

# Why Jihadis Care About Water

## *An Exploration of Jabhat al-Nusra's Jihadi Hydro-Governance*

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and Oriental Languages

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to address how and why Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaida affiliate group, provided water related public services or what I have labeled *jihadi hydro-governance*, during the war in Syria. Before doing so, I highlight some pre-existing and developing variables which affected their governance strategies, such as the effects of climate change, mismanagement of water resources by the state prior to 2011 and how war effects water infrastructure. The provision of water had to be addressed by Jabhat al-Nusra during their presence in the Syrian civil war, 2011-2016. Unlike other resources, there is no substitute for water. Hence, without sufficient water supply for drinking, cooking, sanitation and so forth, the civilians living in the areas under their control the, could not have survived for over eight years. This raises the question to how Jabhat al-Nusra used water as a tool of governance during the Syrian civil war.

Existing research on water management and conflict tend to include a state-centric focus and neglect one specifically for non-state armed actors(NSAAs). As this study shows, NSAAs during conflict, if they have the capacity and the experience, manage water in accordance to the context of which they find themselves in.

Through analysing al-Nusra made audio-visual material, social media usage, NGO reports, interviews with water experts operating in Syria and two locals from Raqqa, I discovered that the evolution of al-Nusra's governance, the means in which the group tackled the problems regarding delivering basic services and their cooperation with outside actors, to meet the needs of the civilians, can provide an indication on the importance of water in the eyes of al-Nusra. Additionally, I address the level of which their hydro-governance has been Islamized, by highlighting the matter of distribution practices.

## **Acknowledgments**

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In addition, I would like to thank Teije Donker, for his knowledge on rebel and jihadi governance in Northern Syria, which gave me valuable insight on the governing practices in both Raqqa and Aleppo.

Thanks to Erik Skare, Marcus Irgens, Robert Wood, Martine Kopstad Floeng, as well as my class mates for guiding me through the process of writing a master thesis and their selfless generosity.

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Sjur Kristian Moen Tveit,

June 9, 2019

## Notes on Arabic Transliterations

I base my transliteration on the guidelines of chart presented by the International Journal of Middle East Studies.<sup>1</sup> In accordance to these guidelines I use diacritical marks and italics when I present the names of an organization or rebel group in Arabic word for the first time.

However, geographical locations, personal and organizational names, will be written in as they are normally presented in English speaking media. For example, in the case of the southern city of *Dar ʿā*, which is mostly referred to as Daraa in English, the latter version will be used.

Furthermore, I have chosen to transliterate names and concepts according to how it is written in Modern Standard Arabic or classical Arabic (*fuṣḥā*), and therefore not focus on how it is pronounced. One example is the name al-Sham, which refers to the area of the Levant, and is pronounced *ash-shām*. For the sake of simplicity my transliterations of formal Arabic will exclude modes and cases.

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<sup>1</sup> “IJMES Transliteration system for Arabic, Persian and Turkish,” International Journal of Middle East Studies, last modified April, 2014, accessed May, 8. 2014, <http://ijmes.ws.gc.cuny.edu/files/2014/04/TransChart.pdf>

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AS	<i>Ḥarakat Aḥrār al-Shām al-Islāmiyya</i>	The Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant
AQ	<i>al-Qā'ida or Qā'idat al-Jihād</i>	The Base, The base of Holy War
FSA	<i>al-Jaysh al-Sūriyy al-Ḥurr</i>	Free Syrian Army
IS	<i>al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya</i>	The Islamic State
ISI	<i>al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fi-l-'Irāq</i>	The Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	<i>al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi-l-'Irāq wa-l-Shām</i>	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JN	<i>Jabhat al-Nuṣra li Ahl al-Shām min Mujāhidī al-Shām fi Ṣāḥat al-Jihād</i>	The Support Front for the People of Greater al-Sham from the Fighters of al-Sham in The Field of Jihad (Referred to as al-Nusra)
HTS	<i>Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām</i>	The Organization for the Liberation of the Levant. Or, Levant Liberation Committee
The GDS	<i>al-'Idāra al-'Āmma lil-Khadamāt</i>	The General Directorate for Services <sup>2</sup>

Note: In this thesis I will refer to ISI, ISIS or IS in accordance with the time in which the groups existed.

