory and politicisation during the conflict.

The organisation of an insurgency and its consequences

The characteristics of the conflict largely determined the militarisation of the uprising and the leading role played by Islamist groups. They helped to define the proprieties of the groups that could be successful, especially their modes of organisation. AaS's early days shaped its organisational dynamics in the next few years. The group's organisational structuring positioned it as the leading insurgent group by 2015. More importantly, they imposed substantial restraints that underpinned its politicisation.

One of the defining features of the insurgency is its geography. The Syrian regime historically used geography as a tool for political consolidation (Balanche 2011). These choices occurred at city and country levels. The regime established security belts populated by regime supporters around certain cities and consolidated a structural backbone around a North–South axis vital to Syria's infrastructures (Balanche 2006). This configuration has allowed the regime to maintain effective control over the country's economic centres throughout the conflict. Geographic differences largely account for the regime-differentiated approaches to the uprising depending on a combination of local dynamics, including the structures of local communities and the practicalities of their integration into the Syrian state (Mazur 2021). These features ultimately prevented the armed opposition from consolidating in geographically contiguous areas. Instead, the armed opposition established itself in the periphery of the country, either the northern border with Turkey, the eastern border with Iraq and the southern border with Jordan in addition to several pockets in the periphery of several cities (including Damascus).⁷

Islamist armed groups' mode of organisation varied quite substantially. Despite the similarity of their ideological leanings, Islamist groups varied according to their membership, local embeddedness, and existence across discontinued geographic areas. These differences were more relevant than the traditional hierarchical versus networking divide arguably differentiating insurgents (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001). Most groups remained very narrow either in membership or local embeddedness. Some recruited primarily foreign fighters – the most prominent being the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)–, which limited their expansion (Mantoux 2017). Others remained very localised in one distinct area, such as *Jaysh al-Islam* in the periphery of Damascus in Ghuta or the local group *Suqur al-Sham* in Jabal al-Zawiya (which is both very local and linked to Islamist activists without necessarily being Islamist per se). The main groups that managed to expand across geographic areas were *Faylaq al-Sham*, JaN and AaS. *Faylaq al-Sham* was nonetheless a marginal player initially (Lefèvre and El Yassir 2014). It only expanded in a subsequent phase thanks to Turkish support.

AaS's specificity was to expand in most Syrian regions as a bottom-up process. The group started as a coordination mechanism between several independent military units situated in the Northwest of the country. They were linked to pre-2011 activism or prison networks and decided to coordinate their efforts before institutionalising as a group. The leaders of each military unit were included in a supervising consultative council that took decisions in consensus. This mode of organisation did not rely on one particular region or strong-man. It was also more open than JaN's initially more elitist individual mobilisation.⁸ AaS became a credible alternative to independent military units connected to the Islamist social movement, which wanted to benefit from associating with a larger group. AaS's

early developments also helped it attract growing foreign support since the group was more interconnected to a plurality of support networks and appeared as a credible non-AQ Islamist local force.

AaS's mode of organisation constrained its ideological evolution and informed the construction of its political views over the years. AaS remained structured around a plurality of centres of power represented in a consultative council endowed with making strategic decisions that gradually institutionalised the group's organisational structures. This characteristic nurtured a culture of consensus inside the group. While AaS mobilised individuals and factions associated with several Islamist trends, the polycentric nature of its leadership prevented the imposition of a single ideological view. The existence of many other competing groups meant that AaS's sub-groups always maintained the ability to join another faction in case of disagreement. AaS therefore had to position itself in mainstream political Islam to satisfy everybody, from the sub-groups increasingly closer to other revolutionary groups to more hardliner Islamists that mutually contained one another. The former include new urban factions that joined AaS during the course of the conflict, such as *Liwa al-Haq* from Homs, in contrast with hardline factions that gathered around several more radical Egyptian religious scholars. The group's consensual positioning was reflected in its charter (Ahrar Al-sham 2013), which insisted on the need to perform institutional work to conduct an array of missions beyond military operations, including in the fields of politics, media, religious proselytisation (*da'wa*), and education. Similar views were later published in the charter of the Islamic Front in 2013 (al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya 2013). These positions justified IS's excommunication of the group (Al-Ha'yat al-Shari'yya 2014).

