PROXY WAR IN THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR

How Inequality Shaped the Syrian War: The Case of Mareʿa

Jeremy Hodge & Hussein Nasser

About the Authors

Jeremy Hodge is an investigative journalist and senior Zomia researcher. He conducts field work on the development of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Hussein Nasser is a Zomia fellow and founder of the Syrian Counter Extremism Center (SCEC), which oversaw rehabilitation programs for former jihadists in Syria. He is from Mareʿa Syria, and currently lives in Syria.

About the Zomia Center

The Zomia Center is dedicated to the rigorous study of non-state spaces for scholarly and humanitarian pursuits. It is an initiative of Arizona State University's Center on the Future of War and New America, a D.C.-based think tank. Zomia researchers produce contextually sensitive, interdisciplinary, and empirically grounded studies on areas outside formal government control.

The Center's projects address a diverse set of questions on the micro-politics of war and revolution; the political economy of non-state spaces in the context of globalization and neoliberalism; public health; and local cultural histories. The center's goal is to encourage the free exchange of information among the scholarly and humanitarian communities.

Named for the historically contested uplands of Southeast Asia, The Zomia Center builds on a rich tradition of non-state scholarship, in the belief that empirical understanding of the contested present is necessary for a more peaceful and egalitarian future.

For more info, see www.zomiacenter.org

In partnership with

Introduction

In the Syrian revolution, no city has attracted the attention of theinternational community more than Aleppo. As the country's second largest urban center, the city served as a hub for Sunni business elite who profited following Bashar al-Assad's partial liberalization of the economy in the 2000s. Many observers predicted that the Assad regime's pact with this merchant class would ensure that Aleppo would remain a pro-regime stronghold. At first, this proved correct, as Aleppo did not witness a homegrown revolutionary movement strong enough to contest for power, even as other Sunni-majority areas were swept up in the revolutionary tide.

Ultimately, it took the invasion of external rebel forces, from rural towns like Mareʿa, Tel Rifaʿat, and Anadan, for parts of the city to fall to the insurgency. Like Aleppo city, these towns had witnessed powerful anti-regime movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood-inspired uprising. However, unlike Aleppo city, they had largely been neglected and denied the sort of investment, services, and economic opportunities extended to Aleppines in the 1990s and 2000s, which had proved pivotal in reconciling Aleppo's Sunni middle and upper-middle class with the state. This urban-rural divide is one of the key under-reported features of the Syrian conflict, and perhaps plays an even more important role than issues like sectarian identity. A striking example is a 2012 statement issued by Abd al-Aziz al-Salama, the commander of Aleppo's largest Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel faction, directed towards Aleppo city residents as the regime prepared an assault on Heiratan and his hometown of Anadan[1]:

> A message to the people of Aleppo…today, tanks have mobilized near Heiratan and the Artillery Academy, to launch an assault on the countryside…we demand that the people of Aleppo support the countryside…. Today, the [countryside] is being slaughtered, while you all remain seated.…I say to the [religious] scholars of Aleppo, by God you all are more unjust than the regime. Your silence, forsakenness and abandonment of your religion is harder for us to bear than the regime's tanks….Those of us in the countryside, with Almighty God's permission, will sacrifice our lives, and slaughter the regime out of our pure and honorable countryside.

"It took the invasion of external rebel forces, from rural towns like Mareʿa, Tel Rifaʿat, and Anadan, for parts of the city to fall to the insurgency.

After the 1980s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) was crushed in Aleppo, while much of the Sunni religious establishment in Aleppo city was co-opted by the regime. But in the Aleppo countryside, a residue of the SMB survived among the families of former members, who were close to a coterie of rich landlords.

The combination of a disenfranchised population, a tight-knit class of landlords, and SMB-linked networks gave towns in the Aleppo countryside the personnel and resources to finance protests and create Free Syrian Army groups that would become the most powerful in the country. In the early days of the revolution, many of these individuals gathered in Mareʿa, a town of no particular pre-war prominence, to form the vanguard of Aleppo province's civil and military uprising. In this study, we will trace the unlikely story of how a small town that few Syrians had heard of pre-2011 would become one of the most important locales in the entire conflict. By examining the history of Mareʿa, we will shed light on how urban-rural divides and socioeconomic inequality shaped the Syrian war.

The Free City of Mareʿa

With a pre-war population of roughly 30,000, Mareʿa was like other rural towns caught up in the rage that swept the

1 Freedom Anadan 2011, April 4th 2012, "Statement number ((1)) of the Aleppo and it's Countryside Revolutionary Council Leadership 2012-4-5": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWqvJfxQ67U

Arab world in the spring of 2011. In addition to grievances aired around the country, locals in Mareʿa were also moved by the memory of their historical marginalization when they took to the streets.

Mareʿa was so marginalized that the regime lacked an institutional presence in the town—which meant it could not contain the city's revolutionary activity without diverting precious resources from areas it perceived as more strategic.

> **"Diversity within the ranks of Mareʿa's opposition movement, which drew from the most committed revolutionaries across the region, also gave the city's leadership access to a diverse set of networks of local and foreign patrons.**

The result was a protest movement in Mareʿa that took to the streets in far greater numbers than its counterparts in cities across the region. From early on, Mareʿa became something of a safe haven, leading to an influx of activists fleeing regime crackdowns in their hometowns.

In December 2011, Mareʿa officially declared its independence from the Assad regime; unlike opposition movements elsewhere that devolved into rivalries and infighting, Mareʿa's revolutionary leadership managed to exert control over the city and preserve civil cohesion—despite sitting atop a much larger and more diverse grassroots movement than elsewhere. Mareʿa's leaders were therefore able to assemble cohesive FSA factions willing to go to great lengths—and at great personal risk—to battle regime security forces. These armed groups worked closely with Mareʿa's civil governing bodies. Mareʿa therefore began to stand out amid the chaos of the Syrian battlefield as a potentially attractive partner in the eyes of foreign patrons seeking clients.

Diversity within the ranks of Mareʿa's opposition movement—which drew from the most committed revolutionaries across the region—also gave the city's leadership access to a diverse set of networks of local and foreign patrons. Connections to large, transnational Islamist movements such as Jamaʿat al-Daʿawa wa al-Tabligh (JTD) and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), in particular, helped facilitate these networks. By mid-2012, much of the foreign aid accruing to FSA groups throughout Aleppo province was being channeled through Mareʿa and its most powerful armed faction, Liwa al-Tawhid.

The city had emerged as one of the decision-making nerve centers of northern Syria. Many activists began to jokingly refer to Mareʿa as the "Qurdaha of the North," a reference to the small Alawite hamlet in Latakia province that is the hometown of the al-Assad family, and through which resources and patronage often ran.

By 2014, the regime had been replaced by a new threat. In February of that year, ISIS, fresh off its successes in the east Aleppo countryside and Raqqa, turned its sights on the town. Over the next two and a half years, Mareʿa held off the invasion, sometimes living under siege, until ISIS eventually succumbed to the U.S., Turkey, and other powers.

This study is based on dozens of interviews with activists and local leaders that were at the center of Mareʿa's revolutionary movement from its earliest moments to its most recent days. It is also based on a detailed review of relevant literature and open source materials that shed light on the nature of foreign and domestic aid to FSA groups in northern Syria. Mareʿa's success as a revolutionary model is rare in the context of the Syrian conflict and reflects its revolutionaries' ability to utilize extant networks in order to present a united front to the outside world. These sources reveal a microhistory that forces us to look differently at the question of why the revolution in other parts of Syria lacked cohesion. With this cohesion, a no-name town managed to fend off ISIS and Assad and become, for a while, one of the most important centers of resistance in all of Syria.

Chapter 1: The History of Mareʿa and the Aleppo Countryside

Background

The Baʿath Party Fails the Aleppo Countryside

The roots of Mareʿa's neglect stretch back to the 1940s and 1950s, when Syrians across the country began joining the Baʿath Party. However, Aleppines joined in far fewer numbers. This was partly due to the unintended consequences of factors that predated the organization: The French Mandate favored rural religious minorities such as Alawites, Druze, and Ismaʿilis for the officer corps, and these groups came to associate military service with social mobility. Many also came from families too poor to pay to exempt their sons from conscription, unlike their Sunni urban counterparts in Aleppo and Damascus.[2] As a result, these minorities were disproportionately represented in the armed forces, from which the Baʿath Party heavily recruited. Despite making up 20% of Syria's population between 1963 and 1966, Aleppines held only 8% of the seats in the party's regional command. By 1976, this number dropped to zero. Furthermore, while Aleppines held on average more than 20% of total cabinet positions in the period from 1942-1963, by 1976 this number stood at just 5%.[3]

Aleppines' exclusion from Baʿathist patronage also stemmed from the party's self-proclaimed socialist framework, particularly with respect to land reform. The northern Aleppo countryside had been settled and cultivated by rich Aleppine merchants beginning in the mid 19th century following an international spike in cotton prices caused by the American civil war. This was followed by a post-WWII boom in the prices of labor-intensive products, including cotton and wheat, leading to investments in modern farming technology. In Mareʿa, for example, the introduction of tractors, advanced water pumps, and new irrigation techniques encouraged the town's landowners to shift from watermelons to the more profitable cultivation of potatoes.

Agricultural plots in the north Aleppo countryside were smaller and more capital-intensive—and therefore less feudal—than those in other parts of the country. In contrast, territory in the east Aleppo countryside and areas north of the Euphrates river in the provinces of Raqqa, Hasakah, and Deir Ezzor—the so-called Jazira region—underwent a very different trajectory. Bedouin areas in the Jazira region remained uncultivated or state-owned until the 1920s.

2 Similarly, the Baʿath also managed to obtain a large constituency in the multi-confessional Hama province, where a series of peasant revolts in the 1940s led by Akram al-Hourani led to the formation of the Arab Socialist Party that officially merged with the Baʿath in 1952.

3 Raphael Lefevre, Page 74, "Ashes of Hama, The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria"

Beginning under the French Mandate, nomadic tribal leaders settled and amassed large landholdings—often in excess of 100,000 hectares. The breakneck speed by which this process took place—effectively a privatization of commons and state-held land, aided by the rapid injection of urban capital—meant that many tribal leaders became massively wealthy landowners in just a few years. The sheer size of holdings far surpassed that of the landowners in the more densely populated northern Aleppo countryside.

This had important consequences for Baʿathist land reform policy. The holdings in the east along the Euphrates valley were subject to expropriation and redistribution to poor and landless peasants. On the other hand, the landowners in the northern Aleppo countryside were not subject to the same level of expropriation, as their holdings were smaller. This made northern Aleppo something of an outlier in the early Baʿath period, and unlike the Euphrates valley region, the Baʿath regime was never able to cultivate a strong rural constituency in the area.

These rural constituencies—where the Baʿath party message resonated—were also remote populations that had little exposure to the rhetoric of urban Islamist movements such as the SMB. This, too, would not be the case in Aleppo. In places like Mareʿa, a combination of political marginalization and the presence of a landowning class that survived the Baʿathist land reforms created conditions ripe for the growth of an Islamist resistance.

“The presence of a landowning class that survived the Baʿathist land reforms created conditions ripe for the growth of an Islamist resistance.

Neglecting Mareʿa

In 1964, during the first wave of Baʿath Party purges of the armed forces, a mid-ranking Air Force officer from Mareʿa named Salih al-Hafiz was ousted due to his affiliation with the Nasserists and his refusal to join the Baʿath Party. Having graduated from the Air Force Academy during the Egypt–Syria union, Salih belonged to the al-Hafiz household, one of the richest families in Mareʿa, which had derived its fortune mostly from agricultural landholdings.

Salih's exit is remembered by leading figures from Mareʿa as one of the first indications of the ruling Party's intent to alter the status quo in the countryside and deny local elites access to regime patronage. Mahmoud al-Najjar, an opposition figure in Mareʿa, long-time member of Riad al-Turki's opposition Syrian Communist Party, and signatory to the 2005 Damascus Declaration, recalled:

> After Salih's removal, the regime closed ranks and scaled back the number of officer candidates from Mareʿa and the north Aleppo countryside in general who were accepted to serve in the military. We viewed this as an attempt to impose collective punishment by certain figures within the regime. Meanwhile, while Mareʿa residents were denied access to institutions outside the city, government agencies that did expand in our town, such as the Agricultural Bank, which was crucial for farmers in Mareʿa, were staffed primarily by loyal cadres from other provinces.

Abd al-Rahman al-Hafiz, doctor and director of Mareʿa's field hospital after 2011, and a relative of Salih's, claimed the latter possessed connections to Ibrahim al-Safi, a high-ranking Baʿathist who took an active role in ensuring his removal, which carried with it broader ramifications:

> Salih was part of the same graduating class as Ibrahim al-Safi, an Alawite officer from Jableh whom he became close with and regularly visited in Damascus. By 1963, al-Safi had become a Baʿathist and was among the conspirators involved in the coup. According to what Salih often told us, after the Baʿathist takeover he was given an ultimatum by Ibrahim and others he served with: switch party allegiance or step down. He chose the latter.

