Alliance and Conflict Behavior between Non-State Actors Fighting in the Syrian Civil War

By

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. Three Alliances: The Syrian Islamic Front, The Islamic Alliance, and The Islamic Front
4. An Alliance Falls Apart: Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State
5. Conclusions

Map of Syria:

Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the fundamental goals of political science is to understand how states interact and when they will enter into conflict or ally with one another. The question of how this same dynamic takes place between violent non-state actors, however, has received relatively little attention. Violent non-state actors are becoming a larger part of international relations, especially in conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War where a multitude of militant groups are shaping the conflict. How do these groups interact? Why do they work together and what factors make an alliance more likely to last? Conversely, in what situations are groups likely to fall into conflict with each other?

These questions are relevant to many places in the world, but Syria is a perfect case study because state control over the area has broken down and violent non-state actors exhibit a large range of behaviors, which makes it a good case to compare and contrast what factors in the same situation lead to different alliances and hostilities. Specifically, this paper will consider three alliances: The Syrian Islamic Front, the Islamic Alliance, and the (new) Islamic Front. These alliances existed for varying amounts of time, but all have different compositions and goals, which make them good case studies. It will also consider the case of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State, which were formerly allied together but then split and have been engaged in hostilities with one another for over two years. Hypotheses to be tested will include balance of threat reasons, identity, geography, the effects of outside actors, size of the groups involved, and the number of groups. This thesis will determine that the balance of threat theory does exist on the level of non-state actors. It will find support in evaluating factors such as proximity, group size, and intentions.

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2 Examples of this include South American drug cartels, countries where for-hire military companies operate, and failed states such as Syria.
Relevance and Feasibility

The Syrian Civil War, which has killed over 200,000 people and displaced over 17 million since it began in 2011, is one of the worst conflicts currently occurring. As the United States continues striking within Syria, it is crucial to ask these questions because the ability or disability of Syrian groups to work together will eventually determine whether they can overthrow Assad and what type of force they will be. Furthermore, it will determine whether these groups can ever constitute a state should they become the dominant power in Syria. Many of the groups in Syria have varying degrees of religion and a good portion of them are not attempting to create a democratic state. They vary in size from small brigades to national organizations that are allied with, controlled by, and control other groups. This creates a large network that complicates the goals of international actors. Does attacking one faction make an enemy out of the entire alliance? What would it mean to align with one of them? To what extent do they share weapons and information? How do they interact with groups outside of their immediate allies, especially those that were part of other alliances? For example, Turkey has offered to work with the Islamic Front in creating a safe zone within Syria. The fact that Turkey and the U.S. seem to be moving toward opposing sides of the Islamic Front is a prime example of how the dynamics between non-state actors can directly lead to effects on the international scale. Meanwhile, the rise of the Islamic State and the resulting strikes against them by the Western Coalition have changed the balance of power considerably. To add to this, the United

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States struck at Liwa al-Haqq, which is still a part of the Islamic Front. It is important to understand when groups will balance or bandwagon with a strong regional force because that will determine who best to work with and against to ensure that the regime that replaces Assad is a positive change.

Methodology and Research Design

The Syrian conflict is still ongoing, which complicates any project concerning it. The full extent of the groups operating in Syria is still unknown. The data that is available is often incomplete and organizations reporting on the conflict usually have proposed courses of action that they are using the data to support, meaning that it might be biased towards a specific purpose. Few reliable and complete studies have been conducted about individual groups. Those that have been are only about the largest groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and are always somewhat outdated by the time they are released. Because of these restrictions, the facts for this study are pieced together from different reports and news articles from reputable sources.

The first portion, considering alliances, will include a quantitative analysis of the number of groups and their size in each larger alliance as well as a qualitative analysis of realist and identity factors. The case concerning the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS will rely primarily on qualitative factors.

Part of the purpose of this thesis is to suggest the primary reasons that groups ally or fight each other, but there will inevitably be some severe constraints of the findings. The greater purpose of this project is to consider the feasibility of applying state-based theories onto non-

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state actors and considering the Syrian conflict from this perspective. The time frame of this research is from the outset of the Syrian conflict to the fall of 2014.

Definitions of Key Terms

The actors this paper is primarily concerned with are best described as violent non-state actors. They often vary considerably in size and scope, but they can all be considered as enemies of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. They can and will also be referred to as rebels and insurgents. These terms, while accurate, are more difficult because international actors and media have used them as it suits them, often substituting in other terms such as terrorist, when they desire to refer to them in a negative way, or freedom fighter, when they prefer a positive tone.

Typically in international relations research, alliances are considered to be formal agreements that are usually made public and mean that there are no hostilities between the two states while the alliance is in effect. When considering non-state actors, this definition has to be looser because leaders often do not have perfect control over their organizations. In addition, the agreements are not always made public. For the purposes of this project, an alliance will be considered a formal agreement made between the leaderships of two organizations. It will not be considered to have ended until one of the leaders formally breaks the alliance by making an announcement or ordering some action against the other organization.

This paper uses the terms balancing and bandwagoning. “According to this view,” says Stephen Walt about balancing, “states join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat.”

Bandwagoning is the behavior of smaller powers joining with larger powers in hopes that the greater power will not attack friendly

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Hasler

actors. These generic behaviors are useful for understanding the specific strategies pursued by
groups in Syria. The challenge comes in allowing for larger asymmetries of power between
actors like the Syrian government and the smallest brigades. Allowing for the place of
international actors in this model is another challenge.

The Syrian conflict is a civil war, which allows for a high degree of domestic anarchy.
The notion that the international system is inherently anarchic goes back to Thomas Hobbes and
has been extensively discussed by authors such as Robert Keohane and Kenneth Waltz. 7
Originally, Hobbes’s notion that the international system was inherently anarchic began with
observations between people. Part of his argument is that states act just as humans would if they
were put in a situation without some controlling government to proscribe social norms and
guarantee a version of justice. Because of this, returning the notion of international anarchy to
the state level is easy. In most of Syria, Assad’s regime lacks real control. Similarly, while ISIS
controls a few cities, a number of towns, and the routes between those population centers, they
do not have the amount of control that a modern state is expected to have. 8 Because no one force
effectively controls the entire state of Syria, the country is in a state of domestic anarchy, which
is the same assumption that Stephen Walt begins with in his Balance of Threat theory.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

7 Robert Owen Keohane, “Hobbes’s Dilemma and Institutional Change in World Politics: Sovereignty in
International Society,” in Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World (Psychology Press, 2002),
https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Ty-cyk-ZOGAC&oi=fnd&pg=PA63&dq=%22domestic+anarchy%22+political+science+international+relations&ots=DqU
Gq9vdD8&sig=4G480Oy4I2MIPmSkwdt-tbtQuZ8#v=onepage&q=domestic%20anarchy&f=false; Kenneth N.
Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Waveland Press, 2010).
east-22798391.
The following literature review has two parts. First, it looks at some of the most successful theories in predicting the alliance and conflict behavior of states and considers the effects of attaching it to the actions of non-state actors. It is important to consider this perspective because these groups all desire to become part of the Syrian state that would replace Assad should they win. Because of that, they often emulate state behavior. Additionally, their alliance and conflict behavior is more like that of states than that of peaceful NGO’s because those organizations rarely have their survival threatened when deciding whether to work with or against other groups. Security and survival is taken as the first concern of states in international relations, and it is the first concern of these actors, so it can be expected that many of the theories might apply. The second part of the literature review focuses specifically on what other authors have said about the alliance behavior of non-state actors.

Kenneth Waltz says, “Among states the state of nature is a state of war. This is meant not in the sense that war constantly occurs but in the sense that, with each state deciding for itself whether or not to use force, war may at any time break out.”9 The idea that states act within a larger anarchy is the basis for most of international relations research, including this one. The Syrian crisis mirrors this in many ways. It is in a state of domestic anarchy because there is no authority that can effectively control the territory or assure agreements between actors. There have been organizations, such as the Free Syrian Army and now the Revolutionary Command Council, which have attempted to control the disparate groups, but they have been ineffective. Because of this shared precondition, it can be assumed that a version of Waltz’s theory of Balance of Power might apply in the Syrian situation just as it has been proven to effect international relations between states.

9 Waltz, Theory of International Politics.
Stephen Walt’s theory of “Balance of Threat” is an evolution of Waltz’s original Balance of Power theory and is based on the perceptions and rational responses to threat. For my purposes, the understanding that Walt bases his argument off of balance of threat theories and not balance of power theories is crucial. Walt outlines four aspects of what could make a state threatening. One of them is aggregate power like in Waltz, but the others are proximate power, offensive capability and offensive intentions.10 These factors all play an important role in Syria. Although the country is relatively small compared to the dynamics of the Middle East as a whole, which Walt originally developed his theory on, the number of groups and intensity of the conflict mean that some groups operating in Aleppo might not have any contact with groups in southern Syria. Thus, proximate power and by extension a hypothesis concerning the effects of geographic distance on group interactions might prove effective in predicting the interactions of non-state actors. It will need to be modified, however, to consider what happens with groups lacking set boarders and thus less of an understanding of sovereignty.

