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Syria and the Salafists

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The Syrian uprising has turned into a battle of whether the Islamic narrative should be subjugated to the narrow definition of the Salafis or be allowed to exist as a more eclectic mix of ideas than has so far been the case in Syria, argues **Ola Wam**.

With the dominance of radical jihadis in Syria's ongoing war, recent gains by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Northern Syria seem too late. The FSA has been cut off from large-scale foreign support and marginalized by hardline Islamists, and is now in shambles. In an attempt to (re) attract foreign support, the FSA has over past weeks undertaken a comprehensive restructuring, involving the replacement of chief-of-staff Salim Idris. The restructuring is necessary, Monzer Akbik from the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) says, because "the revolution is built on shifting sands. We don't want Syria to be a failed state or a safe haven for al-Qaida. The only way to do that is with a moderate army."

The restructuring is expected to generate the most military and financial aid yet, from the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. This may be the catalyst the FSA needs to oust the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from key bases in northern Syria. Further aid will depend on the FSA's capacity to continue an effective uprising, and its ability to challenge the radical Islamists,

but the FSA may not be prepared for a two-front war. The civil war seems too far gone to dislodge those forces that see the uprising solely in sectarian and religious terms.

How could it have gone so wrong?

As the Arab Spring shifted eastwards, it fuelled the idea of a democratic, pluralistic Syria. But ethnic and sectarian identity has always been of political importance: When Hafez al-Assad, from the Alawite minority, seized power in 1971, he was the first non-Sunni president. But though the Alawites hold key government and military positions, their political role should not be overestimated: The Ba'athist regime is religiously diverse and fervently secular.

The idea of a secular Syria did not remain unchallenged. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) had its own ambitions for a Syria based on Islamic ideals and principles, and in the mid-1970s started an insurgency that culminated in 1982 with their assault on Hama. The regime's devastating counter-attack, killing between 10,000 and 30,000 people, is well known.

Thirty years later, events in Tunisia and Egypt emboldened the Syrian population, as small, scattered demonstrations grew into countrywide popular protests. Unlike the MB uprising in the 1970s, the 2011 protests were not rooted in Islamist ambitions but called for general reforms. The protestors represented a cross-section of Syrian society as Sunnis, Christians, and even Alawites, took to the streets. But the uprising was soon hijacked by sectarian and geopolitical interests.

The southern town of Dara'a (known as the 'cradle of the revolution') was the starting point of the uprising. But after only a few months, armed rebellion erupted in northern Syria, where militant Sunni Islamists had long been established and the regime's brutal repression had turned the uprising violent. In the armed insurrection that followed, minor militias kept surfacing until most were consolidated into the FSA.

Although made up of military defectors, large parts of the FSA consisted of people and networks previously affiliated with the Brotherhood and other Islamist militants. Though the FSA was initially a relatively secular movement, as the civil war progressed it developed into a vanguard for Sunni grievances and soon was accompanied by a number of sectarian-based militias. The uprising attracted thousands of Sunnis from across the Middle East, predominantly from Lebanon and Iraq, where Shia majorities had gained political power at the Sunnis' expense. In Lebanon, the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2006 and Hezbollah's increasing dominance had diminished the Sunni minority's political significance. And in Iraq, the fall of Saddam and western intervention had left the Sunnis sidelined by a Shia majority. So the Syrian uprising gave the region's

Sunni Muslims an opportunity to regain geopolitical influence.

By fuelling the rebellion's demand for weapons and money, Saudi Arabia and Qatar saw the uprising as an opportunity to break the Shia crescent: a strategic alliance between Iran and Syria, which includes Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shia factions in Iraq. Since US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, this alliance has changed the regional balance of power and given Iran increased clout beyond its borders.

As the Arab Spring spread, there were fears that Iran could exploit the situation by exerting its influence on the substantial Shia populations of the Gulf. When the Shia majority took to the streets in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, concerned that the rebellion could spread to their oil producing and Shia dominated Eastern Region, intervened on the side of the ruling Sunni royal family. And it recognized the opportunity to further contain Iran's regional influence by supporting the rebel movement in Syria.

The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran is more than a geostrategic power struggle; it's a battle over the Islamic narrative. Driving this battle are the hegemonic ambitions of Saudi Arabia's homegrown strain of ultraconservative Wahhabi Islam. At the core of Wahhabism is a mission to recreate Islamic homogeneity at the expense of Islamic pluralism by enforcing religiously conservative rules of behavior and purging society of versions of Islam they deem heretical.

The Wahhabi clergy and the Saudi royal family had reached an agreement in the 18th century: The Wahhabis were given complete religious authority in return for promising not to challenge the royal family politically. Secure in Saudi Arabia and helped by Saudi petrodollars, the Wahhabis turned their focus to the wider Islamic world, funding educational institutions, including in Syria. This has led to a resurgence of Wahhabi theology at the expense of more traditional forms of Sunni theology.

Since 1979, Iran has had similar ambitions of exporting its Islamic Revolution by supporting Shia (and Sunni) Islamist movements across the Islamic world. The ayatollahs perceived the traditional monarchies as inherently un-Islamic and advocated a People's Republic under the guidance of a religious clergy, by revolution if necessary. This did not go down well with the Gulf monarchies and posed a challenge to the pan-Islamic ambitions of the Wahhabis.

Since the 1980s Saudi Arabia has financed Salafi movements and militants in a number of Muslim countries. Salafism, often referred to as the political counterpart of Wahhabi Islam, is far more authoritarian than the Islamism of the Brotherhood. And unlike the Iranian version, which allows a degree of religious pluralism, the Salafis seek to enforce complete homogeneity on Muslim society.

However, interwoven with the Wahhabi mission, as Samir Amghar, author of *Contemporary Salafism: Sectarian movements in the West*, explains, are Saudi Arabia's own geopolitical ambitions which aim to consolidate the kingdom's geostrategic interests through a network of political proxies rather than to 'salafize' the Muslim world.

In Syria, radical Salafism does not resonate with the average Sunni population. But with Saudi funding, the Salafist groups have grown exponentially more powerful than the more moderate or secular groups. According to Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIL has now become the strongest rebel group in northern Syria, largely due to its superior resources. The outcome has been intra-rebel rivalries, not only between the Salafis and the FSA, but also between the radical Salafist factions themselves. On the other side, the Syrian regime has the support of its ally Iran, and of Shia militants from Lebanon and Iraq who join ranks with pro-regime militias from Syria's many minorities and large secular population; they share a fear of what may await them if the regime falls.

In areas under their control, Salafist militants have established stringent forms of legislation and a draconian rule of law, and have systematically attacked religious minorities. They see this as a holy war (jihad) against Muslim heretics responsible for perverting the 'true' religion and have expressed ambitions for the establishment of a regional (and eventually pan-Islamic) 'Great Caliphate' in which the 'genuine' form of Islam will be restored.

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