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 **REPORT** ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

Into the Tunnels

The Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in the Eastern Ghouta

DECEMBER 21, 2016 — ARON LUND

In the sixth year of its civil war, Syria is a shattered nation, broken into political, religious, and ethnic fragments. Most of the population remains under the control of President Bashar al-Assad, whose Russian- and Iranian-backed Ba'ath Party government controls the major cities and the lion's share of the country's densely populated coastal and central-western areas.

Since the Russian military intervention that began in September 2015, Assad's Syrian Arab Army and its Shia Islamist allies have seized ground from Sunni Arab rebel factions, many of which receive support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, or the United States. The government now appears to be consolidating its hold on key areas.

Media attention has focused on the siege of rebel-held Eastern Aleppo, which began in summer 2016, and its reconquest by government forces in December 2016.¹ The rebel enclave began to crumble in November 2016. Losing its stronghold in Aleppo would be a major strategic and symbolic defeat for the insurgency, and some supporters of the uprising may conclude that they have been defeated, though violence is unlikely to subside.

However, the Syrian government has also made major strides in another besieged enclave, closer to the capital. This area, known as the Eastern Ghouta, is larger than Eastern Aleppo both in terms of area and population—it may have around 450,000 inhabitants²—but it has gained very little media interest. One reason is that the political situation of the Eastern Ghouta is exceedingly complicated and difficult to parse. Despite a three-year army siege, ruthless shelling and airstrikes, and a sometimes very strict blockade on food and aid deliveries, discreet links have been maintained across the front lines. Even as they wage war on each other, certain progovernment and pro-opposition commanders remain connected through an informal wartime economy, muddling their political and military incentives and complicating any analysis of the situation.

The Eastern Ghouta is unique even in terms of its political players. Northern Syria is dominated by Islamist factions like Ahrar al-Sham, the Muslim Brotherhood's Failaq al-Sham, and the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front (which renamed itself Fateh al-Sham in July 2016 and claims to have cut its ties with al-Qaeda). But these groups have only a limited presence in the Eastern Ghouta. There, instead, the insurgency has been led by factions indigenous to the area, including, at various times, a major Salafi group known as the Islam Army, the non-Salafi Islamists of Ajnad al-Sham, the self-declared Free Syrian Army faction Failaq al-Rahman, and local groups with opportunistic politics and uncertain ideology, such as Fajr al-Umma and the coalition known as the Umma Army.

In mid-2013, one of these factions began to overshadow all rivals: the Islam Army, a military-religious organization led by the Salafi firebrand Zahran Alloush, who would come to play a pivotal part in the Eastern Ghouta rebellion. By early 2015, Alloush had managed to pressure nearly all other local factions into joining military and judicial institutions under

Islam Army dominance. The power of the Islam Army kept smaller factions in check and brought a modicum of stability to the enclave, allowing it to maintain a more or less united front against the Syrian government. Though he was resisted and reviled by critics who opposed his autocratic methods, Alloush began to appear as one of the insurgency's few effective state-builders.

The efforts to establish a new political order under Alloush's dominance make the Eastern Ghouta important to understand—and tragically relevant for the rest of Syria and, indeed, for other fragmented insurgencies. For over five years, the Syrian opposition has failed to produce any viable alternatives to the government it seeks to replace. Only two credible state-building projects have emerged in the territories abandoned by Assad's regime: the Sunni-fundamentalist "caliphate" of the so-called Islamic State, and the Rojava region run by secular-leftist Kurdish groups. However, both have developed in opposition to the general thrust of the Sunni Arab insurgency and neither could hope to seize Damascus and rule Syria. While other Syrian opposition groups have created a variety of coalitions, military councils, and rival leaderships-in-exile, they have failed to develop effective ground-level governing structures that supersede factional divides and are able to impose themselves on the population. In the Eastern Ghouta, an exception to that rule seemed to be taking shape in 2014–15, led by the Islam Army.

But the balance of power that had enabled Alloush's ascent eventually began to crumble, due to changes in the enclave's political economy that weakened the Islam Army and provoked conflicts over smuggling revenues. Alloush's death in December 2015 created a political vacuum that second- and third-tier factions sought to fill. As the Islam Army's dominance faded, intra-rebel conflict resurfaced with devastating effect.

In April 2016, major infighting split the Eastern Ghouta enclave, putting a decisive end to the Eastern Ghouta's experiment with rebel unity. It also seems to have hastened the end of the enclave itself. In the months since, the Syrian army has retaken about a third of the area, and it is now pushing to impose "ceasefire" deals that will effectively dismantle the last anti-government stronghold near the Syrian capital. If this succeeds, Bashar al-Assad will have dealt a crippling blow to the opposition.

Though the insurgency in the Eastern Ghouta has been the product of unique circumstances, the rise of its rebellion—and now likely also its fall—remains instructive for what it tells us about the development of factionalized insurgencies, how political order may be created from the bottom up, and what conditions facilitate state-building successes or presage their failure.

Methodology

This report attempts to chronicle the evolution of the Eastern Ghouta's politics since 2011, with a focus on the relations

between local armed factions. Much could undoubtedly be written about how the Syrian government and its supporters have reacted to events in the Eastern Ghouta, but such analysis falls outside the scope of this report except as it touches directly on events inside the enclave.

Unable to carry out research in the Eastern Ghouta or even meaningfully in Damascus to investigate these issues, I have instead relied on interviews with Syrians inside and outside the enclave, several of whom have to remain anonymous or are referred to by a pseudonym. Some interviews have been conducted in person, but most have taken place through Skype, phone, and email, or via Internet-based services such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter, Viber, and Facebook.³

I have drawn a great deal of material from press statements by the relevant rebel factions and from Syrian government communications, as well as from online news sources and opposition forums in Arabic and English. Many rebel commanders maintain an active presence on Twitter and Facebook, and local activists have produced a wealth of commentary on social networking sites. Last but not least, coverage over the past few years by Syrian and international media, including from other Arab countries, has been an invaluable resource.

Nonetheless, the dearth of systematic research and the lack of reliable source material has been a severe problem. In many cases I have been forced to piece together key events and context by collecting and comparing scraps of limited, biased, or contradictory data. Despite my best efforts, this report is certain to contain errors of fact and interpretation, and I would like to stress that those failures are mine alone; no interviewee or other source should be held responsible for any of the descriptions, conclusions, or opinions expressed below.

The Eastern Ghouta

“...we came to Damascus; and we beheld it to be a city with trees and rivers and fruits and birds, as though it were a paradise...”

–The Thousand and One Nights

Since ancient times, Damascus has been known for the beauty of the Ghouta.⁴ A lush agricultural region into which old irrigation channels and pumps drove water from the river Barada and the wells of Damascus, it encircled the city on the west, south, and east, its expanse blocked only in the north by the bare, brown hump of Mount Qasioun. In the fourteenth century, Arab historian and geographer Ibn al-Wardi defined the Ghouta as “the region whose capital is Damascus,” describing it as

*...full of water, flowering trees, and passing birds, with exquisite flowers, wrapped in branches and paradise-like greenery. For eighteen miles, it is nothing but gardens and castles, surrounded by high mountains in every direction, and from these mountains flows water, which forms into several rivers inside the Ghouta. It is the fairest place on earth, and the best of them.*⁵

In towns and villages like Douma, Saqba, Harasta, and Jobar, the people of the Ghouta lived off the land, only a short distance from the bustle of the great city. Their olive and almond trees, orange groves, wheat fields, glittering canals, and morning mists would be the first sight of any traveler arriving to Damascus, a city known for its beauty—and that beauty was the Ghouta.

Following Syria's independence from France in 1946, urbanization and technological changes began to transform the Damascene hinterland into a region of suburbs and satellite towns. Successive waves of refugees arrived, from Palestine in 1948–49 and from the Golan Heights in 1967. They were joined by poor Syrians seeking employment or shelter. Wheat fields were crisscrossed by roads and power lines, while factories, army compounds, and drab housing projects spread out of the city and into the countryside. The ancient oasis seemed destined to disappear.⁶

Douma, which had for hundreds of years been a small town of mosques and Islamic learning, grew into a city in its own right. Many villages were swallowed up by the capital, with, for example, Jobar—once a picturesque multireligious hamlet where Muslims and Jews tended their orchards—transformed into a series of mostly unremarkable city blocks on the eastern fringes of Damascus. Above, the air hummed with flights from the capital's main airport, built in the southeast of the Ghouta in the 1970s. The transformation and immigration picked up speed as time passed, and statistics show a rapid expansion of new housing around Damascus from the 1990s onward.⁷ This outward expansion of the capital's urban sprawl took place “without the slightest regard for environmental, aesthetic, or health concerns” and often without building permissions or planning. It ended up creating what researchers have termed a “belt of misery” around Damascus.⁸

Through these changes, much of the Ghouta's overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim population clung to local tradition. Many were bitterly opposed to the authoritarian secularism of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, which had seized power in 1963, and the Alawite military elite around the Assad family, which rose to power through then-defense minister Hafez al-Assad's November 1970 coup d'état. In the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, labor migration and new information technologies allowed Gulf-backed Islamist movements to pick up on some of this discontent and penetrate the Syrian countryside.

Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his father in 2000. His first decade as president was marked by painful economic (as opposed to political) reforms, price shocks, and a severe drought, and more generally by the Ba'athist government's turn away from its traditional base in the countryside in favor of the big cities. In a climate of mounting social crisis, discontent and desperation rose in rural regions, including the Ghouta. Throughout the first decade of the new century, slum areas around Damascus expanded rapidly as the capital and its satellite towns took in poor migrants, while spiraling living costs forced parts of the Damascene middle class to abandon the inner city for a congested daily commute. It was as if every driver of anti-regime resentment in the late Assad era had congregated on the outskirts of Damascus: political frustration, religious revanchism, rural dispossession, and downward social mobility.

When the Arab uprisings swept into Syria in March 2011, the comparatively affluent and carefully policed central neighborhoods of the capital hardly stirred—but the Ghouta rose fast and hard in an angry, desperate rebellion. “When the uprising first reached the capital in 2011, I noticed something odd as I followed the news,” recalled the British writer Matthew McNaught in a beautiful essay on the class dimension of the Syrian war as seen through the windows of the capital's ubiquitous microbus taxis, the *servees*:

The first areas in Damascus that rose up against the regime sounded strangely familiar, although I had never visited them: Jobar, Douma, Barzeh, Ghouta, Qaboun, Harasta. It took a moment before it hit me. They were the names that I had seen every day on the roofs of passing microbuses. They were the destinations of the routes; places on the outer limits of the city's sprawling suburbs. Some of them were lines that I had ridden regularly within the city. But I didn't have any friends or students in these places. There were no famous restaurants or beauty spots there. I'd never had a reason to ride the servees to the end of the line.⁹

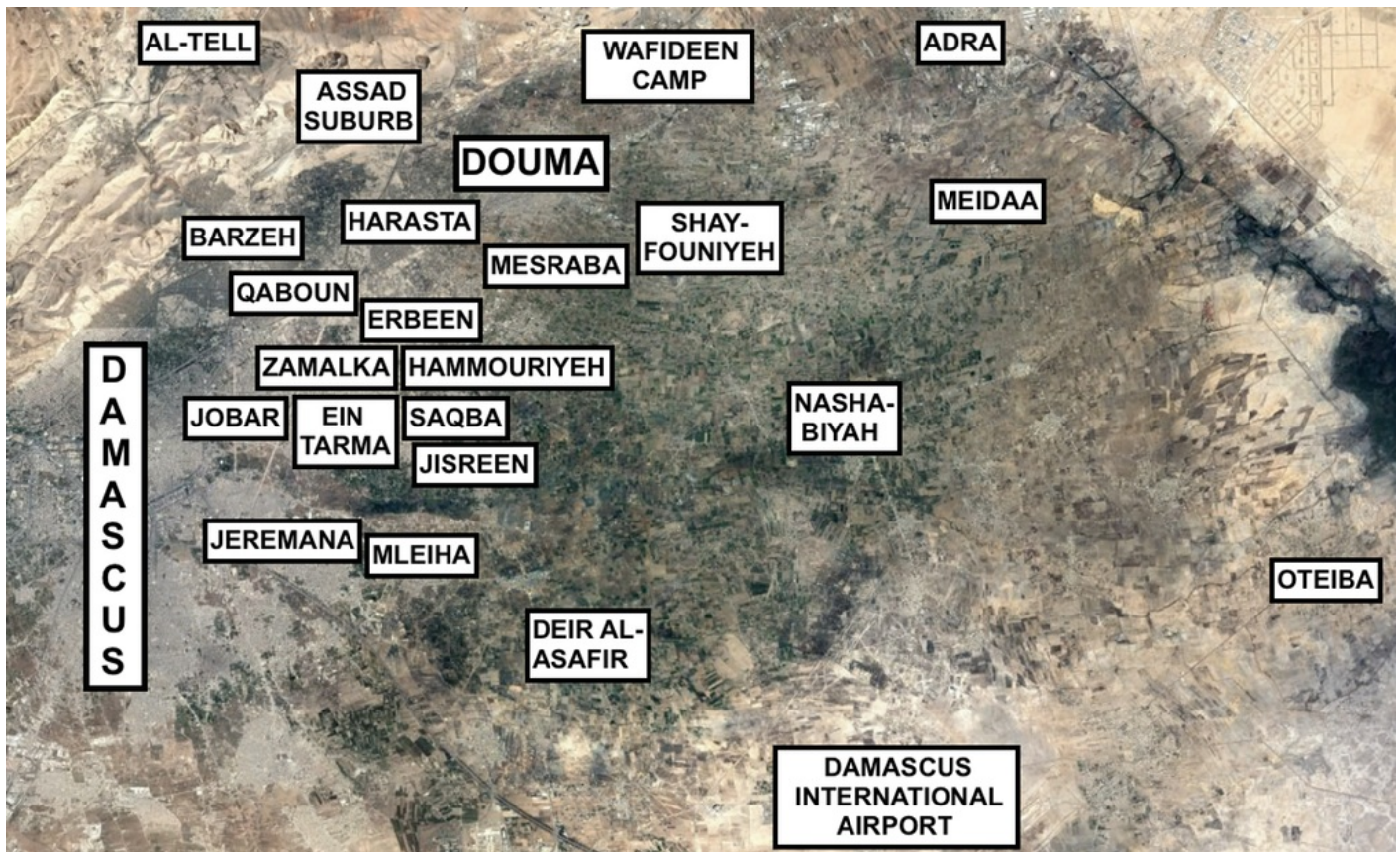
Suddenly, the end of the line had determined to make itself a new beginning.

The Creation of an Enclave

Five years into the Syrian crisis, the war for the capital seems to be coming to an end. Resistance in the Western Ghouta has been extinguished through the fall of Darayya in August 2016 and Khan al-Shih in November. Rebel areas south of the capital have gone the same way, with the neighborhoods of Yarmouk and al-Hajar al-Aswad isolated and primed for surrender.

Only east of Damascus does the rebellion still flare violently, a lingering threat to Bashar al-Assad's control over the Syrian capital.

In the Eastern Ghouta, government control began to fray almost immediately in March 2011, as the government cracked down on any public expression of protest. Hundreds of demonstrators were killed or wounded by security forces in the first months of the crisis. Early attempts by commanders in the Republican Guard to negotiate with notables from Douma, the largest city in the Eastern Ghouta, were overtaken by violence or, in some cases, blocked by hardliners in the intelligence services.¹⁰



MAP OF EASTERN GHOUTA. SOURCE: MADE BY AUTHOR.

Hardliners also surfaced on the opposition side. Masked men put up roadblocks and Kalashnikov-toting locals were seen in Douma soon after the first crackdowns, but there was no semblance of an organized armed rebellion. It took until summer 2011 before a structured and politicized insurgency began to develop. Some of the armed groups were led by local Islamists, including men recently amnestied by the government, but others were made up of military defectors or local street toughs with no evident ideology. Many were inspired by Colonel Riad al-Asaad's July 29 declaration in Turkey of the establishment of the Free Syrian Army. While the Free Syrian Army was always more of a brand name than an effective organization, Asaad's announcement accelerated the formation of armed groups across Syria by providing a symbolic focal point and a template for armed resistance, and by shifting the wider opposition discourse in favor of a military struggle.

By the end of 2011, the opposition had seized entire neighborhoods in Douma and eastern Damascus and was disrupting day-to-day government control over perhaps a million citizens. The army sent tanks into the east of the capital in January 2012, briefly wresting Saqba, Erbeen, Hammouriyeh, and other suburbs from the opposition in what had now evolved into “urban war.”¹¹ But with large quantities of weapons being smuggled into the Ghouta area from Turkey, the rebellion kept growing and the army could not sustain its gains. In late 2012, the last troops fled Douma.

By early 2013, the opposition controlled an area in the Eastern Ghouta that stretched from the Damascus suburbs in the west to the desert town of Oteiba in the east, and from Douma in the north to the outskirts of the Damascus International Airport in the south. Within these lines, Bashar al-Assad’s government had ceased to exist.

At this point, Assad gave up his attempts to roll back the rebels and instead sought to contain them, backed by Shia Islamist militias such as Lebanese Hezbollah and various Iraqi groups. The pro-Assad coalition launched a reinvigorated offensive to shore up government defenses, and then sent armored columns to cut off the flow of arms from Turkey through the Syrian desert.

In April 2013, the government retook Oteiba and began to choke off access to the rebel territory it had surrounded. The opposition launched a counteroffensive in May, backed by nearly all the rebel groups that now operated in the area: the Islam Brigade, the Douma Martyrs Brigade, the Martyrs of Islam, the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, and many others.¹² “The battle of Oteiba was a tipping point between success and disaster,” said a member of a rebel faction in the Damascus region, who noted the town’s key role as a link between the Eastern Ghouta region and the smuggling routes that ran through the desert and the Qalamoun Mountains. “It was not the only such place,” he said, “but it was the last one.”¹³

By mid-June, it was clear that the army could not be dislodged: the Eastern Ghouta had turned into an island of opposition control, an isolated territory under siege. Having failed to break the siege in the east, the insurgent forces were drawn deep into the battle for the Damascus suburbs. The fighting was brutal and the rebels reported a growing number of small, tactical nerve gas attacks, culminating in a gruesome massacre of civilians on August 21, 2013. As the siege hardened, the horizons of the Eastern Ghouta shrank, and its defenders were increasingly preoccupied by how to defend, organize, and rule the enclave in which they had been trapped.

A Key Leader: Zahran Alloush

As in all of Syria, the opposition in the Eastern Ghouta has suffered from its fragmentation. Over the past five years, dozens of local factions have spawned and split in the areas east of Damascus, slowly coalescing to create a handful of

larger umbrella movements.

The most important of the groups to emerge in the Eastern Ghouta was the Islam Army (*Jaysh al-Islam*), which rose to dominance from 2013 onwards under the leadership of Mohammed Zahran Alloush, also known as Abu Abdullah. Over the next two years, he would establish himself as the central figure in the enclave's factional landscape and demonstrate the pivotal role that a single individual can play in the midst of political upheaval. It is worth looking at his background in some detail.

Zahran Alloush was born in Douma in 1971. His father, Abdullah Alloush (b. 1937), was an Islamic scholar who espoused the ultra-orthodox Salafi school of Sunni Islam, as understood by the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia. This brand of Salafism stresses personal piety and doctrinal purity. But although it, too, seeks a theocracy based on the strict application of sharia law and is hostile to Shia Muslims and other non-Sunni minorities, it differs in important respects from the Salafi-jihadi teachings popular in al-Qaeda and likeminded movements. "It is a traditional type of Salafism, what we call salafiyya 'ilmiyya [scholarly Salafism]," said Abdulrahman Alhaj, a Turkey-based specialist in Syrian Islamism and a former minister in the opposition's exile government. "They don't have a global agenda. Their agenda is almost purely religious and national. Jihad is not the aim, the aim is to correct people's beliefs."¹⁴

Such views found fertile soil in Douma, a famously conservative city sometimes known as the City of Minarets. It is one of very few places in Syria and the wider Levant to be dominated by the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, which predominates in Saudi Arabia, and this facilitated the spread of Salafi teachings.

Abdullah Alloush had been one of the leading exponents of modern Salafism in the Eastern Ghouta. In the early 1980s, he became the imam of the Tawhid Mosque in southern Douma, and in 1985 he was permitted to open a Douma branch of the Assad Institute for Memorizing the Quran. At this time, the Syrian government focused its attention on the rival Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been involved in an armed uprising in 1979–82, but the Alloush family later came into conflict with both the authorities and rival clerics in Douma. Abdullah Alloush was never arrested, but claims to have been repeatedly called in for questioning and suffered police harassment, and he eventually immigrated to Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990s.¹⁵ His son Zahran reportedly had his first run-in with the security apparatus as a teenager in 1987.¹⁶

Zahran Alloush began to study Islam as a child, first under his father and then under other Syrian religious scholars. He continued his religious studies at Damascus University and later enrolled at the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, studying under Salafi religious luminaries such as Ibn Baz (1910–99), Ibn Othaimin (1925–2001), and Mohammed Nasreddine al-Albani (1914–99). Back in Syria, Alloush capped his education with a master's degree at the Sharia Faculty

in Baramkeh in central Damascus. He then went into private business, with some sources saying he ran a shop or company selling honey, while others insist that he founded a construction consultancy. Whatever the nature of his work, his real vocation seems to have been secret Salafi missionary activity. During that period, he was deeply involved in running study circles and distributing banned religious literature, and possibly also in organizing support for the Iraqi insurgency, though all sources seem to agree he never carried arms either in Iraq or in Syria.



ZAHARAN ALLOUSH SPEAKING AT THE DECLARATION OF THE UNIFIED MILITARY COMMAND IN AUGUST 2014. SEATED, LEFT TO RIGHT: KHALED TAFOUR, ABU HAMZA AL-GHOUTANI, YASSER AL-QADRI, ABDEL-NASR SHMEIR, ABU SULEIMAN AL-ZABADANI, SAMIR KAAKEH, SAID DARWISH. SOURCE: REBEL VIDEO.

In 2009, the Assad government arrested Zahran Alloush as part of a broader crackdown on Sunni religious activism and Islamist militancy. He ended up in the Sednaya Prison alongside hundreds of other Islamist prisoners, many of whom had volunteered with al-Qaeda in the Iraq War. Rubbing shoulders with these men, he reportedly emerged as a respected leader in the prison. Alloush was still in jail when the Syrian uprising began in March 2011, but he was released in a presidential amnesty on June 22, 2011. He immediately joined the budding insurgency in his hometown, Douma.¹⁷

2011–12: The Early Insurgency

In summer 2011, the Eastern Ghouta was a hotbed of political ferment. Several small groups had taken up arms against the government, most of them using the Free Syrian Army moniker.

After his release from prison, Zahran Alloush and his Salafi allies initially worked with the Obeida Ibn Jarrah Battalion

of the Free Syrian Army, which was reportedly the first armed group in the Eastern Ghouta.¹⁸ Formally established under that name in or around August 2011, it was led by “Abu Mohammed,” a retired Kurdish lieutenant-colonel from the Rukneddine neighborhood of Damascus, and does not seem to have been an explicitly Islamist group.¹⁹ However, as the Damascus insurgency grew in autumn 2011 and new armed groups mushroomed across the region, the Obeida Ibn Jarrah Battalion fell apart.