AaS's politicisation continued after the killing of most of its leadership in 2014. In September 2014, an explosion killed most of the group's leadership (Lund 2014). The group's pre-existing organisational structures and their embeddedness in most rebel-held Syrian provinces facilitated its survival along with continued external support by regional states such as Turkey and Qatar (Abazeid 2015). AaS resumed its institutional trajectory but did not alter its polycentric configuration. The group instead polarised around two poles favouring or opposing growing collaboration with other Syrian factions and, increasingly, foreign states such as Turkey. AaS's institutionalisation reflected these divisions. The two sides contended over their influence in AaS's internal institutions, which explains why consensual but indecisive leaders successively became the only figureheads acceptable by the two sides. The group ultimately reconfigured its political and religious offices to marginalise radical religious voices that opposed new strategic directions (Ahrar Al-sham 2015c, 2015d; Ahrar2016a, 2016b; Drevon 2021), especially the possibility to forge a strategic alliance with Turkey.

The AaS's mode of organisation nonetheless imposed an important trade-off. The group benefited from its decentralised organisational make-up across Syrian regions to avoid relying on one geographic area or only a local strongman. This feature increased its attractiveness to unaffiliated groups as well as foreign states trying to support credible military groups. Unaffiliated groups could more easily be integrated into AaS's organisational structures since the group was more institutionalised than the brigades formed by a few individuals or structured around a limited geographic area. Foreign states found in AaS a national alternative that most insurgents failed to present. These features additionally positioned AaS favourably to politicise over the years, thanks to a culture of

compromise that resulted from its own ideological choices as much as its structural configuration. But this characteristic ultimately crippled the group. Although decentralisation contained hardline tendencies and favoured a rapprochement with other actors, it also prevented the group from adapting quickly to changing circumstances, especially after the disappearance of the group's early leadership. AaS's organisational structures would nearly freeze its decision-making process between 2014 and 2016 because of internal bureaucratic quarrels.

External relations as additional sources of restraint

AaS interacted with external actors during the conflict. These interactions acted as an additional important source of restraint on the group's trajectory, which reinforced its ongoing politicisation. The three main types of actors are other insurgents – especially competing *jihadi* groups –, the population, and foreign states. AaS's interactions with each of these actors complementarily confirmed the politicisation already promoted by its organisational dynamics.

The characteristics of the conflict nurtured the existence of hundreds – up to thousands – of armed groups. Competition was particularly severe with Islamist groups. AaS's strategy towards other groups was largely informed by its own organisational construction. AaS's strategic choice was to initiate the creation of coordination mechanisms known as factional 'fronts', which aimed at facilitating military cooperation between powerful insurgent groups throughout the country, before institutionalising them to become more cohesive organisational structures. The creation of fronts started with the front of revolutionaries and the Syrian Islamic Front in 2012 (Lund 2013). They were later followed by the emergence of the Islamic Front in 2013, which was established to unify the main Islamist insurgents active throughout Syria.⁹ This approach reinforced AaS's willingness to compromise with other armed opposition groups. The creation of fronts was complemented by the emergence of shared mechanisms to deliver governance to the population, as in the various court systems established by insurgent coalitions (Schwab 2018).

Competition with other Islamist groups, especially Islamic State (IS) and then JaN as it transformed into HTS, was more challenging. Regardless of internal ideological divergences, Islamist groups broadly share an overlapping constituency. Between 2011 and 2013, membership in the insurgency was fuzzy. Armed groups were not yet consolidated, membership could switch relatively easily, and most groups collaborated locally (ICG (International Crisis Group) 2012). Despite some political disagreements, Islamist groups' ideological commitments themselves were not that clearly distinctive. Competition only exacerbated in the following years, which forced AaS to clarify its views and confirm its politicisation.

Internal Islamist competition occurred in two distinctive phases. The first phase started with IS as it declared itself to be an Islamic caliphate that required the allegiance of all the groups. Competition with IS was challenging for AaS for two reasons. First, IS started to excommunicate and attack other insurgents, which forced them to defend themselves. But fighting IS was problematic. AaS's leadership realised that their soldiers were not willing to fight fellow Muslims, even when they opposed them.¹⁰ Although the group's leadership had started to revise its ideological views based on pre-2011 prison experience,

it had not fully clarified them to foot-soldiers. AaS therefore realised the need to distance itself more clearly from IS ideologically too. The group started to emphasise its distinctiveness as a result of the fight against IS by denouncing the group as heretics (*khawarij*) and extremists (*bugha*) (Al-shami 2014. See also Tarsha 2018). The second reason was international. IS antagonised most countries in the region. Its reputation started to be detrimental to the Syrian opposition, which was denounced for its alleged collusion with the group. AaS and other Islamist factions therefore had to distance themselves more clearly from this radicalism internationally too. They published a revolutionary covenant of honour (*mithaq sharaf thawri*) in 2014 to publicise their divergences with IS, emphasising their local nature, and project of establishing a state that would respect the rights of all including minorities (Al-Islamiyya et al. 2014). They also reaffirmed the need to reach out to foreign countries supportive of the revolution. Other efforts by AaS included the publication of editorials in British and American newspapers by one of its leader (Al-nahhas 2015a, 2015b) and a communiqué re-emphasising AaS's sole focus on Syria (Ahrar Al-sham 2015b). AaS started to be considered revisionist the same year (Heller 2015).