Walt suggests that in many cases balancing is more prevalent than bandwagoning. He notes that “unalterably aggressive” actors will always elicit a balancing response from other actors.11 Very simply, this is the fundamental reason no rebel group would ever ally alongside the Assad regime. The regime does not see any outcome other than its complete domination of Syria, so no other group would ally with it, knowing that it would inevitably have to face off against the regime anyway.

Considering the effects of offensive capabilities and intentions is especially difficult in Syria because all of the groups are armed and already involved in a conflict with the regime. As such, they all have significant capabilities and they all have the intention of being part of the

11 Ibid. pg. 13.
regime that will replace Assad. More allies in the civil war translates into a smaller share of the victorious regime for each of the groups. Any piece of the power, however, might be preferable to not being part of the winning coalition at all. This is more complicated than when dealing with states because none of the Syrian actors have their own territory to fall back on should they not choose their allies wisely. This is one of the primary ways that domestic anarchy differs from international anarchy and in some ways it provides for an even more anarchic system. States can be much more secure within their own borders than a non-state actor is because non-state actors often have amorphous zones of control that they constantly have to fight others for dominance over. Not winning translates to losing everything. The need to be a part of the winning organization might suggest that, unlike what Walt finds in his state-based model, bandwagoning would be more prevalent. The amount of conflict and the lack of allies for exceptionally strong organizations such as the Islamic State suggests this is wrong and that balancing is still more likely.

It should also be noted that Walt briefly discusses the effect that identity has on balancing and bandwagoning behavior. He uses Hans Morgenthau’s term “ideological solidarity” to describe the effect of shared institutions and ideas creating allies. Ideology is often a part of identity, which also includes aspects such as racial and national background. The primary concern of this hypothesis is identity, with the recognition that ideology can strongly affect identity, even to the point of severely diminishing other characteristics as is the case with ISIS. Walt finds that identity can be a factor in many alliances, which is why a hypothesis concerning identity will be addressed for the case studies. More importantly for the Syrian case, he finds that states with monarchic or democratic ideologies that do not require them to dominate other actors are likely to have alliances strengthened by ideology whereas deeply religious states that demand
unity under a single leader or government often have difficulty allying with like states. This could possibly explain why more radical organizations such as the Islamic State have difficulty finding potential allies.

Very generally, Walt suggests that smaller states are more likely to bandwagon while greater powers are more likely to balance. This is why regions of equal powers, such as Europe, often mean "checkerboard" alliances whereas regions with a single power are likely to result in a sphere of influence. Of all Walt's arguments, this seems the least applicable to Syria. There are many small powers and, with the exception of the regime, only one really strong power—the Islamic State.

In Syria, this is further complicated because the situation is a modified zero sum game. A normal zero sum game occurs when a victory for one would mean a loss for another, but that is not the case because all of these groups are fighting the Assad regime and other organizations, such as the Islamic State. Short term, groups might be able to help each other, but if their ultimate goal is to control the entire state of Syria, assisting other groups can hurt them in the long term. Attacks and assistance by the Western Coalition also affect the nature of the conflict. As an example of this, it was recently reported that Assad increased attacks on moderate groups as the Coalition began bombing the more radical groups such as JAN and ISIS. Assad took advantage of the weakened radical forces to refocus his efforts on the groups the Coalition was not striking. This situation presents a loss for all of the groups involved in the study even though the original strikes were targeted at enemies of the moderate groups. It complicates each group's understanding of each other's threat because the decrease in aggregate power and offensive

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12 Ibid. pg. 16.
capabilities in radical groups, which should have a positive relative effect for the other groups, in fact has a negative effect as well.

A critical assumption of both Walt and Waltz is that actors are rational, but the Syrian conflict is exceptionally dynamic with a large multitude of actors. The purpose of striking the Islamic State was not to benefit the Assad regime, but that was an unintended consequence. For each group, deciding whether to balance of bandwagon is exceptionally difficult because of a general lack of information, but they still attempt to form alliances, suggesting that Walt’s ideas are relevant.

Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants look specifically at the high degree of fragmentation in the Syrian conflict in an effort to understand when and why alliances form in civil wars. Instead of focusing on particular groups, they consider four broader sets of fighters—secular groups, Salafi groups, Muslim Brotherhood inspired groups, and “amorphous Islamists”—to get a greater understanding of the conflict. They limit their explanatory variables to goals, which for my purposes is similar to ideology, but focuses almost exclusively on what system would replace Assad, and access to resources. They also suggest that sponsorship by states and other actors outside of the conflict can seriously affect the resources of an organization.\(^{14}\) They find that groups with differing access to resources and similar goals are more likely to work together than groups with differing goals or same goals and same access to resources. The former because agreement on an ideological level creates a basic level of credibility that is often needed to start an alliance and the latter because two groups that are similar in every way will view the other as a competitor, not an ally.\(^ {15}\)

\(^ {15}\) Ibid.
McCants and Ostovar draw attention to Seden Akcinaroglu’s piece discussing the best way for rebels to win a civil war. He suggests that a situation with many rebel groups is actually preferable to a single unified group because it increases the number of autonomous groups the regime must take down in order to win. These groups, however, must be allied together otherwise they will not able to realize a resistance capable of defeating the regime.16 His formulation is an excellent explanation for the length and destruction of the Syrian civil war and could help explain why the first formulation of the rebellion was many brigades loosely linked through the FSA. It is possible that the FSA’s inability to create a high degree of cooperation and quick overthrow of Assad is what led to many of these groups abandoning the central command and begin fighting each other and that this in turn is why the Syrian opposition cannot overthrow Assad.

Fjelde and Nilsson performed a numerical study concerning interrebel violence in civil wars between 1989 and 2007. Their goal was to identify the types of civil wars that would increase the risk of the rebel factions fighting each other rather than the government. Through a statistical analysis, they show that groups are more likely to fight when resources are scarce and easily “lootable,” when groups hold large areas of land away from government control, when there is considerable asymmetry in the strength of different groups, and when the state is especially weak.17 The Syrian conflict could easily be used to prove their argument, as it suffers from all of these factors and does have a large amount of fighting between non-state actors. There is, however, considerable cooperation at times as well, which their piece fails to predict. In

addition, their piece is only meant to identify which conflicts are likely to exhibit interrebels conflicts, not specifically which groups will fight each other.

Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, Kristin Bakke, and Lee Seymour also perform a large N study on conflict between non-state actors, but they look solely at ethnic separatist movements. They primarily look at the number of groups and how that relates to the amount of violence against the state and against other groups. They find a positive correlation, but note that other aspects of the conflict could be causing both increased fractionalization and interrebels violence. Their work is useful to this thesis because they consider what dynamics between groups will cause violence, but their limited scope of separatist movements and their lack of consideration for explanations other than total number of factions leaves considerable room to expand on their original findings.

Bapat and Bond consider the other side of the spectrum by focusing on alliances instead of hostilities. Using equation based models, they argue that when two rebel groups have equal power, they will be more likely to defect from each other under a strong government because the government would offer better concessions to one in exchange for betraying the other. Note that this is the exact opposite of what is predicted by Fjelde and Nilsson. They also consider the situation when there is an asymmetry of power between two groups. They argue that trust concerns will always prevent an alliance from forming unless an external state sponsor guarantees the relationship through continued support and the promise of punishment should either group defect. In such a case, the two groups would remain allied against a strong government. Their argument is useful for this paper in that it gives a starting point for engaging with alliances between violent non-state actors in civil wars, but, like Fjelde and Nilsson, they

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fail to give more than a brief side note to issues such as group ideology, methodology, longevity, and goals, and they use a quantitative study over an in depth qualitative study.

Although they focus on terrorist organizations as opposed to factions fighting in a civil war, Michael Horowitz and Philip Potter have developed a dynamic explanation for non-state violent actor alignment based on the strengths and allies of other groups. Working from the basic premise that every group will want to ally with a stronger group that shares similar goals, which is also applicable for militant groups in Syria, stronger groups will have fewer alliances, but they will all be with equally significant actors. Such groups are at the center of a network, which branches outwards to weaker groups that form many alliances with similarly weak groups.19 This poses many interesting questions for the work set forth in the essay. How does one consider an alliance of smaller groups that, using its greater strength, then allies with stronger groups, as in the case of the Islamic Front? Also, how do conflicts enter into this formulation? Can there be hostilities within networks or does conflict necessitate showing two different networks?

Most of this literature is meant to serve the broader purpose of predicting when conflict will occur in an intrastate conflict, but not specifically which groups it will be between which this paper proposes to do. While this will present challenges when utilizing the work to date, it reveals a notable gap in the current literature that this paper could help to fill. This thesis will put forth a number of hypotheses based on the above literature that might explain alliance or conflict behavior between groups. After analyzing each of the case studies, it will check each hypothesis against them in an effort to determine their veracity. Finally, the conclusion will determine which hypotheses are overall the strongest.