By September 2011 at the latest, Zahran Alloush had gathered his followers into a new faction under his own leadership. Known as the Islam Company (Sariyat al-Islam), it reportedly started with a small core of only fourteen members, several of them religious students or scholars like Alloush. It then grew quickly by drawing on old networks connected to the Tawhid Mosque and other Salafi institutions in Douma, an environment that apart from the Alloushes also included members of the Boueidini, Delwan, and Sheikh Bzeineh families.²⁰ For example, the Salafi preacher Sa’id Delwan (a.k.a. Abu Nouman, 1948–) had led Friday prayers in the Tawhid Mosque in the 1980s, and he now lent his support to Alloush’s militia.²¹

Although others contributed to the founding of the Islam Company, Zahran Alloush was undisputedly its central figure. He seems to have had a knack for organization, combined with an authoritarian, centralizing streak that would soon make its mark on the Eastern Ghouta insurgency. The Islam Company appears to have borrowed its organizational model from the Iraq War jihadi factions in which many Syrian Islamists had fought. It bestowed complete executive power on Zahran Alloush, unchecked except by the constraints of sharia, and he would take advice but not orders from a shura council (or “consultative council”) led by religious scholars and other important figures.

The Islam Company’s first documented attack seems to have been a nighttime raid against a checkpoint in Mesraba, near Douma, in September or October 2011.²² But the group’s distinguishing feature was not, at this early stage, its military capacity. Rather, the Islam Company stood out among the rebels in Douma for its overtly religious and missionary character.



ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATION IN DOUMA ON APRIL 8, 2011. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Much of the early insurgency in the city was led by local toughs, who were sometimes members of Douma's old families and in some cases linked to organized crime. Though they wrapped themselves in Islamic rhetoric when appearing as rebel leaders, many were not particularly religious or ideological. One Syrian researcher refers to them as *qabadayat*, an old term for the opportunistic neighborhood strongmen who ruled the streets and played politics in Ottoman and French mandate days.²³ Some such networks would later coalesce into Free Syrian Army groups like the Douma Martyrs' Brigade or the Douma Shields Brigade, early incarnations of which played a major role in driving government forces out of Douma city in 2012 under the leadership of local commanders Abu Subhi Taha (real name Ahmed Rateb) and Abu Ali Khibbiyeh (real name Majed Khibbiyeh).

According to one of Zahran Alloush's early associates, Essam Boueidani, the Islam Company approached these factions as an ally and "taught them how to do the ablution and establish the prayer. Most of them didn't pray. They were kind people but they didn't pray."²⁴

The Islam Company's religious identity was an important source of attraction as it sought to gather new recruits. Though Alloush's fundamentalist rhetoric and Saudi connections caused alarm among secularists and some anti-Salafi Islamic scholars, they were not strong or united enough to put up effective resistance. More importantly, his views were not unpopular with the much larger conservative Sunni population in Douma. Indeed, the Islam Company's ability to portray itself as a religiously observant and uncorrupted force against the Assad government drew recruits away from

the Free Syrian Army factions. In turn, the Free Syrian Army factions ended up in the hands of opportunistic elements who, according to the Syrian researcher Youssef Sadaki, “had no strategy and no vision; they were just fighting to be powerful and to get back in the spotlight.”²⁵

In early 2012, the Islam Company had emerged as one of the most powerful factions in Douma and in all of the Eastern Ghouta. To emphasize its strength, Alloush renamed his group the Islam Brigade, or Liwa’ al-Islam. Its identity was gradually becoming that of a big-tent Islamist movement seeking to represent the Ghouta region’s conservative Sunni population and aspiring to a national role in Syria, though the top-level leadership remained firmly in the hands of Alloush and his Douma Salafis.

An important source of influence for Zahran Alloush was his family connections with Salafi clerics in the Arab countries of the Gulf, which he leveraged to improve the Islam Brigade’s financial standing. Several Syrian expats and foreign clerics dedicated themselves to collecting money on his behalf in Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Among the best known was Adnan Arour, a Riyadh-based Syrian televangelist who had met Alloush during his days as a student in Saudi Arabia. Originally from Hama, he had become immensely popular among Syrian rebels and Islamist-leaning demonstrators for his feisty and unapologetically Sunni-sectarian denunciations of Assad. Many expat Syrians and other Islamist supporters of the uprising donated money to Arour without knowing his precise affiliations inside Syria, and he seems to have passed on considerable funds to Alloush.²⁶ The Islam Army’s deep pockets were an important reason for its growing power, according to Sadaki. “When money started rolling in to Zahran Alloush and he was able to pay his soldiers \$150 or \$200 a month, which is a lot inside the Ghouta, people left [the other Douma factions],” he said.²⁷

Another source of influence for Alloush was the arms trade. Several local alliances had been set up in the Damascus region under the Free Syrian Army brand, such as Colonel Khaled al-Habbous’s Military Council of Damascus and Its Countryside, created in March 2012, and Captain Abdel-Nasr Shmeir’s Revolutionary Military Council of the Eastern Ghouta, created in September 2012. These councils were organizationally unstable and failed to inspire much loyalty among the fighters, but some of them played a role in channeling arms from foreign sponsors.

According to Habbous, his Military Council began to serve as a channel for arms shipments from Turkey in mid-2012.²⁸ Large amounts of weapons and ammunition had by then been collected in now-stateless Libya by Syrian exiles and the Muslim Brotherhood, with assistance from Libyan Islamists, Qatar, and the Turkish government. The first leg of the arms transports seems to have been handled by the Farouq Battalions, a group that had emerged in the Homs region in 2011 and now controlled areas on the Syrian-Turkish border. To reach the areas east of Damascus, the smugglers then had to bring their cargo from Homs through the mountainous Qalamoun region.²⁹

Alloush refused to join the Military Council, allegedly because he saw the defected officers as impious ex-Ba’athists, but

he collaborated with the group in order to tap into its arms smuggling network. According to Habbous—who, it should be noted, has made a number of unsubstantiated accusations against the Islam Army—Alloush was made responsible for distributing weapons in the Ghouta, but ended up diverting most of the cargo to his own allies. “In this way, the Islam Company started to develop,” Habbous said, “because Sheikh Zahran was the one—or rather one of the members of the committee—that distributed the arms.”³⁰

On July 18, 2012, the Islam Brigade gained national (and international) attention by claiming responsibility for the assassination of several senior security officials at the National Security Office in Damascus, including Bashar al-Assad’s brother-in-law General Assef Shawkat and Defense Minister Dawoud Rajha.³¹ The incident remains murky and it is possible that this was either an opportunistic false claim on Alloush’s part, or an operation executed by someone else—such as a foreign intelligence service—who credited the Islam Brigade in order to escape attention. Whatever the case, the Islam Brigade was able to use its newfound notoriety to attract additional funds and recruits.

In its claim of responsibility for the July 18 attack, the Islam Brigade had still referred to itself as part of the Free Syrian Army, but in the following months it dropped this label. Free Syrian Army symbols had been in general use among the Syrian rebels, but by mid-2012 they were falling out of fashion as the main factions of the insurgency began to emphasize a religious and sectarian Sunni discourse. The Free Syrian Army brand remained in usage as a general term for the insurgency and would later reemerge as a collective name for Western-approved factions, but Alloush’s group chose to instead double down on its Islamist identity.

2013: Rise of the Islam Army

As the conflict entered its third year, Zahran Alloush was becoming a figure of national importance. Drawing on old contacts from Sednaya Prison, he developed a broad network in northern Syria and Turkey, where some of his former fellow inmates were present in the leadership of groups like Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front. But his primary focus seems to have been closer to home.³²

The Assad government and its security apparatus had been expelled from Alloush’s hometown of Douma in late 2012, creating a power vacuum that had yet to be filled. Alloush’s main rival in this area was the Douma Martyrs’ Brigade, a group with roots in the early, nonreligious rebel networks that had led the capture of Douma. Although their conflict was not primarily about ideology, Alloush’s growing power had prompted a closing of ranks among secular activists and rival

religious groups, such as Sufi clerics who feared the rise of Salafism. The Douma Martyrs' Brigade became the primary beneficiary of this backlash, and the two factions began to compete for power in Douma by trying to attract smaller armed groups to their respective sides.

These power struggles seem to have played out almost exclusively within the opposition itself, with little involvement from the wider population. All factions clearly had some grassroots influence and there was considerable support for the rebellion as such, but none of the commanders seemed to have developed a genuine civilian following or an organized popular base. It was not even clear that they were trying. With rare exceptions, the rebels did not form political parties, nor did they stage elections or seek to mobilize the wider population for their purposes through organizations or public rallies, except for the ongoing Friday demonstrations against Assad. There were attempts at political and associative action, but these mostly seemed to be initiatives from civilian activists who had no clout among the armed factions. And though the Islamists worked to influence public opinion through the mosques and missionary outreach, the overall impression was that of an insurgency whose commanders simply took popular support for granted.

The lack of a central authority in Douma after the expulsion of the regime had led to growing lawlessness. Several of the armed groups now ran their own sharia courts and private prisons. Some rebel commanders were becoming infamous for thuggish behavior and criminality and there were sporadic bouts of infighting. As the economic situation and local security deteriorated, the rebels seemed to realize that their internal divisions and failure to govern had become a liability.

In March 2013, rebel commanders in Douma gathered to create the Douma Mujahideen Council in order to rule the city and tamp down intra-factional conflict.³³ Though the council included many small factions, it was dominated by and polarized between the Islam Brigade and the Douma Martyrs' Brigade. The two factions had decided to divide power between themselves, with the Douma Martyrs' Brigade commander Abu Subhi Taha becoming president of the alliance and Zahran Alloush taking up leadership of its religious advisory board, the Shura Council.

However, the balance of power soon tilted in Alloush's favor, as smaller factions began to join the Islam Brigade. There seem to have been several reasons for this, including the organizational talents of Alloush's team and his support from Douma's Salafi civil society networks. But another reason was the rising foreign support for the Islam Brigade.

In mid-2013, or perhaps earlier, a Kuwaiti charity called the Council of Supporters of the Syrian Revolution had emerged as one of Alloush's most important foreign sponsors.³⁴ It had been set up the previous year under the leadership of the Kuwaiti parliamentarian Mohammed Hayef al-Moteiri, and it collected a great deal of money. For example, a twenty-four-day fundraising drive in February 2013 listed a goal of 500,000 Kuwaiti dinars, or \$1.75 million.³⁵ Much of these funds went into humanitarian projects, but the Council of Supporters did not try to hide the fact that they also financed

armed factions. For example, the group's June 2013 fundraiser was called "The Mobilization Campaign to Support the Mujahideen in Syria,"³⁶ and among its projects was the building of an arms factory in the Eastern Ghouta.³⁷

Over summer and autumn 2013, the Council of Supporters pumped cash into Alloush's coffers with the unspoken aim of trying to engineer a Ghouta-wide supergroup under his leadership, reportedly directing 70 percent of their donations specifically to the Islam Brigade. On September 29, Alloush declared the merger of the Islam Brigade and forty-two other armed groups into what would be called the Islam Army (Jaysh al-Islam).³⁸ Other small factions quickly decided to bandwagon with Alloush, and by November, the Islam Army claimed to comprise no fewer than sixty rebel factions. Though this was probably an exaggeration, there was no doubt that the Islam Army had grown into a very powerful group.³⁹

The summer and autumn of 2013 allegedly also marked the start of serious Saudi support for Alloush, possibly through or in coordination with the Kuwaiti network. "Saudi tribal figures have been making calls on behalf of Saudi intelligence," a Damascene rebel commander told Reuters after the Islam Army merger. "Their strategy is to offer financial backing in return for loyalty and staying away from al-Qaeda."⁴⁰ The suspicions of a Saudi connection were further strengthened when it emerged that Alloush had quietly slipped out of the Eastern Ghouta to visit Saudi Arabia for the hajj pilgrimage right after the announcement of the Islam Army.⁴¹

However, Alloush's links to Riyadh often seemed to be exaggerated by his rivals on the jihadi end of the Salafi spectrum, who were sensitive to and fearful of any Saudi intelligence involvement. In fact, he seemed to be taking money from many sources. There had previously been hints of a Qatari connection, and it seems quite possible that the Islam Army still relied on diverse and mostly nongovernmental sources of funding.

Whoever was responsible for his rise, there could no longer be any doubt that Zahran Alloush was now the most powerful man in the Eastern Ghouta and that he was steadily getting stronger.

Whoever was responsible for his rise, there could no longer be any doubt that Zahran Alloush was now the most powerful man in the Eastern Ghouta and that he was steadily getting stronger. He leveraged his military might by offering protection to wealthy businessmen and minor commanders, while using his money to set up charities to curry favor with the population, fund friendly preachers and mosques, and lure new recruits with weapons and a steady salary.

With Alloush now too big to share power equitably with anyone, the power-sharing arrangements agreed in his

hometown through the Douma Mujahideen Council broke down. In October 2013, the council president and Douma Martyrs' Brigade commander Abu Subhi Taha expelled Alloush from the leadership of the coalition. The putsch was cheered on by secular activists and perhaps also by rival foreign powers, but Alloush had no intention of allowing himself to be legislated out of power. He simply pulled his followers out of the council, which duly collapsed. Abu Subhi Taha was temporarily cowed, but continued to plot his revenge.

The following month, virtually all of Alloush's regional rivals gathered into yet another short-lived alliance, this one called the Greater Damascus Operations Room, which had been conceived of as a coordination structure for both the Western and the Eastern Ghouta.⁴² Though it was an impressive project on paper, it didn't work well and it ultimately failed to balance the rise of Alloush. The Eastern Ghouta had now been sealed off from surrounding territories by the army siege and, inside its enclave, the Islam Army was too powerful to be isolated. Left as the biggest fish in a shrinking pond, Alloush was instead finally able to impose himself on the smaller factions, first in Douma and then in the wider Eastern Ghouta.

Repression and Controversies

The Islam Army's growing power brought increased scrutiny of its humanitarian track record, which was not comforting. The chaos that had plagued the enclave was giving way to an order of sorts, but it was built on a balance between armed factions and on repressive policing. Alloush had created a security branch that was beginning to spread its influence far outside Douma, often setting up offices to encroach on the turf of smaller factions. There were occasional military skirmishes, while civilian opponents of the Islam Army could face harassment, threats, and beatings. The group ran several private prison facilities, such as the Repentance Prison (Sijn al-Toubah), which gained a terrifying reputation for torture and abuses.

"Of course the siege and the indiscriminate attacks of the government are the most important part of the destruction of these areas, but it was also due to the behavior of these armed groups," recalled Bassam al-Ahmed, a former spokesperson for the Violations Documentation Center, a human rights group based in the Eastern Ghouta. "It is no longer a secret that this experience has failed to bring anything better than Assad in that respect. By 2016, a lot of activists have been forced to leave. Many of them have been abducted, kidnapped, and tortured."⁴³

The repression also touched Ahmed's own group. In December 2013, the Violations Documentations Center's founder and president, the well-known human rights lawyer Razan Zeitouneh, was kidnapped in Douma along with her husband Wa'el Hammada and two other secular democracy activists, Samira Khelil and Nazem Hammadi.⁴⁴ Never heard from since, it is widely believed that they were murdered after capture. Though the Islam Army has denied involvement,

human rights groups and relatives of the “Douma Four” hold Alloush responsible, pointing to a history of threats and harassment against the activists by his security officers.⁴⁵ A young and charismatic intellectual who had publicly advocated for democracy even before 2011, Razan Zeitounh was an iconic figure for much of the secular opposition, and she was closely connected to Western human rights monitors. Her disappearance came to define Zahran Alloush in the eyes of many liberal Syrians and foreign observers, and it would later obstruct his attempts to clean up the Islam Army’s image and build relations with the West.

The Islam Army’s politics were also coming in for criticism. In line with his religious beliefs, Alloush was an out-and-out opponent of democracy and he indulged in menacing Sunni-sectarian rhetoric that sometimes bordered on the genocidal. For example, in a September 2013 propaganda video, he had vowed to cleanse the Levant from the “filth” of Shia Islam.⁴⁶ Among secular Syrian intellectuals and pro-opposition Western observers, he was now being held up as an example of the “bad rebel.”

In fact, such sectarian notions had become mainstream within the armed insurgency two years into the war. Alloush’s opinions were at odds with the idealized democratic revolution envisioned by the Western media, Western officialdom, and the democratic opposition itself, but among the fighters on the ground, Islamist values predominated and there was no evidence that Alloush’s anti-Shia statements had hurt his standing. If anything, they seemed to be broadly shared and appreciated, which was presumably why they were part of the Islam Army’s public propaganda in the first place.

Indeed, rather than shunning him, the other major factions in Syria sought his support. On November 22, 2013, the Islam Army created an alliance known as the Islamic Front alongside some of the most powerful factions in the country, including the Tawhid Brigade of Aleppo, Idlib’s Suqour al-Sham, and the large Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham,⁴⁷ all of whom espoused Islamist views similar to those of Alloush. The Islamic Front alliance mattered greatly in northern Syria, where the Islam Army had by now acquired subfactions operating along the Turkish border, but it had little direct impact on the politics of the Eastern Ghouta. It did however raise Alloush’s profile as a top-ranking opposition leader on the national level, a status that no other rebel commander in the Damascus region could aspire to.

2014: Uniting the Eastern Ghouta

In early 2014, most of the groups in the Eastern Ghouta seemed to accept that Zahran Alloush had become first among equals inside the enclave, despite vocal opposition from unrelenting rivals like his old competitors in Douma, Abu Subhi Taha, and Abu Ali Khibbiyeh.

After two years of failed coalition building, it was this grudging admission of Alloush’s leading role that finally made

broad coalitions possible, by creating a clear center of gravity. It paved the way for a solution of the now dangerously pressing problem of how to govern the enclave, which had remained in a state of semi-anarchy since the expulsion of Assad's government two years prior, with each rebel faction running its own affairs the way it saw fit and a chaotic tangle of sharia courts and revolutionary councils vying for influence over legal and administrative matters.⁴⁸

On June 24, 2014, the Islam Army and sixteen other rebel factions announced the creation of the Eastern Ghouta's Unified Judicial Council, the first enclave-wide union of rebel-backed Islamic courts. Led by a panel of religious scholars, its role would be to impartially administer sharia law across the enclave through a centrally coordinated system of regional courts and institutions. Unlike some of the other post-Assad judicial systems created in the Eastern Ghouta, the Unified Judicial Council had no trained lawyers or judges on its governing board, only Islamic scholars. In practice, most of the sheikhs represented specific armed factions, in order to secure support from these factions for the council.⁴⁹ And it worked: at its creation, the Unified Judicial Council was backed by every major faction in the Eastern Ghouta, though the al-Qaeda-aligned Nusra Front soon broke off to run its own sharia courts instead.

On August 27, 2014, this was followed by the creation of a Unified Military Command, which became the highest military and civilian authority in the Eastern Ghouta. It was founded by five of the enclave's most powerful factions: the Islam Army, Ajnad al-Sham, Failaq al-Rahman, the al-Habib al-Mustafa Brigades, and the Eastern Ghouta branch of Ahrar al-Sham. Alloush headed the command, with the Ajnad al-Sham leader Yasser al-Qadri as his deputy and Failaq al-Rahman's Abdel-Nasr Shmeir as his field commander.⁵⁰

Qadri, also known as Abu Mohammed al-Fateh, was born in 1983 in Damascus to a family from Reyhani near Douma. A young religious scholar with a degree from Cairo's al-Azhar University, he had also studied under several famous Damascene sheikhs and his family had strong links to the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵¹ Ajnad al-Sham matched the background of its leader: it had been formed in November 2013 as a project of the traditionalist Damascene clergy, possibly also with support from the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵² Backed by a broad array of Sufi and traditionalist Islamic scholars, many of whom were hostile to Salafism, it had enough ideological and financial muscle to retain its independence vis-à-vis the Islam Army, but it now grudgingly accepted to work under Alloush's command.

Captain Abdel-Nasr Shmeir, also known as Abu al-Nasr, was born in 1977 in the city of al-Rastan near Homs, but had married into the family of a religious sheikh in the Eastern Ghouta. Unlike his fellow rebel leaders, Shmeir was neither a student nor a scholar of Islam, instead serving as an army captain until defecting in April 2012. In August 2012, he headed an armed group known as the al-Bara Battalion, which made headlines by kidnapping forty-eight Iranians on pilgrimage to the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine; Shmeir claimed that they were Iranian intelligence officers. The Iranians were released in October that year in a murky deal that involved a prisoner exchange and reportedly also a large ransom

payment.⁵³ These funds seem to have helped Shmeir remain independent of Alloush and develop the al-Bara Battalion into the much-larger Failaq al-Rahman network, which was created in late 2013. Shmeir drew on his military background to emphasize nationalist themes and a Free Syrian Army identity, seemingly trying to position Failaq al-Rahman as the Eastern Ghouta's non-Islamist alternative.⁵⁴

The Unified Military Command had gathered the most powerful factions in the Eastern Ghouta, with one very significant exception: the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. A host of lesser commanders also refused to abide by its rules, notably the disgruntled Douma rebels Abu Subhi Taha and Abu Ali Khibbiyeh, both of whom had a bone to pick with Alloush. One source later estimated that "close to half" of the enclave's rebels had stayed outside of the Unified Military Command at the time of its formation.⁵⁵ Alloush and his partners clearly had their work cut out for them if they wanted to use the new alliance to control the enclave.

The armed groups jealously guarded their military and financial independence, and despite their public vows to let the Unified Judicial Council handle all legal matters, they continued to run private prisons and security forces.

Perhaps a bigger problem was that the members themselves often refused to abide by the rules of the Unified Military Command. The armed groups jealously guarded their military and financial independence, and despite their public vows to let the Unified Judicial Council handle all legal matters, they continued to run private prisons and security forces. They also continued to wrestle over local resources and occasionally skirmished with each other. Even so, the new institutions did provide a useful basis for joint action and the institutionalization of political life in the Eastern Ghouta—and Alloush was already making plans for how to deal with the dissenters who refused to join.

Destroying the Anti-Alloush Opposition

In September 2014, soon after the creation of the Unified Military Command, around twenty small groups that had refused to endorse the new system coalesced into two new coalitions, known as the Umma Army and Failaq Omar.⁵⁶

The most pugnacious of these alliances was the Umma Army. Led by the veteran Douma rebel Abu Subhi Taha and his associate Abu Ali Khibbiyeh, the Umma Army was a hodgepodge of Free Syrian Army groups and local gangs held together mostly by their shared hatred of Zahran Alloush. Some of its members were linked to the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army, a rebel coalition on the border with Jordan that received support from the Jordan-based and United

States-backed Military Operations Center, or MOC.

Both Taha and Khibbiyeh had played a pioneering role in the early uprising in Douma and they were well-known figures in their home community, but they were also associated with smuggling and criminality. Unable to build major popular support or construct an effective movement, they had struggled in sullen opposition to the Islam Army since 2012. Among other things, they had offered protection to some of Douma's secular opposition leaders, though it is less clear whether this was a question of genuine political beliefs or if they simply wanted to spite Alloush. In this way, they had emerged as central figures in the anti-Islam Army opposition in Douma.