Ibrahim al-Safi would go on to become a core member of Hafiz al-Assad's security apparatus, eventually earning appointment in 1985 to lead Syria's First Armored Division, and then in 1994 as Commander of Syrian Arab

Army (SAA) forces in Lebanon.[4] In 2011, Ibrahim's son, Jowdat Ibrahim al-Safi, commanded the 154th regiment of Maher al-Assad's 4th Armored Division, and was accused by Human Rights Watch of carrying out massacres against protestors in the Damascus suburbs.[5]

According to locals, it was after this rift that Mareʿa became one of the most "hated" towns in Aleppo in the eyes of the regime. Locals began to feel that Mareʿa was denied services and development projects that were extended to other regions, such as the Alawite-dominated coastline and the multi-confessional province of Hama.

"Even by the early 2000s, dozens of villages in the north Aleppo countryside still hadn't been hooked up to electricity grids or provided proper paved roads," Najjar noted. "In the 1960s and 1970s, almost no effort was made to provide basic services. Meanwhile, cities on the coast like Latakia and Tartus were expanding and absorbing Alawites who previously had been living in villages in the mountains. We felt there was bias."

4 Nikolaos Van Dam, Pg. 174, "The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Assad and the Baʿath Party"

5 Pro-Justice, "Criminals/Jawdat Ibrahim Safi": https://blacklist.pro-justice.org/criminal/jawdat-ibrahim-safi/

This sense was heightened by regime efforts in the late 1960s to invest in new irrigation projects in the central Euphrates region around Raqqa, aimed at improving the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton and wheat. The north Aleppo countryside by contrast, despite its reliance on agriculture for more than a century, did not receive comparable state investment.

In 2004, Aleppo's provincial government began considering the construction of a canal linking the newAfrin Dam, 12 miles west of Mareʿa, with the Euphrates river, thereby providing irrigation to Mareʿa and other surrounding towns. "A team of us, including local politicians and engineers, not just from Mareʿa but also Bab and other large cities in the area who stood to gain, spent more than a year drafting a proposal for how best to pay for and implement the project, outlining the benefit it would bring to the region," recalled a defected intelligence officer from Mareʿa, who consulted for the project, and who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "Our goal was to create a strip running through the region that irrigated 100 hectares of farm land adjacent north and south of the proposed canal. By that point, Mareʿa was supplying 25% of all potatoes in Syria, just relying on rain and ground wells. Imagine what we could accomplish if we had more resources."

But the plan was scrapped at the last second. The dam

water was diverted to irrigate developing suburbs near Aleppo city. Well-connected contractors were seeking to benefit from a boom in real estate prices during the period of economic liberalization. Locals in Mareʿa began to feel a shift in the pattern of marginalization, from favoring the coast and Euphrates region under Hafez al-Assad to favoring the capitalists of Aleppo city, who were now close to the regime.

Farmers in Mareʿa were left to rely on rain and well water, putting lucrative water-intensive cash crops such as cotton out of reach. Furthermore, the success they did achieve in potato cultivation was often contingent on navigating the seemingly arbitrary restrictions enforced by the state through illicit cooperation with regime officials. Muhannad al-Najjar, an activist with the Syrian opposition and a member of the Khalil family, which has owned large estates in Mareʿa for generations, explained the role of the shabiha:

> Everyone lived off agriculture in Mareʿa; however, we couldn't always depend on rain—which was unreliable—and risk seasonal drought, so farmers with large estates would dig ground wells operated by generators. By law, these were illegal. Legally operating a well required a series of permissions that were beyond most people's ability to acquire. Attempting to navigate the application process would open oneself up to exploitation from bureaucrats looking for bribes. It would often be easier to just go to the source: identifying the most powerful and relevant security official in the area who could turn a blind eye, and pay him.

Local corrupt officials found numerous opportunities to exploit locals' reliance on agriculture, particularly following the rise in the availability of cheap credit from the 1960s onwards with the rapid expansion of new branches of the Syrian Agricultural Bank. The bank, which ostensibly offered affordable loans to farmers at rates ranging from 3%-5%, also enjoyed a monopoly on the provision of essential products such as seeds, insecticides, fertilizers, and certain types of farming equipment. In Mareʿa, as in other towns throughout Syria's agricultural heartland, local security chiefs and well-connected regime officials utilized their status to simply purchase the entirety of the bank's stock in products and cash available for loans before reselling and lending out both, at exorbitant markups.

"Locals learned not to rely on the Agricultural Bank," according to the defected intelligence officer, "and people developed their own illicit networks for products—including smuggling—and reverted to private credit." However the reversion to private credit was in practice a privilege that only accrued benefits for those who were already rich and therefore deemed "credit worthy," i.e., individuals with enough social capital to secure low-interest loans from banks, acquaintances, or other sources. For poorer borrowers without strong connections, interest rates on private credit were usually just as usurious and untenable as those offered by Agricultural Bank branches held hostage by corrupt officials.

This created a system whereby small farmers were either unable to obtain loans, or forced to go into long-lasting debt in order to acquire capital, while those with large estates possessed the means to expand their already sizable holdings in Mareʿa and surrounding towns. In the ensuing decades, most people in Mareʿa and in other towns throughout the north Aleppo countryside lived in poverty with the exception of a small coterie of exceedingly wealthy families that managed to carve out a position as a provincial bourgeoisie.

The Rise of the Opposition

The Emergence of Political Islam

Against this backdrop of marginalization, informal taxation, and lack of access to economic opportunities, local elites in Mareʿa and similar towns were predisposed to be suspicious of—or downright hostile to—the regime. Primarily landlords and merchants, some of these elites developed a natural affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic movements, whose conservative, anti-socialist message resonated with their economic interests and outlook.

In the 1950s, charities such as Nahda al-Islamiyya (Islamic Renaissance) promoted by the cleric Muhammad al-Nabhan, known for his fiery sermons against secularism, began to proliferate in Aleppo and its countryside.[6] Other

6 Thomas Pierret, Page 148, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution"; Thomas Pierret, Page 137, "Syria from Reform to Revolt, Culture, Society and Religion, Merchant

urban Aleppines such as Muhammad Yassin al-Najjar also spent time in this period in the north Aleppo countryside offering free education services to peasants.[7] (His son and grandson would become prominent national figures within the Syrian Brotherhood). The SMB and Nahda opposed the statist economic intervention proposed by the Baʿath, Communist, and Nasserist parties of the day, while encouraging private charity and providing vocational training courses and workshops, and free religious education.[8]

In the mid-1960s, SMB founder Ahmed Azz al-Din al-Bayanuni opened the Aleppo chapter of the Sufi Zayd Group, a network of mosque-based charities and religious education centers.[9] In 1964, Muhammad al-Nabhan formed the Dar Nahdat al-Ulum al-Shariʿa (Shariʿa Sciences Renaissance House), a body that aimed to teach courses in Shariʿa law to rural peasants in the Aleppo countryside, whom al-Nabhan felt had been underserved by Aleppo's religious institutions. In order to appeal to his new rural base, al-Nabhan went so far as to abandon the teachings of the Hanafi jurisprudence that dominated in the city in exchange for the Shafaʿi school prevalent in the countryside.[10]

In 1973, al-Nabhan was also among the first to sign a petition drafted by SMB leader Sʿaid al-Hawwa opposing Assad's constitutional changes to abolish the requirement that Syria's president be Muslim. The petition was part of a larger movement, but was especially strong in small northern Aleppine towns like Mareʿa. Pressure against the move grew so strong that in 1974 Assad reinstated the clause, and then coaxed Musa Sadr, a Twelver Shiʿa religious leader in Lebanon and later founder of the Amal movement, to release a statement formally recognizing Alawites as Shiʿa Muslims in order to justify Assad's tenure as president.

Further support for Islamists came in response to the regime's foreign policy interventions. In January 1976, at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, the Assad regime backed Christian militias against Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization.[11] Assad's goal was to reign in the PLO, which was behaving increasingly independently and risked dragging Syria into an entanglement with Israel, which he wanted to avoid.

But in backing the Christian militias, Assad was effectively putting his regime on the same side as Israel. By August of that year, the Israeli- and Syrian-backed Christians had massacred at least 1,000 Palestinians at the Tel al-Zaʿatar refugee camp in northeast Beirut. The image of Christian forces backed by Jewish and Alawite regimes killing Palestinians did not sit well with conservative Sunnis and SMB sympathizers. By the late 1970s, they had developed an image of Assad as an anti-Muslim tyrant.

The Response in Mareʿa

In 1979, as the SMB-led insurgency gathered steam, members of Mareʿa's most prominent families took up arms against the state. Youssef al-Hafiz, a distant relative of Salih al-Hafiz, joined the SMB and began to help the organization smuggle weapons from Lebanon. Within a year he was caught by security forces, who detained him along with the vehicle he used to transport weapons, which allegedly belonged to his brother Subhei. Both Youssef and later Subhei disappeared into the maze of regime prisons and were never seen again.[12]

Background Bourgeois Ethics, The Syrian 'Ulama' and Economic Liberalization"

7 Markaz al-Sharq al-Arabi, July 30th 2012, "Profile of Professor Ghassan Najjar": https://web.archive.org/web/20120730012413/http://asharqalarabi.org.uk/ruiah/b-sharq-128.htm

8 The al-Najjar household, whose members can be found in cities across the country, also predominate in Mareʿa, where the local Khalil branch is the largest and most powerful of the city's prominent families. Yassin al-Najjar's son and grandson, Ghassan and Yassin al-Najjar, respectively, would become prominent leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The SMB's Islamic Socialist Front would actually make calls to nationalize public services companies owned by foreign firms, but generally speaking it adopted the "socialist" moniker merely as a means of competing with the left-wing parties.

9 Thomas Pierret, Page 60, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution"

10 Thomas Pierret, Page 48, 49, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution" Though al-Nabhan was among those who would reconcile with the increasingly pragmatic Assad regime by the late 1970s, the stringently secular platform promoted by the Baʿath in the 1960s ran counter to al-Nabhan's agenda at the time.

11 These included the Kata'ib Regulatory Forces, Guardians of the Cedars, National Liberation Party's "Tiger" militia, and the Lebanese Security Forces.

12 Rumors circulated years later by then newly released political prisoners that Subhei had been seen at the Tadmur prison clashing with guards alongside other detainees during the June 27th 1980 Tadmur massacre that led to the death of more than 1,000 inmates; however, nothing confirming the account has ever emerged.

The disappearance pushed their brother, Zakaria al-Hafiz, to join an SMB sleeper cell conducting guerrilla attacks throughout the country. For a full year, his family had no contact with him. "We learned about his death the same way anyone else in the country would have, when members of our family caught a glimpse of his corpse by chance while watching television," said Abd al-Rahman al-Hafiz, cousin of Zakaria and at the time a student at Aleppo University's Faculty of Medicine. "The segment claimed he had been killed in a shootout in Damascus after security forces raided an SMB safe house somewhere in the city. The state never officially reached out to confirm or deny rumors or provide us any closure regarding his or Youssef and Subhei's fate. In retrospect that was probably a good thing. If they had reached out it probably would have only provoked new acts that would have continued the cycle."

Al-Hafiz's death was part of a pattern in Mareʿa, in which many others were similarly disappeared, or forced to flee the country. Abd al-Rahim al-Najjar, from the al-Khalil family, was arrested and disappeared in Aleppo city in 1981 after visiting the home of an SMB member who had been serving as an informant for the regime. Abd al-Rahim's cousin, Talib al-Najjar, a Baʿath Party officer who nonetheless was accused of harboring covert sympathies for the insurgents, was also arrested and disappeared. An SMB member who was a distant relative of both men turned out to be an informant, and fled the country shortly thereafter. Decades later, the children and other direct relatives of these men helped take up arms and become pivotal leaders within Mareʿa's opposition movement.

Even after the SMB insurgency ended in 1982, the regime continued to sporadically arrest suspected SMB members in Mareʿa and nearby towns. For years, stories circulated of entire mosque congregations being rounded up and interrogated by security forces. In the neighboring town of Tel Rifaʿat, where dozens of families took part in the uprising, regime forces are remembered for storming the homes of suspected militants and then publicly dragging their corpses from the back of trucks through the city's streets. In 1982, a regime force of 16 tanks and armored vehicles, along with several hundred soldiers, encircled and besieged Tel Rifaʿat before moving in and carrying out mass arrests of remaining oppositionists, effectively putting an end to insurgent activity in the north Aleppo countryside.[13]

As time went on, residents claimed the regime relied on Alawite officers from other provinces to fill security, education, and other government posts in Mareʿa, Tel Rifaʿat and neighboring towns. Similar to Salih al-Hafiz, stories emerged of Mareʿans who, upon joining the officer corps, were fired or removed after attaining a certain rank.

The inability of locals to penetrate the highest ranks of the party and state was perhaps best reflected by the fact that no Baʿath Party recruitment offices, or political, military, criminal, or intelligence security branches—common features in towns throughout Syria—were built in Mareʿa. Following the outbreak of the revolution, this would prove beneficial as protestors could gather in the city free from the watchful eye of security forces.

