

MERIA

THE SYRIAN JIHAD: REVIEW

By Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi*

The trajectory of the Syrian civil war has given rise to a flurry of books, which in relation to the Sunni jihadist component mostly focus on the Islamic State (IS). Charles Lister's new book The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency (2015, Hurst) attempts a more grand undertaking in trying to offer a granular account of the rise of the jihadist aspect of the insurgency against the Assad regime, following events chronologically from the period prior to the outbreak of the civil war and ending approximately at the time of the beginning of the overt Russian intervention in Syria in October 2015. While Lister's book may be a useful guide to military events, occasionally offering interesting insights, ultimately this work cannot be regarded as a definitive account.

THE SYRIAN JIHAD: REVIEW

The trajectory of the Syrian civil war has given rise to a flurry of books, which in relation to the Sunni jihadist component mostly focus on the Islamic State (IS). Charles Lister's new book *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (2015, Hurst) attempts a more grand undertaking in trying to offer a granular account of the rise of the jihadist aspect of the insurgency against the Assad regime. He chooses to follow events in a chronological order over fourteen chapters, the first three of which aim to provide background on economic and political conditions in Syria as well as on the regime's facilitation of jihadist activity prior to the outbreak of the civil war. The remaining chapters then go through the timeline of the Syrian civil war in periods of a few or several months per chapter with an interlude covering the history of IS in the eleventh chapter. The book's chronology ends approximately at the time of the beginning of the overt Russian intervention in Syria in October 2015.

Of course, Lister's project entails considerable attention devoted to IS. Yet it also focuses on the al-Qa'ida-aligned part of the insurgency, chiefly embodied in Jabhat al-Nusra ("The Support Front"), which has, in the time since the book's publication, rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham ("Conquest of al-Sham Front") after ostensibly dropping links to al-Qa'ida in July 2016. Alongside Jabhat al-Nusra are some smaller "third-way" entities that are aligned ideologically with, if not explicitly linked to, al-Qa'ida. This category includes the coalition called Jabhat Ansar al-Din ("Supporters of the Religion Front"), North Caucasian-led groups, the Turkistan Islamic Party led by ethnic Uyghurs, and Jund al-Aqsa ("Soldiers of al-Aqsa"), which, like many other groups within this category, has by now formally joined Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

Further, as part of his approach, Lister rightly chooses to examine the powerful movement called Ahrar al-Sham ("Free Men of al-Sham"), which appears to straddle a nebulous zone between the clearly jihadist groups and the more mainstream insurgency that may consist of many Islamist groups but operates within a clear national framework regarding Syria's future.

In principle, Lister's undertaking is an excellent idea. Too many of the books on IS, for example, do not really touch on the Syrian civil war with the kind of depth that might help the reader understand how it rose to such prominence inside Syria. Many only regurgitate basic chronological points of the war, sometimes confused in the basic facts. The author is a former fellow at the Brookings Doha institute in Qatar and currently a fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington

DC. Having also done work as a consultant with the Shaikh Group, he has extensive experience in the Track II initiatives which have been going on behind the scenes in Turkey and Europe and which aim to foster understandings among parties on all sides for an eventual political solution to the Syrian civil war. Lister's work in Track II initiatives and his broader research have entailed extensive contact with a broad spectrum of Syrian rebel groups as well as jihadists in both the al-Qa'ida and IS camps. In theory, therefore, one would hope for a highly incisive account of the Syrian jihad.

The end product, however, is ultimately a disappointment. To be sure, there are interesting bits in the book that are worth the time of both the general reader and specialist. For instance, the author offers useful behind-the-scenes material, partly drawing on his inside contacts, as regards the agitations by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—then the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq—to bring Jabhat al-Nusra under his formal command in the run-up to his unilateral announcement of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in April 2013.¹ These events constitute one of the most important episodes of the Syrian jihad, and of the jihad in a more global sense, in opening up the beginnings of the ongoing international rivalry between al-Qa'ida and IS. Noteworthy also is the back story on the formation of the Jaysh al-Fatah (“Army of Conquest”) coalition in spring 2015 led by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, the most powerful rebel coalition in northern Syria today. Lister shows that the discussions and planning went far back as the winter of 2014, as Turkey stepped up its backing for Ahrar al-Sham, convening discussions that included U.S.-backed factions regarding the formation of a bigger operations room that would first dislodge the regime from its military bases of Wadi al-Daif and al-Hamidiya and then move to take Idlib city.²