Hypotheses

There are a number of hypotheses that arise from the above literature. First, the amount of balancing could be directly dependent upon the number of factions at any one time during the conflict. If we account for arguments, such as Cunningham et all, which focus on ethnic ties, it should also be tested whether more factions from a particular ethnicity will translate into more intra- or inter-ethnic balancing. Another hypothesis is that the amount of fighting will be directly related to the asymmetry of power or lack thereof between primary groups in the conflict. Geography and what Walt calls “proximate power” will need to be tested. Finally, factors such as backing or attack by external states and groups should also be considered. It is possible that groups with a shared sponsor or a shared enemy beyond the Assad regime are more likely to join together than balance.

The balance of threat hypothesis expects that organizations will balance or bandwagon in whatever way they believe will most likely protect their security and thus existence. It is important to note that the lack of an equivalent to the international organization or powerful, arbitrating states to insure agreements and alliances makes it easier for aggression to be rewarded. Alliances should be rarer in such a situation, meaning that balancing or bandwagoning correctly is even more critical for the groups that can create an alliance. For the purpose of clarity, what Walt calls proximate power, will be analyzed separately as the geographic hypothesis. Also, in a civil war, almost all aggregate power can be channeled into offensive capabilities. Even economic resources can be quickly transformed into weapons through the use of the black market. Because of this, the other three parts of Walt’s theory will be considered together.

A Complete List of Hypotheses to test:
Balance of Threat: Factions will ally together if they feel their security is guaranteed. They will fight when they feel their security threatened by another group.
Identity: Groups will ally according to their ethnic, cultural or religious groupings. Especially for Islamist groups, the degree of fundamentalism may have an effect.
Geographic: Groups will ally with groups in other regions and fight those in their own region. A lack of government control will increase conflict.
Outside Actors: Groups targeted by the same outside actor either for aid or destruction might be more likely to ally than balance each other.
Size: Groups of a similar size will balance each other, but strong groups will ally with weak groups.
Number of Groups: Alliances will only be stable with a set number of groups.

An additional hypothesis, concerning the methods and tactics of the groups was originally included in this paper. The logic behind this explanation was that groups with similar field tactics would ally together and those with different tactics would have trouble working together or fall into conflict. The clearest example of this is if a group ruled civilians through fear (harsh laws, public beheadings, unlawful imprisonment, etc.) and another group focused on providing public goods (food, jobs, medicine), then these two ways of operating would come into conflict with each other.

This explanation was abandoned for a few reasons. First, guerilla and terror tactics have been disproportionately relied on by most of the groups operating in the Damascus and Latakia areas because of the high degree of government control there. Groups in such regions cannot form organized militias and must rely on smaller cells to reduce the chances of getting caught. Additionally, because of the power of the Assad regime in Damascus, gaining and holding ground is impossible, which means insurgents must rely on hiding instead of defenses. In other areas of the country, it is easier for groups to organize and form military-like hierarchies. This has been the primary trend in Idleb and specifically Aleppo.20 In short, the tactics any group adopts may in fact be dependent more on the geographic location they find themselves in than an

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independent variable on its own. Additionally, there is limited data available concerning the tactics and methods of each group in Syria. In some cases it would be necessary to generalize from one or two specific news reports, which might not give an accurate picture of how the groups operates.

Case Studies

The first case study consists of a set of three alliances that have taken place since the beginning of the conflict: The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), the Islamic Alliance (IA), and the Islamic Front (IF, occasionally called the new Islamic Front to differentiate it from the earlier alliance). These three alliances existed at different points in the conflict and each lasted for a different amount of time. The SIF existed for a year, while the IA took no cohesive actions after the original statement. The IF is still around today, over a year after its inception, but it is considerably weaker than it has been in the past. These three cases are good to compare to each other because they show considerable variation across all of the hypotheses. The hostilities that broke out between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS will also be considered. It would be easier to single out a single hypothesis for testing if two alliances could be found with everything else in common, but given the nature of the conflict, this is unrealistic because of interconnected nature of the organizations and the severely limited information that academics and even states have access to at this time.

Chapter 3: Three Alliances: The Syrian Islamic Front, The Islamic Alliance, and The Islamic Front
The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)

The SIF is the earliest of the three organizations starting in December 2012. It survived for almost a year, but ended when a number of the groups unified together into two larger groups and many of those remaining joined the new Islamic Front, rendering the SIF unimportant. The alliance slowly dissolved after that.21 Those that did not unite allied again under the new Islamic Front. It was originally formed from Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, Jaish al-Tawhid—which were the three biggest groups each with at least 8,000 fighters—, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya, Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir, and four smaller factions in and around Damascus, including Kataeb Suqour al-Islam, Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila, Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa, and Katibat Hamza bin Abdulmuttaleb. These groups, as discussed in the table below were from a broad range of regions and varied considerably in size. While most of the bigger groups had a presence in or around Aleppo, the alliance was considerably dispersed geographically. In addition to the Damascus groups, there were groups from Homs, Latakia, and Deir al-Zor.22

A month after its founding, the SIF released a charter which defined it as a Salafi group seeking a state governed by sharia law, but they made comments suggesting toleration for minorities and a turn towards more modern political practices. The SIF did, as early as January 2013 work alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, but its official statements have always portrayed it as more moderate than the radical Salafi groups.23

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Hasler

During the year the SIF existed, there was not a large shift in Assad's power that can explain its rise or fall, but there is another way to apply a realist explanation here. First, shortly before its creation, two other organizations were announced. The Syrian Liberation Front was announced in September 2012. This organization was approached by some of the groups that formed the SIF about joining together, but they were turned down. More importantly, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and the Syrian National Council (SNC) were formed in exile in Qatar in November, about a month before the SIF formally declared its existence.24 While the groups that would eventually form the SIF had been in negotiations for months, these exile organizations could have been seen as a threat to resources since they were secular and could negotiate easily with other nations.25 It is conceivable that such an occurrence would encourage the formation of an alliance within Syria to better facilitate aid from outside actors and provide a better way for others to get involved in the conflict.

Alliance Information about the SIF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Area of Fighting</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Unified into:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham</td>
<td>Nation</td>
<td>10,000-20,000</td>
<td>Harakat Ahrar al-Sham</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26 Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liwa al-Haqq</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Good est. unknown, probably 2,500-8,000</td>
<td>al-Islamiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya</td>
<td>Idleb countryside</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kataeb Ansar al-Sham</td>
<td>Northern Latakia and Idleb</td>
<td>2,500+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir</td>
<td>Aleppo countryside</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaish al-Tawhid</td>
<td>Deir al-Zor</td>
<td>10,000 based on their own claim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kataeb Suqour al-Islam</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table supports both the hypotheses about the number and size of the groups required to make a successful alliance. Eleven groups came together to form the SIF and most of them were fairly small with the exceptions of Jaish al-Tawhid and Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham. This supports the idea that one or two more powerful groups will unite with weaker groups elsewhere in the country to expand their operational space. The smaller groups ally with the bigger organization in a bandwagoning mentality in the hope that they will have access to greater resources, but they have to trust that the bigger group will not turn on them when they become unnecessary. In the case of the SIF, the smallest groups, which were located in Damascus, probably had less to fear from the rest of the alliance because the heavy presence of the Assad’s regime in the area meant that the larger, militia like groups could not operate there.
This information also backs up the geographic hypothesis because the most powerful
groups were all from relatively different areas. Anyone with over 2,500 members operated in a
different city if not a different province. The one exception here is that a disproportionate
number of groups are based in Damascus. As mentioned in the hypotheses section, most groups
around Damascus are forced to fight in smaller sells using guerilla and terrorist tactics. This is
likely why the alliance needed multiple groups from Damascus and why those groups can get
along. They do not hold territory to fight over and they are small enough that the resources one
organization gets from the alliance is unlikely to impact how much any of the others get.

Unlike the new Islamic Front, the SIF existed during a time period in the Syrian conflict
when there was relatively little interference by outside actors. The Assad regime and Hezbollah
were constant threats, but those have been givens throughout the conflict. There were no attacks
by other states and even the Islamic State had not become the threat it is currently considered to
be. Aron Lund argued while the SIF was still working that it would eventually fail if the aid did
not come from Western, secular sources because it was too moderate a force to successfully
compete for gulf funds.\(^{27}\) While it is possible that this led to a number of groups consolidating
their resources by unifying, the fact that most of the groups involved in the SIF joined the
Islamic Front not too long after suggests that relatively moderate alliances in general were
possible leading up to and after the SIF’s demise. This is compounded by the fact that many of
the groups unified together into the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya and Kataeb Hamza bin
Abdelmuttaleb groups, which, while Islamic, are not as radical as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

Of the hypotheses outlined above, it would seem that all work on some level with the SIF
except for the influence of outside actors. The number of groups, their geography, and their size
are exactly what would be expected. They also have similar identities and had realist reasons for

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
coming together in an alliance. It is possible that the fact that all of the hypotheses are true for the SIF except for one explains why many of the groups unified together. Considering that some of the groups that did not unify allied again in 2013 under the new Islamic Front, it is probable that the SIF did not fail as an alliance, but was successful enough to encourage further unifications and alliances, which necessitated the end of the SIF. This would explain the two unifications and the fact that none of these groups became hostile to one another, they simply joined larger alliances. Perhaps the large scale fracturing of the resistance can lead to a reunification if this type of occurrence is repeated.