Instead, crackdowns on protests in Mareʿa required security forces to mobilize in neighboring cities such as Aleppo and Aʿzaz, allowing locals to get wind of regime movements in advance. Eventually, Mareʿa's Local Coordinating Center (LCC) cooperated with other LCCs in neighboring towns to set up a string of watch posts along the roads linking Aʿzaz, Mareʿa, Tel Rifaʿat, Hayyan, Heiratan, and Anadan to provide an early warning system for demonstrators mobilizing across the region. Mareʿa would be the first among these towns to declare itself liberated from the decades-long clutch of the Baʿath Party. It was then that the city shot from obscurity to become one of the most important locales in the Syrian revolution.

13 Osama Hadba Interview

Chapter 2: The Syrian Revolution in Mareʿa

The Civil Period

Protests Erupt

The first protest in Mareʿa occurred in conjunction with several others across the country on April 22nd, 2011, in solidarity with a large students' demonstration in Daraʿa. Muhannad al-Najjar, one of the city's first activists, was taken by surprise when he heard anti-regime chants in the city's main market.

> A few friends and I followed the sounds of the chants until we came across the small group of protestors, and we decided to join in. The whole thing was so spontaneous and without warning that some people later would suspect that the regime planted that initial group in order to gauge the overall receptiveness of Mareʿa residents to demonstrations. Nevertheless, even if this was the case, they would soon get their answer: within twenty minutes several hundred people had joined in. Mareʿa officially rose up and joined the ranks of the revolution.

In the days and weeks after, residents became increasingly bold, taking to the streets during the day and sometimes under the cover of darkness to voice their opposition to the regime. From the beginning, relatives of Salih al-Hafiz (the ousted air force officer) and others who had disappeared during the 1970s and 1980s played a lead role in organizing, inspiring, and bankrolling the protests.

"When we first started demonstrating, anti-riot units from Aʿzaz would often harass us, driving by and shooting at protestors before skating off and leaving the city," said Sheikh Ali al-Hafiz, imam at Mareʿa's al-Insaf mosque and a first cousin of the disappeared al-Hafiz brothers. Sheikh Ali al-Hafiz was one of only two imams in Mareʿa willing to protest against the regime. The other, Zakaria al-Hafiz, the son of the disappeared martyr of the same name, also led Friday prayers at a mosque in the small town of Herbel just south of Mareʿa. The rest of the city's religious establishment adopted a unified stance of opposition or neutrality towards the protests, preferring to remain in the good graces of the state to which they owed their status. Muhannad recalled,

> Our revolution was an uprising against the entirety of the old order, not only political but also religious, despite

people's common perceptions. Many of the sheikhs in Mareʿa were proponents of the Rifaʿi Sufi order, which had spread throughout the area in the decades prior to revolution. We felt that this had been encouraged by the regime, as much of Sufism, in particular the Rifaʿi school, puts heavy emphasis on the authority of its sheikh, whom followers must submit to on all matters. These sheikhs in turn would often preach that Assad was Wali al-Amr [Protector, Custodian] of a legitimate Muslim state, against whom rebellion was a form of sin or even apostasy. However, after the revolution, we stopped listening to them.

In one instance, Muhannad and a group of demonstrators passed by Sheikh Abdullah al-Hafiz, the town's most influential imam with links to the Ministry of Endowments. He recalled,

"They stood and watched silently as we passed. When we saw them, some of us began chanting, 'man la yusharik ma 'andu namus!' [those who don't participate have no honor!] to which they didn't respond. Some of us approached the sheikhs aggressively and even spit on them. For us, this was the sort of major transgression we never expected to ever take part in. The sheikhs walked off briskly and we continued our march. After that, protests got larger."

As Ramadan approached, the protests (often held after Friday prayers) began to number in the thousands, and were growing more organized. This allowed Mareʿa to distinguish itself as home to a movement that rivaled much larger cities. In addition, without a regime presence in town, troops had to be sent from elsewhere to forcibly put down the protests.

Muthanna al-Nasser, a lawyer and founder of the Free Lawyers Collective in Aleppo, recalled the massive day-long demonstration on August 19th, 2011 to hold off regime attempts to penetrate the city; "There were several thousand of us in the streets when security forces from Aleppo and Aʿzaz arrived and cordoned off the city from all directions. All roads leading in and out were blocked off, effectively putting us under siege." The troops opened fire; he received birdshot to the leg and back.

This was the first instance where locals responded en masse to regime violence against demonstrators. Several thousand protesters, some armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails, marched from four directions, as regime troops rained fire upon them. At one point, soldiers hijacked a bus, which they used to try to plow through demonstrators. However, the protesters managed to set it on fire with Molotov cocktails, forcing the driver to get out and flee

Eventually, regime forces retreated after deciding that the violence required to disperse the marchers would be too excessive. Shortly after,

Khalid al-Khudr, security chief from Aleppo, and Khalid al-Jassim from Aʿzaz were dispatched to negotiate with locals for a joint withdrawal. The regime representatives pledged to leave Mareʿa if the protestors dispersed. The latter, already viewing themselves as having achieved a victory, agreed and left the streets.

From this day on, Mareʿa was de facto liberated.

Birth of the Local Coordinating Committee

Mareʿa's protests were successful in part due to the efforts of Musa al-Musa, a sympathetic police chief from the Idlib countryside and head of the city's modest police force, the only security body in the city. Musa regularly attended Local Coordinating Committee (LCC) meetings, warned protestors before regime forces arrived, and used his influence to help those who had been arrested. Days after the August 19th protest, a delegation of security officers from Aʿzaz visited Mareʿa's police station with a list of wanted people from the local LCC—including Muhannad al-Najjar and Muthanna al-Nasser.

According to both, al-Musa contrived a fake story absolving Muhannad, Muthana, and others of responsibility for their role in the demonstration. All walked free.[14] At the same time, the regime attempted to convince LCC leaders to abandon their activity in exchange for promises of funding for new development projects in the city. Figures such as Aleppo Governor Ahmed Khaluf al-Hussein, Aʿzaz's

14 In early 2012, al-Musa was arrested, interrogated, and replaced as Mareʿa police chief. However, by that point the utility of his role had decreased as the protest movement had morphed into an armed uprising that treated Mareʿa as liberated territory to be administered independently.

Baʿath Party General Secretary Abu Ahmed, Head of Political Security Hilal Hilal, and others visited the home of another prominent protest leader, Muddar al-Najjar, to discuss potential compromise.[15] Muddar, the son of Abd al-Rahim al-Najjar, forcibly disappeared by the regime in 1982 in Aleppo city, by this point had become a lead organizer and financier of the LCC. He, along with members of other wealthy families in Mareʿa, contributed and organized donations to finance the purchase of placards, posters and film equipment for a planned local media office in the city.

During the meeting, regime officials allegedly made a series of promises to locals to help calm tensions, including the provision of new government jobs and the construction of a local hospital— something that still did not exist in Mareʿa. Mahmoud al-Najjar, signatory to the Damascus Declaration and long-time opposition figure, claimed that Muddar and others feigned interest in accepting the concessions on the condition that the regime provide information about their missing relatives.

"Muddar demanded that the regime either point him in the direction of where his father Abd al-Rahim was being held, or provide a death certificate that explained how and where he died and when," he recalled. "Members of the Hafiz house demanded the same regarding Youssef, Zakaria, and Subhei. This was an embarrassing request for the delegation as the regime had still never acknowledged the disappearance of these or any other political prisoners from that period and never would, as doing so might inspire new requests from thousands of others across the country whose relatives had also been killed or arrested."

Several rounds of meetings with regime officials ended with no agreement. Meanwhile, the pace of protests across the region was escalating rapidly, with the coordination across towns becoming more sophisticated. By this point, Mareʿa's LCC was officially chaired by a grain, cumin, and agricultural products merchant named Abd al-Qadr Saleh, a member of Mareʿa's middle-class Hajji household whose relatives owned several small retail stores across the city. Saleh was a religious man who throughout the 2000s conducted several missionary trips with Jamaʿat al-Tabligh wa al-Daʿawa (the Outreach and Proselytization Group), a South Asian Sufi Muslim evangelical organization whose membership numbers in the tens of millions and has been described as the largest Islamist organization in the world.

Both al-Saleh's missionary work and expanding business obligations had taken him, prior to the revolution, on trips to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Lebanon, and non-Arab countries such as Turkey and Bangladesh, where he both preached personal piety and engaged in commercial ventures exporting Syrian potatoes and other agricultural goods across the region. Numerous other figures in Mareʿa were also members of Jamaʿat al-Tabligh wa al-Daʿawa (JTD), including al-Saleh's business partner, Luʿi al-Naʿama, who, like Saleh, helped finance local activists and military factions in Mareʿa during the revolution. During this period, Abd al-Qadr Saleh earned renown as a charismatic and inspirational role model for local youth whose religious leadership had abandoned their cause.

His personal discipline and piety, combined with his light-hearted nature, made him popular with the young men who risked their lives demonstrating on the street. His modesty made him accessible: he ate, slept, and marched alongside the youth, was regularly seen on the frontlines, and used his own money to purchase weapons. His experience as a missionary made him a gifted orator who could rally groups of men.

Under Abd al-Qadr al-Saleh's leadership, Mareʿa's LCC quickly became a model for those in nearby towns such as Tel Rifaʿat and Anadan, whose leaders increasingly traveled to Mareʿa to seek refuge and coordinate joint marches between cities. "Mareʿa was becoming a safe haven for oppositionists elsewhere who were afraid of being arrested in their hometowns," recalled Muhannad. "They would come to Mareʿa and we would often put them up in our own homes for weeks at a time. That was the atmosphere back then, solidarity." Among those who traveled to Mareʿa was Abd al-Aziz al-Salama, chairman of the LCC in Anadan, which he fled due to the strong security presence in the city. Like many in Mareʿa, several of Abd al-Aziz al-Salama's relatives had fled Syria or were disappeared during the SMB-led uprising against the regime in the 1970s and 1980s.

On December 21st, 2011, Abd al-Qadr Saleh, Abd al-Aziz al-Salama, and LCC leaders from towns across the

15 Muddar was Muhannad's brother-in-law.

north Aleppo countryside announced the formation of the Revolutionary Council for Aleppo and its Countryside (RCAC), with Mareʿa as the de facto capital. That day, in a triumphant display, demonstrators celebrated in front of the town's municipality building, climbing atop its roof and hoisting the flag of Syria's opposition, while those in front held a massive placard that read "Free Men of Mareʿa."[16] Solidarity protests were held that same day in towns throughout the region.

In Heiratan, a local LCC organized a demonstration during which a sign proclaiming that activists in the towns of Bab, Manbij, Bizaʿa, Maskana, Safira, Qubtain Jabal, and six others in the Aleppo countryside recognized the legitimacy of the newly formed RCAC, "because God's hand is with those who are unified." Though these towns remained effectively under regime control, a spark had been lit that would soon transform Mareʿa into a lightning rod attracting impassioned youth from across the country who would emigrate to the newly freed city.[17]

16 freedom Anadan2011, December 21st 2011, "Aleppo:Hraytan:Demonstration to Support the Revolutionary Council 21/12/2011": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGWFEWlPEMU; Marea0city, December 21st 2011, "Mareʿa 21/12 Revolutionary Council Announcement in Aleppo and it's Countryside J1": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjcGimSWdZI

17 Marea0city, January 16th 2012, "Defection Sheikh Ammar al-Faruq Hamidu from the Religious Establishment": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSpOABMlGd0

> **“The first weapons appeared in the hands of neighborhood watch groups...”**

Militarization

The Protests Militarize

One week after the RCAC's formation, on December 28th, 2011, several thousand demonstrators from across the province gathered in Mareʿa and marched towards Aleppo city, where they hoped to link up with protestors who had been organizing near the university and in other neighborhoods. Upon reaching Anadan, they were fired upon by security forces with live rounds, prompting them to flee and head back towards Mareʿa.[18] On the way, while passing through the town of Hayyan, the demonstrators were fired on again by members of the local pro-regime Bijji family, killing one demonstrator, Ahmed Ramzi Dada.

Dada was the first protestor from Mareʿa to die. His funeral was attended by thousands from the region.[19] In subsequent days, regime crackdowns in the area grew more intense, and locals began to arm themselves. The first weapons appeared in Mareʿa in the hands of neighborhood watch groups that emerged in response to rumors that shabiha [loosely organized pro-regime militias with ties to organized crime] were planning to infiltrate the city in order to kill or kidnap activists or commit other crimes. Families pooled their resources and raised several thousand dollars each, enough to buy a handful of pump-action rifles available for sale at gun outlets across the border in Turkey.