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<sup>2</sup> The translation of the word *al-'idāra* (directorate) can also mean management or administration in English. The various transliterations are used by al-Nusra. On their Facebook page they use the word “management”. The same goes for *al-'āmma* (general), which also can be translated into “public”, which is also used by al-Nusra. For the sake of clarification, I will continue to use “General Directorate for Services” (GDS).

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# 1. Introduction

In September 2013, the Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra posted a video via their *Himam News Agency*, depicting several men repairing water wells and electrical transformers in the outskirts of Daraa.<sup>3</sup> Two months earlier, the same group had published a video of what appears to be al-Nusra fighters, cleaning the streets of Daraa.<sup>4</sup> Why did these jihadists spend their time cleaning the streets of Daraa and repairing water wells when they had a war to win? And, why did al-Nusra care to make videos of people providing water to households?

These are questions I intend to address throughout this study. I aim to establish a better understanding of how non-state armed actors (NSAAs) in the Syrian civil war have provided public services during the period of 2011-2016. The main group of inquiry in this study is Jabhat al-Nusra, which was an al-Qaida affiliate fighting the Government of Syria (GoS) from the beginning of the war in 2011. Later in 2014, the group faced another adversary, the so-called Islamic State (IS), a confrontation which came to define al-Nusra's governance practices.

In order to address these issues, I have tried to bring together two separate strands of academic literature: an existing state-centric literature on water management and an emerging corpus of scholarship on rebel governance, of which jihadi rebel governance is an important part. In addition, I will present a set of underlying variables which most likely have affected the ways in which the NSAAs in Syria addressed the governance of water resources during the war. These variables include the effects of climate change on water supplies in Syria, the water mismanagement of the GoS prior to 2011, and war's effect on water infrastructure.

## 1.1. The Research Question

To engage in the matter of how Jabhat al-Nusra provided public services, and in what ways the group addressed the pre-existing and developing variables, I have chosen this research question for this study:

*How has water been used as a tool of governance by Jabhat al-Nusra during the war in Syria?*

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<sup>3</sup> Jihadology.net. "Report #26: Repairing Water Wells and Electrical Transformers to Benefit the Muslims - Dar'ā". 28.10.2013. URL: <https://jihadology.net/2013/09/28/new-video-message-from-himam-news-agency-report-26-repairing-water-wells-and-electrical-transformers-to-benefit-the-muslims-dara/>

<sup>4</sup> Jihadology.net. "Report #2: On Some Water and Hygiene Services Provided to the people of Dar'ā". 10.07.2013. <https://jihadology.net/2013/07/10/new-video-message-from-himam-news-agency-report-2-on-some-water-and-hygiene-services-provided-to-the-people-of-dara/>

In the research question, there is an underlying assumption that water has been used as a governing tool by al-Nusra in Syria. The research question is built upon my hypothesis for this project: Al-Nusra engaged in what I will term *jihadi hydro-governance*<sup>5</sup> because they understood the importance of maintaining popular support. Providing basic services to cover the needs of the Syrian people, including securing public water distribution, was essential if al-Nusra was to strengthen its ideological claim in Syria. Thus, water became important to al-Nusra, due to its importance to the Syrian population. In addition, as part of the question (and the answer to it), by asking how al-Nusra turned to hydro-governance, I see the need to address the question why they performed the hydro-governance as well.

Hence, I will present in this thesis how and why al-Nusra performed hydro-governance. I believe the issue of water had to be addressed by every non-state armed actor (NSAA) present during the war in Syria. Without sufficient water supply for drinking, cooking, sanitation, etc., the Syrian opposition and civilians living in opposition-held areas, could not have been able to survive.

The capacity and the extent of a NSAA's hydro-governance practices, rest upon several crucial factors; the goals and the methods in which a NSAA wants to achieve them, the governing experience or willingness by the actor, the amount of pressure from the civilians in the area, and status of the water resource. Some of the factors can be less accessible than others, for a master student trying to understand the extent of hydro-governance by a NSAA. I have concentrated on their practices and methods, rather than their goals, for this study, due to the accessibility to document and analyse with an amount of certainty.

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<sup>5</sup> Jihadi hydro-governance is water related governing strategies by a jihadi rebel group. The term includes ideological, pragmatic and socio-political aspects of governance. For more on the matter, see chapter 3.5.2.

## 1.2. The Structure of the Study

In the *second chapter*, I will present the methods of which I have approached this task, and discuss the implications regarding ethics, limitations and accountability.

In *chapter three* I will present fitting theories and give an overview of the existing literature with relevance to this study. The chapter aims to establish a bridge between the existing state-centric theories on water and the developing literature on rebel governance.