**Islamic Alliance (a.k.a. Islamic Coalition)**

The Islamic Alliance or Coalition was founded through a statement released on September 24th, 2013 and was signed by Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Suquor al-Sham, Liwa al-Islam, Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya, Harakat al-Noor al-Islamiya, Kata’ib Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Ansar, Tajam’u Fastaqm Kamr Umrat, and Al-Forqat al-Tisa’a ‘Ashr. As with the Syrian Islamic Front, most of these groups were centered around Aleppo with a few notable representatives from other parts of the country. They varied in size and degree of Islamism, but mostly shared a similar ideology. The most radical was Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Two more southern groups were present for the creation of the group, but did not sign the statement.  

The Islamic Alliance is an important case because many alliances are considered and then rejected without ever becoming public. Such non-cases are exceptionally hard to know about and use in studies even though they often represent an important set of cases. The IA provides the

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closest thing possible to a non case and understanding why it failed might say more about what leads to an alliances succeeding or failing than studying the successful ones ever could.

The founding statement of the IA specifically rejected the leadership of the Syrian National Coalition and all groups outside of Syria that claim to represent the rebels fighting inside the country. A top official of the SNC, Anas al-Abdeh, responded shortly after the statements release criticizing the timing of the announcement and the effect it would have on SNC efforts to talk to the United Nations. 29 Given that the SNC had been scheduled to visit the UN for a while, it is possible that this was a desired effect and not just unfortunate timing. 30 A spokesman for the Liwa al-Tawhid brigade, which released the statement, suggested that there was more coming, but as nothing ever did. The Islamic Front was founded two months later and included a number of the same groups as the IA, as detailed below. 31 These events suggest that the groups may have been engaging in a spoiling tactic to damage the SNC’s ability to gain support at the United Nations. While for the rebellion as a whole it might have been counterproductive to do so, it was not for the individual groups since all of them have designs on replacing the Assad regime and a legitimate government in exile threatens that. If this was the primary motivation for the alliance, it would explain why it fell apart so quickly.

Another reason it may have fallen apart is that, unlike the Islamic Front, which seems to be spearheaded by Ahrar al-Sham, the Islamic Alliance was also formed by Jabhat al-Nusra. It could be argued that the more extreme ideology of this group may have made cooperation with the other groups difficult, but Jabhat al-Nusra has shown a willingness to work with more

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30 Szybala, “The Islamic Alliance Emerges.”
moderate groups throughout the conflict, including the Syrian Islamic Front and the new Islamic Front. The more moderate groups may have been the cause of the problem if they thought working with Jabhat al-Nusra would hurt their chance of receiving international aid or make them the target of attacks. Additionally, there were multiple fairly large groups engaged with the alliance and all of them were in the Aleppo and Idleb area of Northwestern Syria. This supports the hypotheses regarding geography and group sizes which argue successful alliances require only one or two strong groups and many weak ones and that the groups generally need to be spread out geographically. The number of different groups involved, while on the large side, is similar to the number that formed the SIF, which suggests that the related hypothesis is incorrect. The information available suggests that many of the hypotheses would have predicted the failure of the Islamic Alliance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Area of Operation</th>
<th>Size (est.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jabhat al-Nusra</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>5,000-8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya</td>
<td>National, but especially Northeast</td>
<td>10,000-15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liwa al-Tawhid</td>
<td>Aleppo (strongest group in the area at time of IF)</td>
<td>8,000-10,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35 “Guide to the Syrian Rebels.”
The involvement of outside actors is the last hypothesis to be tested. It is supported by the fact that the groups that formed the IA most likely felt threatened by the SNC and wanted to spoil their negotiating possibilities at the UN. The involvement of Jabhat al-Nusra, however, means that the hypothesis about outside actors cannot hold here because, except for Assad, no state actors were putting the same pressure on all of the groups involved either in the form of aid or an attack.

Directly comparing the two also fails to account for anything the groups of the Islamic Front may have learned from the failure of the Islamic Alliance. The situation in Syria is continuously evolving and because these two groups did not exist at the same time, and had similar members, it is likely that some learned from their experience in the Islamic Alliance about how to create a more robust alliance. Along with understanding why one group failed and the other succeeded is the goal of predicting the likelihood of future groups to unify or fracture. If this is the case, it suggests that later groups will be even better a creating strong alliances. A strong argument against this is that the Syrian Civil War is almost half a decade old and no alliance has been strong enough to dominate the arena.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suquor al-Sham</td>
<td>Idleb</td>
<td>9,000-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liwa al-Islam</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harakat al-Noor al-Islamiya</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kata’ib Nour al-Din al-Zinki</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liwa al-Ansar</td>
<td>Aleppo and Idleb</td>
<td>Small-Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajam’u Fastaqm Kamr Umrat</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Forqat al-Tisa’a ‘Ashr</td>
<td>Area near Golan Heights</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In late November 2013, a new, smaller alliance was announced called the Islamic Front. The seven groups to come together under the IF were Suquor al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Jaysh al-Islam, Liwa al-Haqq, Ahrar al-Sham, Ansar al-Sham and the Kurdish Islamic Front. As mentioned above, Ahrar al-Sham, Ansar al-Sham, and al-Haqq were already allied under the SIF, but they had changed considerably in the year since they formed that organization in the fall of 2012. This alliance is still in existence today, but had decreased in power starting around the fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014. In late November 2014, the alliance announced it was part of the broader Revolutionary Command Council, but was still an independent organization as well.

The question of intent is the hardest to evaluate for the IF because three of the groups, Ahrar al-Sham, Suquor al-Sham, and Liwa al-Haqq were already united under the SIF. Because of this, it is possible that they didn’t need as much incentive to ally together again because they already knew they could trust each other. Additionally, the failure of the IA both provided a vacuum for a new alliance to be formed and provided for some of the groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, another failed alliance to learn from. This history and knowledge may have abated some of the realist risks of allying together.

Each of the groups involved in the IF are slightly different with regards to ideology and capabilities. Liwa al-Tawhid, for example, has been exceptionally powerful in Aleppo. While, like all the groups, it is Islamic and wishes to see an Islamic government replace Assad, it has been careful to remain on good terms with all of the other factions as well as the West. Suquor al-Sham was always Islamic, but it was part of the FSA and has been slowly intensifying in

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religiosity since it was founded.\textsuperscript{39} The Kurdish Islamic Front is relatively small and, at first glance, represents an important ethnic faction within Syria. They have, however, been at odds with more secular Kurdish groups and have even fought them at times.\textsuperscript{40} Overall, their ideologies are no more disparate than the groups that formed the earlier SIF.

The Islamic Front has not allied with any Western countries, but it has also been careful not to designate them an enemy. When it was announced, many argued that it was a strongly backed by Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, Turkey. This is because Jaysh al-Sham has been supported strongly by the Saudi Arabia, but some scholars suggest that the role these other states play has been exaggerated.\textsuperscript{41} They boycotted the Geneva II conference last January, citing the preconditions under which Assad agreed to take part and arguing that without Assad’s removal on the table, negotiations would get nowhere.\textsuperscript{42} This, however, was also before the Islamic State (IS) made considerable advances in Iraq during the summer of 2014.

In early September, IS carried out an attack on a meeting of the senior members of Ahrar al-Sham, killing 28.\textsuperscript{43} This level of hostility did not exist when the group formed last November. While it is unlikely the Islamic Front likes the idea of teaming up with the West, it being at odds with both IS and Assad, along with the fact that they have not openly threatened the United States, makes it at least worth consideration moving forward. The United States held off striking inside of Syria for a variety of reasons, but one easy one is that they have no group they can happily throw their support behind anymore. Understanding the Islamic Front might give the US the information it needs to make such a decision, especially given the presence of Kurdish elements.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Lund, “The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 3.”
in the Front, an ethnic group it has already begun to back. The difficulty of convincing the IF to ally with the West, however, probably remains the bigger obstacle to such a union. Now that it has joined the RCC, which could one day replace Assad, it is even more necessary that the IF is looked at as a possible partner. This situation is complicated by the fact that the U.S. targeted Ahrar al-Sham during the Coalition strikes on the Islamic State and a portion of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Khorosan group.\(^4^4\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group (^4^5)</th>
<th>Area of Operation</th>
<th>Size (est.) (^4^6), (^4^7)</th>
<th>Previously Under:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya</td>
<td>National, but especially Northeast</td>
<td>10,000-20,000 (now 10,000-15,000)</td>
<td>Syrian Islamic Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ansar al-Sham</td>
<td>Latakia</td>
<td>2,500+</td>
<td>Syrian Islamic Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liwa al-Haqq</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Good est. unknown, probably 2,500-8,000</td>
<td>Syrian Islamic Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurdish Islamic Front</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>&lt;1,000</td>
<td>Syrian Islamic Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaysh al-Islam</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>Syrian Islamic Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suqour al-Sham</td>
<td>Idleb</td>
<td>9,000-10,000, though possibly less since suffering</td>
<td>Syrian Islamic Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4^5\) Szybala, “A Power Move by Syria’s Rebel Forces.”
\(^4^6\) “Guide to the Syrian Rebels.”
\(^4^7\) “Profiles | Mapping Militant Organizations.”
The IF is notable in that it is smaller than the other two alliances considered in this paper and all of the groups except for Ansar al-Sham and the Kurdish Islamic Front are relatively large. The group seems to argue against the asymmetry of power hypothesis. It should be remembered, however, that three of the groups have a strong history of allying together. The specific details of how these seven groups came together is not available, but if they entered negotiations and the alliance as a block, this may have provided the same dynamic of a strong group united with weaker groups referred to in the literature. The groups do, however, easily conform the geography hypothesis. The seven groups cover most of the major Eastern cities, which are the major population centers of Syria. The most notable missing city in the organization is Deir ez-Zor in Western Syria, but given gains by Jabhat al-Nusra prior to the IF’s founding and the recent entrenchment of the Islamic State in the east of Syria, this is hardly surprising. The Islamic State makes it difficult for any other group to exist in that area and if any do, it would be nearly impossible to form ties with other groups in the east.