Yet it can be easy to miss these significant nuggets. In general, this book reads too much like an encyclopedic chronicle of various military developments that have taken place over the course of the Syrian civil war. The author frequently employs the adverb “meanwhile” in his narrative, using it to abruptly shift his focus to events occurring elsewhere geographically. As such, the various sections do not cohere together to produce a compelling account of the Syrian jihad through effectively connecting pieces of information.

Besides the book's lack of linkage of data points, Lister has devoted too much space to content of little analytical value, such as detailed summaries of the infamous IS beheading videos of foreign hostages, reproducing predictable threats to the West from IS executioner “Jihadi John,”³ recounting at length the kidnapping and execution of Japanese nationals by IS,⁴ and discussing whether or not aid worker Peter Kassig's beheading was staged through citation of readily available secondary material.⁵ In a similar vein, there is unnecessary reproduction of long chunks of easily accessible speeches by the likes of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani⁶ and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,⁷ much of which comprises rhetorical flourish which does not merit comment, or which could have been briefly paraphrased. One cannot help wondering whether the author has included so much of this material simply to fill a word count of some sort.

The result of these shortcomings is that the book is highly uneven. Many important events in the Syrian jihad are either omitted, referenced very briefly or dealt with inadequately in so far as there is a treatment of some length. Part of the problem may derive from lack of familiarity with Arabic source material. For instance, Lister's account of the development of IS-linked groups in southern Syria and the attending tensions that culminated in open clashes in late 2014⁸ is unsatisfactory. He mentions the assassination of the Afghan jihad veteran Ahmad Kassab al-Masalama in Deraa in November 2014, but does not explain what his position was or attempt to explain why the assassination might have taken place.

This is so despite evidence in Arabic source material at the time that showed Masalama was part of the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade (YMB), and that he was suspected of being a supporter of IS.⁹ Masalama was in fact one of the first links between YMB and IS, having gone to visit Raqqa after IS declared the Caliphate.¹⁰ YMB accused Jabhat al-Nusra both at the time of Masalama's death and in a subsequent video of being behind his assassination. Rather than touching on this essential information, Lister suddenly throws YMB's name into his chronicle of events without any real

explanation as to the background, leadership and power base of the group. In addition, he fails to mention the fact that YMB had abandoned the FSA Southern Front in summer 2014 and had clashed in that season with Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiya (HMI). HMI is a southern Syrian jihadist group mentioned repeatedly in Lister's book¹¹ without any real background account, despite concerns which began arising in spring 2015 that it too was connected with IS¹²—a development which is entirely omitted from the book. On top of all of these content deficiencies surrounding the development of IS affiliates in Deraa, no citations are given for this section.

Another event worthy of consideration here is Lister's treatment of the Qalb Lawze massacre of villagers at the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra in June 2015. The incident is of importance as it highlights the sensitive issue of how jihadists have treated populations of religious/ethnic minority origin under their rule in Syria.¹³ The village of Qalb Lawze—originally Druze—is located in the Jabal al-Summaq area in the north of Idlib province. Important context for the incident is missing in Lister's account. How did Jabhat al-Nusra come to have a presence in the area, such that its Tunisian commander could be confiscating property? Unfortunately, the author has not tied the group's dominance of the Jabal al-Summaq area with its expulsion of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front from Idlib province in late 2014.¹⁴ Nor does Lister even note the conversions to Sunni Islam forcibly imposed on the local population by Jabhat al-Nusra in January 2015, even though it was subtly referred to in Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani's interview with Ahmad Mansour of al-Jazeera Arabic in May 2015, a point which Lister curiously omits from his account of that pivotal interview.¹⁵