After his marginalization at the hands of Alloush in 2012, "Abu Ali Khibbiyeh didn't have that many people with him anymore, but by the end of 2013 and in 2014, people were drawing closer to Islamic and Salafi thoughts, and some opposed this," explained Youssef Sadaki, of the Orient Research Center. "For them, it was not about whether Abu Ali Khibbiyeh was a bad person or not, or about whether he smuggled and stole. It was about Zahran Alloush becoming all-powerful and trying to finish off everyone else. So people gathered around Abu Ali Khibbiyeh."⁵⁷

When Zahran Alloush learned of the Umma Army's challenge to his unity project, he reacted with outrage, threatening its leaders and stating that the Eastern Ghouta could not suffer having "two heads on the same body."⁵⁸ Clashes between the groups erupted almost immediately. In late October 2014, the Umma Army agreed to recognize Alloush's leadership of the Unified Military Command, but the conflict continued.⁵⁹

One front of the struggle appears to have played out at the Wafideen Crossing near Douma, where Abu Ali Khibbiyeh and his allies were running a lucrative siege-busting business with the complicity of traders and military commanders on the government side. When the Islam Army moved in and began arresting Umma Army members, apparently also seizing some of the goods that had come through the crossing, the Syrian government shut down all trade. This sparked an instant humanitarian crisis in the Eastern Ghouta. The Umma Army blamed Alloush, slamming him as a dictator and a war profiteer who had stolen food from the starving. He in turn castigated the Umma Army leaders as drug dealers, smugglers, and agents of both the Islamic State and the Syrian government.⁶⁰ To further weaken Alloush, Umma Army members in Harasta decided to stop the Islam Army from using their smuggling tunnels to bring in otherwise unavailable supplies.

As the crisis grew, the Umma Army encouraged demonstrations against Alloush, accusing him of hoarding food and of being Assad's silent partner in the siege. In mid-November 2014, armed demonstrators stormed Islam Army warehouses in Douma, egged on by the Umma Army. "The guards fired on us directly, which prompted some protesters to fire back, leading to serious injuries among some residents," a local activist told the online journal Al-Monitor.⁶¹

However, if the Umma Army leaders had thought that they could force Zahran Alloush to share power, they had badly misjudged the man. In late December 2014, the Islam Army declared that it would now “cleanse the land of corrupt filth” and launched a ferocious, no-holds-barred military assault on the Umma Army.⁶² Zahran Alloush’s partners in the Unified Military Command publicly criticized him for acting outside the framework of the joint institutions, but none of them intervened to defend the Umma Army on the battlefield.⁶³

Left alone to face Alloush, the Umma Army did not stand a chance. The Islam Army leader later claimed to have jailed thirteen hundred members of the group.⁶⁴ Abu Subhi Taha’s fate remains unclear, but the Islam Army later released a video in which a subdued-looking Abu Ali Khibbiyeh, who had been captured after a manhunt in early January 2015, confessed to being a criminal, a narcotics trader, and a homosexual.⁶⁵ According to some reports, he was executed nine months later.⁶⁶

Alloush dealt with Failaq Omar, the other faction created in September 2014 that opposed him, in a more cautious fashion. The group had its roots in the Marj area on the southern end of the enclave and seems to have been a local enterprise linked to Bedouin clans and hardline Islamists. Starting in July 2014, the Islam Army’s secret police had waged an unsparing war against the Islamic State, which escalated in 2015 as Alloush declared that even ideological sympathy for the jihadists would be considered a crime.⁶⁷ Some Islamic State cells were apparently operating inside Failaq Omar, which exposed the group to repeated crackdowns. Weakened and wary of suffering the same fate as the Umma Army, the remaining leaders of Failaq Omar finally gave up and joined the Islam Army in April 2015.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, another potential rival to Zahran Alloush collapsed in a complicated split. In March 2015, Ahrar al-Sham’s local branch in the Eastern Ghouta was bought up by Failaq al-Rahman, though some members immediately backed out and sought to revive the Ahrar al-Sham brand.⁶⁹ A dispute over ammunition stockpiles and bases followed, in which the Islam Army sided with Failaq al-Rahman—possibly in return for some of the spoils. The Unified Military Command then sought to enforce a February 2015 ban on the creation of new factions, which effectively outlawed Ahrar al-Sham in the Eastern Ghouta.⁷⁰ Fearing complete isolation and eager to aid anyone that opposed the Unified Military Command, the Nusra Front stepped in to protect the dissidents. However, according to the Syrian researcher and opposition member Ahmed Aba-Zeid, this rump faction of Ahrar al-Sham comprised only about one hundred fighters, meaning that Ahrar al-Sham was more or less finished as an independent force in the Eastern Ghouta.⁷¹

Since the smaller groups were now formally banned from creating new alliances or seceding from old ones, the insurgency began to solidify at a higher pace. Most of the remaining mini-groups were pulled into the orbit of one of the “big three” members of the Unified Military Command: the Islam Army, Ajnad al-Sham, or Failaq al-Rahman.⁷²

As the factional muck slowly drained away, only the Nusra Front remained as an explicit challenger to the new system. It continued to run its own sharia courts outside the Unified Judicial Council system, to which citizens could turn if they didn't like the courts provided by Alloush and his allies. Alloush repeatedly stated that this state of affairs could not continue and that he would not permit anyone to run a legal system outside the United Judicial Council.⁷³ The Unified Military Command was also mobilized to demand that the Nusra Front shut down its courts and submit to the Unified Judicial Council.⁷⁴ But the jihadis refused, and Alloush did not, in the end, move against them militarily.⁷⁵

This exception aside, the new institutions were gaining considerable traction. By early 2015, every major faction in the Eastern Ghouta except the jihadis had endorsed them. Though senior members of the rebel factions were practically untouchable, civilians were now largely being referred to the sharia courts of the Unified Judicial Council. The homogenization of the enclave also proceeded apace on the social level, through the enforcement of strict religious norms. In summer 2015, a new religious police appeared on the streets of Douma to promote Islamic morals and sharia law. Though critics complained that it was a way for the Islam Army to unilaterally impose its worldview on others, the group's leaders could now claim to act on behalf of the Unified Judicial Council.⁷⁶

Yet, while Alloush used the new institutions to legitimize and magnify his own power, he refused to be constrained by them. He had not consulted his allies ahead of the crackdowns on the Umma Army and the Islamic State, and when the Unified Judicial Council asked for access to his own prisons or tried to investigate the fate of Abu Subhi Taha, the Islam Army shrugged it off.⁷⁷

As for the Islam Army, it had now developed into a large and well-equipped military force commanding thousands of fighters. Already officially named the Eastern Ghouta's supreme commander, Zahran Alloush seemed to be seeking the role as its undisputed ruler. In April 2015, the Islam Army released video footage of a large military parade, with long rows of uniformed soldiers and tanks marching past a parade stand where Alloush sat on a chair flanked by his lieutenants.⁷⁸ More than anything, it seemed designed to emulate a traditional Arab army, with Alloush in the role of a traditional Arab president.

The Economy of a Siege

The siege imposed on the Eastern Ghouta in 2013 played a major role in the evolution of its politics. Government-imposed restrictions on trade and aid deliveries created a very particular war economy, which left rebel factions dependent on the government but also increased those factions' influence over the population. In the climate of scarcity created by the siege, the small number of semiofficial frontline crossings and tunnels that could be used to import goods

provided the government with new leverage and engendered new forms of competition among the rebels. Actors on the government side profited from the siege and acquired a vested interest in maintaining it, and rebel commanders also increasingly adapted to the siege economy.

Understanding the background and functioning of this peculiar siege economy is crucial to understanding the Eastern Ghouta's rebel politics, and it provides an instructive example of how financial constraints and opportunities can shape the political and military situation in counterintuitive ways.

As has been described above, the government initially laid siege to the Eastern Ghouta after its capture of Oteiba in April 2013. In the following months, the government moved to seal the main entry routes to the enclave at Mleiha in the south and near the Wafideen Camp in the north. Some trade quietly continued, but the siege was further tightened and expanded into a comprehensive economic blockade in early 2014, when the army recaptured Mleiha and took steps to fully close the Wafideen Crossing. Later in 2014, a limited trade resumed via progovernment businessmen and their rebel intermediaries. But while this allowed food and fuel prices in the enclave to stabilize at a high level, supply has remained spotty and prices sometimes spike due to fighting, checkpoint closures, the destruction of smuggling tunnels, or market manipulations. Civilians have remained trapped inside the enclave, unable to cross the frontlines and prevented from leaving by both government forces and local rebel groups, notably the Islam Army.⁷⁹

The blockade has caused severe human suffering inside the enclave. For an example of the price inflation, the pro-opposition Douma Coordination Group published the following comparison between the Eastern Ghouta and what it termed "Occupied Damascus" in March 2015. (Units differ from product to product, while prices are listed in Syrian pounds.)⁸⁰

Table 1. Price of Goods Comparison, Eastern Ghouta vs. Damascus, March 2015

Product	Eastern Ghouta	Damascus
Sugar	2750	120
Eggs	5100	750
Bread	750	35
Tea	8000	1200
Heating Oil	1100	120
Potatoes	1300	90
Lentils	1600	125

Source: Posted on the author's Twitter account on March 4, 2015.

The rebels did what they could to counter the effects of the new policy, including trying to grow more food inside the besieged area and using aid money to subsidize certain goods. Nevertheless, the blockade crippled normal life in the Eastern Ghouta and it had a severe impact on the civilian population, which suffered from malnutrition and the depletion of medical supplies. The opposition-friendly Syrian American Medical Society estimates that more than two hundred civilians in the enclave died from a lack of food or access to medical care between October 2012 and January 2015,⁸¹ and Amnesty International concluded that the Syrian government's blockade on food and medicine in the Eastern Ghouta amounted to a crime against humanity.⁸²

Apart from its effect on the civilian population, the blockade has had a profound impact on the structure and cohesion of the Eastern Ghouta insurgency. On the one hand, new types of conflict emerged, as rebel commanders jockeyed for control over scarce resources, smuggling routes, and government-approved imports. On the other hand, those who successfully monopolized some facet of the siege economy profited greatly and could expand their influence in the enclave. Government-connected businessmen have similarly used the siege to gain influence in Damascus and over the rebels. Army and intelligence chiefs have enriched themselves at checkpoints controlling access to the enclave, and the government also seems to have exploited its ability to turn trade on and off in order to sow enmity among the rebels.

“Keep in mind that the regime wants to strengthen a certain faction at the expense of other factions,” said a member of a rebel group operating in the Damascus region. “So it will open a crossing and call it civilian or a humanitarian, and then it turns a blind eye to what passes through there.”⁸³

The Million-Pound Checkpoint

Though neither side has been eager to talk about it, a deal emerged in 2014 through which select progovernment traders are allowed to bring goods to the frontline near the army-controlled Wafideen Camp.

Though the arrangement has occasionally broken down or been temporarily suspended by the government, the so-called Wafideen Crossing has remained the most important outside source of food for the enclave since then and it is often described as the “lung” through which the Eastern Ghouta breathes. In June 2015, a local trader working the Wafideen Crossing explained to Amnesty International how it operates:

*To leave Douma I need to pass by a non-state armed group checkpoint then I drive for a couple of minutes passing by an area that is not controlled by anyone. Then I pass by three checkpoints controlled by the Air Force Intelligence and State Security forces. I reach al-Wafedine camp where I buy the food. I do not leave the truck. Two women with me in the car transfer the food and non-food items to the truck and pay the security forces. For every item I pay a price equivalent to eight or ten times the price in central Damascus.*⁸⁴

Commanders on both sides of the front will demand a cut from the trade, turning the enclave’s captive market into “a source of monetary support for the regime,” but also, paradoxically, for the rebels.⁸⁵ Consumers inside the Eastern Ghouta end up paying enormously inflated prices even on larger shipments, as described in a 2015 report from the London School of Economics:

Assume a businessman in Ghouta wants to buy a ton of sugar which costs USD 0.5 per kilo in Damascus; he would then coordinate with a businessman in Damascus who is connected with certain security officials in the government and would then source the sugar and deliver it across the government-controlled checkpoint ‘One Million Crossing’ entering the ‘exchange zone’. To make it there, certain fees have to be paid. The businessman from Ghouta, who in turn has to be connected with the right commanders in the opposition, enters this zone after crossing the opposition-controlled checkpoint, completes the deal, receives the sugar then enters Ghouta again after paying fees at the opposition controlled checkpoint. When the time is right, this businessman would then sell the sugar for the highest price to smaller dealers and stall sellers and finally to arrive to the end user with the price of USD 11.8 per

kilo, a twenty-four fold increase in price. To put it differently, for each ton of sugar which costs USD 500 a staggering USD 11,265 is going to feed this well-established network of war profiteers and violent actors.⁸⁶

On the government side, the crossing has become so profitable that it is known in Damascus as Hajez al-Milyoun “the Million Checkpoint,” in reference to the earnings of the soldiers manning it.⁸⁷ The checkpoints do not seem to be manned by the regular army. Rather, various sources name different security and military branches as being in control of the trade, with most pointing to either the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, or the Republican Guard, or both.⁸⁸

On the rebel side, the Douma–Wafideen route was at one point controlled in whole or in part by the Free Syrian Army faction of Abu Ali Khibbiyeh. In the autumn and winter of 2014, Zahran Alloush sent troops to seize Khibbiyeh’s checkpoints, as part of his crackdown on the Umma Army. Since then, the Wafideen Crossing has been in Islam Army hands. The group reportedly exercises strict control over food imports. Traders are forced to acquire signed permits if they wish to bring food into the Eastern Ghouta, and they must sell and offload all foodstuffs at Islam Army-protected warehouses. In this way, the Islam Army and its surrogate businessmen have gained near-monopolistic control over food imports. However, traders are allowed to bring nonfood items, like cigarettes, into the Eastern Ghouta and sell these privately at a higher profit.⁸⁹

Eastern Ghouta activists have accused the Islam Army of taking a 30 percent cut from each shipment and of making “unimaginable” profits,⁹⁰ but the Islam Army denies having any economic interest in the trade. The Wafideen Crossing “is open only to some civilians who transport small amounts of certain goods by foot, or to humanitarian convoys, as well as to a trader who runs a barter operation through the crossing. He brings out certain products from the Ghouta and brings in some of the things it needs,” said Mohammed Bayraqdar, a member of the Islam Army’s political office. “The role of the Islam Army in all of this is simply to provide security, so that agents of the regime do not infiltrate via the crossing.”⁹¹

The Cheese King

The trader that Bayraqdar mentioned is Mohieddine Manfoush, also known as Abu Ayman, a little-known local businessman who has emerged as the most important figure in the Eastern Ghouta’s siege economy.⁹² Manfoush hails from a family in Mesraba, southwest of Douma, but although he reportedly still visits the Eastern Ghouta sporadically, he resides in government-held territory and his offices are in the western suburb of Mezzeh. His family controls the Manfoush Trading Company, which is a major supplier of cheese, yoghurt, and other dairy products for the markets in Damascus under the brand name Almarai. The Manfoush family factory is located in Mesraba, and remains in operation despite the war and the siege.

According to Youssef Sadaki, who has studied the Eastern Ghouta's siege economy,⁹³ Manfoush began to provide support for bakeries and bring in wheat to the Eastern Ghouta in 2014, as the government tightened its siege. He later began to pay stipends to teachers in his hometown, Mesraba, and the nearby village of Medyara. Eventually, he emerged as a middleman between the rebels and the markets in Damascus, negotiating with Syrian military commanders to take in truckloads of food, fuel, and other civilian supplies through the Wafideen Crossing, while bringing out his own dairy products for sale in Damascus. He thus established himself as the most important supplier of basic goods and food for hundreds of thousands of civilians in the enclave. Sadaki claimed Manfoush has some two thousand employees and has even set up a force of two hundred armed men to guard his farm and his properties in Mesraba, which seems to have been spared most of the airstrikes that have devastated other Eastern Ghouta towns. He is now said to be fabulously rich.⁹⁴

It is not clear who is providing cover for Manfoush's operations in Damascus, although the government is clearly well aware of his involvement with its Islamist enemies in the Eastern Ghouta. Given the sensitivity of the issue, there is no doubt that his business has been approved by very senior figures in the regime, and it seems likely that they, too, must benefit financially from it.⁹⁵

Whoever his contacts are on the government side, Manfoush has clearly built a strong relationship with the Eastern Ghouta insurgents as well as with the civilian population, where many reportedly seek his counsel to access services or other favors. Though these sentiments are perhaps not widely shared in the civilian population, he has been described as "beloved by both the opposition and regime."⁹⁶ Some rebels even express surprise at the notion that Manfoush could be perceived as a progovernment figure, apparently considering him to be one of their own who just happens to live and work on the other side. "No, Abu Ayman does not take part in the revolution," said Wa'el Olwan, the Failaq al-Rahman spokesperson. "He has continued to work in Damascus and reached a deal between the revolutionaries and the regime. This allows him to work with both sides and, yeah, of course he makes money from it."⁹⁷

The Islam Army is at pains to deny that they have any stake in Manfoush's operations at the Wafideen Crossing, but the group doesn't hide that it appreciates his role. "Manfoush does not serve the Islam Army, he serves the Ghouta in its entirety," said the Islam Army official Mohammed Bayraqdar. "Our interests are in harmony with the interests of the people and our relationship is merely that of facilitating his services. If there were another person [who performed the same function], we would provide the same services to him in return for his services to the people of the Ghouta."⁹⁸

Whatever his motives or the nature of his relationship to the insurgent groups and the Assad regime, all sides seem to agree that Manfoush has emerged as a major powerbroker in the Eastern Ghouta and that his imports via the Wafideen Crossing are now crucially important to sustain life in the enclave. Quite possibly, he is now also a person of some

importance in Damascus, and it seems likely that he could play a significant role in future truce negotiations between rebels and the government, and perhaps also in a postconflict settlement. Yet, he has only been mentioned in a small handful of articles in the Arabic press and hardly at all in English. Indeed, his Wafideen business has gained little attention even in Syrian opposition publications.

While much therefore remains unknown about his exact role in the Eastern Ghouta's siege economy, Mohieddine Manfoush appears as an interesting example of how Syrian entrepreneurs operate in the gray zones of politics and the war economy, and how they can emerge as powerful actors on the ground without even registering in the politicized narratives that dominate media coverage of the conflict.

The Tunnel Trade

Apart from the Wafideen Crossing, the Eastern Ghouta has been supplied through a system of secret tunnels and semi-informal frontline crossings. While the crossings can bring in a far greater volume of trade, the tunnels serve to import goods that are restricted or banned by the government (including fuel, medical supplies, and arms), to move people in and out of the enclave, and to challenge and undercut food prices set by the Wafideen monopolists. Several different factions have had access to tunnels, but much of the traffic has also taken place in collaboration between two or more groups, sometimes leading to ideologically awkward alliances. Repeated battles between opposition groups erupted from 2014 to 2016 over profit sharing, charges of price dumping, and, more straightforwardly, over who should control which tunnel. Though the scope of the traffic may be less than many would believe, the tunnel trade has therefore emerged as an emblematic symbol of rebel corruption to many activists in the Eastern Ghouta.



REBELS EXIT A TUNNEL IN THE EASTERN GHOUTA. SOURCE: ORIENT TV.

It is difficult to get a clear picture of the tunnel trade, since it is both a military secret and a source of some embarrassment to rebel leaders, while civilian activists tend to avoid the topic for fear of retribution from armed factions. However, the following, rudimentary description is what has been possible to piece together from interviews and information collected in Syrian opposition propaganda, online journals, and on social media.

The tunnel trade takes place in the Damascus suburbs on the western and northwestern fringes of the Eastern Ghouta enclave. After exhausting sieges and years of bombardment, Barzeh and Qaboun, two contiguous neighborhoods located just west of the enclave, next to Harasta, signed separate truces with the Syrian army in early 2014.⁹⁹ The local rebels were allowed to retain their arms, surrounded by checkpoints of the army and so-called Reconciliation Committees. Municipal workers and state representatives are allowed entry under certain conditions, and the army now generally permits aid deliveries and trade with Damascus proper, though traffic is inspected and sometimes blocked.

This situation is unusual. Most of the so-called reconciliation agreements (musalahat) imposed by the Syrian government on rebel territories have led to the complete dismantling of local insurgent groups and sometimes their evacuation to other opposition-controlled regions, particularly Idlib. Syria's Minister of Reconciliation Ali Heidar describes a phased process, which according to the Syrian government should ideally move from the ending of active hostilities, to the restoration of services, to full reintegration into the state and government control. In this case, the process has not been completed: "Sometimes we succeed 100 percent, sometimes we do less well. Barzeh is still at the second stage of the process, I would say."¹⁰⁰

One reason for this slow progress seems to be the relationship between Barzeh and Qaboun and the Eastern Ghouta. Government officials, former rebels in the truce areas, and active insurgents in the Eastern Ghouta enclave all profit from the trade flowing from Damascus through Qaboun and Barzeh to the besieged territory. Though neither side is truly content with the arrangement, all have a stake in seeing it continue and individual commanders seem to be making good money from it.

The dividing line between the Eastern Ghouta and the area covered by the Barzeh truce is the Damascus-Homs highway.¹⁰¹ In this area, a major semiofficial point of access has been established, variously known as the Zahteh Tunnel, the Central Tunnel, or the Harasta Crossing. Like the Wafideen Crossing, it allows the Eastern Ghouta to tap into the markets of Damascus, via the truce zones, though that trade is ultimately regulated and limited by the checkpoints surrounding Barzeh and Qaboun.

Starting in 2014, the Eastern Ghouta insurgents also began to dig several smaller smuggling tunnels to Barzeh and Qaboun, as well as to the semi-isolated frontline neighborhood of Jobar, which juts deep into eastern Damascus. These tunnels mainly focused on bringing in ammunition, fuel, and other goods restricted by the government, and on moving wanted individuals and armed units past army checkpoints. Many tunnels have been dug exclusively for military purposes, but around three or four, aside from the Zahteh Tunnel, are used partly or exclusively for commercial purposes. In addition, there seem to be smaller routes, perhaps appended to the main ones—descriptions are unclear. Most of the commercial trade moves along the Harasta-Barzeh route, but tunnels also connect the Eastern Ghouta neighborhoods of Zamalka and Erbeen to Barzeh and Qaboun, and to the military front in Jobar.

Military-purpose tunnels are occasionally blown up by the government, but civilian trade through the Zahteh Tunnel and similar routes has faced much less obstruction. Though the government is aware of the tunnels and knows that they undermine the siege, it seems keen to preserve the Barzeh-Qaboun truce deals. Army and intelligence officers who command checkpoints around the truce areas reportedly use their control over the flow of goods to strike deals with traders, or even negotiate directly with rebel factions on the other side.

Since late 2014, the Zahteh Tunnel and other Harasta routes are under the exclusive control of a group known as the Fajr al-Umma Brigade. In spring 2014, another tunnel was reportedly dug by Failaq al-Rahman from Erbeen to a Nusra Front-controlled property in Qaboun. The Nusra Front may then have acquired a separate tunnel in 2015, after tension with Failaq al-Rahman. The Islam Army has also dug at least two tunnels, linking Zamalka and Erbeen with the frontline suburb of Jobar and apparently also with Qaboun.