The second phase of the inter-Islamist competition involved JaN. JaN never antagonised the opposition as a whole, like IS. Although the group started to attack several factions from 2014 onwards for allegedly colluding with Western states, JaN continued to collaborate with most other groups, including AaS. JaN posed a particular challenge to AaS. AaS needed to collaborate with JaN militarily, yet could not easily contain the group's expansion and occasional attacks against other smaller insurgents. AaS's response was to denounce JaN's ties to AQ, which it considered detrimental to the Syrian revolution. The second response was to reject several dimensions of the *Salafi jihadi* approach to Islam. AaS re-emphasised the importance of the traditional schools of jurisprudence internally (the *maddhab*) to erode the role of foreign *Salafi jihadi* intellectuals unaffiliated to the *maddhab*, re-Syrianise religious authority and reassert internal religious control. AaS strived to clock its political positions in the so-called Sharia politics tradition (*siyasa al-shari'yya*) to justify its adaptation to the context in the jurisprudence of objectives (*fiqh al-maqasid*) (Ahrar Al-sham n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c, n.d.d, n.d.e).

The second main actor that constrained AaS and informed its politicisation was the population. The seizure of large geographic areas forced the group to accommodate the local population and make concessions on governance by abstaining from implementing an ideological project on the ground. The existence of many armed groups and the quick affirmation of a relatively active local civil society imposed their own compromise on local governance, as in other cases beyond Syria (Svensson and Finnbogason 2021). Although AaS embraced an ideological project of governance stemming from its commitment to the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria, the need to cooperate with other local forces largely eroded its practical implementation. AaS's motto changed from a project for the whole Muslim community (*mashru' umma*) to the people's revolution (*thawrat al-sha'ab*) as it disavowed *Salafi jihadi's* elitist jihad (*jihad al-nukhba*) in favour of jihad of the Muslim community (*jihad al-umma*). AaS was a leading proponent of the creation of a civilian – as opposed to factional – administration in the city of Idlib when it was seized by the opposition. In other places, as in Saraqib, the group made local concessions to other revolutionary forces and participated in local elections (Gopal 2018). These changes were officially confirmed in 2017 when AaS agreed to implement the Unified Arab Code (UAC) in opposition-held areas, despite its initial reluctance. This was an important step for the group

since the UAC is an attempt to codify Islamic Law that is strongly opposed by *Salafi* groups. The implementation of the UAC was important to unify the judicial system of opposition-held areas. Similarly, the group adopted the tricolour revolutionary flag, as opposed to the exclusive use of the more ideologically connoted white Islamic banner (Ahrar Al-sham 2017a). Both were strong signals that AaS was merging more thoroughly with the remaining opposition and had to renounce to implement its ideological views on the population.

Finally, AaS has been increasingly swayed by the role of external allies, especially Turkey, which further cemented its politicisation. The group had to forge closer ties to external actors. This decision was legitimised in the group's charter and the charter of honour signed with other groups. While supporting networks were initially quite diverse, including an array of Gulf-based Islamist supporters (Pierret 2015b), the transformation of the conflict gradually reinforced the dominance of a few states like Turkey. Increased reliance on state support, as opposed to wider Islamist networks, narrowed down AaS's options. The group gradually lost most of its margin of manoeuvre. Despite the initially contentious rapprochement with Turkey, which led to internal divisions and split, relations with Turkey strengthened over time. AaS was not necessarily an easy group to support for Turkey considering its reluctance to endorse Turkey's decisions easily. Turkey was paradoxically constrained, as a state, by AaS's inability to impose new decisions internally. In many cases, the group preferred to abstain on several important issues including participation in the Riyadh conference in 2015 and the Astana process two years later (Ahrar Al-sham 2015a). The transformation of the conflict into conflict management between Turkey and Russia, and AaS's failure to impose itself over JaN, ultimately reinforced AaS's reliance on Turkey. The group joined the National Front for Liberation (NFL) in 2018, which was spearheaded by another insurgent organisation aligned with Turkey, *Faylaq al-Sham*. Since then, the peculiarity of AaS's political project has largely waned. The group's continued military resilience on the ground does not suffice for the continuation of a political project defined more than the mere survival of the remaining opposition-held areas with Turkish support.