This point is highly relevant because Jabhat al-Nusra's approach towards local Druze inhabitants is identical to that of ISIS, which also imposed conversions to Sunni Islam on the population in late November 2013 when it had an extensive presence in Idlib province.¹⁶ Besides not referencing the central context points, Lister does not adequately explain the confiscations of homes: they were occurring as Jabhat al-Nusra wished to confiscate property of people from the area serving in the Syrian army and other regime forces, distributing the property to internally displaced persons and to its own members. Finally, there is no mention of Jabhat al-Nusra's promise to hold the perpetrators of the Qalb Lawze massacre accountable,¹⁷ and while the Tunisian commander was removed from his position, no trial was actually ever held against him.

Beyond these particular incidents, there are wider gaps in the book's content that are symptomatic of Lister's excessive focus on battles and estimated numbers of fighters. For example, there is no real consideration of how jihadist and rebel factions interact with the numerous local councils that have sprung up in areas outside of regime control.¹⁸ The absence of substantive discussion of jihadist and rebel judiciary authority is particularly striking. The Dar al-Qada, a *de facto* judiciary wing of Jabhat al-Nusra which was formed in mid-summer 2014, and which represents a significant evolution towards greater unilateralism on law and order, receives just one passing mention,¹⁹ thrown into the narrative without an account of its origins and development. In this passing reference, Lister offers no local context in his account of the particular moves by the Dar al-Qada's north Aleppo branch in January 2015 against the 'Free Police' structures in the area. In fact, the Dar al-Qada in the area has enjoyed wider support, whereas in parts of Idlib province the Dar al-Qada's existence has simply been equivalent to where a Jabhat al-Nusra stronghold can be found. This dynamic also explains the implementation by Dar al-Qada in north Aleppo of harsh *hudud* punishments such as stoning to death for certain offences.²⁰

To offer another example in the realm of judicial matters: Lister does not analyze Jabhat al-Nusra's machinations on Shari'a commissions at the macro and micro²¹ level in Deir az-Zor in detail—a glaring fault considering that Deir az-Zor arguably once constituted the group's most important holdings in Syria before they were lost to IS by mid-summer 2014. And yet another case: there is no mention, let alone discussion, of Ahrar al-Sham-supported service and judicial bodies like the Islamic Commission to Administer the Liberated Areas.²²

In terms of the book's factual accuracy, some errors crop up here and there, though their impact is not too grave. The official title of ISIS' immediate predecessor was *Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiya*

(“The Islamic State of Iraq”), not *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi'l-Iraq* (“The Islamic State in Iraq”) as Lister has it.²³ The ‘of/in’ distinction may seem pedantic, but it is important in illustrating the ambiguity of the Islamic State of Iraq’s relationship with al-Qa’ida, in that the name could be taken to imply an emirate project solely limited to Iraq’s borders and working within the grander framework of al-Qa’ida’s authority. The self-referencing was not always consistent, but once ISIS officially emerged, geography just became a matter of coincidence: the Islamic State happened to be in Iraq and al-Sham at the present time. The name change thus takes on greater significance since it can be seen as the first step towards a much more ambitious assertion of the desire to lead the resurrection of the Caliphate independent of al-Qa’ida’s directives.

Moreover, it is not true, as Lister claims, that no reliable evidence ever emerged of sectarian misconduct by the rebels and jihadists who took over the Armenian Christian town of Kessab in north Latakia spring 2014.²⁴ While nothing points to large-scale massacres, journalist Ruth Sherlock reported desecration of the town’s churches in a visit some time after the town had been retaken.²⁵ Contemporary evidence also suggested misconduct, such as Syria-based Saudi jihadi cleric Sheikh Muheissen’s tweets on the Battle of Anfal (as the offensive was known), celebrating the smashing of crosses and bottles of wine.²⁶ This conduct fits into a pattern that suggested a plan to remake the town as one of Islamic identity- something reflected in evidence at the time of an initiative called “Islamic Kessab.”²⁷ Another error of note is Lister’s confusion regarding the FSA group Liwa Allahu Akbar of Albukamal.²⁸ Lister reports that this group clashed with ISIS in September 2013, when in fact, the main clash was with Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁹ In this case, verifying the facts is not helped by Lister’s lack of citation of sources for the incident.