“There are a lot of exaggerations regarding these tunnels,” said Failaq al-Rahman’s Wa’el Olwan, who insists that all tunnels combined “cannot provide for even 10 percent of the needs of the Ghouta” and that they are insignificant compared to the Wafideen Crossing.¹⁰² Rebel officials typically claim that their own tunnels are only used for military logistics, though they readily agree that other factions use theirs for smuggling. For example, an Islamic scholar with sympathies for the Islam Army insists that its tunnels are not used for commercial activities, except for importing fuel at a 70 percent discount as a service to civilians.¹⁰³ In practice, however, every major faction in the Eastern Ghouta seems to have had some stake in the commercial tunneling business.

The Zahteh Tunnel and Fajr al-Umma

The Zahteh Tunnel in Harasta seems to be the primary commercial smuggling route in the Eastern Ghouta, and it is the one most associated with profiteering and factional conflict. As with everything related to the smuggling in Eastern Ghouta, it is difficult to get accurate information on how the tunnel operates and who controls it. The following

information has been pieced together from a number of sources and testimonies, some of them contradictory, and it should be treated with care.

Though sources portray it differently, the Zahteh Tunnel is most often described as a tunnel or underpass that allows movement beneath the Damascus-Homs highway. It seems likely that it is in fact a preexisting route, though perhaps physically expanded or reinforced, that only gained its current significance after the Barzeh truce opened a possibility of trade with Damascus in January 2014.

Initially, the Zahteh Tunnel appears to have been controlled by a local Free Syrian Army group known as the Fateh al-Sham Brigade, which pioneered its use for trade with the armed groups in Barzeh.¹⁰⁴ Soon, however, the group fell afoul of the Eastern Ghouta's internal politics.

In September 2014, the Fateh al-Sham Brigade leader Fahd al-Kurdi took part in the creation of the Umma Army, perhaps fearing that the growing power of Alloush and the Unified Military Command would strip him of control over the Zahteh Tunnel. Kurdi was murdered by unknown assailants the following month. A rival Harasta faction known as Fajr al-Umma then took advantage of Alloush's purge of the Umma Army in Douma to move against Fateh al-Sham Brigade in Harasta. This seems to have involved seizing control of the Zahteh Tunnel. By early 2015, virtually the entire district was under the sole control of Fajr al-Umma, which began to absorb smaller groups and erected checkpoints around its territory.

The Fajr al-Umma leader, Abu Khaled al-Daqr, also known as Abu Khaled al-Zahteh, is a local man who rose to power through the war. He reportedly hails from a poor family, but since establishing himself as "the emir of Harasta" he is said to have amassed great wealth and developed a measure of popularity in Harasta, where he rules through alliances with local notables. While hardly a bastion of liberalism, Harasta has long self-identified as a more secular and freewheeling place than other localities in the Eastern Ghouta, particularly ultraconservative Douma. Some of Abu Khaled's popularity seems to stem from his ability to keep the Islam Army and its Salafi preachers at bay, though religious conservatives and other critics tend to describe him as an opportunist and a war profiteer rather than as a defender of any particular lifestyle.

He is, in any case, a defender of the Zahteh Tunnel. Having emerged as a primary artery for the Eastern Ghouta's siege economy, the tunnel is now so busy that it reportedly runs in triple shifts, transporting food, cigarettes, livestock, weapons, and even smuggled antiquities. Eastern Ghouta residents who wish to leave the enclave can also use the tunnel, but only after paying a fee that can amount to hundreds of dollars—reportedly peaking at \$1,500 in March 2016, in a country where the average monthly income is closer to fifty or sixty dollars.¹⁰⁵ According to one local activist, Abu Khaled al-Daqr has banned food imports except from selected merchants, from whom he demands a "tunnel tax"

ranging between 25 and 45 percent of the value of the shipment. The final sales price inside the Eastern Ghouta may rise by several thousand percent over the purchase price in Damascus.¹⁰⁶ Other factions also pay Abu Khaled for use of the Zahteh Tunnel and other smuggling routes in Harasta, through which they can get ammunition, fuel, and other goods necessary for their military preparedness.

Unsurprisingly, Abu Khaled's tunneling business has drawn the ire of many in the Eastern Ghouta, who accuse him of usurious practices toward other rebels and profiteering at the expense of hungry civilians. But Fajr al-Umma sympathizers do not seem overly concerned by these accusations. "Regarding the tunnels, we have a right to trade in order to feed the mujahideen and our revolutionaries after people ganged up on us," retorted a Harasta-based supporter of the group.¹⁰⁷

Fajr al-Umma has its roots in a faction known as the Der' al-Asima Brigade, which at one point drew support from individuals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Under Abu Khaled's leadership, this group evolved into Fajr al-Umma in March 2014. At the time, it was presented as a subfaction of the non-Salafi Islamist group Ajnad al-Sham.¹⁰⁸ However, Fajr al-Umma seems to be far more invested in its identity as a local force for Harasta than in any particular ideology, and it has drifted in and out of alliances without much regard for political consistency.¹⁰⁹ "They always want to be part of a bigger faction," said Wa'el Olwan, who, as the spokesperson of Failaq al-Rahman and formerly of Ajnad al-Sham was allied with Fajr al-Umma in 2014 and again in 2015–16. "It's because they have an old conflict with the Islam Army and Zahran Alloush was threatening them."¹¹⁰

The origin of Abu Khaled's conflict with Zahran Alloush is related to the Zahteh Tunnel. Both sides accuse the other of criminality and profiteering,¹¹¹ but whoever was at fault, it is clear that the conflict had more to do with greed than creed. "Fajr al-Umma is a populist faction [fasil shaabi]," Olwan said. "They have no ideology. They work in Harasta. There are some tunnels there and they control them. The tunnels are what gathers the group, not ideology."¹¹²

2015: Lead-Up to Conflict

Two years into the siege, the economic conditions created by the government blockade had begun to reshape the Eastern Ghouta's politics in fundamental ways. Rebel commanders were forced to spend more and more attention on ensuring access to resources and guarding against threats to their supply lines. Some of them—many, perhaps—were drawn to the lucrative smuggling economy for purposes that had little to do with the war itself. Meanwhile, the government, too, began to find its bearings and exploit the sources of leverage created by its control over the smuggling trade. For the Islam Army, 2015 would be a difficult year, ending in disaster.

As the year began, however, Zahran Alloush seemed more powerful than ever. He had just eliminated the Umma Army and was now in sole control of the Wafideen Crossing. He had ensured the near-hegemony of the Unified Military Command, in which he served as supreme commander. Although Alloush did not have the same strong grip on the Unified Judicial Council—which had also been weakened by his unilateral campaign against the Umma Army and the Islamic State—its courts were now almost universally recognized. Though it was still far from fully functional, a cross-factional system finally seemed to be coalescing around the new institutions, with the Islam Army acting as a central pillar of this new order.¹¹³

Below the surface, however, the Eastern Ghouta was seething with unrest and resentment against Alloush. The crushing of the Umma Army and the Islamic State had left a bitter aftertaste, with relatives demonstrating for the release of Alloush's prisoners and any number of feuds and vendettas plaguing the enclave. Alloush's Unified Military Command deputies, Yasser al-Qadri of Ajnad al-Sham and Failaq al-Rahman's Abdel-Nasr Shmeir, wrestled with him for influence and tried to push back at the Islam Army through the Unified Judicial Council, though they now realized that Alloush could not be bound by it. In Harasta, Abu Khaled al-Daqr's Fajr al-Umma group was building its own economic empire on the back of the tunneling business. Last but not least, the Nusra Front remained sullenly hostile to Alloush, his foreign backers, and the new institutional structure, a looming threat in the background.

The Islam Army also appears to have suffered from financial and logistical problems. In 2014, the U.S. had pressured Gulf Arab states to crack down on unregulated private donation networks for the Syrian insurgency. Though this was primarily aimed at funders of the Nusra Front and the Islamic State, the Kuwaiti Council of Supporters that backed Alloush had also drawn attention and it and other mainstream Salafi groups gradually ceased most of their public activity.¹¹⁴ The Wafideen Crossing was a potentially very important source of income, but the government had closed it during the Umma Army clashes in November 2014 and easily could do so again; relying on it would be dangerous. Perhaps not coincidentally, Alloush's tunnel operations in the Damascus suburbs began to be targeted in spring 2015 by the Syrian army (and, according to the Islam Army, also by Fajr al-Umma).¹¹⁵ The Islam Army's finances reportedly worsened to the point where Alloush was forced to start borrowing money from local merchants, and in summer 2015 the newspaper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* claimed that he was heavily indebted.¹¹⁶

Struggle over the Zahteh Tunnel

As he looked for ways to limit the Islam Army's dependence on the Wafideen Crossing and to regain access to ammunition, fuel, and other banned goods, Alloush's gaze fell, of course, on the Zahteh Tunnel. Having secured a near-monopoly on the Barzeh smuggling, Fajr al-Umma now demanded exorbitant prices from other factions that needed to bring in food, ammunition, medical supplies, or fuel. Alloush began to press for better terms and, after some minor

skirmishing, a deal was reached in May 2015 on how to share usage of the tunnel. The Islam Army and Fajr al-Umma would be allowed exclusive use of the Zahteh Tunnel for five days each, while the Nusra Front would have four days and Ajnad al-Sham three. The rest of the month would be shared between civilian organizations and aid groups¹¹⁷

It appears that Abu Khaled al-Daqr never actually planned to abide by the deal, and other factions may have encouraged him to break the agreement to weaken the Islam Army. But Alloush was a dangerous enemy, and he was getting desperate. To avoid retribution, Abu Khaled decided to rekindle his lapsed alliance with Ajnad al-Sham, which happily obliged. The group's clerics swiftly determined that Abu Khaled had found the straight path of Islam again, meaning that he was welcome back in the group and that his moneymaking tunnel would now be under their protection.¹¹⁸

Looking for Foreign Support

Stumped, Alloush seems to have started to look for support outside the enclave, but this would require some political concessions. The politics of the rebellion were changing. The rise of the Islamic State and tensions with the Nusra Front had pushed many otherwise hardline Islamists toward collaboration with the mainstream insurgency, while Saudi Arabia had thrown its weight behind a U.S.-supported peace process and was calling on its Syrian clients to climb aboard.

Alloush began to draw closer to Western-approved opposition leaders and ended his public flattery of the Nusra Front, always less heartfelt than it was an attempt to avoid conflict. Later in 2015, the Islam Army resumed use of some Free Syrian Army symbols after a three-year boycott.

In May 2015, the Islam Army leader smuggled himself out of the enclave. He traveled to Turkey where he met some of his Islamist sponsors as well as foreign diplomats and intelligence services. Also, for the first time, he gave interviews to English-language media, having exchanged his military fatigues for a neat grey suit jacket and appearing as a “model of pragmatism.” Asked about his condemnations of democracy and non-Sunnis, he explained that these unfortunate remarks had been the result of “psychological stress.”¹¹⁹ After Turkey, he traveled to Jordan, where he reportedly met with representatives of the United States-backed Military Operations Center.¹²⁰ Whatever else transpired, Alloush's meetings abroad seemed to have swayed him in favor of the United Nations-led peace process known as Geneva III, which took off a few months later.

During Alloush's absence from the Eastern Ghouta, there was an upsurge in protests against his rule, no doubt encouraged by his local rivals. Ajnad al-Sham's Yasser al-Qadri also briefly tried to claim the position as head of the Unified Military Command, but this was quickly forgotten.¹²¹

As he returned to the enclave, Alloush gave the order to prepare a military solution of the Zahteh problem. “The Islam

Army leadership began erecting earth berms around the town of Harasta and they banned people from entering or exiting,” recalled a media activist friendly with Fajr al-Umma.¹²² “They were arresting whomever they wanted among Fajr al-Umma’s adherents.”¹²³ In August 2015, Alloush sent tanks to the outskirts of Harasta, but he was finally forced to back down when Abu Khaled’s allies in Aynad al-Sham warned that Fajr al-Umma was under their protection. The Nusra Front and other factions did their best to mediate, and Alloush eventually gave up, apparently finding the resistance too great.

Summer Protests

Large-scale violence had been avoided, but the situation in the Eastern Ghouta remained tense. Civilian activists accused the rebel leaders of fighting more over money than against Assad, attributing their misery not only to the government siege but also to rebels’ hoarding of food, corruption, and theft. The previously cited London School of Economics report noted that relations between the armed groups and local residents had at this point, in summer 2015, become “highly strained.” According to the report:

*Citizens told us that they are fed up with the armed groups who coerced the population by manipulating aid and food supplies in a situation of near starvation. There was widespread resentment at the armed groups who have enough to feed themselves during a siege, enriching themselves while civilians suffer. This is being expressed overtly through protests. No one participant expressed sympathy with the main armed groups of Ghouta, although all the participants were very clearly against the government and many had participated in the early days of the revolution.*¹²⁴

All through summer, the enclave was rocked by civilian protests against rebel corruption and abuses, as well as demonstrations by partisans of one group against another. In June 2015, Failaq al-Rahman fighters had shot and killed several demonstrators, whose relatives then stormed the home of the group’s leader, Captain Shmeir, and dragged him off for trial at the Unified Judicial Council. Despite its inability to control the competing factions, the council remained the most important governance body in the enclave. But when asked to punish the leader of one of its most powerful member factions, the council declined to intervene. Shmeir was quickly released.¹²⁵



PLACARD HELD BY DEMONSTRATOR IN SAQBA IN AUGUST 2015. SOURCE: ALL4SYRIA.

Inevitably, many demonstrators also turned their anger on Alloush.¹²⁶ “Hey Zahran,” read a placard carried by a demonstrator (see above) in Saqba during a wave of protests against the Islam Army in August 2015, “We don’t want you to fight your brothers over a tunnel, we want you to fight our enemy above the tunnel!”¹²⁷

Defections from the Joint Institutions

The joint governance institutions painstakingly forged a year earlier now began to come apart. Second-tier rebel factions had by now come to view them more as a tool for Islam Army hegemony than a system in which they had a meaningful stake, and after unsuccessfully demanding reforms, they sought to delegitimize the institutions through boycotts.

In July 2015, Ajnad al-Sham’s Khaled Tafour resigned from the presidency of the Unified Judicial Council as a result of his increasingly public disagreements with the Islam Army.¹²⁸ The council did not dissolve, but the fact that leadership fell to the Alloush-friendly cleric Zeinelabidine bin al-Hussein only reinforced the complaints that it was biased in favor of the Islam Army.

In early August 2015, both Failaq al-Rahman and Ajnad al-Sham reportedly suspended their participation in the Unified Military Command.¹²⁹ Alloush was furious. At a meeting with a group of Ghouta notables, he raged against his rivals, blamed them for all the ills in the enclave, and warned that if they tried to break away it would lead to the unraveling of

the entire administrative apparatus, including courts and police.¹³⁰

For about a year, a string of mysterious assassinations had targeted political and military leaders in the Eastern Ghouta, most of them critics of the Islam Army. The victims included high-profile figures, such as the October 2015 killing of Ahmed Abdelaziz Uyyoun (Abu Shujaa al-Azhari), Khaled Tafour's predecessor as head of the Unified Judicial Council.¹³¹ Many of these assassinations were thought to be the work of Alloush's security services, though no one seemed able to produce tangible evidence. The Islam Army protested its innocence, pointing out—correctly, if insincerely—that there were plenty of other possible culprits, including the Islamic State, the Syrian government, and foreign intelligence services.

On September 30, 2015, the Russian air force had begun to strike targets in Syria, reversing the flagging fortunes of Assad's government, but the Ghouta rebels were preoccupied by yet another tunnel crisis.¹³² By November, the government was attacking the southern end of the Ghouta enclave, and in December it captured the Marj al-Sultan Air Base. The agricultural region around Deir al-Asafir was now at risk of falling, which would spell disaster for the enclave's ability to withstand the blockade. It was no time for infighting, yet the leaders of the Eastern Ghouta seemed blind and deaf to everything except their petty factional feuds.

Ideology and Regional Links

In 2012, the Eastern Ghouta insurgency consisted of dozens of factions. In 2015, mergers and takeovers had reduced them to five core blocks: the Islam Army, Ajnad al-Sham, Failaq al-Rahman, the Nusra Front, and Fajr al-Umma. But ironically, as the insurgency progressed toward what seemed like greater unity, and factions banded together according to their preferences and interests, the polarization between the blocs grew. Ideological and religious differences began to take on new meaning, and political strategies and foreign linkages emerged as serious obstacles to cooperation.

Though many of the conflicts between the enclave's armed factions revolved around mundane matters like access to money or fuel, political and religious differences have also played a part and sometimes intensified rivalries. They are worth studying in some detail.

Religious and Political Ideology

Three of the major Eastern Ghouta factions adhere to some variety of Salafism: the Islam Army, the Nusra Front, and Ahrar al-Sham. To an outsider, they may seem indistinguishable, as all favor the imposition of a Sunni theocracy based on sharia, are overtly antidemocratic and hostile to Shia minorities and Sufis, and often throw around quotes from the

same scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) and Mohammed ibn Abdelwahhab (1703–92). But despite the overlap, subtle doctrinal differences and incompatible foreign allegiances divide the Eastern Ghouta's Salafi camp.

The Islam Army: The Saudi-trained leaders of the Islam Army tend toward so-called “purist” or “scholarly” Salafism (al-salafiyya al-’ilmiyya), in the tradition of the Syrian-Albanian scholar Mohammed Nasreddine al-Albani (1914–99) and other such figures. Normally averse to political action, this strand of Salafism focuses instead on missionary activity and on enforcing social norms. It tends to be hostile to both al-Qaeda-style Salafi-jihadism and the reformist activism of the Muslim Brotherhood, but close to the Saudi religious establishment, though not necessarily to the monarchy. However, even after excising the jihadist trend, Salafism can hardly be described as a monolithic movement and its ideological divides were always very fluid. Alloush's clerical connections seem to have ranged from politically quietist Saudi establishment figures to activist and independent-minded Salafi ideologues, including those in the so-called Surouri trend.¹³³

However, the Islam Army always resisted being labeled an exclusively Salafi organization. “The Islam Brigade [as it was then called] carries the name of Islam, not the name of any particular school of thought or any particular jihadi line,” noted Mohammed Alloush, a senior political figure in the group who was also a close companion and relative of Zahran.¹³⁴ The Islam Army-friendly Salafi preacher Abu Ammar Hawwa said the group “believes in confessional pluralism within a Sunni framework” and stressed that though it is largely Salafi, the Islam Army does include non-Salafi members and even leaders, such as the locally influential Sufi sheikh Said Darwish.¹³⁵

The Nusra Front: The Nusra Front (which renamed itself Fateh al-Sham in July 2016) draws mainly on the teachings of al-Qaeda-friendly clerics in the so-called Salafi-jihadist trend, an insurrectionist reinterpretation of Salafism that focuses on global armed struggle. It is a modern revolutionary ideology that has been shaped by the work of radical thinkers like Sayyed Qutb (1906–66), Abdullah Azzam (1941–89), Sayyed Imam al-Sharif (1950–), Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi (1959–), and Abu Qatada al-Falastini (1960–). Mainstream, nonrevolutionary Salafi trends tend to view Salafi-jihadism as an adventurist diversion at best and at worst a criminal assault on legitimate governments, particularly that of Saudi Arabia. The disagreement is thus at heart a political one, flowing from contradictory relationships to established governments of Muslim countries, and to the international system, even as both sides of the argument are keen to dress it up in religious scripture.

Ahrar al-Sham: The Qatari- and Turkish-backed group Ahrar al-Sham combines aspects of Salafi-jihadism with more mainstream Islamist views. While many of the group's founders came from a Salafi-jihadist background, Ahrar al-Sham diverged from al-Qaeda-style politics early on by stating that its project would be limited to Syria and by seeking constructive relations with Gulf Arab and other governments that al-Qaeda considers enemies of Islam. When war

erupted with the Islamic State in 2014, the group's leadership began to revise its views, draw closer to Free Syrian Army-style factions, and openly placed itself under Turkish patronage. Some of its chief ideologues publicly rejected Salafi-jihadism, though others defected in protest against this relative moderation. Since then, the group's rhetoric has evolved toward something more resembling a paramilitary Salafi version of the Muslim Brotherhood, with echoes of the style of jihadism that was more prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. However, al-Qaeda-friendly hardliners remain well implanted in its ranks and the group is now deeply factionalized.¹³⁶ As has been explained above, much of the Eastern Ghouta's Ahrar al-Sham membership joined Failaq al-Rahman or the Islam Army in 2015, leaving only a small rump faction of hardliners who have opted for a close alliance with the Nusra Front.

Ajnad al-Sham: In contrast to these three, Ajnad al-Sham is not a Salafi organization at all, albeit still Islamist and committed to some form of sharia-based government. The group was created with support from a powerful cast of mainstream Damascene clerics, including Sufis and others who are hostile to Salafism on doctrinal grounds. Among them were some of Syria's most well-known Islamic leaders, like the brothers Osama and Sariya al-Refai and their Zayd Group, which, before the war, controlled around thirty Damascene mosques and an enormously influential charity network.¹³⁷ On the ground inside the Eastern Ghouta, Ajnad al-Sham has been strongly influenced by Khaled Tafour, a Naqshbandi Sufi and former preacher of the Hassiba Mosque in Douma.¹³⁸

Many of these clerics had worked within state-approved Islamic institutions before drifting into overt opposition in 2011, routinely interacting with government officials and in some cases even meeting with Assad, who sought their support.¹³⁹ For decades, the Assad family has used its control over political life and religious associations to cultivate ties to conservative but politically pliable traditionalists.¹⁴⁰ By contrast, Syrian Salafis were largely shut out from state patronage, both because of official distrust and because of the opposition they faced from the traditionalists and Sufis who monopolized official institutions. The Salafis were themselves deeply hostile to Sufism and other forms of traditionalist Islam, and they tended to view these clerics as religiously impure government cronies. In keeping with this attitude, a Salafi preacher in the Eastern Ghouta described Ajnad al-Sham as being "run by traditional sheikhs who used to be supporters of Assad as long as he and his father ruled, but who were forced to jump on the bandwagon of the revolution because they feared that people would otherwise turn away from them."¹⁴¹

Salafis and other rivals have also accused Ajnad al-Sham of serving as a front for the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁴² Some Ajnad al-Sham subfactions were created with Muslim Brotherhood start-up money, but there is otherwise no clear evidence of an organizational link. However, there is considerable ideological and social overlap, as well as family connections between senior Ajnad al-Sham and Muslim Brotherhood leaders.¹⁴³ "Ajnad al-Sham stems from Damascus's traditional (non-Salafi) Islam, which when it politicizes is virtually indistinguishable from the Muslim Brotherhood,"

explained Thomas Pierret, an expert on Syrian Islamic politics at the University of Edinburgh. “In the Ghouta, Ajnad al-Sham have been frequently dubbed ‘Ikhwan’ [Brotherhood members] by locals because they look like Ikhwan, speak like Ikhwan, have leaders with Ikhwan background, etc.”¹⁴⁴

Failaq al-Rahman: In contrast to the above-mentioned four groups, all of which are explicitly Islamist, Failaq al-Rahman presents itself as a faction of the Free Syrian Army and seeks to emphasize nationalist and military themes, albeit still infused with conservative Sunni piety and religious rhetoric. The Failaq al-Rahman leader Abdel-Nasr Shmeir is neither a scholar nor a student of Islam as his counterparts in the other groups are, but rather a former army captain. Even so, the group drew on the support of local clerics whenever possible, which made for a certain ideological affinity with Ajnad al-Sham. Captain Shmeir is married into the family of Abu Rateb Abu Dikka, a sheikh from Douma, and Failaq al-Rahman had initially followed a Jobar-based scholar named Riyad al-Khiraqi, or Abu Thabet, who “was clearly part of traditional religious networks, as opposed to Salafi ones.”¹⁴⁵ Khiraqi was assassinated in May 2015, reportedly by the Islamic State.