Across Syria, the intensity of military action began to escalate significantly. By the end of 2011, FSA military councils appeared in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Daraʿa, and Damascus provinces. On January 28th, 2012, the Arab League officially withdrew its monitoring mission in Syria, citing the "critical deterioration of the situation." Five days later, on February 3rd, the regime launched a bloody assault to recover the liberated neighborhood of Bab Amr in Homs city, which had been under the control of a rebel group calling itself the Faruq Brigades. Other liberated towns such as Zabadani in

18 Marea0city, December 29th 2011, "avi. Live rounds fired on peaceful protestors Anadan 12--28": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDPOfE5vsSs

19 freedomaleppo, December 29th 2011, "Aleppo – Mareʿa || Martyr Ahmed dada at the al-Furqan mosque 2011-12-28": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVwpWCINHqw; Marea0city, 29 December 2011, "For the mediahd death of the Martyr Ahmed Ramzi Dada Aleppo countryside Mareʿa 12—29": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQA6ZCKsQtU

the Damascus countryside, Rastan in Homs province, and parts of Daraʿa city were increasingly fending off violent regime attempts to wrest them back into its possession. That month, a new group calling itself the Abu Ammara Brigades began carrying out targeted assassinations of prominent elements of the security forces in Aleppo city. By March, FSA units began to appear in the north Aleppo countryside.

Mareʿa's neighborhood watch groups provided the initial structure for the city's first FSA faction, Qabdat al-Shamal (Fist of the North). Similar groups made up of armed men appeared in neighboring cities, such as Asifat al-Shamal (Storm of the North) in Aʿzaz, Qalb al-Shamal (Heart of the North) in Tel Rifaʿat, and the Abu Bakr al-Sadiq brigades in al-Bab. These groups began to use Mareʿa as a base of operations to plan attacks in their hometown. In March 2012, commanders from these groups, with the backing of sympathetic wealthy merchants, pooled their resources and formed Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal (Free Men of the North), an umbrella alliance of FSA groups across the north Aleppo countryside.

In al-Bab, a large city with a pre-war population of 100,000 and a well-developed manufacturing sector, pro-revolutionary families of wealthy industrialists such as the Kirz, Zemmar, Afura, Shuwayh, and others organized donations to Ahrar al-Shamal through Abdullah al-Kirz, a linens merchant who would later became Liwa al-Tawhid's top commander in the city. In Mareʿa, other businessmen with ties to Abd al-Qadr Saleh, including Luʿi Naʿama and Ahmed al-Khattib—the latter also a veteran of the Jamaʿat al-Tabligh wa al-Daʿawa (JTD) proselytization group—paid out of pocket to help purchase weapons for Ahrar al-Shamal fighters. Nearly a dozen other members of JTD were also active in the city and helped contribute resources to the militarization of Mareʿa's opposition movement. Rich farmers and owners of large plots of real estate in the surrounding countryside similarly contributed funds to bankroll armed resistance to the regime.

Weapons for Ahrar al-Shamal were mostly seized from government facilities in the area or purchased on the black market from officers in the security services who sympathized with the revolution or simply saw an opportunity to get rich. One such figure, Abu Shihab, an intelligence officer from Aleppo city, allegedly brokered arms deals allowing Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal to source arms from officers in Nubl and Zahra, two Shiʿa towns northwest of Aleppo city whose population was disproportionately represented in local officer ranks, giving them ready access to weapons.

Enter the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

In addition to donors from among the Aleppo countryside's merchant elite, Mareʿa soon began to attract other individuals with ties to foreign donors, in particular the SMB, which by this point had begun to muscle in on key Qatari and Saudi weapons networks being organized abroad. One local figure crucial in facilitating the direct link between the SMB and Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal was Abdullah Othman, a director of a Shariʿa academy in Turkmen Berah, a small town five miles northeast of Mareʿa. Othman had close ties to key members of the official Sunni religious establishment in Aleppo city, including Mahmoud Nasser al-Hut, director of the Dar Nahdat al-Ulum al-Shariʿa, which had been opened 48 years earlier by Muhammad al-Nabhan.

During these formative months, Abd al-Qadr Saleh and Abd al-Aziz al-Salama also met with members of the SMB, in particular Ghassan Najjar, son of prominent Sunni proselytizer Muhammad Yassin al-Najjar, acting then as a representative for Ahmed Ramadan, chairman of an SMB splinter faction known as the National Action Group and member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition "government" in exile. According to those with knowledge of the talks, organized by a Turkish intelligence agent known simply as "Abu Jassim," Ghassan Najjar offered Abd al-Qadr al-Saleh an influx of funding on behalf of Ahmed Ramadan to purchase smuggled weapons in exchange for pledges of loyalty to the SMB group, offers al-Saleh allegedly turned down.

Other leaders in Mareʿa such as Abd al-Aziz al-Salama and Muddar al-Najjar, however, were rumored to have been more amenable to establishing ties with the SMB, paying lip service to their demands for allegiance in exchange for aid that could strengthen their individual positions within the city. Before long, outside money began to trickle into Mareʿa and the factions of Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal, setting the stage for a partnership later that would result in the formation of Liwa al-Tawhid.

Foreign Jihadists Make a Foothold

Around this time, the region also witnessed its first introduction to foreign jihadists, who emerged to help train local FSA factions. In addition to being solicited by the SMB, Abd al-Qadr Saleh was allegedly approached by members of al-Qaʿeda, who unsuccessfully sought to recruit the charismatic new leader to their cause. Around this time, in early 2012, Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi, an Iraqi national and a founder of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State of Iraq's Syrian franchise, established his headquarters in the neighboring town of Tel Rifaʿat. A former Baʿathist intelligence officer under Saddam Hussein, Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi had actually been living in Tel Rifaʿat since 2006, fleeing his home country after being targeted by US coalition forces for his involvement with al-Qaʿeda in Iraq.

"Abu Sattayf rented an apartment in Tel Rifaʿat's northern neighborhood, became a taxi driver, and mostly laid low," according to Osama Hadban, former media spokesman for Liwa al-Fatah, previously Tel Rifaʿat's largest FSA faction. "He barely spoke with or developed relationships with anyone in town, with the exception of a few of his neighbors."

According to Hadban, in the decade prior to the revolution Tel Rifaʿat had become a center of Salafist recruitment in the north Aleppo countryside. "More than 300 young men from Tel Rifaʿat traveled to Iraq to fight against the Americans," Hadban claimed.

Many were influenced by Sheikh Ahmed al-Fayyad, a Shariʿa law scholar and imam at a mosque on Tel Rifaʿat's east side who also taught Arabic language and Quranic interpretation courses. Al-Fayyad specifically railed against the aberrant practices of local al-Qadariyya and Naqshabandiyya Sufi lodges, such as saint worship and performing rituals at gravesites, that had become popular in the area. By the early 2000s, al-Fayyad convinced nearly half of Tel Rifaʿat's youth to turn away from Sufism and embrace Salafism.

Despite being directly adjacent to one another, Tel Rifaʿat presented a stark contrast to Mareʿa, whose opposition and regime-backed religious leaders remained staunchly Sufi in the years before and after the revolution.

Tel Rifaʿat's history made it a welcoming environment for fleeing Iraqi insurgents such as Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi. Many of those from Tel Rifaʿat who fought in Iraq after 2003 later became prominent FSA leaders after 2011, foremost among them Ammar Hilal, a member of Tel Rifaʿat's large Hilal family and founder of the Ghuraba al-Sham FSA faction that would later become one of Liwa al-Tawhid's main rivals in northern Syria.

Like many others, Hilal was influenced by Abu Suri al-Qaʿqʿa, a firebrand Salafist cleric based in Aleppo city's Sakhur neighborhood who had inspired hundreds of Syrians to perform jihad in Iraq, allegedly with tacit approval from Syrian intelligence agencies.[20] It's perhaps no surprise that Ammar Hilal adopted Ghuraba al-Sham, the official moniker of Abu Suri al-Qaʿqʿa's 2003 Salafist Daʿawa organization in Aleppo city, as the name for his own rebel faction nine years later.

In early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra slowly grew in Tel Rifaʿat and neighboring towns, with Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi instructing local FSA fighters on how to manufacture Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and homemade mortars while offering training in guerrilla tactics learned on the battlefield in Iraq. On April 3rd, in the immediate lead up to a massive regime assault on the north Aleppo countryside, a video emerged showing Abu Sattayf delivering a sermon to nearly fifty Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal fighters, including Abd al-Qadr Saleh, before their departure for battle. Abu Sattayf's rhetoric was far more overtly sectarian and regionally focused then the traditional nationalist rhetoric adopted by Syria's early activists like the SMB. Al-Iraqi proclaimed,

> For you all are the last hope of the Ummah [Islamic Nation]! The people of Iraq, the Sunnis of Iraq, have their eyes [fixed] on you all! The Sunnis of Saudi Arabia have their eyes [fixed] on you all! God has reckoned that [many] of the oppressed throughout the world would be unable to join their brothers [in the Levant]. [However] the cries of the women of Iraq have reached your [ears]....Brothers, we do not fight for some national council, or for nationalism, but rather for the religion of Islam!…No flag will fly over the Levant other than the [flag] of 'there is no god but Allah'![21]

Over the next year and a half, both Jabhat al-Nusra (and later ISIS) would recruit heavily in Tel Rifaʿat. By the latter half of 2013, the city would become a headquarters for other senior Iraqi ISIS leaders such as Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi, also known as Hajji Bakr, who oversaw an aggressive campaign to seize control of lucrative border crossings with Turkey and other revenue-generating infrastructure from FSA groups across northern Syria.

Eventually, ISIS would turn against Liwa al-Tawhid and all other FSA in Tel Rifaʿat and neighboring towns in a bid to establish its caliphate across Syria and Iraq. Before his death, Abd al-Qadr Saleh became one of ISIS' most potent adversaries, expelling the group from Mareʿa in July 2013 and helping to instill a culture of anti-ISIS resistance throughout rebel-held territory that has lasted to this day. However, in early 2012, both sides were united in the goal of liberating territory from the regime.

Escalation

On March 24th, 2012, Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal, the Abu Ammara brigades, and other factions in northern Syria managed to block the road leading from Aleppo city to Aʿzaz in preparation for a broader assault on the city in the hopes of creating a corridor to the Turkish border.[22] The move provoked a violent regime response that marked the next stage of escalation.

On April 4th, 2012, the regime mobilized a force of several thousand soldiers along with dozens of tanks outside the town of Heiratan. As described previously, Abd al-Aziz al-Salama beseeched the people of Aleppo city to not remain neutral during the assault. The day before, Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi had delivered his sermon to Abd al-Qadr Saleh

20 Al-Jumhurriya, 13 March 2018, "Ghuraba al-Sham: Abi al-Qaʿqaʿ wa Hassan Jizra": https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/content/%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B9%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A9

21 Marea0city, April 3rd 2012, "Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal-Special Operations Unit": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGJjIYlcT14

22 freedom Anadan 2011, March 24th 2012, "Anadan|Abu Ammar brigade blocks the international Aleppo Turkey road": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJZP4InrKs0

and 50 other Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal fighters. Over the next six days, regime forces moved north, town to town, from Heiratan towards Mareʿa, attacking everything in their path. The most grievous assault came on April 9th, when regime tanks and helicopters entered Tel Rifaʿat and killed 45 people, including 10 members of the Sakran family.[23]

Having witnessed the assault over the previous six days, Qabdat al-Shamal fighters in Mareʿa, along with the majority of the town's civilians, withdrew from the city, leaving regime forces to find the town empty. Despite this, regime troops still suffered heavy losses. Qabdat al- Shamal fighters had dug up many of the roads to make it appear as if IEDs had been hastily planted, slowing the regime's advance through the city streets. A local baker named Ahmed al-Najjar, who ran the Sultan Pastry Shop, left the door to his business open, hoping to lure in soldiers, who were known for looting. Al-Najjar in fact had laced the shop's entire stock of pastries with poison; in the days afterwards, reports emerged from al-Kindi hospital in Aleppo city that dozens of soldiers had died while many more were in critical condition after eating pastries stolen from his store.

23 Zaman al-Wasl, April 10th 2012, "Details of the 'Tal Rifaʿat' massacre…burnt corpses and 45 martyrs": https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/25881/; Aljazeera Mubasher, April 10th 2012, "Tel Rifaʿat Massacre": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCEdoQWw36w

Nevertheless, regime troops still managed to destroy hundreds of houses and buildings using conventional shelling and white phosphorous, leaving many beyond repair. Qabdat al-Shamal fighters did not engage with the attackers, but instead waited for the assault to end before returning to the city. Despite their brutality, the regime made no attempt to occupy the city. Local FSA and the RCAC simply returned to Mareʿa and continued their operations. The regime never again tried to recapture Mareʿa. Nevertheless, Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal wasted no time resuming attacks on regime forces, particularly in the border town of Aʿzaz.