On the whole, Lister’s book could serve as a useful guide at times for a quick reference on military events in certain months of the Syrian civil war leading up to October 2015 or so. It also has occasionally interesting insights as explained earlier in this review. However, his work cannot be regarded as a definitive account of the jihadist insurgency in Syria and is not worth slogging through from start to finish if this is what one is looking for. The book certainly does not merit being considered a classic of jihadism literature, while comparisons of its writing style with that of Tom Clancy come across as sycophantic.³⁰

There is certainly room for constructive suggestions for a future edition of the book that would lead to considerable improvement. Unfortunately, the potential to have reasonable public debate is often drowned out by *ad hominem* attacks on Twitter, deriding the author as a stooge of Qatar and engaging in simple name-calling like “armchair Blister” and “Jihad Lister.”³¹ The first step for improving the book is to reduce the amount of content that does not have much analytical value. Certain episodes should also be revisited with the view to exploring more Arabic source material from the time and perhaps looking for relevant local contacts to shed further light if possible. In the course of 2016, the author has shown he has valuable insights on the rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham³²: this development will of course have to be incorporated into any future account of the Syrian jihad.

In any case, reviewing this book provides an important lesson for those covering the Syrian civil war more generally. While the airwaves of social media have been flooded with streams of information about military operations, group statements, formations of new coalitions and the like, we do not really have a clear picture of how the various rebel groups operate on the ground on a day-to-day basis. Understanding the internal dynamics and how personal relationships work between the factions—especially at the local level, which is of paramount importance—is severely hampered by lack of opportunity for researchers to report and observe independently on the ground in rebel-held Syria. This fact became readily apparent over the course of reading this book, as Lister has not been inside Syria even once during the war. In other words, the lack of first-hand experience of the war shows in the book. Even so, that is not something that should be used to mock the author: there are rational fears for one’s safety and practical obstacles to this kind of field work. In addition, it must be

stressed that it is possible to be on the ground and be misled and get things wrong. This caution applies regardless of which side one chooses to embed with and cover during the war.³³

Of course, it is possible to establish connections with sources on the ground through online means and personal meetings outside of Syria, but this approach also has problematic limitations. One's information on a group may only be as good as what is said by one's contacts in that group, but can we necessarily be sure that the information will not be spun according to what the source or sources may perceive to be the outsider's agenda (for instance, advocacy work in policy circles)?

In the end, it was difficult to come away from Lister's book with a sense of getting even remotely close to *the* inside story on the jihadist factions, but it is unlikely that an account will emerge anytime soon that will bring us much closer to this ideal. Considering that Lister is widely presented as an authority on the Syrian insurgency and is being paid to research the phenomenon, we should all be clear in acknowledging what we can and cannot know.

**Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi is a Rubin Fellow at the Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya. He is also the Jihad-Intel Research Specialist at the Middle East Forum. He is a graduate from Brasenose College, Oxford University, with a degree in Classics and Oriental Studies. His research interests primarily concern Iraq and Syria, focusing on armed groups on all sides of the conflicts therein. He has given expert testimony at the British House of Commons and has been published in and made media appearances on BBC News, France 24, Al-Jazeera English, USA Today, The Economist, El Mundo, PJMedia, and more.*

NOTES

¹ pp. 124-6 (all page numbers alone refer to Lister's book, *The Syrian Jihad* (2015, Hurst))

² pp. 341-3

³ pp. 281-2, 309

⁴ pp. 325-8

⁵ p. 309

⁶ pp. 289-91

⁷ pp. 239-40

⁸ p. 313

⁹ "Assassination of an important leader from the supporters of the Dawla organization in Deraa, and eyes towards Jordan," STEP Agency, November 11, 2014 (<http://stepagency-sy.net/archives/23491>). It should be noted Masalama was a Shari'i (cleric/religious official) in YMB.