The Fajr al-Umma brigade: The Harasta-based Fajr al-Umma brigade, finally, seems to pay little attention to ideology, though its members are probably close to local traditionalist clerics insofar as they follow any religious school. A Fajr al-Umma-friendly media activist using the name Ahmed al-Boustani accuses the Islam Army of seeking to impose a “single way of thinking, namely the Salafi-Wahhabi thinking supported by Saudi Arabia,” which, he argues, “contradicts the Shami [Syrian or Damascene] Islamic thought that is spread throughout the Ghouta.”¹⁴⁶ But although such views dovetail with the traditionalist perspectives promoted by Ajnad al-Sham (of which Fajr al-Umma was originally a part) the group has never followed a clear ideological path, identifying more with its social and geographic roots in Harasta.

Regionalism in the Eastern Ghouta

The longer the conflict has dragged on, the more attention there seems to be to regional tension inside the Eastern Ghouta. Despite being a small area, some of the towns in the enclave have a distinct identity. In particular, Douma stands out: it is a large city with a conservative and religious character, a rare stronghold of the Hanbali rite, and it was a center for Salafi missionary activities even before the war. By contrast, certain Damascus suburbs have clung to a less religious identity, and recently urbanized or agricultural areas obviously share other traditions than the city.

The only group that wears its geographical origin on its sleeve seems to be Fajr al-Umma, which operates only in Harasta. But the Islam Army is also seen by some of its rivals as not merely an Islamist group, but specifically a group representing the Salafi movement of Douma. That is not to say that it is a clear-cut issue, since many other leading rebels

also hail from Douma, though generally from non-Salafi families. By contrast, Failaq al-Rahman is best implanted in the Damascus suburbs, though it is not obvious that this is more than a military coincidence.

Since all rebel groups have expanded to their current size by absorbing smaller bands of fighters, who often fought and sacrificed to seize their own hometown or neighborhood, they are now made up of subfactions that can be intensely territorial. Indeed, some Syrians make the point that regionalism is mainly an issue among the armed factions. “Not among the civilians. The civilians all stick together, from Erbeen to Mesraba, Douma, or Harasta,” said the activist Alaa al-Ahmed, who hails from Douma but now resides in Erbeen. “But it does exist among the military factions and they plant it in society. It is about trying to cultivate support, regardless about whether we’re talking about the Islam Army, Failaq al-Rahman, or the Fustat Army. They all want to be the main power in the Ghouta.”¹⁴⁷

In short, regionalism should not be overstated, but neither can it be discounted as a factor in the Eastern Ghouta’s politics.

International Support and the Role of the MOC

Religious ideology was never in itself a decisive cause of conflict among the Eastern Ghouta’s rebel factions, but it has colored their political and international affiliations, and these seem to have mattered greatly.

The Islam Army: The Islam Army generally appears to be close to Saudi religious officialdom and has previously received strong support from Salafi preachers and donors in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.¹⁴⁸ The group may enjoy the favor of some faction of the Saudi royal family, but it is not fully clear whether or to what extent it has been directly funded or armed by the Saudi government. In fact, Alloush seems to have cast his net widely and at various points also courted Qatar-aligned supporters and the Turkish government.

Descriptions of the Islam Army as a mere Saudi proxy therefore appear to be exaggerated, not least because Alloush could rely on powerful means of self-financing through his clerical networks and the Wafideen Crossing. Nevertheless, there is now undoubtedly some level of coordination with the Saudi government, because “the political alignment is very close,” according to Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute who works closely with Syrian rebel factions.¹⁴⁹

Fajr al-Umma: The epitome of a self-funded faction, Fajr al-Umma’s main source of support is the Zahteh Tunnel. The group hardly engages in diplomacy or political outreach except to communicate its views about factional infighting in the Eastern Ghouta, and it is unlikely that it enjoys any meaningful foreign backing. However, the group has aligned

itself with other groups in ways that may indirectly connect it to foreign interests, including Afnad al-Sham in 2014 and 2015–16 and the Nusra Front in 2016.

The Nusra Front: Like other al-Qaeda factions, the Nusra Front has largely self-funded its activity through donations from radical clerics in the Arab Gulf and through the war economy. There are also allegations of Qatari and Turkish support. Judging by the available evidence, this seems to have come in the form of ransom payments and guns channeled via its allies in Ahrar al-Sham, who are openly aligned with Qatar and Turkey, but the Nusra Front remains openly suspicious of and unwilling to work with the governments in Doha and Ankara. The Eastern Ghouta wing of the group has remained isolated from the larger body and has sought to finance itself through involvement in the tunnel economy, working pragmatically with factions like Failaq al-Rahman and Fajr al-Umma to develop its economic infrastructure.

Ahrar al-Sham: Well-connected in the Gulf Salafi environment, Ahrar al-Sham initially relied on private religious fundraisers, some of them close to al-Qaeda and others in the hands of mainstream Salafi clerics. It also seems to have received support directly or indirectly from Qatar, particularly from 2013 onward. Since 2014, the group seems to have grown firmly dependent on payments and arms deliveries from Qatar and Turkey, which constrains its autonomy. In the Eastern Ghouta, Ahrar al-Sham has been an insignificant force since 2015 and it does not appear to ever have had a major stake in the tunnel economy. This apparent failure to develop an autonomous economic base may be one reason for its close alignment with the Nusra Front.

Afnad al-Sham: Afnad al-Sham also enjoys good ties to Turkey and Qatar, but seems to receive most of its support from powerful traditionalist Damascene clerics and the Muslim Brotherhood. The group is closely aligned with the Syrian Islamic Council, a body of pro-opposition clerics that incorporates some of Syria's most influential Sunni preachers, including independent Sufis, Muslim Brotherhood members, and so-called Surouris, who espouse a politically activist form of Salafism. Its president is Osama al-Refai, an influential Damascene Sufi scholar.¹⁵⁰

Failaq al-Rahman: As for Failaq al-Rahman, which also refers to the Syrian Islamic Council for religious edicts and political cues, it is strongly associated with the Free Syrian Army brand.¹⁵¹ Many sources, including Lister and a number of Syrians interviewees, insist that Failaq al-Rahman has been CIA-vetted to allow foreign support from the United States-backed Military Operations Center in Jordan, known as the MOC. Failaq al-Rahman itself denies this. "We have sources of support abroad like everyone else," acknowledged Wa'el Olwan, the Failaq al-Rahman spokesperson, but he refused to acknowledge any connection to the MOC.¹⁵² Although many other accounts point to a connection between Failaq al-Rahman and the MOC, a non-Syrian source with good insight into rebel politics claimed that the MOC has refrained from supporting any armed group inside the Eastern Ghouta enclave for fear of sparking a destabilizing battle in the Syrian capital.¹⁵³

The truth of the matter is hard to pin down, but one possible explanation is that the MOC may have restricted its support to Failaq al-Rahman sub-branches in the Qalamoun Mountains, while withholding (or sharply limiting) support for the central leadership in the Eastern Ghouta. This is the view of, among others, the Erbeen-based opposition activist Alaa al-Ahmed, who asserted that there is “no space for neutral factions” in the Qalamoun, where all groups have been “forced in under the MOC’s influence” to combat the Islamic State, even as the MOC has refrained from direct involvement in the Eastern Ghouta.¹⁵⁴

Did Alloush Seek Support from the MOC?

As previously mentioned, several sources claim that Zahran Alloush met with Western officials to investigate the possibility of being cleared for logistical and financial support through the MOC during his trip to Turkey and Jordan from May to June 2015.

According to a story widely believed among Syrian opposition activists, the Islam Army leader was presented with such stringent conditions that they effectively amounted to a refusal.

According to a story widely believed among Syrian opposition activists, the Islam Army leader was presented with such stringent conditions that they effectively amounted to a refusal. Different versions of this narrative exist, but all seem to agree that the Islam Army was told not to destabilize the situation in the capital or shell targets inside Damascus.¹⁵⁵ Members and supporters of the group have also stated that Alloush was told to release the kidnapped human rights activist Razan Zeitouneh and the imprisoned Umma Army leader Abu Subhi Taha.¹⁵⁶ Other rumored conditions include the dissolution of the Islam Army’s religious leadership (led by Samir Kaakeh), surrendering or destroying the Soviet-made 9K33 Osa surface-to-air missile systems Alloush had captured from the Syrian government, voicing support for democracy and minority rights, and even changing the name of the group to something less conspicuously Islamist.¹⁵⁷

Rumors and rivals may well have embellished the truth, and it is possible that Alloush was simply faced with a laundry list of complaints rather than an actual negotiation over terms. Whatever the truth of the matter, it seems clear that he did not bring any new understandings with the MOC back to the enclave, though he seems to have picked up a considerable amount of cash from other sponsors. The Islam Army’s relationship to the Western-backed support

structures in Jordan seems to have remained tense, and as rebel infighting peaked in spring 2016, its leaders and propagandists made harsh verbal attacks on the MOC, accusing it of waging a counter-revolutionary campaign in the Eastern Ghouta on behalf of the United States, Israel, and even the Assad regime.

Talking Peace and Provoking the Jihadis

After Zahran Alloush took his regional circuit in summer 2015, the Islam Army publicly endorsed the United Nations-led peace process, known as Geneva III. Failaq al-Rahman and Ajnad al-Sham did the same. Islam Army representatives then participated in a major opposition meeting in Riyadh in December 2015, in preparation for the talks.¹⁵⁸



SEATED ON A PODIUM, ZAHRAN ALLOUSH WATCHES ISLAM ARMY FIGHTERS AND ARMORED VEHICLES PARADING THROUGH THE EASTERN GHOUTA, 2015. SOURCE: REBEL VIDEO.

Since the Islam Army was both the largest and the most hawkish Islamist faction to join the peace process, its participation was a crucial source of legitimacy for the opposition delegation.¹⁵⁹ It was therefore also seen as a particularly grave threat by the Nusra Front, which correctly assumed that any agreements in Geneva would come at its expense.

For this reason and others, tension between the Eastern Ghouta branch of the Nusra Front and the Islam Army rose steadily in autumn 2015. When information began to trickle out in winter and spring that the Islam Army had facilitated the visit of a Russian military delegation to Douma to discuss the possibility of a local ceasefire, the Nusra Front and the Islam Army found themselves on a direct collision course.

2016: The Breakdown

On Christmas Day 2015, an unmanned drone slowly circled a nondescript, walled-off compound in the farming areas east of Hammouriyeh in the central-western part of the Eastern Ghouta enclave, watching and filming as men entered and a car slowly rolled past on the road outside. Without warning, a massive explosion tore through the building, sending a billowing white and brown cloud of smoke into the air.

Later that day, it was confirmed: a precision air strike had killed Zahran Alloush, leader of the Islam Army and supreme commander of the Eastern Ghouta's Unified Military Command.¹⁶⁰

Opposition media showed Alloush's body, his face undamaged and seemingly at peace, in a burial shroud. Former rivals among the rebels hastened to pay their respect to the man they now described as a hero and a martyr, forgetting the criticism and controversies that had defined their relationship to Alloush when he was alive.

Most early reports spoke of a Russian air strike—President Vladimir Putin's military intervention was not even three months old—but the Syrian military high command quickly claimed credit, saying its air force had hit a meeting between Alloush and commanders from Failaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham.¹⁶¹ Apparently it was a lucky shot: the government had been told by local informants that militant leaders were in the building, but not that its enemy number one in the Damascus region would be among them.

The Islam Army quickly announced that Alloush's longtime deputy, Essam Boueidini, also known as Abu Humam, would take his place. But it was a heavy blow. Ever since its humble beginnings as the Islam Company in summer and autumn 2011, the group had been synonymous with the charismatic and authoritarian leadership of Zahran Alloush. His friends and relatives from Douma held key positions in the group, and the politics of the group—and of the entire enclave—had revolved around him, personally. It was uncertain whether Zahran Alloush could truly be replaced.

Anti-Islam Army Block Formation

"The Islam Army is on a downward spiral, I think," said a Syrian who is closely involved with the politics of the armed groups, though he does not belong to one. "A confrontation was foregone conclusion as soon as Zahran died. There was a power vacuum that Failaq al-Rahman and the Nusra Front will rush to fill. It's like when a powerful mafia don gets killed and rival families move in to take advantage."¹⁶²

Indeed, within weeks of Alloush's passing, the politics of the Eastern Ghouta had turned into a game of musical chairs as all factions sought to position themselves for the post-Zahran era.

In February 2016, Ajnad al-Sham announced that all its troops in the Eastern Ghouta would place themselves under the command of Failaq al-Rahman.¹⁶³ The merger between the Eastern Ghouta's number-two and -three factions mean that for the first time since 2013 there now existed a more or less evenly matched competitor to the Islam Army. The new Failaq al-Rahman supergroup was clearly about to mount a challenge to the Islam Army.

Failaq al-Rahman's decision to buy up Ajnad al-Sham came as a surprise to some. Until Alloush's death, there had been "serious discussions to unite Failaq al-Rahman and the Islam Army," said Islam Army spokesperson Islam Alloush, but now Failaq al-Rahman instead merged with the Islam Army's main rival.¹⁶⁴ The Islam Army and some other sources claim that this was a result of pressure from the MOC. One source claimed the group had just received an infusion of funds from the MOC to help it "incorporate smaller groups and getting progressively bigger, challenging the Islam Army's dominance."¹⁶⁵ Failaq al-Rahman disputes this.¹⁶⁶

Whatever the case, the merger led to drastic worsening of relations between the rebel groups. The Islam Army claimed that some members of Ajnad al-Sham had refused the merger with Failaq al-Rahman, preferring to instead join the Islam Army along with all their equipment. "It is customary in Syria's military circumstances that when a military formation joins another one, it will bring its weapons and headquarters with it into the merger," explained Islam Alloush.¹⁶⁷ But Failaq al-Rahman rejected this, claiming that the Islam Army was press-ganging former Ajnad al-Sham fighters into its ranks.¹⁶⁸ Conflict flared over who should control disputed former Ajnad al-Sham bases in the Douma area, leading to a tense standoff and tit-for-tat arrests. Neither group was in the mood for compromise, sensing that what was at stake was the long-term balance of power in the enclave.

In this climate of escalation, another anti-Islam Army alliance was declared. On March 15, 2016, Fajr al-Umma joined with the Nusra Front in a new coalition called the Fustat Army.¹⁶⁹ It vowed to confront Assad's "Crusader-Communist-Shia alliance," but its main target was, clearly, the Islam Army.¹⁷⁰

It was far from clear that the decapitated Islam Army could handle both challengers at once, especially not with Assad's forces simultaneously attacking the southern part of the enclave. Air strikes against the southern town of Deir al-Asafir killed and injured dozens of civilians on March 31, 2016 and, in late April, a two-pronged government offensive came close to severing the Deir al-Asafir region from the rest of the Eastern Ghouta.

The Islam Army did little to defuse tensions. Zahran Alloush's successor Essam Boueidini was preoccupied with internal matters, ceding public space to the group's head of religious affairs, Samir al-Kaakeh, whose threatening tone and relentless scolding of rival factions threw fuel on the fire. "We had some minor problems with Zahran Alloush when he

was alive, but thanks to his charisma he was mostly able to maintain discipline in the Islam Army,” recalled Failaq al-Rahman’s Wa’el Olwan in an interview in May 2016. “That has changed now. We didn’t see this aggressive rhetoric from the religious officials of the Islam Army while he was alive, but now we do.”¹⁷¹

The Tafour Affair

On March 28, 2016, a group of masked assailants tried to assassinate Khaled Tafour, the Sufi cleric who had served as the spiritual leader of Ajnad al-Sham and now supported Failaq al-Rahman. The group claimed to have caught one of the perpetrators, who was interrogated.¹⁷² In a videotaped testimony released by the group, the prisoner claimed to be working for a secret Islam Army assassination squad tasked with murdering the Failaq al-Rahman leadership.¹⁷³

The Islam Army immediately denied involvement. Kaakeh called the tape a forgery and Boueidini would later claim the man had been tortured into making a false confession.¹⁷⁴ But Failaq al-Rahman and Tafour pressed their case and had a committee appointed by the now nearly defunct Unified Judicial Council to investigate the incident. Islam Army loyalists refused to cooperate, causing the council to finally break apart.

The clashes escalated sharply in mid-April and Failaq al-Rahman accused the Islam Army of having seized its bases in Shayfouniyeh on April 18.¹⁷⁵ But the Islam Army, too, saw itself as a victim of aggression: “Failaq al-Rahman attacked our headquarters in Zamalka and Erbeen, which prompted our members in other areas to defend themselves,” Islam Alloush said in an email. “Thus the fuse of war was lit.”¹⁷⁶

Ghouta Civil War: April 28 to May 25, 2016

On the morning of April 28, 2016, fighters loyal to Failaq al-Rahman and the Fustat Army overran Islam Army positions in Jisreen, Zamalka, Hammouriyeh, and Ein Terma in a surprise attack. The Islam Army lost several bases, arms caches, and weapons factories, as well as its two tunnels in Zamalka and Erbeen. Failaq al-Rahman now gained near-complete dominance over the Damascus suburbs, but the Islam Army quickly countered by rooting out opposition from the Douma region. An internal frontline emerged in Mesraba, splitting the Eastern Ghouta halfway between the Damascus suburbs and Douma.¹⁷⁷

Supporters of the Islam Army were initially bombastic and vowed revenge. “We will exterminate them all!” screamed Samir Kaakeh in a video-recorded sermon.¹⁷⁸ But as the days passed and the group realized the extent of its losses, its officials became more plaintive, emphasizing themes of betrayal and conspiracies. “What happens in the Eastern Ghouta is an alliance against the Islam Army between the MOC, represented by Failaq al-Rahman, and al-Qaeda,” said Abul-Hareth, the Islam Army’s commander in northern Syria, who claimed that the goal of this alliance was “to remove the

Islam Army from Damascus and from the fronts of Damascus.”¹⁷⁹

Civil society groups and opposition members in other areas of Syria reacted with shock and outrage. Both Failaq al-Rahman and the Islam Army were conscious of the reputational damage they were suffering and that the infighting might allow Assad to seize territory, but they had irreconcilable views on what a truce should look like.

The Islam Army stressed that a ceasefire would have to involve a return of all property and territories seized since April, specifically mentioning the two tunnels in Zamalka and Erbeen, the loss of which had done considerable damage to the group’s economic and military positions.¹⁸⁰ By contrast, Failaq al-Rahman and the Fustat Army were seeking to preserve their territorial gains and wanted to keep the Islam Army weak. The Islam Army had given them no cause for compassion, and they had every reason to fear that it would seek vengeance if allowed to regain its former strength. “You can lead water back to its course,” the Failaq al-Rahman member Louai al-Sayyed wrote on May 9, 2016. “But you cannot make it drinkable.”¹⁸¹

Despite these divergent views, an agreement to silence the guns was arrived at within a week of the initial infighting. But on May 6 and 7 the Islam Army overran the frontline in Mesraba with tanks and BMP armored transports. Its opponents cried foul and the fighting picked up again.

In the end, it was Bashar al-Assad who brought peace inside the Eastern Ghouta.

In the end, it was Bashar al-Assad who brought peace inside the Eastern Ghouta. On May 19, the Deir al-Asafir pocket crumbled, handing Assad control over around ten towns and villages as well as much of the farmland that had sustained the Eastern Ghouta during three years of siege.¹⁸² The Failaq al-Rahman and Islam Army leaderships continued to blame each other in the media, but the disaster in Deir al-Asafir finally shamed them into agreement. In the following days, all factions made good-will gestures such as releasing prisoners.¹⁸³

On May 24 and 25, a Qatari-backed mediation mission led by former Syrian prime minister Riyad Hejab clinched a deal between Failaq al-Rahman and the Islam Army.¹⁸⁴ After nearly a month of bloodshed and hundreds of deaths, the infighting subsided. The Fustat Army had apparently delegated Failaq al-Rahman to negotiate on its behalf and immediately issued a statement blessing their agreement.¹⁸⁵

The Doha deal mandated a ceasefire in the Eastern Ghouta, while also “banning fighting between brothers, releasing prisoners, opening public roads for civilians, returning civilian property to its owners, and stopping the media incitement campaigns.” A mediation committee composed of six locally respected civilians in the Eastern Ghouta (some with ties to the exile opposition) was set up to resolve outstanding issues, including the confiscated bases and tunnels.¹⁸⁶ In late May, both sides released prisoners and began to dismantle some of their checkpoints, turning Mesraba into a buffer zone between their forces.¹⁸⁷

However, the military factions refused to cede real power to each other or to any joint committee, and the deal would therefore never be properly implemented. According to the agreement signed in Doha, “the Eastern Ghouta is a single entity in terms of geography and population and cannot be divided into areas of influence.” But in practice, it had already broken in two. Douma and the rural east of the enclave were now under the exclusive control of the Islam Army, while the Damascus suburbs south of Mesraba were held by Failaq al-Rahman. The Fustat Army factions also had a significant presence, with Harasta still under exclusive Fajr al-Umma control and a few Nusra Front strongholds scattered across the suburbs (particularly Hammouriyeh and Jobar) and on the southern frontline.