In early June, Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal and other factions in the north Aleppo countryside received their first large shipment of foreign arms: several hundred semi-automatic rifles that fired 5.5mm/5.6mm bullets that were known colloquially as "NATO weapons." Though light, these arms were known for their accuracy and their ability to fire at long ranges. They were brought into Syria via a loose network of Gulf, Lebanese, and Syrian financers collectively referred to as the "Istanbul Room" who met in that Turkish city. Organized by Okab Saqr, a Lebanese politician and close associate of former Lebanese Prime Minister Saʿad al-Hariri, the "Istanbul Room" channeled

weapons purchased by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to FSA factions inside Syria from sources in Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Greece, Georgia, Libya, and elsewhere.[24]

Weapons delivered to Ahrar al-Shamal arrived through Idlib province by way of the smuggler Ali Billu, who founded Liwa Ahrar Suriya (Free Men of Syria), an FSA faction based in Anadan. Billu was in direct contact with Okab Saqr and members of the al-Hariri family in Lebanon. From Anadan, Billu distributed the weapons to FSA groups in Mareʿa and factions in towns in the nearby provinces of Idlib and Homs. As acknowledgement for Saqr's role in helping to bankroll the FSA, local factions calling themselves the "Saʿad al-Hariri Brigades" soon emerged in Anadan and other towns throughout Aleppo province.[25]

The Birth of Liwa al-Tawhid

In early June, rebels and key financiers began to hold talks aiming to unite the more than hundreds of rebel groups in the Aleppo countryside. A key figure pushing the talks was Ahmed Ramadan, the influential SMB member and Syrian National Council (SNC) leader. On July 4th 2012, Ramadan managed to secure $600,000 for the formation of a rebel alliance in Idlib which became known as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF). This soon proved unsuccessful, however, and quickly fell apart. Nevertheless, the influx of cash for the SRF helped strengthen one of its component factions, Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of the Levant), which went on to become one of the most powerful Salafist factions in Syria.[26] Less than two weeks later, Ramadan secured a second tranche of funding from Qatar to bankroll the formation of a merger between Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal and 30 other FSA factions of the north Aleppo countryside, under the name Liwa al-Tawhid—whose name translates simultaneously as "the Unity Brigade" and "the Monotheist Brigade." Not long after, the rebel movement stepped up its attacks against regime positions in the north Aleppo countryside, launching raids on police stations in Ghandura, Manbij, Tadif, Heiratan, al-Raʿi, Menagh, Aʿzaz, al-Bab, and elsewhere.[27] It was in this last city, on June 24th, 2012, that media activists from Mareʿa first used the moniker Liwa al-Tawhid to refer to the group that carried out an assault on the city's municipal building.

In each town where Liwa al-Tawhid maintained a branch, its leader became known by the moniker "Hajji" and the name of the area he represented. Abd al-Qadr Saleh become "Hajji Mareʿa," and Abd al-Aziz al-Salama became "Hajji Anadan." Other leaders emerging in this period included Hajji al-Bab (Abdullah al-Kirz), Hajji Tel

24 Zaman al-Wasl, February 9th 2015, "Those two officials that hold the most positions within the Syrian Opposition": https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/57901; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 7th 2013, "Struggling to Adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria": https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/05/07/struggling-to-adapt-muslim-brotherhood-in-new-syria/g2qm; Washington Post, May 15th 2012 "Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbors' money, U.S. coordination": https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-rebels-get-influx-of-arms-with-gulf-neighbors-money-us-coordination/2012/05/15/gIQAds2TSU_story.html?utm_term=.9a0cd0efa299; AP, May 24th 2012, "US poised to vet possible arms for Syrian rebels": https://news.yahoo.com/us-poised-vet-possible-arms-syrian-rebels-161312841.html; Dar News, November 10th 2018, "The Syrian National Movement File Part 2", http://darnews.net/?p=2595; Zaman al-Wasl, March 8th 2015, "Zaman al-Wasl addresses the opposition's financials…where did the Libyan NTC's LYD52m go?": https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/58760

25 Shams al-Horeyya, 20 January 2013, Issue 19, Page 2, "News"

26 Washington Post, 15 June 2013, "Private money pours into Syrian conflict as rich donors pick sides": https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-money-pours-into-syrian-conflict-as-rich-donors-pick-sides/2013/06/15/67841656-cf8a-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story.html; Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Aron Lund, 14 September 2012, Page 41, "Syrian Jihadism"; International Crisis Group, 12 October 2012, Page 29, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition"; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 07 May 2013, "Struggling to Adapt: the Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria": https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/05/07/struggling-to-adapt-muslim-brotherhood-in-new-syria/g2qm; Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, DOI, 2017, Page 13, "Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War"

27 Harith Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, "Qabdat al-Shamal brigades clash with the Ghandura police station": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMQtUjv1BMU; Harith Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, "Ghandura police station sergeant defects24.06.2012": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-se2CJAhNY; Harith Abd al-Haq, June 20th 2012, "Joint operation [launched on] the Public Roads station in Manbij": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWcN3jeJHDw; Harith Abd al-Haq, June 20th 2012, "Tadif sector forces surrender to the Tawhid brigades": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swqjIDhJj_g; Harith Abd al-Haq, November 17th 2014, "Abd al-Qadr Salih - released for the first time - clip from the battle of Hraytan filmed 2012/6/12": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLftFWJ8WMg; Harith Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, "Tawhid brigades besiege the Saraya building in Bab22.06.2012": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpvg9zR-n5U; Harith Abd al-Haq, June 24th 2012, "Tawhid brigades strike a plane in Bab22/06/2012": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDuyrX-G_n0; Harith Abd al-Haq, June 23rd 2012, "Liwa Ahrar al-Shamal's spoils from Assad's shabiha22/6/2012": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIcY2Uhm9uo

Abd al-Qadr Saleh aka Hajji Mareʿa (L) and his brother (R) when the former was a member of Jamaʿat al-Tabligh wa al-Daʿawa before 2011

Rifaʿat (Hussein al-Assaf, also known as Abu Tawfiq), and Hajji Heiratan (Ahmed Zaydan).Liwa al-Tawhid's Hajjis soon became some of the most well-recognized figures of the Syrian revolution both at home and abroad.

For the time being, though, Liwa al-Tawhid was unparalleled on the battlefield. July 19th, 2012, the day after its formal merger, Liwa al-Tawhid scored a major victory by liberating Aʿzaz and the Bab al-Salama border crossing with Turkey, which had been the target of rebel activities for four months. The liberation of Aʿzaz and Bab al-Salama allowed the opposition to more easily import arms from foreign donors, without having to rely on smugglers. Two days later, Ahmed Ramadan and the SMB's Qatari and Turkish patrons delivered a new shipment of weapons and aid to Liwa al-Tawhid and gave the order for the group to open the boldest and most ambitious frontline in the Syrian war: Aleppo city.[28]

28 Al-Jumhurriya, 06 March 2015, "Armed Factions Map in Aleppo": https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33255; Interview with author Arif Hajj Youssef

Self-Governance in Mareʿa

The Political Economy of Local Autonomy

Back in Mareʿa, the thrill of living in newly liberated territory was tempered by the exigencies of having to govern a territory without a formal state presence. The revolutionaries did so by seeking to preserve, as best as possible, the regime institutions they took over. On the security front, Abd al-Qadr Saleh and Liwa al-Tawhid assumed responsibility for policing on August 19th, 2012, announcing the formation of a new "Amn al-Thowra" (Revolutionary Security) force tasked specifically with preserving local security rather than fighting regime forces.[29]

Meanwhile, Mareʿa's civil governing bodies remained

29 Ugarit News – Syria, 19 August 2012, "Ugarit Aleppo, Liwa al-Towhid forms the Amn al-Thowra Office led by Brigadier General Zaki Ali Lula with Ahmed Hamdu Sheikh al-Jib as his deputy 19 8 Aleppo": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zPe5CrjYMI

unchanged. Throughout most of 2012, Muhammad Dibu al-Najjar, Mareʿa's former Baʿath party mayor prior to the revolution, remained at his post and oversaw the operation of the town's utility departments, run by many of the same bureaucrats and civil servants who worked in the city prior to its liberation. Despite living amongst the rebels, al-Najjar made no bones about where his loyalties lay. "Bashar al-Assad is a democratic [leader], and he loves his people," al-Najjar stated to a BBC news crew that visited rebel-controlled Mareʿa in October 2012. "Since coming to power he has instituted many reforms, [for example,] salaries for state employees rose from LS4,000 to LS25,000 per month."[30] By keeping al-Najjar in place, Liwa al-Tawhid commanders were able to exploit his connections to the regime to coerce the mayor to secure much-needed fuel and flour. However, the two sides did not pretend to be friends: around the time of the BBC news crew's visit, al-Najjar's son was kidnapped and held as collateral in order to keep al-Najjar in line.

The shipments of goods al-Najjar arranged were desperately needed in a town already long underserved and now almost entirely cut off from the outside world. The supply chains that locals had relied upon for basic sustenance were no more; gone were the days of farmers exporting potatoes to Doha, Dubai, and elsewhere. Though merchants now had greater access to the Turkish market, cross border commerce was tightly regulated by Turkish authorities who sought to prevent an influx of cheap Syrian products from undercutting their own agricultural sector. While Bab al-Salama and other border crossings were ostensibly open to the free movement of goods and people, smuggling and black market trade remained the primary means of acquiring and shipping goods.

The Politics of Bread

The biggest challenge was the difficulty of importing flour from regime territories, which was needed for bread, a staple of the Syrian diet. By the second half of 2012, the demand for bread in towns in the Aleppo countryside that possessed flour mills such as Dayr Jaml, al-Atarib, Manbij, and the newly liberated neighborhoods in Aleppo city outstripped the supply of flour, creating shortages in cities throughout the region. Previously, Mareʿa, like all Syrian towns and cities, had a mix of private and public bakeries, with the latter offering bread at subsidized rates. Now, to weather the shortfall in flour, locals in Mareʿa abandoned market forces altogether and adopted collectivist measures. The Mareʿa Local Council "nationalized" flour procurement and bread distribution to ensure that all households received equal rations that could get them through the crisis.

Mahmoud al-Nasser, a retired Baʿathist intelligence officer who became a supporter of the revolution early on, took it upon himself to fundraise and unite the efforts of local military and business leaders to procure wheat shipments large enough to meet the needs of the entire town. This required organizing for the wheat to be transported and converted to flour outside the city and brought back to Mareʿa. The process demanded that Mahmoud move fast, both to buy up local supplies of wheat before his counterparts elsewhere and to secure a spot at the front of the line at any of the flour mills scattered across the region.

In Mareʿa, flour is processed at the town's factory bread furnace, a facility that is present in some cities and is capable of producing large quantities of bread. Distribution was handled through a centralized system whereby each neighborhood selected a "muʿatamid" (point man) responsible for registering the number of households in his area and assigning each one a weekly ration depending on the number of individuals in the home. Similar systems were adopted in liberated towns across northern Syria; however, Mareʿa's dearth of infrastructure forced residents to collaborate in a way that closely bound them to one another and fostered broader political and social unity than elsewhere.

By contrast, in other nearby liberated towns, such as Manbij—home to 43 private furnaces in addition to some of the country's largest factory furnaces and flour mills—the large-scale infrastructure combined with a lack of central planning incentivized infighting between armed groups and criminal organizations seeking to lay claim to segments of the city's chaotic bread sector. Moreover, persistent aerial bombardment that damaged or destroyed the city's factory bread furnace and main groundwater wells, crucial for local agriculture, forced Mareʿa's elites to mobilize to raise funds to repair, and eventually take

30 Harith Abd al-Haq, 27 October 2012, "BBC Report on the Revolution in Mareʿa English BBC Network": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wA6w5s8iSr0

over, this infrastructure. At the same time, burgeoning international NGO and private development sector began to appear across the border in Turkey, and they sought to assist the development of local governance in liberated territories. All of these factors combined to help transform the political scene in Mareʿa; locals' efforts to address the bread crisis ultimately laid the groundwork for cooperation that spurred the formation of an opposition governing council to replace the regime body led by Muhammad Dibu al-Najjar.

The Birth of the Mareʿa Local Council

In December 2012, Mareʿa's elite families gathered for negotiations on forming a new, independent local governing council. The communal landscape of the north Aleppo countryside is dominated by networks of kinship organized around deracinated urban provincial households made up of interwoven groupings of extended families. In Mareʿa, seven large households dominated the city's political, economic, and social scene, with nearly two dozen other smaller, poorer families being less influential. When it came time to organize what would later be called the Mareʿa Local Council (MLC), rather than hold a direct vote, the notables agreed to proportionally allocate seats within the MLC's cabinet to members of each of the town's households in accordance with their size.

Families were made responsible for deciding among themselves their representative for the council. However, in practice, the formation talks were largely carried out by 25 local elites and their relatives, who gathered in early December 2012 at Mareʿa's al-Ansar mosque. In three separate rounds of deliberations carried out over two weeks, attendees argued over fair levels of proportional representation for each family. At the second meeting, representatives of the Najjar and Khattib households, the city's largest, demanded that each of them be granted fiveseats on what was decided would be a 30-person cabinet, a move opposed by other households that viewed this as an unjust power grab. The meeting ended with the Najjar, Khattib, Abbas, and Nasser households each being granted three seats, while the Hafiz, Hajji, and Faruh families each received two. Twelve other smaller families that had representatives in attendance each received one seat.