### Evaluation of Hypothesis for Alliances

**Balance of Threat:** Factions will ally together if they feel their security is guaranteed. They will fight when they feel their security threatened by another group.

Of all the explanations, this is the hardest to prove because of the limited amount of information available about how the groups interacted prior to allying together. Furthermore, the literature diverges about what conditions will provoke an alliance response. For example, Bapat

| Liwa al-Tawhid | Aleppo (strongest group in the area at time of IF formation) | 8,000-10,000 | Syrian Islamic Liberation Front |
and Bond are in outright disagreement with Fjelde and Nilsson about what affect a weak government will have over the opposition.

All of these alliances could be seen as balancing against the threat of the regime, but the difficulty with this observation is that the regime has been there throughout the conflict. In the early summer of 2013, Assad’s regime captures the town of al-Qusayr from rebels, which was viewed both within the country and internationally as a major victory of the regime and the possible beginning of a government victory.48 This may have helped trigger the formation of the short-lived Islamic Alliance and later the Islamic Front. It is also possible that these alliances were balancing against a different perceived threat. Two months before the SIF was announced, a large number of groups announced the unification as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces at meeting in Qatar, which included the Syrian National Council. This group was celebrated abroad, but was denounced within Syria by some of the more religious organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra.49 This could have resulted in a threat to religious groups, requiring that they balance against the secular unification. Similarly in July 2013 before the creation of the Islamic Alliance and new Islamic Front, the Syrian National Coalition Ahmed Jarba took over the coalition. Externally, this appeared to show the weakness of the exiled, Qatar based organization, but it could have been seen as a threat from within Syria.

Finally, the Islamic State separated from Jabhat al-Nusra in April 2013 and throughout the summer the relationship between ISIS and al-Qaeda deteriorated. ISIS then began moving into Syria as an independent group, appearing as a major power in the east of the country that

48 “Syria Profile.”
49 Ibid.
was even more powerful than Jabhat al-Nusra. 

This could have prompted the formation of the Islamic Alliance and it would explain why JAN was included in that organization. The short existence of that organization could have been due to an incompatible ideology explanation, which suggests identity can trump security for non-state actors or Jabhat al-Nusra with its negative international reputation and ties to al-Qaeda may have ultimately represented an unacceptable threat to the alliance. While there is no specific proof for this claim, Jabhat al-Nusra is a radical element that was not present in the other two alliances. If either holds, it would makes sense that the alliance failed and some of the actors came back together a few months later as the Islamic Front.

This explanation is also complicated by the other explanations, which often decrease the risk of allying together. Shared identity, which is common and different geographic locations can both make it easier to get over the initial distrust in an alliance. The SIF and IF were created in part to solidify resources among similar groups, which suggests that the hypothesis holds true even if it cannot be shown to be a direct cause. For the Islamic Alliance, it appears to be less about resources and more about responding to an external threat greater than the risk of releasing a shared statement. Since there was no integration beyond the statement, that risk appears to be fairly low.

Identity: Groups will ally according to their ethnic, cultural or religious groupings. Especially for Islamist groups, the degree of fundamentalism may have an effect.

This hypothesis has been proven by the above case studies with some notable exceptions which suggest a slight modification to the language. The IA, the shortest alliance had the greatest

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variance in ideology because of the inclusion of Jabhat al-Nusra. While there are more convincing reasons as to why it failed, it is likely that many of the groups did not want to pursue the alliance given the inclusion of such radical elements. Additionally, the IF included a Kurdish group, which suggests that shared culture and ethnicity are less important than ideology.

The inclusion of the Damascus groups in the Syrian Islamic Front is notable because they differed significantly in the types of methods they used. They were structured and acted much more like terrorist groups than militias. The geographic distance could have been why they were able to continued getting along well with the other groups, but it could also have been because the differing methods would not have caused a rift anyway. This is problematic given that one of the findings of the next case study is that one of the reasons ISIS has such a hard time finding allies is its reliance on more brutal methods to obtain and maintain control.

The question of whether an Islamist faith brought these groups together or not is inherently difficult in a context where all of the groups are either secular or Islamist and the former have been having hard time accessing funds and materials since the start of the conflict. 51 It would have been beneficial to obtain further information about the political leanings of each of the groups involved in three alliances, but that information is not available at this time. Given that the Assad regime is far from falling, it might be assumed that such differences such as the type of government specific groups feel should be put in place is a relatively minor concern compared to the immediate concerns of power and survival. Shared ideology and possibly religion are necessary but not sufficient for the formation of long-term alliances. Shared ethnicity, politics, and culture seem to be less important.

**Geographic:** Groups will ally with groups in other regions and fight those in their own region. A lack of government control will increase conflict.

This explanation was proven in every case. The SIF and the IF were both spread out over the whole nation. The only city to host more than three groups in the same alliance was Damascus during the SIF, and that, as explained above, was likely due to the stronger government presence, which necessitated smaller cells instead of strong militias. This, in turn, meant that each small group was incapable of holding ground and therefore did not feel threatened by the proximity of others.

In the IA, the groups were relatively concentrated. There was still variance, but, especially for the amount of groups involved, most were concentrated in and around Aleppo. This adds support to the theory that the founding of the IA was more about making a political statement to the Syrian National Council’s UN trip than anything else. If the goal was a message and not an alliance, it would make sense that the organizers would not bother communicating with many groups in other regions to make it happen. It would also have been easier to get groups from Aleppo to join if they already knew nothing would come of it and their security would not be at risk.

**Outside Actors:** Groups targeted by the same outside actor either for aid or destruction might be more likely to ally or balance each other.

Influence by outside actors was a contributing factor in every case. The SIF was formed shortly after the SNC was created as a government in exile, which had the effect of damaging the legitimacy of independent groups fighting within Syria. The IA may have been created solely as a spoiling tactic to damage the SNC’s negotiating power at the U.N. and the IF was created
shortly after Assad agreed to a deal concerning the removal of chemical weapons, which suggested an international recognition of and willingness to deal with his regime.\textsuperscript{52}

The IF has also been weakened over the last year by advances by the Islamic State, the Assad regime and Coalition bombings, some of which targeted Ahrar al-Sham. In September 2014, Ahrar al-Sham also lost the majority of its leadership after a precision attack by the Islamic State.\textsuperscript{53} Some, such as Aron Lund, have argued that these attacks would force the IF to disband, but the recent announcement placing IF under the new RCC appears to confirm that groups targeting by outside actors will band together.\textsuperscript{54}

It is also possible that these groups received aid from similar sources, but this aid would have been from clandestine sources such as Gulf States wishing to influence the outcome of the Syrian conflict quietly. Because of this, it is difficult to say with certainty whether this took place. The unofficial nature of this support, however, would have made it possible for individual groups to claim or deny support and have left no way for other groups to verify their claims. If all the groups in the alliance claimed one thing, the same cohesive force could have been present even if the support was not. Without specific information, which is unlikely to ever be available, it is impossible to substantiate this argument.

\textit{Size: Groups of a similar size will fight each other, but strong groups will ally with weak groups.}

The case studies suggest that this hypothesis, which argues for an asymmetry of power between the groups in any alliance, is correct but cannot be proven. It is certainly the case in the SIF, which is considered to be a success, and not the case for the IA, which failed immediately, but the IF throws it into doubt. Looking only at the relative sizes of the seven groups involved,

\textsuperscript{52} “Syria Profile.”
\textsuperscript{53} “BBC News - Syria Conflict: Blast Kills Leader of Ahrar Al-Sham Rebels.”
\textsuperscript{54} Lund, “Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 6.”
they all appear similar, but if you consider that the three groups previously allied under the SIF came in to the negotiations as an allied block, it is conceivable that such an asymmetric dynamic does exist between the groups.