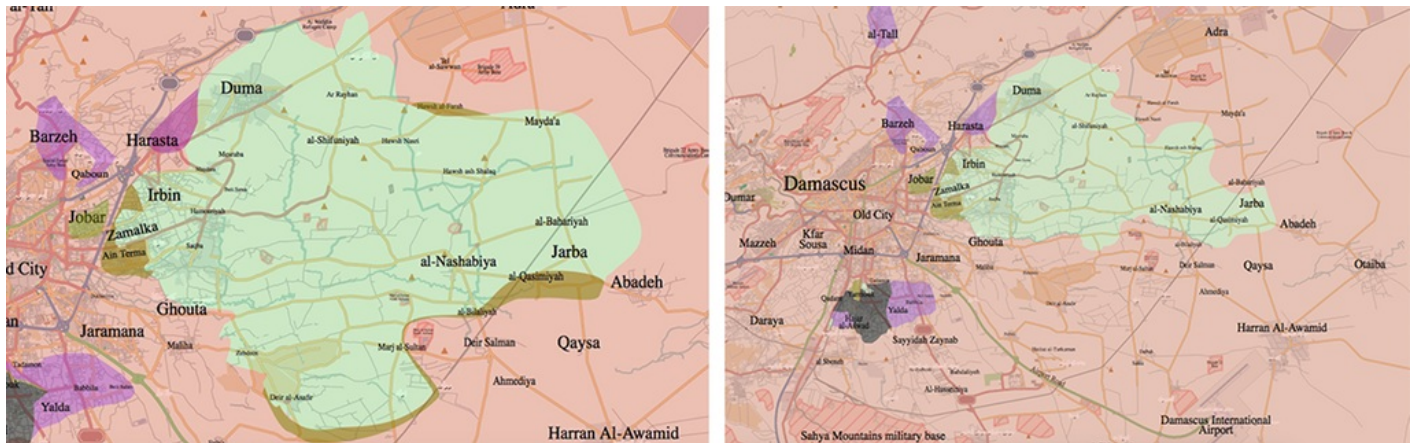
The political scene reflected the military divide on the ground. After the collapse of the Unified Military Command and the Unified Judicial Council, other governance bodies also fell apart. “Even the humanitarian institutions and the educational institutions have been divided into two,” said the independent opposition activist Alaa al-Ahmed. “We now have two military councils, one belonging to Failaq al-Rahman and one belonging to the Islam Army. We have some educational institutions belonging to Failaq al-Rahman and others that belong to the Islam Army, and the provincial authorities led by Akram Toumeh have also split into two parts.”¹⁸⁸

A Western-backed civilian provincial governor who, unlike the rebel commanders, had a measure of popular legitimacy by virtue of having been elected by local activists, Akram Toumeh was widely respected in the enclave. Alongside five other notables of similar backgrounds, he had been appointed by the Doha mediators to the committee that would mediate between the factions. But it was an impossible job. As the civilian institutions splintered, the mediators’ influence withered, and neither popular sympathy nor electoral legitimacy could restrain the rebel commanders. In July 2016, gunmen belonging to Failaq al-Rahman broke into Toumeh’s offices and beat him. Three months later the committee wrapped up its work, having made no discernible progress, with Toumeh complaining of abuse and harassment from Islamists. The Eastern Ghouta remained bitterly divided.¹⁸⁹

Divided They Fall

The Syrian government had skillfully exploited the infighting. After collapsing the Deir al-Asafir pocket on May 19, 2016 the army offensive in the southern part of the enclave had at first seemed to stall. But it was soon replaced by a new army offensive launched from the desert areas in the east, blasting its way through weakened Islam Army defenses.

Government media gave large coverage to the victories in the Eastern Ghouta and Bashar al-Assad himself turned up for a rare photo-op in the Marj area near Deir al-Asafir on June 26, where he broke the Ramadan fast with his troops and promised more victories.¹⁹⁰



FRONTLINES IN THE EASTERN GHOUTA ENCLAVE, DECEMBER 2015 (LEFT) - JUNE 2016 (RIGHT). SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

By the end of July 2016, the government had recaptured Jarba, Bahariya, and Meydaa on the eastern edge of the enclave, and were moving toward the central areas of the enclave. The collapse of the Western Ghouta rebel stronghold of Darayya in late August released thousands of government troops for other missions, and that month the Eastern Ghouta village of Hawsh Nasri fell to Assad's forces.¹⁹¹ Though most of these areas were lightly populated, the loss of food-producing regions was dangerous and the rebels were suffering unsustainable casualty rates.

The Islam Army bore the brunt of the damage, since it was its areas in the east that were being targeted. Leaders of the group felt that this was a deliberate strategy to exploit their weakened state, and insisted that they could not effectively defend the enclave as long as Failaq al-Rahman refused to return the arms stockpiles and tunnels it had seized in April.¹⁹² Failaq al-Rahman blamed the situation on the Islam Army, claiming that it had refused to remove its checkpoints so that other factions could go to Douma and the eastern front. But Failaq al-Rahman's own front lines in the Damascus suburbs remained mostly calm through the summer, despite pleas from the Islam Army to launch diversionary actions. For the first time in years, the Syrian government was permitting aid convoys to enter the suburbs, in what seemed like yet another attempt to play the factions off each other.¹⁹³

September saw continued fighting, and October witnessed the fall of the Eastern Ghouta town of Tell Kurdi. Assad's troops were now moving through Reyhani, their sights set on Shayfouniyeh, and beyond that, Douma. It was a dramatic reversal, practically a collapse. In six months, about a third of the enclave had been recaptured by the Syrian government. Rebel coordination remained poor—almost nonexistent—and the losses looked likely to continue. Many in the opposition began to sense defeat approaching.

In October 2016, an opposition negotiator revealed that progovernment delegations from Damascus had visited Douma four times to discuss a potential ceasefire, though he complained that the government showed little consistency and did not seem serious about the talks.¹⁹⁴ A government document listed a ten-man committee that would negotiate a “final agreement to restore normal life in Douma and the Eastern Ghouta,” with Russia as a guarantor for any agreement reached.¹⁹⁵ By November, preliminary talks had reportedly also started between the government and residents of Fajr al-Umma-controlled Harasta.¹⁹⁶ Failaq al-Rahman's leaders in the Damascus suburbs seemed unlikely to want to be left alone to face Assad's army.

Publicly, the rebel leaders remained bullish about their prospects, refusing any talk of surrender. But the enclave was now so bitterly divided and leaderless, so outgunned and exhausted, that it was difficult to imagine its defenders holding their ground through 2017. For the rebels of the Eastern Ghouta, there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

Conclusion

The uprising in the Eastern Ghouta, which began as a chapter of the Arab revolts of 2011, drew on a preexisting, strong undercurrent of anti-government sentiment. As in other parts of Syria, a variety of social and political forces responded to the call for revolution, but religious fundamentalists were powerful from the outset and soon became dominant within the armed insurgency.

The success of the Islamists is not difficult to understand. They hit the ground running with an experienced and determined leadership, they embodied ideologies that proved perfectly suited to mobilize fighters in a sectarian civil war, they were able to tap into well-resourced clerical and mosque networks, and they enjoyed easy access to foreign funding in the crucial first months of the war. By contrast, non-Islamist factions tended to be politically parochial and often purely personality-based, and they could offer little ideological guidance or spiritual comfort to their community. Though many such groups would later be empowered by outside funders, thereby ensuring a deep manpower reserve for the insurgency, they generally lacked the characteristics necessary to shape and control the rebellion.

By early 2012, the Eastern Ghouta insurgency was already under strong Islamist influence. The Islam Army now

emerged as the most powerful group in Douma under the forceful personal leadership of Zahran Alloush. The siege imposed in spring 2013 had paradoxical effects on rebel politics inside the Eastern Ghouta. It weakened the local insurgency as a whole, but also delineated a smaller political field, which the Islam Army could more easily dominate. By nurturing competition between the rebel factions for scarce resources and a handful of high-value import routes, the siege also had the dual effect of triggering increased infighting and concentrating power among fewer actors.

This environment allowed Alloush to establish himself as a kingmaker of sorts from 2013 until his death in 2015. By balancing weaker factions against each other, he was able to secure a dominant role in the Unified Military Command and the Unified Judicial Council, which he helped establish to organize the enclave in summer and autumn 2014. He then crushed two of the three main sources of resistance to the new order, represented by the Umma Army and the Islamic State, although he avoided military conflict with the third one, al-Qaeda's Nusra Front. The purges clarified power relations and brought a rare moment of internal stability, which allowed for Alloush's continued entrenchment. While the new institutions were weak and deeply dysfunctional, they seemed like the foundation of a new political system through which Alloush could credibly bid for a monopoly on force—that is, state-like authority.

However, the struggle for control over smuggling routes—in particular, the Wafideen Crossing and the Zahteh Tunnel—also engendered destructive new rivalries. Even after gaining the upper hand militarily and politically, Alloush failed to master the siege economy, which made him vulnerable to subversion by rival commanders who held a stronger stake in the tunnel business. Alloush had overreached, and by mid-2015, the institutions he had used to fortify his dominance were falling apart, as rival groups began to boycott them and threatened to defect. The Russian intervention in September 2015 dramatically raised pressure on the rebels and shattered the stalemate in the Eastern Ghouta, creating another source of tension.

With the insurgency already under severe pressure and internal conflict on the rise, the death of Alloush in December 2015 had a catastrophic impact on the stability of the enclave. Rival factions immediately banded together in counter-alliances to fill the void, possibly with some foreign encouragement. The emergence of almost evenly matched power blocs for the first time in three years profoundly destabilized the Eastern Ghouta, and within months the enclave had slid into full-scale civil war.

The violent events of April and May 2016 split the Eastern Ghouta along factional lines, shredded what remained of the joint institutional apparatus, undercut rebel defenses, and facilitated new offensives by the Assad government. There is now a strong likelihood that the insurgency in the Eastern Ghouta is going to be defeated, perhaps even as soon as in the first half of 2017.

The rise and fall of the rebel enclave in the Eastern Ghouta parallels the wider war in Syria. Inside this besieged area, rebel politics have played out with particular speed and ferocity, but the underlying mechanisms have in many ways been the same as elsewhere in Syria.

Trapped in its factionalism and internal rivalries, the opposition has failed to fill the vacuum created by the destruction or withdrawal of the Syrian regime. The rebels' manifest inability to provide basic governance has made both Syrian and foreign backers of the uprising recoil from the prospect of a battlefield victory over Assad, who has exploited this ambiguity to devastating effect.

To be sure, some of the fragmentation and instability in rebel-controlled areas has to do with government bombing, aid blockages, and political manipulation, but that is not the whole story. From the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) to the Afghan Taliban and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, history shows that nonstate movements can and often have set up centralized military forces and organized basic courts and policing (that is, they have created the primary building-blocks of government) despite extremely adverse conditions. Even in contemporary Syria, this has happened in the areas controlled by the Islamic State—just not among the Sunni Arab opposition groups that the West has sought to empower.

Realistically speaking, in Syria or in similarly splintered polities, only centrally organized, highly motivated, and ruthlessly violent factions—typically motivated by strong ideology and ideally with access to reliable funding sources or outside support—will be able to impose themselves on rivals, gain critical mass and ultimately hegemony, enabling them to construct a new order from within a factionalized and competitive environment. So it was with the Kurds of Rojava, and so with Islamic State in eastern Syria, notwithstanding their ideological and other differences.

When and where Syrian Sunni Arab factions have shown some promise as state-builders—such as Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front in Idlib, and the Islam Army in the Eastern Ghouta—it is, I believe, because at least some of these elements have been present. Very likely, therefore, mere bottom-to-top organizing and foreign encouragement for negotiated mergers cannot overcome divisions on such a scale as those affecting the Syrian opposition. Evenly matched factions can rarely create functioning alliances; if they do, they do not last long. Indeed, the Syrian war seems to demonstrate what should have been obvious from the start: fragmented insurgencies do not unite without coercion.

Factbox: Main Rebel Groups in the Eastern Ghouta

Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement: One of Syria's largest armed rebel groups, the Salafi-inspired Islamists of Ahrar al-Sham have only a small presence in the Eastern Ghouta since suffering a devastating split in 2015.

Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union: A large group created in 2013 with the backing of Sufi scholars and other non-Salafi Islamists from the Damascus region. Led for most of its history by Yasser al-Qadri (Abu Mohammed al-Fateh), under the influence of the Douma scholar Khaled Tafour. Widely seen as the second-largest faction in the Eastern Ghouta since 2014, Ajnad al-Sham dissolved its Eastern Ghouta branch and ordered members to join Failaq al-Rahman in February 2016.

Failaq al-Rahman: Considered the third-largest group in the Eastern Ghouta from approximately 2014, Failaq al-Rahman is aligned with the Free Syrian Army and led by Captain Abdel-Naser Shmeir. It grew in 2015 and greatly increased its power in early 2016 by absorbing Ajnad al-Sham, thus emerging as a dominant force in the urban, western part of the enclave.

Fajr al-Umma Brigade: Created in 2014 under the leadership of Abu Khaled al-Daqr, also known as al-Zahteh, Fajr al-Umma controls the Harasta neighborhood and its profitable smuggling tunnels. Joined the Fustat Army in 2016.

Fustat Army: An alliance of the Nusra Front and the Fajr al-Umma Brigade, created in March 2016.

Islam Army: From at least 2013, this Douma-based Islamist group has been the most powerful group in the Eastern Ghouta. The Islam Army was created by Zahran Alloush who espoused a version of Salafi Islamism different from that of jihadists like al-Qaeda but close to the official doctrines in Saudi Arabia. Alloush was killed in December 2015 and succeeded by Essam Boueidani.

Islamic State: An ultraradical al-Qaeda splinter faction, the Islamic State was suppressed by the Islam Army in 2014–15 and never gained a strong foothold in the Eastern Ghouta.

Nusra Front: The Syrian wing of al-Qaeda. In the Eastern Ghouta, the Nusra Front was never one of the larger groups but influential nonetheless. Its forces were concentrated in the southern Marj region and in some of the Damascus suburbs. The Eastern Ghouta branch of the Nusra Front joined the Fustat Army alliance in March 2016. In July 2016, the Nusra Front changed its name to Fateh al-Sham and claimed to have ended its relationship with al-Qaeda.

Umma Army: An alliance of Free Syrian Army groups and local smugglers formed in late 2014 to check the growing power of the Islam Army, led by Douma rebels Abu Ali Khibbiyeh and Abu Subhi Taha. The group was crushed by the Islam Army in early 2015.

COVER PHOTO: SYRIAN FREE PRESS.

About This Project

This policy report is part of “Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism,” a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

Notes

1. Aron Lund, “The Slow, Violent Fall of Eastern Aleppo,” The Century Foundation, October 3, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/slow-violent-fall-eastern-aleppo>.
2. Population statistics for both regions are disputed and subject to great uncertainties. The opposition generally has an interest in inflating population numbers, while the government has an interest in presenting the enclaves as sparsely populated. The United Nations has estimated that besieged Eastern Aleppo has a population of 250,000–275,000, a figure that at the time of this writing in December 2016 is being called into question. In late October 2016, President Bashar al-Assad told the author and a group of visiting journalists and analysts that the population of Eastern Aleppo was around 200,000, whereas his foreign minister, Walid al-Moallem, stated that it was close to ninety-seven thousand. The Eastern Ghouta’s population in 2016 seemed to be approximately 450,000, though estimates are unreliable and have fluctuated wildly over time, partly because of scarce information and different measuring criteria. In May 2014, the World Health Organization estimated that the Eastern Ghouta had a population of almost one million inhabitants (“WHO Reaches the Besieged Town of Douma in East Ghouta with Life-Saving Medicines,” World Health Organization, May 29, 2014, www.emro.who.int/syr/syria-news/douma-medicines-delivery.html). A little more than a year later, the UN counted 163,500 people under siege in the enclave (Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 [2014], 2165 [2014], 2191 [2014], S/2015/468, June 23, 2015), a figure that had been revised to 176,500 in January 2016 (Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 [2014], 2165 [2014], 2191 [2014] and 2258 [2015], S/2016/60, January 21, 2016). However, Siege Watch, a project of the Washington-based think tank The Syria Institute and Pax, a Dutch NGO, noted in 2016 that some towns and neighborhoods inside the Eastern Ghouta are “inexplicably listed [by the UN] as besieged while others in the same situation are not,” suggesting that this had led to a dramatic undercount of inhabitants (Siege Watch, “First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria,” February 2016, <https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>). The group estimated the enclave’s population to be more than 435,975 (Siege Watch, “Third Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria,” May–July, 2016). This was also the view of a non-Syrian nongovernmental source with access to statistics from major aid groups, which estimated that a realistic figure was around 500,000 inhabitants (interview with the author, early 2016). In November 2016, the United Nations revised its view to add some previously unlisted towns, which will likely bring its figures closer to those of Siege Watch. (Statement by Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien to the UN Security Council, November 21, 2016.)
3. Some parties to the conflict refused my requests for interviews or could not be contacted. I requested information and

interviews on the Eastern Ghouta at the Ministry of Information during a visit to Damascus in November 2016, but I received no response for the duration of my stay in the city. Attempts to request information from Nusra Front and Fateh al-Sham media officials in 2015 and 2016 were similarly unsuccessful. If the viewpoints of these parties are not accurately represented in this report, it is not for lack of trying.

4. The name itself stems from the Arabic غوط, which refers to a depression in the ground.

5. My loose translation from quotes in Samir Bishri, "1,000 Dunum of Ghouta Land Are Transformed Annually to Buildings and Facilities" (Arabic), Tishreen, March 15, 2012, archive.tishreen.news.sy/tishreen/public/read/253435. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this report are my own.

6. See Anne-Marie Bianquis and Guillaume Fantino, "La Ghouta de Damas, une Oasis en Mutation," in *La Syrie au Présent. Reflets d'une Société*, ed. Baudouin Dupret et al. (Arles, France: Actes Sud, 2007), 119-29.

7. Between 1995 and 2010, the surface area of the Damascus Countryside province covered by buildings increased from 72,535 hectares to 85,205 hectares. However, these figures do not include the Damascus province, which contains the capital itself and is nestled inside the Damascus Countryside province. Since much of the suburban buildup and population growth took place inside and near the city limits, the figures cited above likely understate the expansion. The area of the Damascus Countryside province deemed suitable for agriculture also saw net growth in this period, but at a lower pace and mostly due to state-led land reclamation efforts in mountainous and arid areas far from the capital. See Bishri, "1,000 Dunum."

8. Cha'ban Abboud, "Les Quartiers Informels de Damas: Une Ceinture de Misère," in *La Syrie au Présent: Reflets d'une Société*, Baudouin Dupret et al. (Arles, France: Actes Sud, 2007), 169-76.

9. Matthew McNaught, "The End of the Line: A Microbus Map of Damascus," *Syria Comment*, July 2, 2013, www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-end-of-the-line-a-microbus-map-of-damascus.

10. Former senior Syrian official involved in managing the early stages of the Eastern Ghouta uprising, interview with the author, 2016.

11. "Syrian Army Returns to Damascus Suburbs," *BBC*, January 30, 2012, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16784711.

12. Ma'arakat al-Furqan, "Statement about the Start of the Furqan Battle in the Eastern Ghouta, with a Large Number of Participating Brigades and Battalions," YouTube, May 11, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kPq9nM4ntM>.

13. Member of an armed rebel faction in the Damascus region, interview with the author via Skype, September 2016.

14. Abdulrahman Alhaj, interview with the author via Skype, September 2016.

15. Abu Asem al-Zubeir, "A Meeting with the Honorable Sheikh Abdullah Alloush, Father of the Martyred Sheikh Zahran Alloush" (Arabic), YouTube, December 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKjmlhAOxXg&feature=youtu.be>.

16. Haitham Mohammed al-Kinani, "Dialogue with the Leader of the Syrian Islam Brigade Faction" (Arabic), *al-Bayan*, No. 311, May 7, 2013, www.albayan.co.uk/MGZarticle2.aspx?ID=2790.

17. Kinani, "Dialogue with the Leader of the Syrian Islam Brigade."

18. Sermon by Essam Boueidani, *Nida al-Islam*, no date given. See Saleh Abu Mohammed's May 2, 2016 YouTube upload, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiSNBLcGMzQ>.

19. Zuhour Mahmoud, "Abu Qusay: Portrait of a Fighter," *Al-Jumhuriya*, August 1, 2013, aljumhuriya.net/en/portrait/abu.

20. Orwa Khalifa, "On the Salafi Infrastructure in Syria: The Islam Army as an Example," *Al-Jumhuriya*, September 9, 2016, aljumhuriya.net/35519.
21. Another member of the same family, Hassan Delwan (Abu Anas), later became the head of the Islam Army's Sharia Commission.
22. abo omar, "Douma – The First Operation of the Islam Company – 002" (Arabic), YouTube, March 28, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW7j3pTfGY8>.
23. Youssef Sadaki (research assistant at the Orient Research Center), interview with the author, Skype, September 2016.
24. Abu Mohammed, sermon by Essam Boueidani.
25. Sadaki, interview.
26. Arour did not seek to conceal his support for the Islam Brigade. See for example his post on Twitter on September 1, 2013, <https://twitter.com/AdnanAlarour/status/374263055716081664>. Alloush would later receive donations collected by other Gulf-based Salafi sponsors, including Essam Saleh al-Oweid, a professor at the Imam Mohammed ibn Saud University in Riyadh (who also referred to his sponsorship of Alloush on Twitter, on September 3, 2013, https://twitter.com/essamal_owayed/status/374946024936071169), and Mohammed Hayef al-Moteiri, a Kuwaiti ex-parliamentarian who in December 2012 created a major fundraising group known as the Council for Supporters of the Syrian Revolution, which will be discussed in greater detail below.
27. Sadaki, interview.
28. Colonel Khaled Habbous, interview with the journalist Orwa Khalifa, audio file posted in September 2016 at <https://soundcloud.com/user-493689171/9syeorhbjb6>.
29. A parallel trail ran from Homs through the Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the Western Ghouta.
30. Habbous said the committee assembled to oversee the trade included Alloush and two rebel commanders in the Qalamoun area, Abu Khaled al-Telli and Captain Firas al-Bitar. He claimed that a total of four shipments were moved down from the Turkish border by the Farouq Battalions, and then smuggled by Bitar and Telli's men toward Damascus, where Alloush took over. Instead of distributing the weapons fairly, Alloush allegedly favored his own followers and allies. Habbous, interview with Khalifa.
31. Statement No. 1 of the Islam Brigade—General Command, July 2012.
32. In August 2012, Alloush and six other commanders in the wider Damascus region created the Ansar al-Islam Gathering, led by the Iraq veteran Abu Adnan Zabadani, who operated on the Lebanese border. The alliance reportedly drew on funds from Kuwaiti and Qatari sources. However, Alloush was just beginning to develop his own sources of support through Turkey, and when his contacts in the Farouq Battalions created the Syrian Liberation Front along with other northern rebel factions in September 2012 (it was later renamed the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front), Alloush left the Ansar al-Islam Gathering to join them. But though this seems to have allowed him to tap into additional funds from Salafi donors, the Front never evolved into a real alliance. (For some details on these early coalitions, see Aron Lund, "The Islamist Mess in Damascus," *Syria Comment*, February 9, 2013, www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-islamist-mess-in-damascus, and Aron Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: the Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," *UI Occasional Paper 17*, March 2013, www.ui.se/eng/news/ui-publications/namnlos-nyhet-29.aspx.) Alloush later signed onto a new leadership for the Free

Syrian Army in December 2012, only to abandon it just as quickly. He then joined the so-called Islamic Front in November 2013, alongside Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, the Tawhid Brigade, and other factions in central and northern Syria. However, Alloush always stood somewhat apart from the other Islamic Front members, and the coalition eventually ended up serving as a vehicle for Ahrar al-Sham.

33. The member factions were the Islam Brigade, the Douma Martyrs' Brigade, the Ghouta Lions Brigade, the East Ghouta Revolutionaries' Brigade, the Lions of God Brigade, the Tawhid al-Islam Brigade, the Farouq Brigade, the Shabab al-Hoda Brigade, the Seif al-Omawi Battalions, the Military Police Battalion, the System Protection Battalion, and the al-Ishara Battalion. Of these groups, the Shabab al-Hoda Brigade would later go on to become the nucleus of Ajnad al-Sham while the Douma Martyrs' Brigade formed the core of the Umma Army. See Aron Lund, "A Dispute in Douma," Syria in Crisis/Diwan, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 24, 2013, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/53432?lang=en.