Once the roster of MLC members was decided, internal elections were held during the third and final meeting on December 15th, 2012 to determine who would occupy which posts. Hazim al-Saleh from the Hajji family—a close cousin of Abd al-Qadr al-Saleh—ended up beating out a member of the much larger Najjar family for the position

of Mareʿa Local Council chairman.[31] Mareʿa's status as the "Qardaha of the North," spurred by the ever-growing influence of Liwa al-Tawhid, which by this point had established chapters throughout northern Syria and was the faction leading the FSA assault in Aleppo city, afforded the MLC with widespread connections to foreign donors and NGOs that arrived in town to help support the new governing body. The MLC's mandate focused on service provision, with decisions approved by a simple 50% plus one majority. Serious disputes within the council were rare, and throughout 2013 Mareʿa witnessed an influx of funding and new development projects.

The MLC's first act was to repair two electric pumps used to extract water from ground wells needed for local agriculture. This was paid for with an $8,448 donation from two merchants with the Najjar and Abbas families. Before long, the private, USAID-funded development firm Chemonics paid to install solar panels throughout Mareʿa and import flour from Turkey, eliminating the pressure on Mahmoud al-Nasser to purchase flour and convert it outside of the city. The MLC also hosted workshops with the Brookings Institution and International Republican Institute to promote good governance. World Fusion, Mercy Corps, Solidarity, Creative, and other well-known NGOs also carried out projects in the city, and even adopted the burden of paying salaries to MLC employees and workers at local utility departments.

This quick influx of development cash helped strengthen the MLC's perceived effectiveness and legitimacy among residents, helping to temper the type of criticism directed against local councils in other towns. Internal opposition from trade unions, civil society, or local press was nearly non-existent in Mareʿa throughout this period. The outsized power, influence, and success of Liwa al-Tawhid furthermore redirected the talents of many of the town's most active and committed activists to Aleppo and other frontlines outside the city, reducing the scrutiny on the MLC. The MLC, which was inaugurated on December 15th, 2012, continues to operate, surviving more than nine years of turmoil and near destruction at the hands of ISIS.

31 No connection exists between the term "Hajji Mareʿa" and the fact that Abd al-Qadr Saleh happened to hail from Mareʿa's Hajji family; this is a pure coincidence.

Stumbling Blocks

Despite success in preserving the peace within Mareʿa, across northern Syria Liwa al-Tawhid faced numerous challenges in its efforts to instill cohesion within its ranks. By late August 2012 Liwa al-Tawhid was running out of ammunition for its sub-factions in Aleppo city, leading to the loss that month of the Salah al-Din neighborhood to regime forces. One of Liwa al-Tawhid's largest component factions, the Nur al-Din al-Zenki Movement, based in the west Aleppo countryside, defected and joined a rival grouping, the Saudi-backed Authenticity and Development Front (ADF). Other factions that had previously pledged allegiance to Liwa al-Tawhid also began operating independently.

The threat of a regime counteroffensive in the autumn of 2012 spurred a new wave of SNC fundraising in Qatar that enabled Liwa al-Tawhid to consolidate its forces, halt the regime advance, and restructure its military institutions to bolster its rearguard. In September, the Revolutionary Security—the police force that Liwa al-Tawhid established in Mareʿa in August—received a funding boost and expanded its scope to administer internal security in all liberated towns throughout the north Aleppo countryside. The body relocated its headquarters to the border town of al-Raʿi and was put under the command of Abd al-Qadr Saleh's cousin, Abu Ra'id al-Hajji. Though the Revolutionary Security forces fell short in convincing many armed factions and local councils in the region to accept their authority, by early 2013 branches of the Liwa al-Tawhid-backed force could be found in numerous liberated towns throughout Aleppo province.

Also in September, a partial reconciliation occurred between Liwa al-Tawhid and key cohorts of urban Aleppines and defected army officers that the group had failed to win over in previous months. Chief among them was Abd al-Jabar al-Okaidi, a defected colonel in the Syrian army who on July 3rd, 2012 had announced the formation of the "Aleppo Military Council." At that time, shortly after the liberation of Aʿzaz, leaders of the so-called Aleppo Military Council—mostly based in southern Turkey—had been meeting and presenting themselves to foreign donors as a well-structured umbrella organization through which funds could be efficiently channeled to disparate rebel groups and monitored with accountability.

However, the Aleppo Military Council failed to assert itself as a relevant force on the ground.[32] Like rival commanders in Tel Rifaʿat, Abd al-Jabar al-Okaidi and others in the Aleppo Military Council refused to join Liwa al-Tawhid and subordinate themselves to Hajji Mareʿa and Hajji Anadan. It was rumored that Abd al-Jabar al-Okaidi himself was caught unawares by the launch of the FSA assault on Aleppo days later, learning about the attack after it began via the media, like the rest of the world.

However, by September 2012, circumstances had changed and Liwa al-Tawhid needed new allies who could help widen its appeal. On September 9th, Abd al-Jabar al-Okaidi and Hajji Anadan, speaking as commander of Liwa al-Tawhid, announced their effective merger via the formation of an overhauled Aleppo Military Council. Though from the southern Aleppo countryside, al-Okaidi's history as a ranking officer in Syria's armed forces meant he'd spend years living in Aleppo city before the revolution, which afforded him the opportunity to cultivate relationships with many of its residents.

By partnering with al-Okaidi, Liwa al-Tawhid sought to appeal to defected army officers throughout northern Syria, many of whom could attract support from Western countries. By this point, fears had already begun emerging abroad of the increasingly Islamized nature of the Syrian uprising. Partnering with al-Okaidi served as a clear signal that Liwa al-Tawhid prioritized achieving results on the ground over imposing a radical brand of religion in areas they controlled.

On September 24th, two weeks after the formation of the Aleppo Military Council, Liwa al-Tawhid achieved another symbolic victory by securing the support of a group of 48 urban Aleppine businessmen calling themselves the Muslim Scholars of Aleppo Front. Though it did not exert much influence on the ground, the group was notable for whom it represented. Led by Abdullah al-Salqini, son of Ibrahim al-Salqini, grand mufti of Aleppo from 2005 until his death in September 2011, the group represented of Aleppo city's traditional urban ulama establishment that cultivated close ties to the Baʿath party regime in the aftermath of the SMB led uprising of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Following the outbreak of the revolution, Ibrahim al-Salqini remained visibly associated with the regime, ignoring pleas by his colleagues who joined the opposition to step down grand mufti. In July 2011, when the National Salvation Congress, an opposition body based in Istanbul, put out a press release listing Ibrahim al-Salqini as a signatory, he publicly condemned the statement and dissociated himself from all opposition activity. The willingness of his son to proclaim support for the revolution so soon after his father's death served as a major symbolic victory that helped

32 The previous month, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency established an operations room in southern Turkey aimed at monitoring ongoing developments in Syria's uprising and conducting vetting operations of FSA forces seeking to obtain material aid.

legitimize Liwa al-Tawhid among a new layer of urban Aleppines. Following its formation, the Muslim Scholars Front of Aleppo announced its desire to help organize and bankroll a Liwa al-Tawhid-led political administration in liberated parts of east Aleppo. This occurred as the group received a new tranche of funding from Qatar.

While the injection of much-needed cash helped Liwa al-Tawhid keep its internal house in order, particularly in Aleppo city, the aid created problems for the group elsewhere. Among the groups that split from Liwa al-Tawhid early on was Asifat al-Shamal (Storm of the North), an outfit based in Aʿzaz led by Ammar al-Dadikhi, a brutal FSA warlord who quickly asserted total control over his hometown. Aʿzaz's strategic location next to the Turkish border and the Bab al-Salama crossing enabled al-Dadikhi to blackmail factions across northern Syria by threatening to forcibly limit their access to arms and weapons provided by foreign donors, or in some cases to simply seize entire shipments for himself without releasing them to their intended recipients.

By October, "Ammar al-Dadikhi went off the rails," claimed a former high-ranking leader within Liwa al-Tawhid who asked to remain anonymous.

> That month, he seized control of a weapons shipment we needed to resupply our forces in Aleppo city, demanding we pay a tax to have it released. He even went so far as to threaten to build a wall at the Bab al-Salama crossing, thereby preventing all future foreign aid from coming into Syria. However, he overplayed his hand, as this didn't just piss us off but also our contacts in Turkish intelligence who were involved in setting up these deals. They had skin in the game as well. Eventually, he reached an agreement with Hajji Mareʿa, and the latter set up a permanent office at Bab al-Salama with full-time staff to watch over all future arms shipments. After that, shipments became more consistent.

For a short period in late 2012 and early 2013, with a relatively stable safe haven in the Aleppo and Idlib countryside and a steady supply of weapons coming from abroad, FSA factions in northern Syria were at the peak of their power. This allowed them to shift their focus east and to liberate towns and cities in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces, including Raqqa city. By March 2013, nearly half the country was under Syrian opposition control. However, just when the regime's overthrow felt closer than ever, a new, unforeseen enemy began to undermine the rebels from within.

Chapter 3: ISIS and the Siege of Mareʿa

Jabhat al-Nusra Appears in Mareʿa

The first public indication that the group later known as ISIS sought to make inroads into Mareʿa came on January 13th, 2013. That day, Muhammad al-Najjar, nicknamed "Buni" or "brown," was filmed handing out free copies of the newspaper *Tuba lil Ghuraba*, or "Blessed by the Strangers," outside a clothing store owned by Hajji Mareʿa's former business partner, Luʿi al-Naʿama.[33] The newspaper, with its sophisticated design and glossy cover, praised the efforts of foreign fighters who had begun arriving in large numbers to northern Syria via the Bab al-Salama, encouraging locals to support them morally and materially, and to match them in their levels of piety.

Buni's older brother, Abd al-Aziz al-Najjar, was the cameraman for one of Liwa al-Tawhid's official spokesmen, Harith Abd al-Haq, himself the brother of MLC Chairman Hazim Saleh and a cousin of Hajji Mareʿa. Despite these connections to the city's top leadership, Buni, Abd al-Aziz, and Harith all later became ISIS supporters (with Buni himself dying on the frontlines on behalf of the group, and the latter two eventually being run out of town). A well-known soccer player who had a reputation for piety prior to the revolution, Buni first encountered Jabhat al-Nusra in December 2012 while praying at the Nur mosque near his home, across from which Nusra established its main HQ. Mareʿa's neighborhoods are named after the various households that predominate within them; Nusra purposefully set up its headquarters in the Najjar neighborhood, in the hopes of attracting recruits from the city's largest household and cohort. However, other than Buni, his brother, and a few other recruits, these efforts were a failure.

Though Jabhat al-Nusra had existed in Syria since January 2012, being led in the north Aleppo countryside by figures such as Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi, the group's membership increased in towns around Mareʿa only in late 2012. In December, a group of foreign fighters affiliated with Nusra established a rearguard headquarters at a farm just east of Mareʿa that was thereafter dubbed the "Saudi farm." The farm's previous owner had been a Liwa al-Tawhid commander who was killed during the battle to liberate the Syrian Army Infantry Academy north of Aleppo city. After his death, other Liwa al-Tawhid commanders divvied up his assets, with one, Abu Tamim, acquiring ownership of the farm that he then leased to Nusra fighters.

Abu Tamim, like Hajji Mareʿa and many other prominent figures in Liwa al-Tawhid, was a veteran of the Jamaʿat al-Tabligh wa al-Daʿawa (JTD) organization, and he grew close with Jabhat al-Nusra through 2013, by way of Hussein Ayyad "Abu Ruwaha," another JTD veteran and Salafist who was among Nusra's earliest recruits in the city. After ISIS emerged from the split with Nusra, it established a headquarters in Mareʿa established in the Najjar neighborhood at the home of one of Abu Tamim's cousins. However, it would be in the neighboring town of Tel Rifaʿat that ISIS established its largest presence.

Nusra Preys on Divisions in Tel Rifaʿat to Grow

Liwa al-Tawhid had long faced challenges expanding beyond its initial collection of 30 or so component rebel groups. Commanders from other factions proved unwilling to relinquish their role as nodes in the patronage network extending from foreign donors to local fighters—a position that offered opportunities for personal enrichment. Commanders who agreed to subordinate themselves and accept the authority of the likes of Hajji Mareʿa and Hajji Anadan usually had to be convinced that by doing so they stood to gain more than if they ventured out on their own. Often, local elites were not convinced, as in Tel Rifaʿat, where members of the Hilal and Qarandal households, the two most powerful clans in the city, resisted offers to merge with Liwa al-Tawhid because it meant subordinating their decision-making and revenue stream to Mareʿa. Instead, they created a new formation, Liwa al-Fatah (the Conquest Brigade).

Within months, Liwa al-Fatah split; during the offensive to capture lucrative border crossings, Ammar Hilal and fighters under his command defected to form Ghuraba al-

33 Harith Abd al-Haq, 13 January 2013, "Mareʿa city - distributing the Tuba lil Ghuruaba magazine 2013/1/12": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNYHCFNEIAk

Sham. Ghuraba al-Sham became notorious for kidnapping, theft, the smuggling of valuable industrial machinery looted from factories, and the seizure of grain silos and other profitable facilities tied to Syria's bread sector. Ammar Hilal was rumored to have a brother living in a Gulf country who also helped bankroll his faction's exploits. Eventually, Ghuraba al-Sham grew to be one of the largest factions in northern Syria, becoming a major rival to Liwa al-Tawhid. It, along with Liwa al-Fatah, dominated Tel Rifaʿat.

