



# The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency

By Charles R. Lister

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The eruption of the anti-Assad revolution in Syria has had many unintended consequences, among which is the opportunity it offered Sunni jihadists to establish a foothold in the heart of the Middle East. That Syria's ongoing civil war is so brutal and protracted has only compounded the situation, as have developments in Iraq and Lebanon. Ranging across the battlefields and international borders have been dozens of jihadi Islamist fighting groups, of which some coalesced into significant factions such as Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State.

This book assesses and explains the emergence since 2011 of Sunni jihadist organizations in Syria's fledgling insurgency, charts their evolution and situates them within the global Islamist project. Unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters have joined such groups, who will almost certainly continue to host them. Thus, external factors in their emergence are scrutinized, including the strategic and tactical lessons learned from other jihadist conflict zones and the complex interplay between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and how it has influenced the jihadist sphere in Syria. Tensions between and conflict within such groups also feature in this indispensable volume.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Lister's knowledge of the various groups is impressive ... [The Syrian Jihad] is an indispensable guide to the different jihadi factions." -- *New York Times*

"Lister has done yeoman's work in tracing how the peaceful uprising that began in 2011 was hijacked by an Islamist insurgency that now threatens global security ... as [he] persuasively argues, ISIS is itself a product of Mr. Assad's evil regime." -- *Wall Street Journal*

"He wants to tell the story of the emergence and evolution of the struggle of Sunni jihadists and their Syrian Salafist allies against President Bashar al-Assad, and he tells it with exceptional erudition and lucidity... [Lister's] wide-ranging access gives the book a vitality that combines with the author's comprehensive analysis of Syria, its political structures and its history to give the most detailed account yet written of how Sunni jihadists have come to dominate an (admittedly loose) anti-regime movement... Lister has produced a work that is required reading for both experts and the general reader alike."--*Prospect Magazine*

"The Syrian Jihad is an insightful and comprehensive account of Syria's violent descent into civil war and the rise of Al-Qaeda's offspring in that war. This is essential reading for understanding the most difficult and complex international crisis facing the world community today." -- Bruce Riedel, Brookings Institution Intelligence Project, and author of *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad*

"Lister ably illuminates the jihadist labyrinth, tracing the roles of Chechens and Uzbeks, and crucially, of the Iraqi groups preceding ISIL ... *The Syrian Jihad* is at once the definitive guide to such groups and the most comprehensive blow-by-blow military account of the war thus far." -- *The National*

"Charles is the Syria expert whose work other Syria experts read. He uniquely combines strategic insight and forensic analytical skills to tell it like it is on the ground and -- crucially -- foretell what will happen next. On something as complex as the Syrian crisis, Lister's voice is authoritative." -- Gareth Bayley, UK Special Representative for Syria

"There can be few people better qualified than Charles Lister to describe and explain the evolution of extremist groups in Syria and the complexities of the insurgency. He does so with great skill and authority in *The Syrian Jihad*, an invaluable aid to understanding what will surely be a defining conflict of our age." --

Richard Barrett, former Director of Global Counter Terrorism Operations for the British Secret Intelligence Service, and coordinator of the United Nations Al-Qaeda-Taliban Monitoring Team

"A wonderful book which sets the standard for our understanding of the course and implications of Syria's war. Lister's writing is detailed and reliable, and captures the complexity of the conflict as well as its broad themes. *The Syrian Jihad* ranges more broadly across Islamist rebel landscape than other books currently available on the topic and will make an enduring contribution." -- Marc Lynch, author of *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy Across the Middle East*

"Charles Lister's book answers urgent questions about the modern Levant: where did the Syrian uprising come from, who have been its key actors and how has the revolutionary movement, especially the Islamist elements, evolved under the enormous pressures of violence and external powers? Lister himself knows the Islamist factions very well, and his book will become a standard reference." -- Robert Ford, former US Ambassador to Syria

"Lister's book will certainly become a classic of the literature on the Syrian civil war. This richly-documented study actually consists of two intertwined histories, as the account of the Jihadi insurgency, a tour de force in its own right, is complemented with in-depth analysis of the broader military developments." - Thomas Pierret, Lecturer in Contemporary Islam, University of Edinburgh and author of *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*

"Charles Lister offers compelling arguments woven together in a convincing and readable narrative. Drawing heavily on first-hand interviews, this ambitious and superbly organised account of the trajectories of Syria's various jihadi groups ranks it among the best books on how ISIS and Al Qaeda metastasized in the brutal chaos of the Syrian war." -- Andrew Tabler, Martin J. Gross Fellow in the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute

"The sheer volume of [Lister's] research, interviews, field visits and intimate familiarity with the various Syrian players leave no stone unturned." --*PassBlue.com*

"The Syrian Jihad is a comprehensive and authentic history of the Syrian jihad, month by month. It gives an unprecedented insight into this violent world. With his unmatched scholarship, Lister has written the best book on the Syrian jihad."

--The Washington Book Review

About the Author

Charles R. Lister is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution's Doha Center. He was formerly head of the Middle East and North Africa section at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre. From January 2016, he will be based in Washington, DC.

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