**Number of Groups:** Alliances will only be stable with a set number of groups.

The above cases appear to disprove this hypothesis. The SIF had eleven groups as did the IA and they had significantly different outcomes. The IF had seven groups and it has lasted longer than either of the others. If it were retested with a larger number of groups that showed greater variety it might have different results. It is notable, however, that four of the groups in the SIF were much smaller (the ones based in Damascus). Counting those as a single group could make sense since they were not in direct competition, but did share the same geographic area. Together, they would have had a similar amount of power as the medium sized groups in the alliance. In such a case, the IF and the SIF appear to have similar numbers and the IA appears to have considerably more. It would validate the hypothesis, but this type ad hoc modification of the numbers to fit the hypothesis is difficult to apply on a larger scale or in different conflicts. It seems plausible here, but requires too much manipulation to be said to prove the hypothesis.

The other problem with declaring this hypothesis to be true or false is that the structure of these groups is often ambiguous. In some cases, a group might in fact be a cohesive whole, but in other situations it might be a “unified” organization only in name and in reality made up of many smaller brigades. In such cases, it is difficult to say with certainty what their representation in the alliance would have been like and, as such, what that says about this hypothesis.

**Case Conclusions**
The three organizations suggest that balance of threat theory was a serious determinate in each. There were events and stronger organizations that the groups were balancing against in allying together. Similarly, geography, which factors into Walt’s argument as proximate power, was also a strong factor in the success of these alliances. The SIF and the IF were geographically disparate and they survived for at least a year, whereas the IA was concentrated in the northeast of the country and failed immediately. Identity also was confirmed: the IA, containing the more radical Jabhat al-Nusra, failed immediately. Given that each of these were Islamic, however, this is not the strongest case study for this hypothesis. Finally, hypotheses about the size and relative power of the groups were difficult to prove either way.

Chapter 4: An Alliance Falls Apart: Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State

Until the late spring of 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) was suspected of having strong ties to al-Qaeda and of possibly being a direct affiliate, but nothing had been officially stated or proven. On April 9th, 2013, a statement was released by the head of the Islamic State, then called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), claiming that JAN had in fact been created under the authority of ISI to be the new arm of al-Qaeda in Syria. The statement went farther, attempting to subsume JAN into ISI and create the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The following day, JAN released a statement rejecting the authority of Baghdadi to unify (or possibly re-unify) the two

The phenomenon of one group creating another does not have an equivalent on the state level. While states can help create other states, it is difficult to have one state begin within another with the full support of the original and then break off. Nationalist movements rarely have the support of the parent country and governments set up for colonies are also a bad parallel because the parent country is expanding and creating the government elsewhere. Therefore, one group creating another does not fit well with Walt’s balance of threat theory. However, a new and smaller JAN could be compared to a weak state bandwagoning with a larger power, ISIS, as it has little other choice. JAN then grew inside Syria until reaching a point where it could make an independent decision to balance or bandwagon and ISIS was forced to take more direct steps to keep control over it.

As a result, a schism appeared between the two groups that almost immediately became violent and has remained so ever since. While this event was clearly the catalyst that began the conflict, violence has continued between the two groups for the past two years, which suggests that other factors are at work as well. After the split, the head of al-Qaeda, Aymenn al-Zawahiri, asked for peace between the two groups and, even though both sides worked under Zawahiri at that time, it never happened. To complicate matters further, al-Qaeda central, headed by Zawahiri, sided with JAN against ISIS, which eventually led to ISIS rejecting al-Qaeda and declaring its independence. Additionally, both groups, but especially JAN, have suffered numerous defections to the other side as individual fighters attempt to reconcile their own views

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and chances of success with those of the greater organizations. This case study will serve as a test for why two groups, which are seemingly alike in identity and had many other organizations calling for peace between them when hostilities first broke out have remained in conflict for the last two years.

This presents an interesting case study because at first glance the two groups appear to share a similar ideological background, which appears to disprove the hypothesis that ideologically similar groups will work together. Similarly, both groups at the beginning of summer 2013 were exceptionally geographically diverse and were targeted and helped respectively by the same type of states and groups, which also suggests that they should have worked together. Of the remaining hypotheses, size and number of groups in an alliance also predict that they should work together since, relative to other groups in the Syria, they were massive, and both were already a part of the al-Qaeda franchise. The only remaining hypothesis would appear to be the one pertaining to a realist notion of balance of power, but it is not clear that either group had much to risk by working together, especially as they had been successfully working together since January 2012.

There are, however, nuances in these hypotheses to be considered. A thorough examination of the backgrounds of both organizations and the subtle differences between them will reveal that a number of the hypotheses are in fact true in this case. Specifically, the groups differ quite a bit in their ideology, which has led to different perceptions of the two organizations internationally since they originally split. Surprisingly, the al-Qaeda linked organization has become more popular because of the methods and tactics that it adopted, which included providing public goods and denouncing the violent killings of the Islamic State. This chapter will

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proceed by outlining the backgrounds of JAN and ISIS. It will then consider the initial rift between the two groups and the hostility that has set in since then. Finally, it will test the hypotheses to determine which fit best with this case study.

The Background of Jabhat al-Nusra

Interviews with fighters, as well as statements released by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the current head of the Islamic State, and Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the head of JAN, suggest that JAN was originally formed in July 2011. Their first credited attack, however, did not occur until January 2012 when they perpetrated a car bombing in Damascus. A report by the Quilliam Foundation only traces the organization back to October 2011, but claims that the first meetings had five objectives:

1. to establish a group including many existing jihadists, linking them together into one coherent entity
2. to reinforce and strengthen the consciousness of the Islamist nature of the conflict
3. to build military capacity for the group, seizing opportunities to collect weapons and train recruits, and to create safe havens by controlling physical places upon which to exercise their power.
4. to create an Islamist state in Syria
5. to establish a ‘Caliphate’ in Bilad al-Sham (the Levant)

When Jabhat al-Nusra began, it shared many goals with the current ISIS. It wanted to create a Caliphate that would link all jihadis together and create a “safe haven.” It might at first appear puzzling that this type of rhetoric did not affect the same type of widespread balancing that has

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appeared to happen against the Islamic State, but it is important to remember that JAN started out with a series of car bombings in Damascus while the Islamic State has been around for a decade and launched its Caliphate with a takeover of Iraq’s second largest city.62 This report also notes that part of JAN’s ideology centers around the Levant’s position in a number of key prophecies, including one that claims “the camp of Muslims on Judgment Day would be in Damascus.”63 The translation of the full name is: The Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad. It has occasionally also been translated as the Victory Front.64

Prior to the split, JAN was a well-organized group. It had a Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) that was responsible for all religious issues and an al-qadi al-a’am (Grand Mufti), who was believed to be Abu Musab al-Qahtani. JAN’s operations were split into two categories. Amniya (security) operations generally took place in Damascus and askariya (military) actions took place in other locations.65 Recruits had to be recommended by two field commanders and then fight on the front lines long enough to prove their dedication and loyalty. They were then required to swear a bay’a (religiously binding oath) to their commander. This is different from many other groups that recruit hundreds that may or may not stay and work with the group. Some JAN brigades were formed based on nationality to make operating easier. Seraya al-Tuaanisa, for example, had solely Tunisian fighters.66 Since its rise to prominence, some groups,

63 Benotman, Quilliam Foundation, and Blake, Jabhat Al-Nusra a Strategic Briefing.
65 Benotman, Quilliam Foundation, and Blake, Jabhat Al-Nusra a Strategic Briefing.
66 Ibid.
especially in Aleppo, claimed to be part of JAN without actually being involved. JAN’s media wing is al-Manarah al-Bayda or The White Minaret. This name was mostly likely chosen based on hadith #7015, which claims that Jesus will appear at the White Minaret. The existence of a separate media branch separates the group from others operating in Syria in a number of key ways. They are clearly worried about how they are perceived. Additionally, the creation of a media branch is a trait of all al-Qaeda franchises. Since the schism, it is likely that much of this organization has been discarded as JAN has lost many fighters to the Islamic State, making such tight control over who can and cannot join the organization difficult.

JAN’s significant internal bureaucracy, as well as the one developed by the Islamic State, make these two groups much more like actually states than some of the smaller groups considered earlier in this thesis. This suggests that theories, such as Walt’s, specifically concerning states should be much more applicable to such groups, so long as the internal bureaucracy mirrors that of an actual state.

While JAN successes have always been around Damascus and Aleppo, they were strongest in the east of the country prior to ISIS invading. On their way to Iraq to fight against the American occupation, many fighters had travelled through Deir ez-Zour. A report by Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake of the Quilliam Foundation states that many of JAN’s fighters, including Golani himself, are veterans of the Iraq conflict and that JAN had always received fighters, money and weapons from ISI. As the Syrian conflict grew in magnitude, it is speculated that fighters and material aid flowed the opposite direction using the same networks.