Opposition to Liwa al-Tawhid from Tel Rifaʿat's large Qarandal and Hilal households forced Mareʿa leaders to recruit instead from within the town's smaller Assaf, Dabso, Barburi, and Jamal families. (In media interviews conducted with Liwa al-Tawhid leaders on the day of their formation, Hussein al-Assaf "Abu Towfiq," owner of a small cement plastering company, appeared under the moniker Hajji Tel Rifaʿat.)[34] Such divisions between the towns of Mareʿa and Tel Rifaʿat, and between families and households within Tel Rifaʿat itself, helped facilitate ISIS's rise in the city and the region.

Among the influx of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters that arrived in late 2012 was Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi, known colloquially as "Hajji Bakr," a top commander of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Hajji Bakr had been ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's number two since 2010, when both men secured the latter's rise to the position of ISI caliph by carrying out a purge of senior leadership. Now, Hajji Bakr was in Tel Rifaʿat to oversee a similar effort within the ranks of Syria's opposition.

According to Osama Hadban, a former spokesman for Liwa al-Fatah, Jabhat al-Nusra (and later ISIS) recruited more than 500 fighters from the ranks of Tel Rifaʿat's dueling families. These forces were supplemented by another several hundred foreign fighters, who often arrived with large sums of money, enabling them to help plug deficits in the Tel Rifaʿat Local Council's budget and making them attractive marriage prospects for local families with young daughters. From their headquarters at Tel Rifaʿat, Jabhat al-Nusra (and later ISIS) fighters spread into the surrounding area to build up the ranks of the organization.

34 Harith Abd al-Haq, 18 July 2012, "Meeting with Liwa al-Tawhid leaders 18/7/2012": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7aN09sdNxc

The Birth of ISIS

These efforts kicked off in earnest in Mareʿa in April 2013, after a conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra's Syria-based leadership and their Iraqi superiors, resulting in a split that produced the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Upon formation, ISIS moved to seize control of much of Nusra's assets. Throughout most of the Aleppo countryside and neighboring Raqqa province, the majority of Nusra fighters switched allegiances to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS. On the other hand, in Aleppo city, Idlib, and parts of Deir Ezzor, Nusra maintained much of its support.

In Tel Rifaʿat, Hajji Bakr and Abu Sattayf al-Iraqi were joined by two other foreign ISIS leaders, Abu Suheib al-Iraqi and Abu Anas al-Saudi. This group helped lead the ISIS recruitment drive in Mareʿa. As elsewhere in Syria, ISIS recruited by hosting outdoor carnivals aimed at young people and children, organizing Quran memorization contests, running "Daʿawa" (proselytization) courses, and attempting to appoint scholars loyal to the group as imams at mosques throughout the city.

But the group's efforts in Mareʿa ran up against opposition. In one instance, when an ISIS imam attempted to mount the podium to deliver a Friday sermon at the Ammar bin Khattab mosque, congregants assaulted him and threw him out of the building. The group was only able to make inroads among Mareʿa's small, weaker households, who felt they had been denied opportunities in the MLC and Liwa al-Tawhid; a few individuals from lower-status families were moved by ISIS's religious rhetoric and joined the organization during this period. Foremost among them was Abu Ruwaha, the former JTD veteran and well-known Salafist who initially was granted a mid-ranking position within the MLC's Religious Affairs office, where he often bumped heads with superiors whom he felt were less qualified than him. Eventually, he was expelled from the MLC. Older and better educated in Shariʿa law than most other Mareʿans who joined ISIS, Abu Ruwaha became the group's spiritual godfather, recruiting four of his sons, and his nephews and cousins.

Another leading figure was Muhammad al-Badr, a mid-ranking Liwa al-Tawhid commander whose brigade had helped lead the group's successful assault on the Syrian Army Infantry Academy in December 2012, after which

he complained that his fighters were denied a fair share of the spoils by Liwa al-Tawhid's leadership. By mid-2013, Muhammad al-Badr had joined ISIS and recruited three of his brothers and four of his neighbors and their relatives.

Lastly, Abd al-Rahman Baydun, a former member of Liwa al-Tawhid's Mortar Production Unit, who had developed an animosity for his superiors, was selected to be ISIS's emir for Mareʿa. Abd al-Rahman recruited a number of his relatives to join. Having won a solid social base among the marginalized families, by mid-2013 ISIS represented the only viable alternative to Liwa al-Tawhid in Mareʿa. The group was quietly expanding its ranks while Liwa al-Tawhid's leadership was distracted by regional and international developments. Yet ISIS was not able to avoid Liwa al-Tawhid's notice for long.

ISIS Moves to Block U.S. Aid to the FSA

The road to the inevitable clash between ISIS and the FSA began in May 2013, when Qatar scaled back aid for FSA groups significantly, while Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faysal bin Abd al-Aziz and the director general of the Saudi intelligence agency, Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz, became personally involved in negotiations with FSA leaders in Turkey and Jordan to form a "moderate Sunni army" that would turn its guns against both Assad and ISIS. Prominent SMB leaders such as Farouk Tayfour, Nazir al-Hakim, Ahmed Ramadan, and others, long anathema to Saudi Arabia, sensed the shifting winds, and even led several delegations to the kingdom. In a related effort, the U.S. was promising up to $250 million in aid to FSA factions to combat "extremist groups." This was part of a broader U.S. push to force Qatar—responsible for having funded hardline factions, including Ahrar al-Sham—to relinquish its role as primary benefactor of the revolution in favor of Saudi Arabia, which shared American fears of a safe haven emerging in the region for al-Qaʿeda-linked groups.

In summer of 2013, ISIS seized the moment to launch an aggressive campaign to eliminate or co-opt all other armed groups. It began by likening non-Islamist FSA factions to former "Sahwa" (Awakening) groups in Iraq, a reference to Sunni tribal militias and ex-insurgents who accepted American military support to fight al-Qaʿeda.

Following its campaign to smear the FSA, ISIS began seizing control of Syrian border crossings in the hope of preventing Syrian rebels from receiving U.S. and Saudi aid. In July, ISIS captured the border town of Jarablus, home to the Qaraqamish crossing, in a series of bloody clashes with a local Liwa al-Tawhid franchise. ISIS also expelled the FSA from Adana, a town located next to

the Bab al-Hawa crossing in Idlib province. It launched a violent push against the Asifat al-Shamal faction to seize the border town of Aʿzaz. The faction, under the control of Ammar al-Dadikhi, who had defected from Liwa al-Tawhid to rule the town on its own, began desperately to call for rejoining Tawhid in order to fend off ISIS. ISIS launched operations further east, as well, establishing near total control over the Tel Abyad crossing in Raqqa. In Raqqa city, finally, ISIS moved against Jabhat al-Nusra.

FSA Factions Are Initially Reluctant to Fight ISIS

On July 19th, 2013, locals in Mareʿa organized the town's first anti-ISIS protest, accompanied by a large Liwa al-Tawhid military convoy equipped with heavy weapons. Shortly after, Hajji Mareʿa issued a public condemnation of ISIS and expelled the group from its headquarters at the Saudi farm east of the city. (The group's headquarters in the Najjar neighborhood—disguised as a Daʿawa missionary center—remained undiscovered.) Yet these events proved to be the exception: most factions were unwilling, at first, to fight ISIS. From the perspective of these factions, ISIS—despite its aggressive behavior—was simply too valuable for its firepower, and too dangerous, to turn on at this moment. In other words, these factions did not want to fight a two-front war, especially as the regime was launching a new assault on western Aleppo. Furthermore, the option of fighting ISIS was unpopular among the FSA rank and file, which had become increasingly Islamized throughout 2013. Even the most influential FSA commanders could hardly be expected to force their men to risk their lives for a battle they did not believe in. And so FSA negotiations for the release of the U.S. money stalled.

Despite the events in Mareʿa, Liwa al-Tawhid as a whole was no exception to such considerations. While Hajji Mareʿa vocally opposed ISIS encroachment, Hajji Anadan was far more tempered in his critique, owing to the history and dynamics of his own family.[35] Abu Ibrahim al-Salama, a cousin of Hajji Anadan, was among the founding members of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and a confidante of its leader, Muhammad al-Jolani. Yazin al-Salama, Hajji Anadan's son, also joined Jabhat al-Nusra, becoming a media activist with the group. Such ties led him to hesitate to declare war on ISIS. Though Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS had already split, with Hajji Anadan's relatives electing to stay with the former, Nusra's leadership was still keen on repairing its relationship with its Iraqi counterparts, and certainly opposed any partnership with the U.S. to destroy the group. Nusra's leadership also likely recognized that any U.S.-backed effort to combat "extremist groups" could easily expand beyond ISIS and include Nusra as well, which remained an official branch of al-Qaʿeda.

The FSA Prepares to Fights Back

In early September 2013, motivated in part by the Assad regime's chemical attack against FSA forces in East Ghouta

35 Despite having grown up in Anadan, Hajji Anadan and his relatives were emigrants from the small village of Babis, southwest of the town.

that killed 1,729 people, the Obama administration reversed its policy of withholding aid and released portions of its $250 million aid package. On September 13th, 2013, Syrian opposition media reported on a meeting in Paris, France between representatives of French, Emirati, and Jordanian intelligence and Ahmed al-Jarba, president of the Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and a close Saudi ally who was helping Riyadh's outreach to the FSA.

ISIS sensed the tide was turning and moved to seize the advantage. The group stepped up assassinations of FSA commanders it believed were working with foreign countries. On September 15th, 2013, sensing the impending threat from ISIS, leaders from Liwa al-Fatah formally merged with their longtime rivals, Liwa al-Tawhid. Three days later, ISIS temporarily took over Aʿzaz and captured 40 Asifat al-Shamal fighters, who were used as leverage in negotiations.

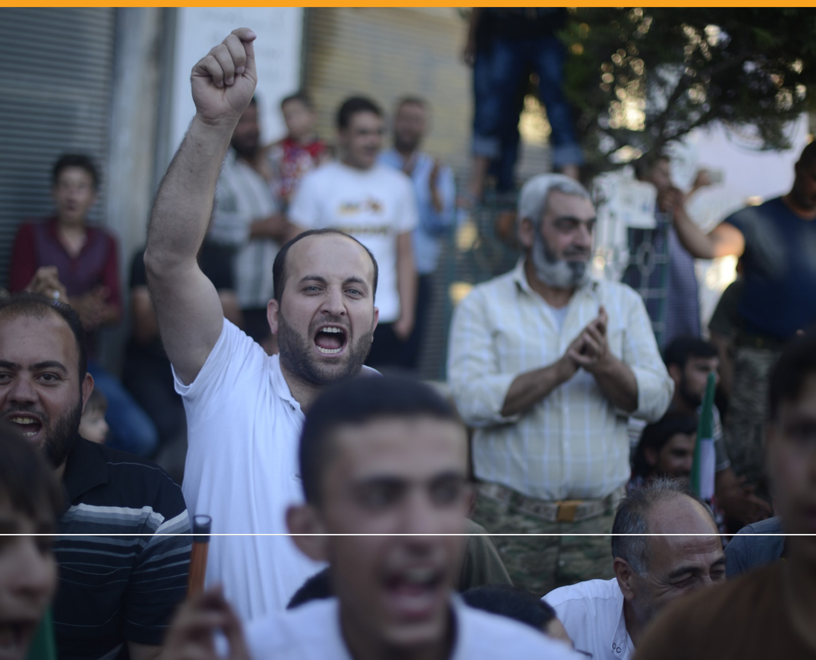
By October, Saudi aid finally began pouring into the country. Foremost among the beneficiaries was Jeish al-Islam, a large Salafist faction based in the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta. Under the command of its charismatic leader, Zahran Alloush, Jeish al-Islam become one of the most potent anti-ISIS forces in Syria, expelling the group from much of the liberated territory of the Damascus countryside. Saudi aid also arrived that month in northern Syria to the Nur al-Din al-Zenki Movement (formerly belonging to Liwa al-Tawhid), the Fastaqim Union, and other factions, which united to form Jeish al-Mujahideen (Army of Mujahideen). Like Jeish al-Islam in Damascus, Jeish al-Mujahideen in northern Syria led the FSA's first coordinated assault against ISIS in January 2014, expelling the organization from vast stretches across Aleppo and Idlib provinces. According to well-placed sources within Liwa al-Islam who asked to remain anonymous, as Saudi aid was pouring into both factions throughout October, Hajji Mareʿa himself attended a meeting in Turkey with U.S. representatives in an attempt to secure similar levels of support for Liwa al-Tawhid. However, these efforts failed, and the battlefield shift would mark the beginning of the end of Mareʿa's dominance.