External actors did not solely constrain AaS during the conflict. Even a group like JaN, which was created by IS commanders, ultimately followed a similar trajectory. When JaN transformed into HTS, the group started to become also more inclusive religiously, make concessions to parts of civil society, and mend its ties with Turkey (Drevon and Haenni 2021). The key difference is that HTS imposed itself militarily over the other factions to increase its leverage and lower the range of concessions that the group had to make. HTS was less restrained than AaS when it established its own structures of governance in Northwest Syria. It has not explicitly engaged in ideological revisions like its competitor.

Conclusion

AaS initially portrayed itself as a project for the whole Muslim community (*mashru' umma*). Its leaders wanted to develop a new Islamist project that would be an alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood as much as AQ. In practice, AaS has undertaken important ideological revisions during the Syrian conflict. The revisions brought the group in line with the direction of the revolutionary uprising and distanced it from *Salafi jihadi* elitism. Without renouncing all its ideological commitments, AaS has largely disconnected itself

from implementing an ideological agenda in practice. It has instead partially emulated the example set up by former *jihadi* groups that renounced violence by conditioning its applicability, as in Egypt (Drevon 2015).

But ideological change does not occur in a vacuum. Although AaS leaders started to revise their ideas before 2011, most changes primarily resulted from the transformation of the conflict as the group had to adapt to changing circumstances. The ideological revisions accompanied AaS's organisational transformation in parallel to the evolution of its relations with other actors, including other groups – allies and contenders –, the population, and foreign states. Any substantial insurgent ideological development cannot be isolated from these groups' internal dynamics as well as their changing patterns of relation with other actors. This is analytically important considering how ideology is usually considered central for these groups.

First, organisational constraints have shaped AaS's trajectory. The group's emergence as a conglomeration of independent military units that institutionalised their relations with one another as they consolidated organisationally has had a lasting legacy. AaS's decision-making over strategic questions remained consensual and was taken by the majority of its leadership council. This characteristic positioned the group favourably towards politicisation since it forced its leaders to balance ideological and pragmatic views to maintain internal unity. At the same time, it also slowed its decision-making processes and ability to make and implement new decisions quickly.

Second, AaS's politicisation was the outcome of changing patterns of relations with other actors. The nature of the Syrian conflict forced the group to collaborate with a large set of actors, including other insurgents and then foreign states, and make concessions to them. AaS could not simply impose its views on a diversified revolutionary insurgency. Instead, the group engaged in a rapprochement with all its components over the years. AaS's most explicit ideological clarifications occurred in the context of internal competition with other *jihadi* groups. It began with IS and continued with JaN, which forced AaS to explicitly distance itself from globalist *jihadi* groups. It is notable that JaN similarly transformed as it established HTS. JaN/HTS similarly distanced itself from globalist groups by reaffirming its localism and aligning itself with the dominant revolutionary agenda [e.g. (Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham 2018a, 2018b,2018c)]. The main difference between AaS and JaN/HTS is organisational. JaN/HTS has remained more centralised around core leadership, which has imposed itself over other insurgents to limit the range of concessions made to other actors.

Ideological change is therefore not merely an independent cognitive process. Armed groups' leaders have agencies and can revise their ideological views for idiosyncratic reasons. Ideological change should not, however, be analysed only as an individual or theological process as opposed to an organisational process. Analysing *jihadi* groups' restraint is important to delineate the impact of changing patterns of relations that occur within and outside these groups. Instead of focusing on intricate points of theology, whose real-life relevance might not be critical in practice, understanding the conditions underpinning insurgent restraint emphasises the environmental context in which new views and practices can emerge and consolidate.

Notes

1. Interviews with the interviewees who are explicitly referenced agreed to be named. Their interviews were fully transcribed by the author. More extensive quotes are referred in another publication by the author in Drevon and Haenni (2021).
2. Range of interviews with Syrian Islamist insurgents and independent Islamists between 2016 and 2021, Istanbul and Idlib.
3. Interviews conducted in Istanbul between 2016 and 2020.
4. Interviews with HTS's leadership, including Abu Abdullah al-Shami and Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. July 2019, August 2020, December 2020, Idlib.
5. Interviews with multiple former prisoners, including Rami Dalati and Abu al-'Abbas al-Shami, two Islamist prison leaders closer to AaS's leadership. July 2016, January 2017, Istanbul.
6. Interviews with several AaS's leaders, including Iyyad al-Sha'ar, conducted between 2016 and 2019 in Istanbul.
7. See, for instance, a map of insurgent territorial control in 2015: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Situation_in_Syria_\(August_2015\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Situation_in_Syria_(August_2015).svg).
8. Multiple interviews with HTS leaders. July 2019, August 2020, December 2020, Idlib. See also Atoun (2016).
9. Interviews with several AaS leaders.
10. Interviews with several AaS leaders conducted between 2016 and 2019 in Istanbul.

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