69 Benotman, Quilliam Foundation, and Blake, Jabhat Al-Nusra a Strategic Briefing.
ISIS, however, pushed into that region during the Fall of 2014, which has forced JAN to refocus most of its operations on Aleppo. Deir ez-Zour, once home to some of JAN’s top leaders is now one of the major population centers claimed by the Islamic State.\(^{70}\)\(^{71}\)

In July 2014, audio was leaked suggesting that JAN was looking into founding its own emirate, similar to the way ISIS had declared its own caliphate a few months prior. The idea immediately drew fire from many other groups in Syria as being too radical and similar to what ISIS did when declaring a caliphate.\(^{72}\) Al-Qaeda has always had establishing a global Caliphate as one of its goals and JAN’s role in that would be to pursue a local emirate that would be a part of that Caliphate. These respective goals, however, are for the future and more immediate concerns tend to take precedence. JAN does not appear to be announcing an emirate to rival ISIS yet, but it will likely be in the future should JAN gain power.\(^{73}\) The leak was then confirmed by Golani himself, but an emirate has yet to be established.\(^{74}\)

In early February 2015, rumors surfaced that JAN might be seeking to leave al-Qaeda just as ISIS did, but little about it is known.\(^{75}\) This could change multiple aspects of the relationships between the two groups. It could make it easier for other organizations and outside actors to work with JAN, which would present a greater threat to ISIS, but it could also lead to the two reconciling, which currently would be difficult without ISIS rejoining al-Qaeda.


\(^{71}\) O’Bagy and Institute for the Study of War (Washington, \textit{Jihad in Syria}.


day released by The White Minaret argued against it, suggesting that Golani had created the group himself.\textsuperscript{82} This was followed in May when a response from Ayman al-Zawahiri surfaced reprimanding both commanders and ordering that the two organizations remain separate. In addition, Zawahiri’s letter ordered the Shura Councils of both groups to submit a progress report in a year that would determine if the two men remained as the leaders of their respective organizations.\textsuperscript{83} This letter, however, was not released through the regular al-Qaeda channels. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi speculates that this could simply be because Zawahiri wanted the situation dealt with quietly away from the media.\textsuperscript{84}

On June 14, 2013, another unofficial communication was released, this time by Baghdadi, questioning the authenticity of Zawahiri’s letter and claiming that it had “several Sharia and method-based issues,” such as respecting the borders of the Sykes-Picot agreement. This was followed by an official message by Abu Muhammed al-‘Adnani, ISI’s spokesman identifying himself now as ISIS’s spokesman, labeling JAN as defectors and arguing that Baghdadi’s original statement had been an effort to keep JAN under control.\textsuperscript{85}

This argument led to a considerable amount of confusion on the ground and in jihadi forums. Some stated that both groups should be supported regardless of the dispute.\textsuperscript{86} As it has


\textsuperscript{85} Katz and Raisman, “Special Report on the Power Struggle Between Al-Qaeda Branches and Leadership.”

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
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become clear that the two groups are distinct and not joining back together, this confusion has abated.

Since the original dispute between the two organizations, the situation on the ground has changed dramatically in different locations while staying the same in others according to a series of postings on jihadology.net by Al-Tamimi. In Raqqa governate, ISIS and JAN appeared to be working very closely and protests where both flags were visible suggested that to many the two names are merely synonyms of one another. Since then, however, ISIS has taken over the area completely and has fashioned it into a sort of capital for the Islamic State. Most other organizations, including JAN, were forced to retreat from the area. In Aleppo, ISIS and JAN are noticeably separate groups. They carry out and publicize different operations. While they generally will work together, minor issues have broken out, such as the distribution of bread.

The Dera’a governate would appear to be a special case as there is absolutely no ISIS influence in the area. This may be because JAN forces in the region have always had a high degree of autonomy from the rest of the organizations, including their own media outlet. Al-Tamimi suggests this may be because of the region’s proximity to the Golan Heights, a region that could be Golani’s home. The region is also geographically the farthest from the Islamic

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89 “Musings of an Iraqi Brasenostril on Jihad.”
State’s center of power, but much closer to the areas in the east that JAN has been able to maintain control over.91

These observations about changes based on geography suggest that the proximate power dimension of Walt’s theory could be a deciding factor. The places where the organizations get on better are areas that are not as valuable and are farther away from both groups centers of power. It suggests that regional branches of each organization are allowed to make decisions for themselves and that they have the capability to do so. This is different from a state-based situation where states act as unitary actors and it introduces a new level of complexity. It is surprising that the default when there is not as much at stake seems to be cooperation. This might be because of the generally trend toward balancing that facing off against the Assad regime should cause throughout Syria.

Evaluation of Hypotheses

*Balance of Threat: Factions will ally together if they feel their security is guaranteed. They will fight when they feel their security threatened by another group.*

This case study is a strong example for the power hypothesis. The violence between the two groups directly followed a failed attempt from one group, ISIS, to subsume the other. While it was initially done in a relatively cordial statement as opposed to a hostile takeover, the threat to JAN’s existence could not have been more explicit. ISIS moved into many areas where JAN had a considerable presence, most notably Raqqa, and began to push them out. The many announcements meant that many individuals were unclear about what to do and which group to

91 This section is based on research I originally did in the Summer of 2013 for Professor Barak Mendelsohn on the origins of ISIS and JAN and the schism between them, which was then very recent.
report to. Since JAN was the only one with fighters in Syria prior to the announcement, this meant that JAN suffered many defections to ISIS while almost none happened in the reverse.

To compound the issue, fighters on the ground were thrown into disarray because they did not know which organization they were working for and who they were taking orders from. This further threatened the security of both groups, forcing each to more aggressive in their attempts to retain fighters, territory, and supplies.

This is a unique case because of Walt's four components of threat, the two that are the most applicable are offensive intentions and proximate power. The actual aggregate and offensive powers of these groups did not change except in that the power they did had suddenly became threatening to the other group. What is notable, however, is that the two groups appear to have worked together well right up until the statement by Baghdadi. There was no indication that JAN felt threatened by ISIS, perhaps because it thought the protection of Zawahiri and core al-Qaeda, combined with the geographic separation of the two groups would be sufficient. JAN started while the Islamic State was already established, meaning that it was created within ISI's equivalent of a sphere of influence. ISIS also did not appear to be preparing for the split in any significant way. This suggests that the statement from ISIS was not intended to have the reaction it did. The Islamic State likely saw the announcement as formalizing an already existing hierarchy, but JAN saw it as a grab for more power. As the pieces by al-Tamimi suggest, following the statement, there were areas where the division between the two groups was almost unnoticeable and other places still where JAN maintained complete control. It is clear that ISIS did not expect JAN to fight the unification declaration and were ill equipped for a hostile takeover of the other group. ISIS may not have characterized its original intentions as hostile towards JAN, but that is the way that they were taken.
Proximate power changed considerably because the two groups had begun in entirely separate states, but the Islamic State’s announcement suddenly made ISIS a threat to all of JAN’s territories. The geographic variance, however, supports a realist approach because in every region the threat posed by each group might have been different whereas the identity behind the organizations is less likely to differ. Identity and other factors did not change from region to region, but the threat that the other group posed did. Material factors differed, but so did the effect of ISIS attempting a takeover of JAN. In southern Syria, for example, where JAN forces were used to working under the directions of a geographically distant command, the switch meant less than in Aleppo and Raqqa where the change would have immediate effects.

**Identity:** Groups will ally according to their ethnic, cultural or religious groupings. Especially for Islamist groups, the degree of fundamentalism may have an effect.

Both groups are adhere to extreme Islamic ideals. They both have religious councils to help guide their decisions and they both want to see a caliphate one day in control, but there are some key differences. First, JAN seems to be willing to make certain ideological compromises when necessary to advance its material needs. They have even gone as far as to sign deals such as the Islamic Alliance discussed in the previous chapter, which was a political move that ISIS is unlikely to have ever undertaken.

It is also worthwhile to consider the different types of organizations each has attempted to found. ISIS called for a caliphate, which, in theory, was meant to give them authority over all Muslims and, by extension, the other Islamic groups fighting in Syria. JAN, however, called for an emirate. While it does not appear to have come about as successfully as ISIS’s caliphate, the emirate would, have only given the group authority over the geographic areas it already
controlled. Because of this limitation, it presented a much lesser threat to other organizations fighting in Syria, but still showed a considerable amount of defiance towards the Islamic State.

Walt argues that religious ideologies that require a single leader can often drive groups apart. ISIS has maintained that stance, making it what he calls "unalterably aggressive" and impossible to bandwagon with. JAN’s ability to compromise, however, means that many groups can balance with it against ISIS.

The two groups are implementing two different strategies. ISIS is attempting to gather as many followers as possible under its direct control by making grand claims and subsuming entire regions. While they cannot back them up fully, they do have control over enough territory to appear legitimate to fighters coming from other areas of the world. This strategy does not allow for alliances because part of the propaganda and missions is that ISIS should eventually control whatever a potential ally does anyway. Any groups that do work with ISIS have to accept it as the leader, not an equal. Meanwhile, JAN’s strategy is to increase its influence over other groups in Syria without directly controlling them. While they have been able to work with many more groups in an informal way that ISIS is incapable of, they have failed to enter into grander agreements such as the Islamic Alliance. What is remarkable is that ISIS appears to have been more successful in the short term in building up numbers, power, and land, but JAN likely has more staying power because its willingness to work with others makes it possible for it to one day take part in a united overthrow of Assad and the formation of whatever government might come after that. This would, however, require it to successfully take part in a formal alliance.