In *chapter four* I present the context and the historical background to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and the evolution of their governing practices. Finally, I highlight the consequences of war on the water infrastructures and its distribution.

In *chapter five* I discuss in what ways Jabhat al-Nusra has performed jihadi hydro-governance, what their challenges were and explore why the group made the choices they did in the field of hydro-governance. I also, discuss the level of water management cooperation among the actors in Syria, and finally, I devote some attention to discussing to what extent al-Nusra and IS were able to Islamize their provision of hydro-governance.

The *sixth* and final chapter I conclude this study and present a summary of the main findings.

## 2. Methods

This master's thesis builds on fieldwork conducted in Jordan between September and December 2018. The fieldwork was primarily a process of collecting data from online archives and websites, as well as conducting interviews. Notably, I carried out three expert interviews with professionals with experience with water management in Syria during the civil war, and two online-interviews in Arabic with Syrians who had been present in areas where the Syrian opposition (including al-Nusra), the Government of Syria and ISIS (later IS) had governed.

This chapter consists of two parts. First, I present my fieldwork in Jordan and highlight the difficulties stemming from not being able to conduct fieldwork in the country that concerns my thesis, namely Syria. I then address the limitations and strengths of this approach. In the second part, I explore the different kinds of sources that I have consulted for this study in order to shed light on how Jabhat al-Nusra (and the Islamic State) used water as a means of governance. Additionally, I will address the water-related propaganda, in order to grasp the relevance of water as portrayed in al-Nusra's online publications. Finally, I will discuss the matters related to the research ethics of this study.

### 2.1 Case Selection

There was, and still is, an abundance of various non-state armed actors (NSAAs) engaged in the war in Syria, whose aims and behaviour to a large extent vary. Consequently, and due to the limitations of this study, I had to narrow the scope of my research. Essentially, I had to identify what Seawright and Gerring call the "primordial task of the case study researcher,"<sup>6</sup> that is to pick the main subject of focus. With most of the information gathered from Syria and Iraq on NSAAs' ways of governing, focuses on IS, I decided to centre on a NSAA partly neglected by existing literature (in terms of governance). Because of the sufficient existence of relevant data, I chose Jabhat al-Nusra. By the time of writing, the group has ceased to exist and had rebranded itself twice, as it merged with other groups. Some of the group's leadership and practices has survived, making studies into al-Nusra still relevant. So does the

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<sup>6</sup> Seawright, Jason and Gerring, John, "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options," *Political Research Quarterly* 61, nr. 2 (June 2008): 294, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912907313077>.

fact that it was an affiliate with still existing al-Qaeda (AQ). Studying practices of jihadi hydro-governance of an AQ-affiliate might provide new insight into the broader question of AQ's rebel governance strategies and its evolution over the past few years. Due to the vast amount of literature and analysis produced on the Islamic State (IS), I saw an opportunity to compare IS and al-Nusra, with regards to their governing practices focusing on water especially. Initially, I used IS as a "back-ground case"<sup>7</sup> to al-Nusra and created a point of departure to understand al-Nusra's jihadi hydro-governance.

Starting with a wide perspective on water management and NSAAs' activities in Syria, I narrowed down the research. I chose to divide my study into two relevant time periods according to and confined my analysis to IS and al-Nusra. When I started looking into which of the NSAAs in Syria that provided, or still provide, "governmental-like" services, I discovered they were mainly four groups that could be of interest: The Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State, Ahrar al-Sham, and Jabhat al-Nusra. Eventually, I ended up focusing on the latter group, al-Nusra. However, for the sake of contextualization and comparative perspectives, I kept on collecting information on all the mentioned actors.

As for the part of this study which focuses on the aspect of water and the availability of it, I found it relevant to include five to eight years prior to 2011, in order to include any important factors that might have affected the water situation in Syria and the way al-Nusra and IS might have used it to govern.