34. On Kuwaiti Salafi sponsorship of the Syrian uprising, see Zoltan Pall, "Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2014, carnegieendowment.org/files/kuwaiti_salafists.pdf; Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," Brookings Institution, December 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/private-gulf-financing-syria-extremist-rebels-sectarian-conflict-dickinson.pdf>.

35. The "lan nakhdhuluhum" ("we will not forsake them") campaign, February 4–28, 2013.

36. The Council for Supporters' (@w3tasimo) Twitter post from June 13, 2013, <https://twitter.com/w3tasimo/status/345253768394330112>. One of the Salafi scholars headlining the campaign, Nayef al-Ajami, wrote on Twitter: "The Ghouta is now under siege with its more than two million inhabitants. It has run out of flour, there has not been any electricity for months, and supplies have been cut for the Mujahideen. But soon there will be relief, God willing." Nayef al-Ajami, Twitter, June 23, 2016, <https://twitter.com/dralajmey/status/348767068608401409>. Ajami was appointed minister of justice in Kuwait in January 2014, but resigned after U.S. protests only four months later. ("Kuwait Minister 'Linked to Syria Jihad' Quits," Aljazeera English, May 12, 2014, www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/05/kuwait-minister-linked-syria-jihad-quits-2014512115223118343.html.)

37. Hamad al-Jaser, "The Kuwaitis Supported the 'Syrian Resistance' with Close to 100 Million Dollars," Al-Hayat, November 4, 2013, www.alhayat.com/Details/568664.

38. Whether the Council for Supporters understood it or not, the figure was probably exaggerated for propaganda purposes, since many of the forty-two smaller factions already seem to have been de facto subsidiaries and proxies of the Islam Brigade, while others did not in fact integrate the new group. A list of the factions was read at the creation of the group. See rayat al-sham, "Announcing the Formation of the Islam Army with the Participation of 43 Military Formations" (Arabic), YouTube, September 30, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jFxe2bpY0.

39. "Syria: Jaysh Al-Islam Rejects Geneva II Conference," Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, November 12, 2013, english.aawsat.com/2013/11/article55322150. The original plan of the Kuwaitis had been to make the Islam Army the centerpiece of a larger alliance, known as the Main Damascus Operations Room (not to be confused with the Greater Damascus Operations Room), into which they managed to gather nearly every significant faction in the Eastern Ghouta. However, when Council of Supporters Secretary-General Mohammed Hayef al-Moteiri stated this publicly on Twitter

(September 29, 2013, <https://twitter.com/mhamdhaif/status/384263221286559745>) it sparked an immediate backlash. Three Islamist groups—the Sahaba Brigades, the al-Habib al-Mustafa Brigades, and Ahrar al-Sham—immediately pulled out of the alliance, complaining that the Kuwaitis were trying to “reinforce the hegemony of some factions,” meaning Alloush’s group. (“Three Islamic Factions Announce their Withdrawal from the Operations Room in Damascus and Its Countryside” (Arabic), Al-Dorar Al-Shamiya, September 30, 2013, eldorar.com/node/28361.)

40. Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Insight: Saudi Arabia boosts Salafist rivals to al Qaeda in Syria,” Reuters, October 1, 2013, www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-jihadists-insight-idUSBRE9900RO20131001

41. At this point, Alloush’s need for external sources of income was not in doubt. In a November 2013 interview Alloush claimed that the Islam Army would consume fifty thousand dollars in a matter of “hours.” See Najm Salem, “Zahran Alloush Reveals Details about the Islam Army and Its Supporters and Its Relationship with Nusra” (Arabic), Kulluna Shuraka, November 21, 2013, all4syria.info/Archive/112835.

42. Aron Lund, “The Greater Damascus Operations Room,” two parts, Syria in Crisis/Diwan, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 18–19, 2013, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/53566?lang=en and carnegie-mec.org/diwan/53567?lang=en.

43. Bassam al-Ahmed, interview with the author by phone, September 2016.

44. “Syria: No Word on 4 Abducted Activists,” Human Rights Watch, December 9, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/09/syria-no-word-4-abducted-activists>.

45. See Yassin al-Haj Saleh, “Why Zahran Alloush Stands Accused,” Yassin al-Haj Saleh, May 31, 2015, www.yassinhs.com/2015/05/31/why-zahran-alloush-stands-accused, which is a translation of “Why Zahran Alloush Stands Accused” (Arabic), Al-Jumhuriya, April 22, 2015, aljumhuriya.net/33430.

46. For some examples of sectarian, anti-Shia and anti-Alawite rhetoric, see Joshua Landis, “Zahran Alloush: His Ideology and Beliefs,” Syria Comment, December 15, 2013, www.joshualandis.com/blog/zahran-alloush. As noted later in this report, Alloush tried to distance himself from these statements when giving interviews to the Western press in 2015.

47. Aron Lund, “Say Hello to the Islamic Front,” November 22, 2013, Syria in Crisis/Diwan, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/53679?lang=en.

48. There were in fact many attempts to organize civilian life and create governance institutions, but without support from the armed factions they were doomed to fail. In March 2014, civilian activists and opposition groups managed to hold elections for the Douma Local Council, backed by the exiled opposition. But with so little aid coming into the enclave, the council chairman Akram Tōumeh was unable to provide meaningful leadership or even fund the salaries of his employees, and he could certainly not control the armed factions. See Souad Khibyeh, “An Interview with the Head of the Elected Local Council in Douma,” The Syrian Observer, March 13, 2014, syrianobserver.com/EN/Interviews/26876/An+Interview+with+the+Head+of+the+Elected+Local+Council+in+Douma. The armed groups also helped create various religious councils and sharia courts, but though these were sometimes locally powerful, each one tended to be closely associated with a particular faction.

49. In spring 2016, the members were Abu Abderrahman Zeinelabidine, Abu Rateb Abu Diqqa, Khaled Tafour, Ali Dandal, Abu Adnan Erbeen, Abu Mohammed Hammouriyeh, and Abu Yaser al-Sheikh Bzeineh. Of these clerics, many—perhaps all

—were understood to serve on the council on behalf of an armed faction. For example, Khaled Tafour had been a religious teacher for the leaders of Ayn al-Sham, Abu Abderrahman Zeinelabidine was linked to the Islam Army, and Abu Rateb Abu Diqqa was the father-in-law of Failaq al-Rahman's leader Captain Abdel-Naser Shmeir. One of the council's founding members, Ahmed Abdelaziz Uyyoun, reportedly had links to the former leaders of the Umma Army, which may have been a reason for his assassination in October 2015.

50. *al-ittihad al-islami li-ajnad al-sham*, "Statement Announcing the Unified Military Command in the Eastern Ghouta," YouTube, August 27, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syCxOW0uCNk>.

51. Yasser al-Qadri's uncle Marwan Abderrahman al-Qadri (1943–) is a religious sheikh and a senior Muslim Brotherhood leader. He is a member of the oppositional National Coalition on behalf of the Syrian Muslim Scholars Association, which is closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. I am thankful to Raphaël Lefèvre for this information. Another source also described the Qadri family as "staunchly" aligned with the Brotherhood.

52. On preconflict Syrian Islamic politics, see Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Middle East Studies, 2013).

53. Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," February 5, 2013, www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoLSyria/A.HRC.22.59_en.pdf; author interviews with sources that have requested complete anonymity, 2016.

54. Unusually among major Syrian rebel groups, Failaq al-Rahman's eight-point political program (posted on its website) includes only one reference to religion, saying it will "defend the rights of the Syrian people in all of its [religious and ethnic] variety, in accordance with the principles of the Islamic sharia."

55. Mohammed al-Youssef, "Eastern Ghouta: The Unified Military Command... A Project for Unification or Infighting?" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, April 29, 2015, www.almodon.com/arabworld/2015/4/29/الغوطة-الشرقية-القيادة-العسكرية-الموحدة-مشروع-اتحاد-أم-إقتال.

56. "Formation of the Umma Army and Failaq al-Badr [sic] as the Result of the Merger of Twenty Factions in the Eastern Ghouta," *Al-Hayat*, September 19, 2014, www.alhayat.com/m/story/4676297#sthash.33k0HdRj.dpbs.

57. Sadaki, interview.

58. Khaled Atallah, "As Syrian Army Closes in, Douma Residents Turn against Rebels" (Arabic), *Al-Monitor*, November 24, 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/syria-douma-protest-jaish-al-islam.html.

59. "The Umma Army Joins the General Command of the Ghouta" (Arabic), *El-Dorar Al-Shamiya* October 31, 2014, eldorar.com/node/62517.

60. Mohammed Azizi, "Alloush: Abu Ali Khibbiyeh Is a Hashish Salesman... And the Umma Army Is Connected to Daesh and the Regime," *Orient News*, October 1, 2015, www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/84234.

61. Atallah, "As Syrian Army Closes in."

62. Heba Mohammed, "The Islam Army in Syria, Led by Zahran Alloush, Seizes the Headquarters of the Umma Army, and There Is Conflicting News about the Killing of Its Leader Ahmed Taha" (Arabic), *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, January 5, 2015, www.alquds.co.uk/?p=274455.

63. "Statement by the Factions of the General Command of the Eastern Ghouta about Today's Events" (Arabic)El-Dorar Al-Shamiya, January 4, 2015,eldorar.com/node/66925. Jordan-based commanders of the Western-, Jordanian-, and Gulf Arab-backed Southern Front, which had links to Umma Army members, took a stronger stance against Alloush, but this had no impact on events. "The Formations of the Southern Front Declare War on the Islam Army, Considering It a Partner to the Regime," Step News, April 1, 2015,stepagency-sy.net/archives/29412.
64. "Zahran Alloush: The Decision to Shell the Security Centers in Damascus Was a Collective Decision" (Arabic)Rasd, April 8, 2015, www.rasd-sy.net/زهران-علوش-قرار-قصف-المراكز-الأمنية-ف/.
65. Dimashq Al-An, "The Gunmen of the Ghouta Admit to Homosexual Practices among the Foremost Leaders of the Armed Groups in the Damascus Countryside," YouTube, February 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScxyZUKcQ3o>.
66. "The Islam Army Executes Abu Ali Khibbiyeh in the Eastern Ghouta," Enab Baladi, September 1, 2015, www.enabbaladi.net/archives/43690.
67. "Zahran Alloush: The Decision to Shell the Security Centers in Damascus Was a Collective Decision," Rasd.
68. "Failaq Omar Joins the Islam Army" (Arabic), Al-Hayat, May 3, 2015, www.alhayat.com/Articles/8946997/ فيلق-عمر-ينضم-الى-جيش-الإسلام.
69. "The Leader of Ahrar al-Sham in the Eastern Ghouta Denies the Truth of the Statement about a Merger with Failaq al-Rahman" (Arabic), El-Dorar Al-Shamiya, March 20, 2015, eldorar.com/node/72100.
70. Haya Khitou, "Syria: the Unified Command Bans the Creation of New Factions in the Eastern Ghouta" (Arabic)Al-Arabi Al-Jadid, February 20, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/2/20/سورية-القيادة-الموحدة-تمنع-تشكيل-فصائل-جديدة-بالغوطة-الشرقية>.
71. Ahmed Aba-Zeid, interview with the author online, May 2016.
72. For example, the Jund al-Asima faction in Jobar was absorbed by Failaq al-Rahman in June 2015.
73. Alloush did allow for internal courts where factions could try their own members. See "Zahran Alloush: The Decision to Shell the Security Centers in Damascus Was a Collective Decision," Rasd.
74. "The Unified Military Command of the Eastern Ghouta Refuses the Invitation of Jabhat al-Nusra to Establish 'al-Fateh Army in the Ghouta' Calling It to Disband Its Judicial Councils and Join 'the Unified Command,'" Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 6, 2015, www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=20123.
75. Unlike the Umma Army, the Nusra Front was a major force in rebel politics outside the enclave and well implanted in the Syrian Islamist camp. It could also have retaliated with devastating effect against much weaker Islam Army brigades in northern Syria. Alloush therefore had to tread carefully in his dealings with the group.
76. Sameh al-Youssef, "Divisions in the Damascus Ghouta over the Implementation of Hesbah," Aljazeera, August 9, 2015, www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/8/9/انقسام-بغوطة-دمشق-حول-تطبيق-الحسبة.
77. Amjad al-Tinawi, "Khaled Tafour Presents His Resignation from the Presidency of the Unified Judicial Council in the Eastern Ghouta," Kulluna Shuraka, July 5, 2015, all4syria.info/Archive/229777. [note]

Although the joint institutions were clearly weak, contested, and riddled with problems, the new, Islam Army-dominated Eastern Ghouta did seem to be moving away from the political and factional incoherence and anarchy that had plagued the area since the expulsion of the Assad regime. A monopoly of force—that is, state-like authority—began to seem within reach. Apart from the areas controlled by the Islamic State “caliphate” in the east of the country, and the northern regions controlled by Kurdish groups aligned with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (the PKK), this was without precedent in Syria.[note] Strong systems of sharia courts have also existed in Idlib and Dera’a, and the Dar al-’Adl court in Deraa certainly merits further study. Eastern Aleppo’s Sharia Commission (al-Hay’a al-Shar’iyya), which was created by Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, the Nusra Front, and the Tawhid Brigade in late 2012 could possibly have developed into something resembling the Eastern Ghouta structure, but it lacked a unified military counterpart like the Unified Military Command and it stood no chance of gaining international recognition and support due to the involvement role of the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front. At any rate, it fell apart in the summer of 2014, when the Nusra Front pulled out to create its own court system, known as the Dar al-Qada.

78. Ahmir Hussain, “Jaysh al-Islam ‘The Army of Islam’ Military Parade,” YouTube, July 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE8u1fPtMhg>.

79. “‘Left to Die under Siege:’ War Crimes and Human Rights Abuses in Eastern Ghouta, Syria,” Amnesty International, August 2015, www.amnesty.be/IMG/pdf/embargoed_eastern_ghout_report_left_to_die_under_siege_-_august_2015.pdf.

80. Copy posted on the author’s Twitter account on March 4, 2015, <https://twitter.com/aronlund/status/573189184707547136>.

81. “Slow Death: Life and Death of Syrian Communities Under Siege,” Syria American Medical Society, March 2015.

82. “‘Left to Die under Siege,’” Amnesty International.

83. A member of an armed rebel faction in the Damascus region, interview with the author, Skype, September 2016.

84. “‘Left to die under siege,’” Amnesty International

85. Heba Mohammed, “Assad Closes His Business and Breadwinner in the Eastern Ghouta” (Arabic), Souriya Mubasher, November 9, 2014, slnnews.co/?p=11645.

86. Rim Turkmani, Ali A. K. Ali, Mary Kaldor, and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, “Countering the Logic of the War Economy in Syria: Evidence from Three Local Areas,” report, London School of Economics, July 2015, www.securityintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Countering-war-economy-Syria2.pdf.

87. Salam al-Saadi, “The Million Checkpoints in Syria” (Arabic), Al-Arabi Al-Jadid, April 13, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/supplements/2015/4/12/حواجز-المليون-في-سورية>. According to a report published by the Middle East Institute, at one point in 2014 government checkpoints skimmed the equivalent of two dollars off of every kilogram of food sold through the Wafideen Crossing. See Will Todman, “Sieges in Syria: Profiteering from Misery,” Policy Focus 2016-14, Middle East Institute, June 2016, www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF14_Todman_sieges_web.pdf.

88. Recently, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien noted that the final checkpoint before Douma seems to be under the control of the Republican Guard. (Statement by Stephen O’Brien to the UN Security Council, November 21, 2016,

https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/ERC_USG_Stephen_OBrien_Statement_on_Syria_to_SecCo21NOV2016CAD.pdf

89. *"Left to Die under Siege," Amnesty International.*
90. *War over the Crossings of East Damascus between Two Opposition Currents" (Arabic), Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, January 5, 2015, archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=800771&issueno=13187#.WD6n1dyto0p.*
91. *Mohammed Bayraqdar (member of the Political Office of the Islam Army), interview with the author online, August 2016.*
92. *Though Mohieddine Manfoush is clearly the dominant figure in the Wafideen trade, some sources also mention the name of George Haswani. He is a dual Syrian-Russian citizen born into a Greek-Orthodox family in Yabroud in the Qalamoun region, but now based in Damascus. He runs an engineering company called HESCO and has ties to Russian energy firms and, allegedly, to decision-makers in the Kremlin. Since 2011, Haswani has been involved in striking deals across the front lines of the Syrian war, including by negotiating the release of hostages on behalf of the government. He was sanctioned by the European Union and the U.S. government in 2015, accused of facilitating oil exports to the Syrian government from fields controlled by the Islamic State. Some reports claim that Haswani acts in a similar middleman role at the Wafideen Crossing, helping to arrange shipments to the Wafideen Camp that are then moved piecemeal by small-time traders through the checkpoints. See Sam Dagher, "Syrian Nuns Held By Rebels for Months Released," Wall Street Journal, March 9, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304020104579429074203631210>; "Treasury Sanctions Networks Providing Support to the Government of Syria, Including for Facilitating Syrian Government Oil Purchases from ISIL," U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Center, November 25, 2015, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0287.aspx>; Majd al-Khateeb, "Tunnel Traders: The Cancer of the Ghouta" (Arabic), Al-Modon, April 10, 2016, www.almodon.com/arabworld/2016/4/10/الغوطة-سرطان-تجار-الأنفاق; "Council Decision (CFSP) 2016/850 of 27 May 2016 amending Decision 2013/255/CFSP concerning restrictive measures against Syria," Official Journal of the European Union, May 28, 2016, eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2016/850/oj.*
93. *Youssef Sadaki, "The Siege Economy of Eastern Ghouta," Atlantic Council, March 23, 2016, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-siege-economy-of-eastern-ghouta.*
94. *Sadaki, interview.*
95. *According to unconfirmed rumors, Manfoush may be supported by the Damascene businessman and parliamentarian Mohammed Hamsho, who is in turn widely reputed to be a business partner of the president's brother, Lieutenant-General Maher al-Assad of the Republican Guard. Rivals of Zahran Alloush have accused him of clandestine dealings with Hamsho or even of receiving support from him. (Sabr Darwish, "Zahran Alloush, the Eastern Ghouta's 'King of Kings,' from the Prison of the Regime to Its Warm Bosom," Al-Hayat, January 14, 2015, www.alhayat.com/Articles/6826804/-زهران علوش-ملك-ملوك-الغوطة-الشرقية-من-سجن-النظام-إلى-حصنه-الدافئ.) The Islam Army denies this, but claims that Hamsho backed its enemies in the Umma Army. ("Response from the Islam Army" (Arabic), Al-Hayat, January 20, 2015, www.alhayat.com/Opinion/Letters/6922967/.) Given that trade at the Wafideen Crossing appears to have been under the influence of the Umma Army before being seized by the Islam Army in late 2014, there could of course be truth to both of these claims—that is, if there really is a connection between Hamsho and Manfoush's business. However, no clear evidence has been presented for any of these claims, and unsubstantiated accusations of this type are not rare among the Eastern Ghouta rebels.*

96. Salami Mohammed, "The Regime Siege on the Eastern Ghouta Revealed a 'Leading Personality' with Powers Greater than those of the President" (Arabic), *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, March 18, 2015, www.alquds.co.uk/?p=312250.
97. Wa'el Olwan (Failaq al-Rahman spokesperson, formerly of Aynad al-Sham), interview with author via Skype, May 2016.
98. Bayraqdar, interview.
99. For an interesting report on opposition and loyalist perspectives on the Barzeh truce, see Sadek Abed Alrahman and Karen Leigh, "In Barzeh, Two Versions of a Truce," *Syria Deeply*, March 10, 2014, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2014/03/10/in-barzeh-two-versions-of-a-truce>.
100. Response by Ali Heidar to a question posed by the author at a conference arranged by the British Syrian Society, Damascus, October 2016.
101. In fact, the Damascus-Homs highway cuts through the Harasta area, most of which remains under rebel control inside the Eastern Ghouta enclave. Only the portion of Harasta that is west of the highway was included in the Barzeh truce agreement. For simplicity's sake, I have chosen to refer to both Barzeh and western Harasta as simply "Barzeh," while references to Harasta should be understood to refer to the opposition-held area east of the highway.
102. Olwan, interview.
103. Abu Ammar Hawwa (Islamic scholar in Douma), interview with the author online, May 2016.
104. Not to be confused with the Fateh al-Sham Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), which is the name used by the Nusra Front after it announced that it had cut ties to al-Qaeda in summer 2016.
105. Sadaki, "The Siege Economy of Eastern Ghouta."
106. Khateeb, "Tunnel Traders: The Cancer of the Ghouta."
107. Anonymous Fajr al-Umma-friendly media activist in Harasta, interview with the author online, May 2016.
108. al-ittihad al-islami li-ajnad al-sham, "Formation of the Fajr al-Umma Brigade in Harasta City under the Banner of the Aynad al-Sham Islamic Union" (Arabic), YouTube, March 28, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDoeMYwWGfK>. The core group in Fajr al-Umma, known as the Der' al-Asima Brigade, used to receive support from a Muslim Brotherhood-linked fundraising organization. See the list of factions in endnote 35 in Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria," Carnegie Middle East Center, May 2013, carnegieendowment.org/files/struggling_to_adapt_mb.pdf.
109. Fajr al-Umma left Aynad al-Sham to become an independent faction in late 2014. This presumably rested on Abu Khaled's new ability to finance himself through the Zahteh Tunnel. He rejoined Aynad al-Sham again half a year later in search of protection from the Islam Army, which was massing troops to seize the tunnel, and again assumed a traditionalist-Islamist identity. In February 2016, Aynad al-Sham's central leadership decided to merge all its forces in the Eastern Ghouta with the Free Syrian Army-branded Failaq al-Rahman network. Fajr al-Umma seems to have played along with this decision on paper, but, in practice, Abu Khaled refused to cede control of Harasta and his tunnels to anyone. This would become apparent the following month, when he split from Aynad al-Sham/Failaq al-Rahman to move Fajr al-Umma into an alliance with the Salafi-jihadis of the Nusra Front, known as the Fustat Army.
110. Olwan, interview.
111. "Fajr al-Umma used to have good relations with the Islam Army, particularly after they gave the Islam Army two or

three days per week to benefit from their famous tunnel,” said the Fajr al-Umma-linked media activist Ahmed al-Boustani, who went on to speak about how that collaboration collapsed in early 2015: “Relations turned bad when the Islam Army began to interfere with the import and export through the tunnel. This sparked conflicts. The security office of the Islam Army tried to bring out goods from the Ghouta, mostly stolen goods that would be sold at cut-rate prices in the Ghouta because of the blockade, while it was expensive in Damascus because of the trade in it. They took the profits on behalf of the Islam Army. Fajr al-Umma refused the way they were bringing out stolen goods through its tunnel, which made the Islam Army’s security office run amok.” Interview with the author online, May 2016.