Dénouement

The Death of Hajji Mareʿa

On November 17th, 2013, a Syrian regime airstrike on Liwa al-Tawhid's main headquarters at the Army Infantry Academy just north of Aleppo city killed Hajji Mareʿa. At the time, it was reported that Hajji Mareʿa was rushed to Turkey in an effort to save him, after which his corpse was flown to Qatar for a funeral. However, locals in Mareʿa tell a different story. "After it was obvious that he couldn't be saved, a small ceremony was held for Abd al-Qadr Saleh back in Mareʿa," said a high-ranking commander in Liwa al-Tawhid who asked to remain anonymous. "It was very lightly attended and not publicly advertised. Only his immediate relatives, some of Liwa al-Tawhid's top-tier leadership, members of his own personal office, and a few select others knew about the event. We were under intense pressure on all fronts and wanted to avoid any large events that could eat up our energy or distract us from moving onto the next step in figuring out how to proceed."

His death sent shockwaves throughout Syria and abroad,



as it robbed the opposition of its most well-known, beloved, and committed leader—whose star in the eight years since has yet to be eclipsed. Thousands poured into liberated towns across the country to hold massive funeral services; his sacrifices from the earliest days of the movement inspired those who knew him and those who didn't. However, his death did more than simply impact morale. Though Hajji Anadan was technically Liwa al-Tawhid's supreme commander, Hajji Mareʿa's star always had outshone his. By the time of his death, Hajji Mareʿa and his personal office in Aʿzaz were responsible for coordinating with foreign donors and securing most of the foreign aid. Hajji Anadan would have difficulty filling these shoes—his personal connections made Western and Saudi donors wary. The effect was immediate: Turkish intelligence ceased their correspondence with the group's leaders.

Then, three days after his death, Liwa al-Tawhid, Jeish al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham, and others announced a merger under a new formation calling itself the Islamic Front. The goal of the formation was to join Syria's largest Islamist factions in a coherent bloc that was clearly distinguishable from both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and whose unified structure could improve battlefield efficiency, making the body more attractive for foreign donors. However, divisions between each of the group's component factions soon emerged, and before long the body was largely defunct. Despite the group's professed unity, they disagreed among themselves about what to do about ISIS, with Ahrar al-Sham and others hesitant to move against them.

The FSA – ISIS Battles

By December 2013, infighting between ISIS and most other FSA groups had broken out across Syria. In Tel Rifaʿat, the first open clashes between ISIS and local FSA factions occurred when the former killed a Liwa al-Fatah fighter who had refused to stop at an ISIS checkpoint in the city. In Mareʿa, Liwa al-Tawhid finally discovered the ISIS headquarters in the city's Najjar neighborhood, which had been disguised as a Daʿawa center. Hajji Mareʿa's replacement, Abu Hatim Bakur, sent a small advance team of fighters to the Daʿawa center, where they uncovered large stockpiles of AK-47s, RPGs, PK machine guns, and other heavy weapons, prompting those ISIS members present to detain one of the Liwa al-Tawhid fighters, Abu Ali al-Hur. The standoff ended when Abu Hatim Bakur called off the Liwa al-Tawhid fighters in exchange for al-Hur's release. This was merely an attempt to lull ISIS into a false sense of security. On January 3rd, 2014, Liwa al-Tawhid, alongside the Saudi-backed Jeish al-Mujahideen and select other FSA factions, launched a coordinated assault on ISIS positions throughout Idlib and Aleppo provinces, expelling the jihadist group out of the majority of towns and villages in the area within days.

Liwa al-Tawhid overwhelmed the ISIS Daʿawa center in the Najjar neighborhood, killing several fighters and forcing the surrender of the group's most prominent figures, including Abu Ruwaha, the Mareʿa emir Abd al-Rahman Baydun, the Badr brothers, and numerous foreign fighters. Liwa al-Tawhid forces then turned their attentions south and east, liberating the towns of Sheikh Aissa, Kaljibrin, Sowran, Kafra, Ihtaymlat, Harbal, Um Howsh, Bartyan, and Hardtanin. They opened up the road to the Infantry School that had been occupied by the group. In Tel Rifaʿat, Liwa al-Tawhid forces stormed the city's northern neighborhood and engaged in a shootout at an ISIS safe house after receiving a tip from a local resident that a "high-powered ISIS commander" lived there. It wouldn't be until after the Tawhid fighters managed to kill those inside that they realized the identity of whom they had been clashing with: Samir Abd al-Muhammad al-Khlifawi, or Hajji Bakr, the Iraqi former Baʿathist intelligence officer who served as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's number two.

Battle lines between the FSA and ISIS moved continuously over the next six months. While ISIS withdrew en masse from Idlib, the west Aleppo countryside, and towns in the north Aleppo countryside such as Tel Rifaʿat, Mareʿa, and Aʿzaz, by late January, ISIS reinforcements had returned in force and taken swaths of the east Aleppo countryside, along with the entirety of Raqqa province. From their eastern stronghold, ISIS advanced west and re-occupied the entirety of the north Aleppo countryside, until meeting fierce resistance by Liwa al-Tawhid and other FSA factions in Mareʿa and Aʿzaz. For the next two years, Mareʿa and Aʿzaz were frontline towns subjected to daily assaults, and frequent suicide attacks, by ISIS forces.

Defections, Infighting, and the Levant Front

The ISIS assault on Mareʿa occurred just as Liwa al-Tawhid was beginning to crumble from within following the death of Hajji Mareʿa. Important commanders were defecting to form their own factions rather than remain in a group whose leadership's ties to foreign donors had become tenuous. The first serious post-Hajji Mareʿa fragmentation occurred in March 2014, when dozens of Liwa al-Tawhid fighters and commanders defected to join a new rebel group based in Mareʿa, Tel Rifaʿat, and neighboring towns, called Fajr al-Hurriya (Dawn of Freedom). Formed by a former commander and defector from Tel Rifaʿat's Ghuraba al-Sham, Fajr al-Hurriya later became close to American-backed FSA factions such as the Hazm Movement and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, who would engage in intense clashes with Jabhat al-Nusra in late 2014. Then, on December 20th, 2014, Hajji Anadan, in partnership with Jabhat al-Nusra, was invited to establish a headquarters in Mareʿa. The "Redressing of Grievances" campaign to go after Fajr al-Hurriya and other defectors was announced, in addition to renegade fighters who had resorted to criminality since Hajji Mareʿa's death. For several weeks, there were clashes in the city, leading to the arrests of Fajr al-Hurriya, with many being held in a makeshift prison set up in Mareʿa's municipality building.

Despite this, Hajji Anadan's partnership with Jabhat al-Nusra would frustrate attempts to build a truly cohesive post-Hajji Mareʿa force in the north Aleppo countryside. On December 25th, 2014, as the Redressing of Grievances campaign was underway, a collection of FSA commanders met at the al-Carfour mall in the city of Hreitan to announce the formation of "al-Jabhat al-Shamia" (the Levant Front). The new group included some of the FSA's biggest names in northern Syria; commanders from Liwa al-Tawhid, Jeish al-Mujahideen, the Nur al-Din al-Zenki Movement, the Fastaqim Union, and the Authenticity and Development Front all appeared to pledge allegiance to the group. Hajji Anadan, longtime commander of Liwa al-Tawhid, was elected to serve as its supreme commander. The formation of the Levant Front was spurred on by the Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi (MOM), a U.S.-backed joint operations room based in Turkey, with funding from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, that sought once and for all to instill cohesion within the ranks of FSA factions, which could then be redirected to resist ISIS.

However, the election of Hajji Anadan as the group's commander undermined the Levant Front's image as a "moderate" faction. His ties to Jabhat al-Nusra—at a time when the group was already at war with other U.S.-backed factions—made his selection as leader unpalatable to the United States. Over the next four months, the formal rollout of the Levant Front as a unified force stalled, held up by negotiations between foreign donors and local factions, with individual commanders shuffled to various positions in an attempt to appease the Americans while simultaneously accommodating commanders who possessed a real following on the ground.

By April 9th, 2015, the parties had failed to reach a compromise, so Hajji Anadan stayed on as commander of the Levant Front. That day, US negotiators cut off funding for the group, prompting a new wave of defections. These moves forced Hajji Anadan to step down in July 2015 in favor of Abu Amru Safira, another former Islamic Front commander viewed by foreign donors as more "moderate" and therefore trustworthy. However, Hajji Anadan's removal significantly reduced the popularity of the new formation and failed to attract those who had left. Instead, more sub-factions defected over the next several months. Liwa al-Tawhid was effectively finished.

Conclusion

The town of Mareʿa's two-year battle with ISIS finally ended in September 2016, when a Turkish-led assault expelled the group from Dabiq and a string of towns east of Mareʿa, thereby eliminating the frontline. Dubbed "Operation Euphrates Shield," the Turkish assault eventually liberated towns across the north Aleppo countryside, including Jarablus and al-Bab.

Meanwhile, in the six years since that pivotal summer of 2015, new-armed formations have emerged and dissolved in Mareʿa and across northern Syria. In Mareʿa, two factions are now dominant: The Daʿawa and Jihad Brigades and Liwa al-Muatasim. Meanwhile, the MLC continues to govern. MLC continues to consist of seven cabinet posts, with its chairmen peacefully transferring power through elections held among representatives of the town's families.

Despite the FSA's losses, Mareʿa still maintains its reputation as "Qardaha of the North" and occupies a leading position within the Turkish-occupied zone of the north Aleppo countryside. Mareʿa's unique status within Syria has its roots in the earliest days of the revolution, when the city's leaders became the favored recipients of domestic and foreign aid due to the unparalleled effectiveness and cohesiveness of their early protest movement. Mareʿa's ability to mobilize such a powerful revolutionary movement stemmed from its residents shared, bitter experiences of institutional neglect. The relative lack of regime presence in Mareʿa, combined with the presence of a vanguard of activists with grievances stretching back decades, and with elements of pure chance, like having a cooperative police chief, made Mareʿa an ideal gathering spot for oppositionists throughout northern Syria. Protestors took to the streets in numbers that rivaled much larger cities such as Aleppo and Homs, and managed to ward off numerous regime incursions.

The existence of a tight-knit class of rural notables, organized around family ties, was also critical for the town's success. These notables, though they had carved out stature for themselves within their rural conservative society, had been marginalized at a national level by various Baʿathist policies since the 1960s, with many having supported the 1979-1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising.

Throughout 2011, the city became a safe haven for the most committed opponents of the regime throughout the region. Among these were key figures belonging to international Islamist networks such as Jamaʿat al-Tabligh wa al-Daʿawa (JTD) and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB). As the city's opposition movement evolved, Mareʿa's leadership managed to stitch together a coherent movement of otherwise disparate armed men whose energies could be focused towards specific regime targets. Finally, Mareʿa was simply lucky to produce a charismatic leader like Hajji Mareʿa, whose revolutionary commitment inspired many others to put their lives on the line.

Throughout 2012 and the first half of 2013, Mareʿa's Liwa al-Tawhid was integral to the revolution's greatest battlefield achievements, including the assault on Aleppo city and the liberation of wide swaths of territory across northern Syria. However, as elsewhere, the emergence of ISIS in the latter half of 2013 proved to be a major impediment to Liwa al-Tawhid's ambitions. The emergence of ISIS as a third side to the conflict helped devour the revolution from within and deny it support from abroad.

A second factor that hurt Liwa al-Tawhid was its lack of institutionalization. The group's foreign ties were primarily through Hajji Mareʿa, which meant that once he was killed, the group soon fell apart. One early example of this lack of institutionalization is the case of al-Safwa al-Islamiyya Brigades (The Islamic Elite Brigades), a large component of Liwa al-Tawhid that did the lion's share of the fighting on the Aleppo old city frontline. In October 2013, the group split from Liwa al-Tawhid following a dispute over the distribution of weapons and ammunition. The al-Safwa al-Islamiyya Brigades were formed as a sub-faction of Liwa al-Tawhid on January 18th, 2013 by Himam al-Najjar "Abu Yazin," the son of Yahya al-Najjar, a prominent Brotherhood member from Mareʿa who fled Syria for Kuwait during the 1979-1982 uprising. Though highly integrated into Liwa al-Tawhid's structure, Abu Yazin's upbringing in Kuwait afforded him his own network of contacts within the SMB, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafist groups throughout the Gulf. In late October 2013, as fighting in Aleppo's old city intensified, an al-Safwa al-Islamiyya brigade commander named Abu Hussein was sent to Liwa al-Tawhid's leadership at the Infantry Academy to request more ammunition. Liwa al-

Tawhid's leadership, which felt that the al-Safwa brigades consumed a disproportionate amount of the group's overall ammunition, turned down the request. Shortly after, Abu Yazin and other commanders, confident in their ability to fundraise on their own, officially defected. A string of similar instances occurred over the next two years.

In the end, it was the death of Hajji Mareʿa, and Hajji Anadan's own complicated relationship with Nusra, that helped derail the revolution throughout northern Syria. Nonetheless, Mareʿa remarkably survives as a small, self-governing city-state—albeit under the thumb of Turkish occupation—which is a testament to the town's unique place in the history of the Syrian revolution.