

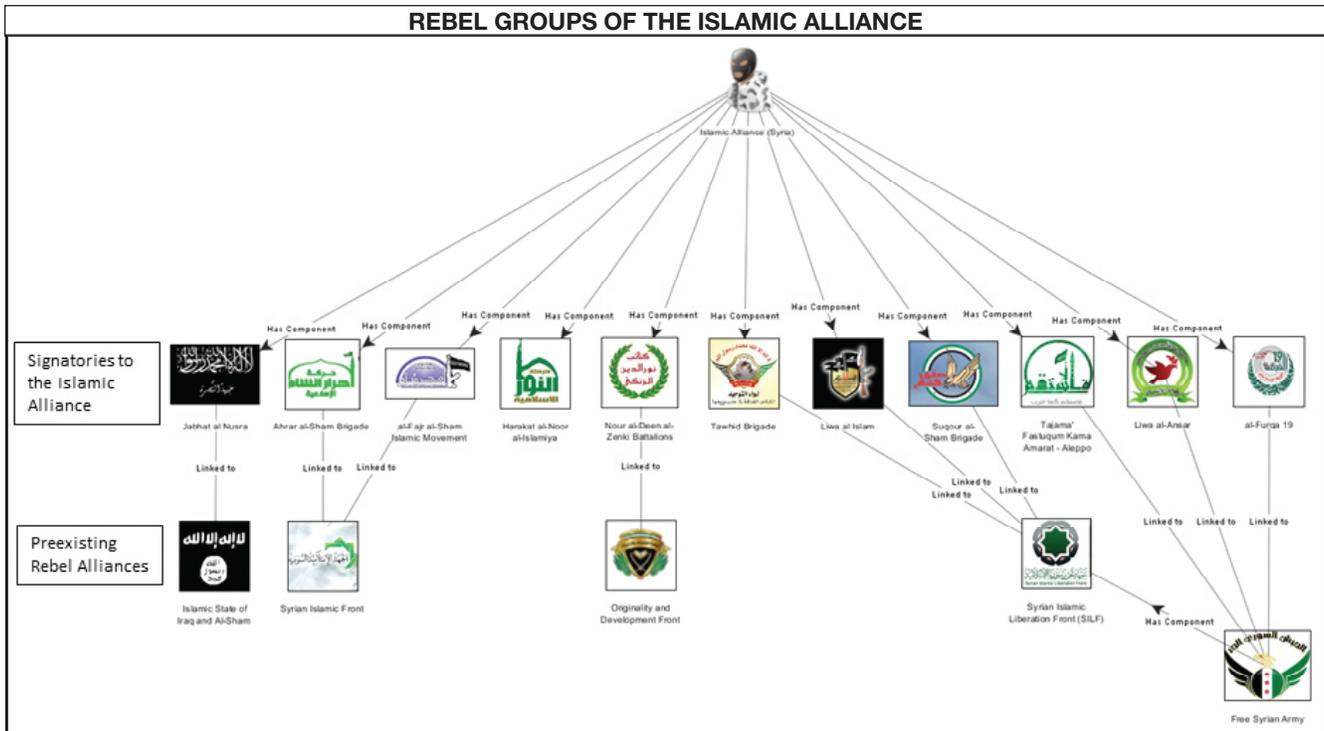
THE ISLAMIC ALLIANCE EMERGES

A new coalition has formed among eleven Syrian rebel organizations, according to a statement that Liwa al-Tawhid released late on September 24. Liwa al-Tawhid has hitherto fallen under the umbrella of the Syrian Military Council. The new Islamic alliance—which includes some of the most powerful factions from the FSA, the Syrian Islamic Front, and also Jabhat al-Nusra—aims to fight to establish an Islamic state under Shari’a law in Syria. It also rejects the Syrian National Coalition and the leadership of Ahmad Tohme—recently elected as the head of the Syrian opposition’s interim government—by name. The signatories to the document claim to represent the following organizations:

Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Suqor al-Sham, Liwa al-Islam, Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya, Harakat al-Noor al-Islamiya, Kata’ib Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Ansar, Tajam’u Fastaqm Kamr Umrat & Al-Forqat al-Tisa’a ‘Ashr

The following graph, made with Palantir, represents the eleven rebel brigades that signed the Islamic alliance document released on September 24th near Aleppo. It also shows their existing alliances, which include all of the major blocs in Syria (the FSA, the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), and the al-Qaeda affiliates). At this time it remains unclear whether the FSA brigades that signed on to this alliance intend to maintain their FSA ties or break with the coalition completely.