112. Olwan, interview.

113. The political structure of the enclave remained confused and fluid. Old and new institutions coexisted uneasily. In April 2015, a General Assembly for the Eastern Ghouta had been set up to organize civilian affairs, seemingly by civilian activists who had attached themselves to the Unified Military Command, but its role and purposes remained unclear. Later in 2015, the Douma Local Council leader Akram Toumeh was elected governor of the Damascus Countryside Province, tasked with running what remained of the provincial institutions after the rebel takeover. The oppositional local and provincial councils were supported by the Western-friendly exile government and its international donors, rather than by specific factions in the Eastern Ghouta, and they had limited influence. Toumeh’s role seems to have been restricted to disbursing aid and coordinating the basic functioning of residual government institutions. Elected or not, he had no way of reining in the armed groups and his provincial authorities were of course also forced to obey the factions and their religious sheikhs. Nevertheless, he was a respected figure whose neutrality made him a useful mediator among the factions. In 2016, he was appointed deputy prime minister in the exile government. Abul-Hassan al-Andalusi, “The General Commission of the Eastern Ghouta: An Auxiliary Body... or a New Body!!” (Arabic), Kulluna Shuraka, April 2, 2015, all4syria.info/Archive/191692; “Election of Districts 1-2-3-4 in the Eastern Ghouta of the Damascus Countryside Province” (Arabic), Syrian Interim Government, October 21, 2015, syriaig.org/syr14/index.php/content-category-4/4429-2-3-4; “The Damascus Countryside Provincial Council Elects a New President, a Deputy for Him, and Members of the Executive Office” (Arabic), Al-Souria, December 10, 2015, goo.gl/EsVbCd; “The Coalition Publicizes the New Form of the Interim Government” (Arabic), National Coalition Geneva Media Unit, July 12, 2016, www.syriageneva2.org/2016/07/الائتلاف-ينشر-تشكيلة-الحكومة-المؤقت.

114. Simeon Kerr, “Kuwait Clamps down on Terror Financing,” *Financial Times*, September 9, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/1cd94792-3812-11e4-b69d-00144feabdc0>; Bashair al-Ajami, “Kuwaiti Donations Look for ‘the Good Ones and Not the Bad Ones’ in Syria,” *Al-Rai*, May 7, 2016, www.alraimedia.com/ar/article/local/2016/05/07/677895/nr/kuwait.

115. Salami Mohammed, “The Eastern Ghouta on the Brink of an Explosion, as Heated Conflicts Based on Tunnels, Power, and Doctrinal Differences Ravage the Opposition Formations,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, July 31, 2015, www.alquds.co.uk/?p=380115; “The Islam Army and Ajnad al-Sham... Arrests, Followed by a War of Communiqués,” *Zaman Al-Wasl*, August 7, 2015, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/63161.html>.

116. Mohammed, “The Eastern Ghouta on the Brink of an Explosion.”

117. Sabr Darwish, “Struggle over the Crossings in the Eastern Ghouta... May Ignite a War between the Factions” (Arabic),

Al-Modon, July 3, 2015, www.almodon.com/print/607ac4ab-1f1e-41e5-95e1-487ce7b405af/408b8b00-6006-4d9f-b54b-feaad73da86e. This arrangement was confirmed by the Fajr al-Umma-linked Harasta activist Ahmed al-Boustani in an online interview with the author in May 2016.

118. "The Fajr al-Umma Brigade Activates Its Membership in the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union" (Arabic) Al-Dorar Al-Shamiya, June 8, 2015, eldorar.com/node/78548.

119. Roy Gutman and Mousab Alhamadee, "Islamist Rebel Leader Walks Back Rhetoric in First Interview with US Media," McClatchy DC, May 20, 2015, www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24784780.html. However, little changed in Alloush's Arabic-language rhetoric, and behavior considered deeply problematic by funding nations continued. Later that year, the Islam Army again drew condemnations for parading caged Alawite and female hostages through Douma as human shields. It was another bid to stop the bombings. Though such stunts won the Islam Army no friends abroad, they seem to have resonated with some in Alloush's constituency in the Eastern Ghouta, for whom stopping government air strikes was the overriding priority.

120. The purposes and results of the meeting are in some dispute. See below.

121. Ibada Kojan, "Wa'el Olwan to Enab Baladi: Abu Mohammed al-Fateh Succeeds Zahran Alloush" (Arabic) Enab Baladi, May 31, 2015, www.enabbaladi.net/archives/34864.

122. In the Syrian conflict, "media activist" as a term has come to refer to political activists whose primary method of work involves documentation and dissemination of information, whether through their own independent platforms, dispatches published in media outlets, assistance to correspondents from non-Syrian media companies, or other forums.

123. Boustani, interview.

124. Turkmani et al., "Countering the Logic of the War Economy in Syria."

125. "The Unified Judges Releases the Leader of Failaq al-Rahman, Abu al-Nasr," El-Dorar Al-Shamiya, June 27, 2015, eldorar.com/node/80017.

126. Mustafa al-Haj, "Civilians 'Biggest Losers' of Opposition Infighting in Eastern Ghouta" (Arabic) Al-Monitor, August 14, 2015, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/syria-east-ghouta-opposition-monopoly-tunnels.html. As Abu Tamam al-Shami, a religious official in Ahrar al-Sham, put it: "At the end of the day, the Failaq al-Rahman leader Abul-Naser [Shmeir] is not the decision-maker in the Unified [Military] Command and it is not he who controls the Ghouta tunnels. The primary responsible is perhaps the man who spends his efforts trying to gain mastery of the lands of the Ghouta, making the factions submit to him, and keeping the throne. And perhaps, if he were to spend only a quarter of that effort trying to solve the livelihood crisis or break the blockade, the situation would be very different." (Cited in Omar Bahaeddine, "Eastern Ghouta Rises Up Against Failaq al-Rahman" (Arabic), Al-Modon, June 27, 2016, www.almodon.com/arabworld/2015/6/27/الغوطة-الشرقية-تتنفض-على-فيلق-الرحمن.)

127. The placard can be seen here: all4syria.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/unnamed-56.jpg.

128. "Judiciary Council: We Can't Issue Verdicts without Jaish al-Islam Files," Syria Direct News Update, June 8, 2015, syriadirect.org/news/syria-direct-news-update-6-8-15; Amjad al-Tinawi, "Khaled Tafour Presents His Resignation from the Presidency of the Unified Judicial Council in the Eastern Ghouta" (Arabic), Kulluna Shuraka, July 5, 2015, all4syria.info/Archive/229777.

129. Abdullah Suleiman Ali, *"Demonstrations in the Ghouta... And Signs of the Disintegration of the Unified Command"* (Arabic), *Al-Safir*, August 5, 2015, assafir.com/Article/435229.
130. syria2tv, *"Dangerous Leak: Zahran Alloush, the Leader of the Islam Army, Scandalizes the Agents of the Noseiri Regime in the Eastern Ghouta,"* YouTube, August 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BdO-SLjwYo>.
131. Ahmed al-Dimashqi, *"Assassination of Abdelaziz Uyyoun, the Former General Judge of the Eastern Ghouta of Damascus, and Accusatory Fingers Point to the Regime"* (Arabic), *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, October 15, 2015, www.alquds.co.uk/?p=418569.
132. In late September or early October 2015, the Nusra Front apparently started to bring in food from Qaboun and dump it at cut-rate prices on the Eastern Ghouta markets. This won the al-Qaeda branch a rush of popular sympathy, which it used to present itself as a champion of the people. (Kholoud al-Shami and James Bowker, *"In a Surprise Move, Nusra Digs Tunnels and Undercuts Rebel Smugglers by Slashing Prices,"* Syria Direct, November 9, 2015, syriadirect.org/news/in-a-surprise-move-nusra-digs-tunnels-and-undercuts-rebel-smugglers-by-slashing-prices.)
133. After the Syrian Salafi scholar Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidine (1938-2016).
134. "Zahran is the son of a famous Salafi scholar but he got angry when we asked him," said Mohammed al-Amin, the pseudonym of an Islamic scholar and online commentator who is well-connected in Syrian Islamist circles. "He said, find me a single quote where I say I am Salafi... I am not Salafi, I am a Sunni only." Mohammed Alloush, interview with the author via online messaging service, June 2013.
135. Abu Ammar Hawwa (Islamic scholar in Douma), interview with the author online, May 2016.
136. Sam Heller, *"Ahrar al-Sham's Revisionist Jihadism,"* War on the Rocks, September 30, 2015, warontherocks.com/2015/09/ahrar-al-shams-revisionist-jihadism.
137. On the Refai family and the Zayd Group, see Thomas Pierret and Kjetil Selvik, *"Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading' in Syria: Private Welfare, Islamic Charities, and the Rise of the Zayd Movement,"* *International Journal for Middle East Studies* 41(2009): 595-614.
138. Students of Khaled Tafour helped create the Islamist rebel group Shabab al-Houda, which later led the formation of Afnad al-Sham. Both the Afnad al-Sham leader Yasser al-Qadri (Abu Mohammed al-Fateh) and his deputy Amer Obeid (Abul-Abed) had belonged to Shabab al-Houda before the creation of Afnad al-Sham. While Afnad al-Sham drew on links to a wide array of influential traditionalist clerics and Muslim Brotherhood contacts outside Syria, Tafour was widely seen as the group's "spiritual leader" inside the Eastern Ghouta.
139. While some clerics had supported Assad with apparent enthusiasm before 2011, it should be understood that the government's interactions with the clerical establishment were nuanced and transactional. For example, the Afnad al-Sham-aligned cleric Khaled Tafour had reportedly been the subject of persecution for his social and religious activism, but after 2008 he was tapped to train a new generation of government-approved scholars by the Ministry of Religious Endowments as part of a scheme to marginalize a former regime client, Salaheddine Kuftaro. In 2011-12, Tafour wavered but then signed statements critical of the government and eventually directed his followers to join the armed insurgency. (Najm Salem, *"Creation of the Shabab al-Houda Battalions, from Sheikh Tafour to Abu Mohammed al-Fateh"* (Arabic), *Kulluna Shuraka*, December 21, 2013, all4syria.info/Archive/119817.) The influential Sufi sheikhs Osama and Sariya al-

Refai were allowed to return from exile in 1994. In 2002, Osama al-Refai was visited at his mosque by none other than President Bashar al-Assad, who sought to improve his ties to the Islamic establishment. But though the Refai brothers accepted working with the government and were allowed to expand their movement, it failed to co-opt them as clients. In 2011, many of their followers took to the streets and in August of that year, Osama al-Refai was attacked and beaten by the security forces. By 2012, both brothers had fled Syria. (Pierret and Selvik, "Limits of 'Authoritarian Upgrading.'") According to Pierret (interview with the author by email, March 2014), the founders of Afnad al-Sham also included graduates of the Fateh Institute, an Islamic institution in Damascus that remained supportive of the government after 2011.

140. The most famous cases were Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti (1929-2013) and Syria's longtime Grand Mufti, the Naqshbandi Sufi scholar Ahmed Kuftaro (1914-2004), both of whom gave strong support to the government and were rewarded with permission to develop their own religious associations and sporadic sit-downs with the president. Bouti was murdered during the war and hailed as a martyr by the government. He is now buried next to the medieval Islamic leader Salahuddin al-Ayyoubi (better known in the West as Saladin) near the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. No one claimed credit for the assassination. Following Ahmed Kuftaro's death, the post as grand mufti was given to the Aleppan cleric Ahmed Hassoun (1949-), who has remained loyal to the government. Kuftaro's son Salaheddine (1957-) had a falling-out with the security services toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, which appears to have been partly related to his criticism of Shia missionary activities.

141. Hawwa, interview.

142. On the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, see Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

143. As previously noted, Afnad al-Sham's founder and leader Yasser al-Qadri has family links to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Raphaël Lefèvre, an expert on Syrian Islamism and on the Muslim Brotherhood, noted that whether or not there is a direct connection between the groups, they "share indirect family links, and with it potentially common fundraising networks, and also seem to appeal to a similar constituency." (Raphaël Lefèvre, interview with the author by email, November 2016.)

144. Pierret (senior lecturer, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Edinburgh), interview.

145. Pierret, interview.

146. Boustani, interview.

147. Alaa al-Ahmed (independent activist in the Eastern Ghouta), interview with the author via Skype, November 2016.

148. Alhaj, interview.

149. Charles Lister, interview with the author online, September 2016.

150. Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Islamic Council," *Syria in Crisis/Diwan*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 13, 2014, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55580.

151. See Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand," *Brookings Institution, Analysis Paper No. 26*, November 2016. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army.pdf.

152. Olwan, interview.

153. *Anonymous official in an international organization, interview with the author, 2016.*
154. *Ahmed, interview.*
155. *Interview with international official, 2016; Ahmed, interview. In early 2015, Alloush had warned citizens of Damascus to stay indoors, saying that unless the government stopped its air strikes on the Eastern Ghouta, he would use his now-considerable rocket arsenal to bombard targets in central Damascus. He made good on this threat in February 2015, raining rockets on the capital for several hours and killing about ten people. Alloush later said the goal of deterring government attacks had been at least partially achieved. See "Zahran Alloush: The Decision to Shell the Security Centers in Damascus Was a Collective Decision," Rasd.*
156. *See the discussion between Adnan al-Arour and Said Delwan on the December 31, 2015, episode of "With Syria Until Victory" on Shada al-Hurriya TV, here uploaded by Youtube user dogin2, December 31, 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRdiww_je8.*
157. *Ahmed, interview; anonymous source, 2016.*
158. *Zahran's relative Mohammed Alloush would later be appointed chief negotiator in the opposition delegation to Geneva. On the Riyadh conference, see Aron Lund, "Riyadh, Rumeilan, and Damascus: All You Need to Know About Syria's Opposition Conferences," Syria in Crisis/Diwan, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 11, 2015, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62239?lang=en; and Aron Lund, "Syria's Opposition Conferences: Results and Expectations," Syria in Crisis/Diwan, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 11, 2015, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62263?lang=en.*
159. *Ahrar al-Sham had also participated in the Riyadh meeting, despite protests from hardliners in the group. In the end, no Ahrar al-Sham representatives joined the delegation and the group officially refused to have anything to do with the talks, though its leaders made sure to keep themselves informed of how they progressed.*
160. *Aron Lund, "The Death of Zahran Alloush," Syria Comment, December 25, 2015, www.joshualandis.com/blog/death-of-zahran-alloush-by-aron-lund.*
161. *"General Command: Syrian Air Force Eliminates Terrorist Zahran Alloush and Large Number of Terrorist Organizations' Leaders," Syrian Arab News Agency, December 25, 2015, sana.sy/en/?p=64870.*
162. *Anonymous Syrian who works closely with rebel politics, interview with the author online, May 2016.*
163. *Albin Szakola and Ullin Hope, "Damascus Rebels Merge Amid Jaysh al-Islam 'intimidation,'" Now, February 22, 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsreports/566633-damascus-rebels-merge-amid-jaysh-al-islam-intimidation>. At that point, the Ajnad al-Sham leader Yasser al-Qadri had already resigned and handed power to his deputy Amer Obeid (a.k.a. Abul-Abed, born 1977 in Saqba), in a never-fully-explained November 2015 leadership reshuffle. However, Qadri clearly continued to play a major role behind the scenes, and both he and Obeid were appointed deputy commanders of Failaq al-Rahman after the merger. "The Leader of One of the Largest Military Factions in the Eastern Ghouta Presents His Resignation" (Arabic), Orient News, November 30, 2011, orient-news.net/ar/news_show/95720/0-قائد-إحدى-كبريات-الفصائل; online factsheet about Amer Obeid issued by Ajnad al-Sham in December 2015, in author's possession.*
164. *Islam Alloush (spokesperson of the Islam Army), interview with the author by email, June 2016.*

165. *Anonymous Syrian who works closely with rebel politics, interview with the author online, May 2016.*
166. *"They say we collaborate with the Nusra Front, that we work with Jordanian intelligence and with the MOC, and that we are also trying to help the Islamic State enter the Ghouta," said the Failaq al-Rahman spokesperson Wa'el Olwan. "These are lies." (Olwan, interview.)*
167. *Islam Alloush, interview.*
168. *Hazem Salah, "Important Factional Mergers in the Eastern Ghouta of Damascus, and the Islam Army Attempts to Seize Sole Control of Douma," Al-Quds Al-Arabi, February 20, 2016, www.alquds.co.uk/?p=485522.*
169. *The Fustat Army had also stated that it included the small Eastern Ghouta branch of Ahrar al-Sham. For these fighters, following the lead of their Nusra Front allies must have seemed natural, but Ahrar al-Sham's Idlib-based leaders wanted no conflict with the Islam Army. No sooner had the alliance been announced before they ordered their Eastern Ghouta branch to withdraw. Even so, some members appear to have continued to work with the Fustat Army, which continued to claim that Ahrar al-Sham was part of the group. (Aba-Zeid, interview; a member of Ahrar al-Sham in the Eastern Ghouta, interview with the author online, May 2016.)*
170. *Statement released via the Fustat Army Twitter account, March 15, 2016, <https://twitter.com/FustatOfficial/status/709664392418365440>.*
171. *Olwan, interview.*
172. *Copy of Failaq al-Rahman statement uploaded by the author on Twitter on April 5, 2016, <https://twitter.com/aronlund/status/717328729329025030>.*
173. *set zinab, "One of the Members of the Islam Army's Security Detachment Confesses to the Attempted Assassination of Sheikh Abu Suleiman Tafour," YouTube, April 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpoctY94ssk>.*
174. *Copy of Islam Army statement uploaded by the author on Twitter on April 5, 2016, <https://twitter.com/aronlund/status/717331579614396416>; post on Samir Kaakeh's Facebook page on April 11, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/samerkaakeh/posts/1068146696585888>; sermon by Essam Boueidani, Nida al-Islam, no date given, uploaded by YouTube user Saleh Abu Mohammed, May 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MiSNBLcGMzQ>.*
175. *Olwan, interview.*
176. *Islam Alloush, interview.*
177. *Only one faction seems to have stayed out of the conflict, and only partially. When the conflict began, the Islam Army struck fast and hard against Ahrar al-Sham. An Eastern Ghouta-based member of Ahrar al-Sham acknowledges that some members had by then taken up arms alongside the Fustat Army in an "individual capacity," but insists that this was not sanctioned by the leadership (interview with the author online, May 2016). Ahrar al-Sham's high command in northern Syria quickly proclaimed itself neutral, which was accepted by the Islam Army. The imprisoned Ahrar al-Sham members were eventually released, though some clearly bore a grudge toward the Islam Army and complained of continued harassment as they later tried to mediate in the dispute.*
178. *alaa ra, clip of a sermon by Samir Kaakeh, YouTube, April 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HX9xLuYDXrw>.*
179. *Abul-Hareth (commander of the Islam Army's northern sector), interview with the author online, May 2016.*

180. Copy of Islam Army statement uploaded by the author to Twitter on April 30, 2016, <https://twitter.com/aronlund/status/726531392939679745>.
181. Twitter post by Louai al-Sayyed, May 9, 2016: https://twitter.com/alsayeed_sy/status/729802149975207940.
182. Dan Wilkofsky and Ammar Hamou, "Assad's Army Just Captured a Key Breadbasket—and It Means 600,000 Syrians Could Starve," *Vice News*, May 24, 2016, <https://news.vice.com/article/assads-army-just-captured-a-key-breadbasket-and-it-means-600000-people-could-starve>.
183. A large group of northern Syrian rebel factions speaking collectively under the name of the Free Syrian Army also sought to put pressure on the Eastern Ghouta groups to reach a ceasefire. After Failaq al-Rahman showed itself reluctant to comply, they threatened to start targeting the group's fighters and assets.
184. Statements from both the Islam Army and Failaq al-Rahman, as well as other relevant documents, are uploaded by the author in this May 24, 2016 thread on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/aronlund/status/735426461985845248>.
185. Statement posted on the Fustat Army's Twitter account, May 25, 2016: <https://twitter.com/FustatOfficial/status/735518957084549120>.
186. The six members were the recently elected provincial governor Akram Toumeh (who doubled as deputy prime minister in Syria's Western- and Turkish-backed exile government); the health department director Sakhr al-Dimashqi; president of the financial office Mustafa Qashoua; provincial education director Adnan Salik; an independent member called Dr Abu Adnan; and Mohammed Suleiman Dehla, head of the General Assembly in the Eastern Ghouta. See "The Islam Army and Failaq al-Rahman End the Bloody Strife between them by Signing a Reconciliation Document," *Step News*, May 25, 2016, stepagency-sy.net/archives/90488.
187. In practice, the demilitarization of Mesraba quickly stalled. Remaining checkpoints made normal movement difficult and drew repeated air strikes, prompting the local council to call on rebels to leave the town and complaining that their presence had disrupted social and commercial life. Bahira al-Zarier et al., "Fearing Bombardment, East Ghouta Town Demands Armed Groups Leave," *Syria Direct*, August 1, 2016, syriadirect.org/news/fearing-bombardment-east-ghouta-town-demands-armed-groups-leave.
188. Ahmed, interview.
189. There was precious little unity on display when the mediators ended their mission in October 2016. That month, the Islam Army supported breakout factions in an attempt to split Failaq al-Rahman, while Failaq al-Rahman opened fire at Islam Army-friendly demonstrators in the Erbeen-Zamalka area. Members and supporters of the groups on social media demonized the other side, using slurs like Jaish al-Istislam (the Surrender Army) for the Islam Army and Failaq al-Shaytan (Legion of Satan) for Failaq al-Rahman.
190. Syrian Presidency, "Assad in the Eastern Ghouta," YouTube channel, June 26, 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_P0SgCMsmQ.
191. On Darayya, see Sam Heller, "Syria's Rebels Lose a Symbolic Stronghold," *The Century Foundation*, September 1, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-rebels-lose-symbolic-stronghold>.
192. "Until this day, the agreement has not been fully implemented, or perhaps we could say that its implementation is very slow," said the senior Islam Army official Mohammed Bayraqdar in August 2016, complaining that "up to this point,

neither the tunnels nor the equipment have been handed over in full.” (Bayraqdar, interview.)

193. *In mid-June 2016, UN and Red Cross convoys were allowed to enter Harasta across the frontline. The trucks were escorted by Fajr al-Umma through Harasta and then taken in hand by Failaq al-Rahman, moving on to deliver aid to some twenty-five thousand people in Beit Sawa, Hammouriyeh, and other areas. Later that month, the United Nations was also allowed to send food to the twenty thousand inhabitants of Zamalka and Erbeen for the first time in four years.*

194. *Noura Hourani and Jessica Page, “East Ghouta Negotiator: ‘I Don’t Think That the Regime Is Serious about a Ceasefire,’” Syria Direct, October 25, 2016, syriadirect.org/news/east-ghouta-negotiator-‘i-don’t-think-that-the-regime-is-serious-about-a-ceasefire’.*

195. *The document is stamped and signed by the chairman of the National Security Bureau, Lieutenant-General Ali Mamlouk, and dated April 5, 2016. A photocopy was provided to the author by Youssef Sadaki in September 2016. Though I cannot verify its authenticity, it fits with other information about the talks and I have no reason to believe that it is forged.*

196. *A source on the government side in Damascus who claims personal involvement in the Harasta truce process stated that a series of meetings took place in mid-November 2016, attended by Syrian military officials, the Ministry of Reconciliation, and representatives from Harasta. According to this source, the talks were linked to recent advances in a similar local negotiation in al-Tell, north of Damascus, since many families from Harasta had settled in al-Tell.*

(Communication with author via online messaging service, November 2016.)



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