Their methods also differ. While JAN has set up a few legal courts, their primary interaction with civilian populations has been to ignore them or, in locations where they control
is more consolidated, provide some public goods.\textsuperscript{92} ISIS, however, has preferred implementing a strict interpretation of sharia, which includes removing hands for thievery, and hanging for a number of other offenses. They have also shown a willingness to arm children and make minorities into slaves as they did with the Yazidis.\textsuperscript{93} ISIS has set up some public goods as well in the areas they control, but their harsh punishments and rampant civil rights abuses are in stark contrast to even JAN.

Thus, the identity argument here is inconclusive. The two share many ideological elements, but are still hostile to one another. They do have different methods, but it is difficult to argue that methods have the same repulsive power as differing ideologies.

\textbf{Geographic:} Groups will ally with groups in other regions and fight those in their own region. A lack of government control will increase conflict.

This is a perfect case to evaluate this hypothesis because the nature of the territorial arrangement changed with Baghdadi’s statement. Prior to it, there was an ISIS presence in Syria, but the two groups were mostly separated into the different countries. After it, everywhere JAN operated became a contested area. If this understanding of the situation is accepted, then this explanation works for this case. Baghdadi’s expansion of his group to all of Syria was a permanent change to the situation, after which there has been continued conflict between the two groups as the Islamic State pushes westward. In Walt’s terms, ISIS’s expansion heightened the proximate threat it posed because suddenly the two organizations were competing for the same


territory. The Islamic State’s expansion did lead to it acquiring further material resources, which increased its aggregate power as well and the attempt to subsume JAN denoted a clear increase in offensive intentions, but there was a considerable geographic nature to the threat.

What makes this case even more valuable to this explanation is that during the summer of 2013, JAN found itself threatened in almost all of its controlled territories, with the possible exception of the Dera’a governorate. ISIS, however, was not threatened by JAN in the same way. In Syria, it could only improve its situation, and JAN did not have the operational capability to expand there. JAN and al-Qaeda were more hostile towards ISIS in those beginning months than ISIS was to JAN, suggesting that there was a significant difference in threat perception. There were many statements released demanding that ISIS return to focusing on Iraq, but neither Zawahiri nor Golani had the ability to force the Islamic State out of Syria.94

Though it is impossible to determine what would have happened in such circumstances, it is worth considering how each group might have acted differently if JAN had the ability to rapidly expand into Iraq and more effectively control its territory in Syria. This is notable because this is the only case where an actor, ISIS, controls an area of land, Iraq that is not at the very least a long term goal for every other group in the equation. The other organizations studied in this thesis all are confined to Syria and do not have ambitions beyond that. At most, they might hope to come out as the leader of whatever government might replace Assad. Had ISIS had faced a potential threat in JAN territorially, it might never have tried to merge the territories and thus need to compete for land. This case and the extended hypothetical supports the geography hypothesis.

94 Zawahiri, "Zawahiri Reportedly Sets Dispute Between ISI, Al-Nusra Front | Jihadist News | Articles."
Outside Actors: Groups targeted by the same outside actor either for aid or destruction might be more likely to ally or balance each other.

Both organizations have received substantial support from al-Qaeda since the conflict began, which has necessitated that they also support the organization and its goals. Despite this, neither has ever been incredibly concerned with attacking Western countries. In fact, it was only after ISIS split from its parent organization that it began to orchestrate plots and focus on recruiting in the west. JAN has never done any of these things. It is notable that when ISIS split from al-Qaeda, there was considerable uncertainty concerning what the other franchises would do.\(^5\)

As noted in the identity section, the methods of the two groups differ considerably and part of the reason for this might be that JAN is attempting to curry favor, or at least avoid the wrath, of the western coalition. Both groups have been heavily influenced by states and international organizations. ISIS’s seizure of Mosul and attempt to take Baghdad led to coalition bombings against them. These strikes, however, also allowed the U.S. to undertake strikes against portions of JAN that were closer to al-Qaeda.\(^6\) They were targeted by the same external actors, which this hypothesis suggests should bring them closer together, but it should also be considered that the US only attacked because of ISIS’s actions. This could have forced JAN to distance itself even more in an effort to avoid further attacks.

Size: Groups of a similar size will fight each other, but strong groups will ally with weak groups.

This explanation does not really work for ISIS and JAN. JAN was considerably smaller than ISIS, but both were relatively large in comparison to the other groups in the region. Both


\(^6\) “Who Did the United States Just Attack in Syria and Why?”
were comprised of smaller brigades, but they were always unified with the greater organization, not just allied. According to this explanation, the two groups should always have been at odds, but they were not until Baghdadi’s statement. What is difficult here is the relationship with al-Qaeda, which has a markedly different alliance structure than any of the group alliances and unifications in this thesis. Al-Qaeda allies with local groups and turns them into what can best be understood as franchises. It is a relationship somewhere between alliance and unification, where the franchise normally uses the name of al-Qaeda, but maintains a considerable degree of autonomy.

*Number of Groups:* Alliances will only be stable with a set number of groups.

This argument does not hold because the number of groups involved did not change, which means it cannot explain the transition for cooperation to conflict exhibited by these groups. It is possible to consider the unique dynamic that being part of al-Qaeda played on both groups, since in some ways it is like being a part of a single group and in others it is a multi-group alliance, but this would better apply to earlier explanations.

**Case Conclusions**

The case study appears to contradict the identity hypothesis since the two groups are similar, but it strongly supports the balance of threat hypotheses. It is complicated by the fact that areas exist where hostilities did not break out between the two organizations right away. This would suggest that geographic proximity is not always a problem for cooperation. It is only a problem when it exacerbates an already existing threat from one or both groups. This case study
seems to also disprove the size and asymmetry of power arguments since it would appear that the two organizations worked together well before the split.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

As expected, the findings were varied and there does not appear to be a single explanation that can account for everything perfectly. The Balance of Threat theory, supported by the geographic hypothesis, seems the most prevalent across cases. The SIF and new IF were able to work together because the various groups were not overly threatened by each other, but they were seriously threatened by other groups. This was in part due to the lack of geographic proximity between the various organizations, but also because none of the groups appear to have ever been hostile to each other. In the case of the Islamic Alliance, this theory fails if the intent of the organization was indeed to found a lasting alliance, but if it was simply to counteract the SNC’s trip to the United Nations, that it seems to hold. Finally, it fits perfectly with the eruption of hostilities between JAN and ISIS. Prior to the Islamic State’s announcement, which is a perfect example of aggressive intention, there was no sense of threat, but after the failed attempt to subsume JAN, both sides felt threatened, which destroyed the basis for the alliance.

Identity alone does not appear to be enough to hold an alliance together or prevent conflict given the last case, but it is possible that it is a necessary precondition for an alliance to stay together. The SIF and the new IF were all Islamist groups with a strong degree of religiosity.
Furthermore, the IA did not last and it is the only alliance out of the three to contain the more radical Jabhat al-Nusra. There is, however, no definitive evidence to determine the role that identity and ideology play.

The involvement of outside actors is one of the most difficult to evaluate. This category encompasses a broad range of other types of actors with varying dispositions and goals. To complicate things further, they can take a wide variety of actions with regards to the situation as well. It appears from the cases considered that outside actors only changed group behavior when they might have a considerable impact on the threat calculation of the organization in question. For example, the members of the IA may have felt that the benefit to the SNC and the peace process with Assad may have been too great to ignore and therefore decided to unite together, if only briefly, and ignore the relatively smaller threat that each member posed to each other. Furthermore, some groups inside of the SIF and new IF, such as Liwa al-Haqq, did actively attempt to remain more moderate in hopes of being a candidate for Western funding if it ever became available. Surprisingly, the question of aid seems to have played a larger role in the calculations of Syrian groups than the strikes from the Western Coalition did, but that could be because most of these strikes did not target the specific organizations in question.

Finally, the SIF and new IF appear to confirm that the longest lasting alliances are between a moderate number of groups (seven to eleven) and involve some sort of asymmetry of power, such that there are one to three larger organizations that a number of smaller brigades can organize around.

While this thesis fails to find a single explanation that explains the situation well, it shows that many of the dynamics observed between established states are in fact in play for non-state actors as well. As violent non-state actors continue to be a concern in the modern world, it
is important to consider these groups when creating new theories. Robust additions to available research would apply to non-state actors as well as states and, when not possible, it should consider the effect of and on non-state actors. The Syrian case is still evolving and it is unique in many ways, but it is the best example because it is one of the most serious, pressing issues of our time. Should other regions with a considerable number of violent non-state actors worsen to the extent of Syria, it will serve both academics and policy makers well to have literature already focusing on the Syrian case. Evaluating other arenas, however, would undoubtedly strengthen the research begun above. Looking at past conflicts, while less pressing, would also be useful because then it would be possible to follow these dynamics through to completion.
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