Initial reports on this event (and some still circulating) indicated that there were 13 brigades who signed on to the document instead of 11. The reason for this discrepancy is that the original text version of the brigade list posted on Liwa al-Tawhid’s website listed two additional brigades, although these brigade names did not appear on the scanned signature page of the hard copy of the document or in the list that was enumerated in the video announcement, and



was subsequently removed from the website text. The two other brigades were Liwa al-Haqq (SIF, Homs area), and Liwa al-Forqaan (Quneitra area). According to a Tawhid brigade spokesman, both brigades were present for the drafting process but were not at the signing ceremony. Although some of the remaining brigades have a presence throughout the country, the strength of the II alliance signatories is concentrated largely in Aleppo, and the two additional brigades would have served to bolster their southern credentials.

The fact that this announcement comes amidst a spike in incidents in which the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has clashed with the Free Syrian Army units and, atypically, Syria's other al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, raises the possibility that this new coalition is also a move against ISIS by its Syrian nationalist rivals.

This move follows a chain of events on the battlefield through which ISIS took the town of Azaz in Northern Aleppo and the nearby Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey, which serves as an important supply route for rebel forces and was previously held by Asifat al-Shamal, a Free Syrian Army-linked brigade. The maneuver to take the border crossing began with an incident between local ISIS fighters and members of the FSA-linked Asifat al-Shamal brigade on September 18.

The timeline of events is as follows:

SEPTEMBER 18, 2013

- ISIS raided the al-Ahli hospital in Azaz to arrest a German doctor. When Asifat al-Shamal refused to hand the doctor over to ISIS, clashes broke out between the two groups and ISIS killed two Asifat al-Shamal fighters.
- ISIS assassinated Amr Diab Hajulh, a media activist affiliated with Asifat al-Shamal. Asifat al-Shamal and activists in Azaz called for the Tawhid Brigade to intervene and join in the fight against ISIS.

SEPTEMBER 19, 2013

- Clashes broke out between ISIS and Asifat al-Shamal in Azaz. ISIS also raided the Azaz Media Center, interrupting their news coverage. The Tawhid brigade arrived in Azaz.
- Liwa al-Tawhid mediated a ceasefire agreement between ISIS and Asifat al-Shamal and published it. The agreement was signed by Abu Abdelrahman al-Kuweiti (ISIS) and Captain Abu Ghazala Al Rashid (Asifat al-Shamal brigade). The agreement called for the release of prisoners held by ISIS within 24 hours and for the implementation of standard checkpoints monitored by al-Tawhid.

SEPTEMBER 22, 2013

- The Asifat al-Shamal military administration issued a statement saying the agreement was nullified because ISIS failed to release its prisoners after 48 hours.
- ISIS released a statement accusing Asifat al-Shamal of treason citing several examples. Asifat al-Shamal then wrote a response defending itself against ISIS's accusations.

By Monday, September 23, it was clear that ISIS was in full control of Azaz. The internet was abuzz with talk of the impending battle between FSA brigades and ISIS. The battle had even been given a name, Nahrawan, after a



famous battle of early Islam, in which Ali bin Abi Talib, the fourth caliph, fought and defeated the army of a heretical group of Muslims known as Kharijites, who can be seen as ideological ancestors of al-Qaeda.

Many were expecting Liwa al-Tawhid to release its statement announcing the Battle of Nahrawan on September 24. The coalition formation statement that was published instead could be a preparatory step, a pragmatic consolidation that precedes any sort of direct confrontation with ISIS. The fact that JN has joined a coalition with non al-Qaeda affiliates and that ISIS is not currently a part of this coalition could signal a break between ISIS and JN. It is far too soon to confirm such a break.

The coalition could also represent another major inflection point in the organization of the rebels in Syria. Repudiation of the interim government is a major development and cause for concern, though perhaps unsurprising given its inefficacy. The greater consequence may lie in the implicit departure of this coalition from the leadership of the SMC, the unified military command of the opposition. Erosion of FSA-controlled ground lines of communication across the Turkish border combined with an abandonment by some of its most powerful brigades has the potential to leave the SMC in shambles.

Reactions from many of the relevant players both inside and outside of Syria have yet to surface. One quick response has come from Asifat al-Shamal, the embattled brigade from Azaz. Their quick show of support strengthens the case that this new coalition is a move not only against the ineffective interim leadership, but also against the encroaching forces of ISIS.

On September 26th, the Syrian National Coalition posted a statement on their website entitled: “The Timing of the Brigades’ Statement Is Not Appropriate, But We Should Understand Their Concerns.” that contains an initial response to the Islamic alliance.

Key takeaways from the SNC statement:

- The alliance that was announced is not representative of the Free Syrian Army.
- The future of Syria will be decided at the ballot box by the Syrian people.
- This alliance announcement was poorly timed due to the SNC’s upcoming UN visit, and will cause dangerous schisms in the opposition forces.
- Al-Qaeda has an “un-Syrian” agenda and Jabhat al-Nusra should not have been included in this alliance. The governing body of Syria should maintain dialogue with all of the signatories to the document except for Jabhat al-Nusra.
- The coalition’s interim government is critical for Syria’s future, and the leader of the SNC is connected to the people on the inside of the country.