¹⁰ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Jihadi Threat on Israel's Northern Border," MERIA, May 15, 2016 (<http://www.rubincenter.org/2016/05/the-jihadi-threat-on-israels-northern-border/>)

¹¹ pp. 169, 172, 223, 285, 313, 314, 324, 339

¹² "Harakat al-Muthanna supports the 'Islamic State and the Caliph' and Da'esh secretly threatens some of the Free Army factions in Quneitra," STEP Agency, March 8, 2015 (<http://stepagency-sy.net/archives/37383>)

¹³ pp. 360-1

¹⁴ pp. 301-2

¹⁵ pp. 353-4

¹⁶ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Additional Notes on the Druze of Jabal al-Summaq," October 6, 2015 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/10/additional-notes-on-the-druze-of-jabal-al-summaq>)

¹⁷ "Jabhat al-Nusra statement about the events of the village of Qalb Lawze in Idlib countryside," Syrian Press Center, June 23, 2015 (<https://syrianpc.com/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84->

<https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/03/archive-of-jabhat-al-nusra-dar-al-qada-documents>)

¹⁸ An excellent study on local councils and interactions with armed actors has recently come out, looking at the case of Idlib province. See Sam Heller, “Keeping the Lights on in Rebel Idlib,” The Century Foundation, November 29, 2016 (<https://tcf.org/content/report/keeping-lights-rebel-idlib/>)

¹⁹ p. 322

²⁰ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Dar al-Qada Documents,” March 3, 2015 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/03/archive-of-jabhat-al-nusra-dar-al-qaa-documents>)

²¹ On the micro-level: e.g. in the important town of Albukamal bordering Iraq.

²² “What is the Islamic Commission to Administer the Liberated Areas? What are its activities?” El-Dorar, August 22, 2015 (<http://eldorar.com/node/84377>)

²³ p. 143

²⁴ p. 212

²⁵ Ruth Sherlock, “Dispatch: Syria’s rebels ‘burned down churches and destroyed Christian graves,’” The Telegraph, January 3, 2015 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11323109/Dispatch-Syria-rebels-burned-down-churches-and-destroyed-Christian-graves.html>)

²⁶ Muheisseni’s tweets collected on March 24, 2014 (<https://justpaste.it/marsad26>)

²⁷ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Latakia Front,” Brown Moses Blog, April 26, 2014 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/14706/the-latakia-front>)

²⁸ p. 166

²⁹ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Factions of Abu Kamal,” Brown Moses Blog, December 18, 2013 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/14161/the-factions-of-abu-kamal>). A clearer copy of Jabhat al-Nusra’s statement issued on September 16, 2013 regarding its clashes with Liwa Allahu Akbar can be found here: <https://justpaste.it/jabhatnusraalbukamalstatementsep>. Thus, Lister’s claim that Jabhat al-Nusra had grown close to Liwa Allahu Akbar is absurd.

³⁰ James Denselow, “The rise and rise of the Syrian jihad,” The Huffington Post, November 12, 2016 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-rise-and-rise-of-the-syrian-jihad_us_582731e1e4b057e23e3143f9?)

³¹ A sample collection of these insults can be viewed here: <https://justpaste.it/insultsagainstcharleslister>

³² E.g. Charles Lister, “The dawn of mass jihad: Success in Syria fuels al-Qa’ida’s evolution,” CTC Sentinel, September 7, 2016 (<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-dawn-of-mass-jihad-success-in-syria-fuels-al-qaidas-evolution>)

³³ For example, the rebel group Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, founded in Aleppo in 2012 and primarily operating in that area, has acquired a reputation as the archetype ‘baddie rebels’ since a video emerged of members beheading a child earlier this year. There appear to be attempts in light of this incident to project the group’s role onto past events despite the lack of any real supporting evidence from the time. An example is the fall of the town of Harem in Idlib province in 2012 as related by regime supporters from the town who subsequently fled to Latakia. Nothing substantiates their claim that Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki played any meaningful role in the battle for the town. See Nour Samaha, “Internally displaced Syrians find shelter, but few friends, in Latakia,” Al-Monitor, September 8, 2016 (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/syria-internally-displaced-latakia-idlib.html>)