## **2.2. The Fieldwork**

I was unable to carry out fieldwork in Syria due to the civil war. Thus, I chose to conduct fieldwork in Jordan, due to the fact that Jordan is Syria's neighbour and have been involved in the Syrian war, for strategic domestic, regional and international reasons.<sup>8</sup> I considered Jordan to be a suitable base from where to conduct the research for this study. In addition, I chose Jordan because of my preferred knowledge of Arabic. Turkey could also have been a suitable base for this type of fieldwork, due to the close ties to the Syrian opposition and the number of NGOs working from the country. Yet, due to my limited knowledge of Turkish

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<sup>7</sup> A back-ground case is the notion of using a case to understand the main subject of an inquiry. I will use some information regarding the governmental conduct of IS to highlight and discuss the findings related to al-Nusra at a later stage. For more on back-ground case see: Seawright and Gerring, "Case Selection Techniques,"

<sup>8</sup> Jordan has taken part in military operation against IS and supported some of the more moderate oppositional groups, as well as providing shelter to a large amount of Syrian refugees. See Phillips, Christopher. "Jordan's smart Syria strategy". 23.06.2017. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/jordans-smart-syria-strategy-0>

language and culture contra my almost two year's experiences from living in Jordan and Lebanon, I chose the latter.

The second challenge to this study, besides not doing fieldwork in the country of inquiry, was the challenges of doing research on an ongoing conflict. To mitigate these challenges, I chose to limit the period from 2011 to 2016<sup>9</sup>, which would give the project a contemporary historical perspective. As numerous scholars have done before me – researching rebel and jihadi groups in conflict zones without being present themselves – I was determined to find the necessary solutions in order to make the project work. Thus, my first step was to contact relevant actors located in Jordan, to interview.

Before I started to conduct my interviews, I saw the need to prepare myself by looking for data on the general water situation in Syria. This process made me realize that factors like the weather, climate change and the country's water-infrastructure, probably affected how al-Nusra and IS had provided general services to the public in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, I aimed to gain a general picture of the water situation in Syria and gather reports, statistics and analyses which was accessible online, before starting interviews.

### **3.2.1. The Interviews**

I spent the good parts of three months conducting research in Jordan. The country's strategic positioning and its ties to western states mean that Jordan had witnessed a great influx of foreign NGOs operating in Syria out of Jordan. This, as it turned out, provided me with a reasonable amount of information on my subject. I was able to interview professionals, mainly working with NGOs, with experience and knowledge on both the water situation in Syria and NSAAs' conduct during the war. Some of the humanitarian NGOs in Jordan had been working inside Syria, either by themselves or through a third-party actor, to deliver their services into war-torn areas.

I reached out to regional experts with the relevant knowledge from the region; within the field of WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene). These included different UN-departments and other NGOs with a focus on water, all of them holding experience from the field of water in Syria. This led to two expert interviews with professionals from two different NGOs, stationed in Amman, but operating in Syria, as well as another interview later in Norway. The expert interviews provided me with valuable information on the general

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<sup>9</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra existed from 2011 to 2016. The group rebranded itself 28 July 2016 as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. It repeated the procedure 28 January 2017 with its transformation into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

water situation in Syria and enlightened me regarding certain important events that became defining for this project. I had prepared questions for the interviews and planned to keep them semi-structured, but due to the vast amount of information, the interviews became similar to a long conversation. In addition, this conversation was defined by the discoveries I made during the conversation since most of this information was not public, which made it difficult for me to prepare a structured interview beforehand.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, in order to get impressions and experiences from Syrians living under these NSAAs, I conducted two online interviews via Facebook Messenger with residents of the Raqqa area. The interviews were set up by an acquaintance of mine, with roots from the same area. I would have conducted more, but due to my lack of network in Syria, the know-how in terms of finding these people and the limited time, I was not able to reach further. The interviews were done in written Arabic, which made the information easier to translate and therefore more understandable. Both interviews provided me with interesting findings and perspectives of NSAAs governing methods, which I will use later in this thesis in order to shed light on some of my findings.

### **2.3. Access and Limitations**

Researching wars and conflicts often include several complications. First, the field of inquiry is too dangerous to operate in. Hence, I met people who were living in Jordan and working for international organizations at the time. Second, the information provided to the public can be conflicting and contested in terms of details of events, such as perpetrators of attacks and scale. I collected data related to al-Nusra from the beginning of the Syrian Uprising until 2016, due to the fact that al-Nusra only existed in the time period of 2012-2016.<sup>11</sup> I believe this decision gave me an advantage, because investigative journalists, academics or NGO workers have since the time of a specific event had the time to address the contested information. Subsequently providing me with a nuanced and analysed perspective on matters which otherwise would have been difficult to understand.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, I experienced great difficulties regarding the information on who, when and where an incident happened,

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<sup>10</sup> As one of the interviewees informed me, however, I had to show discretion regarding the information due to the sensitivity of the topic.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Nusra only existed from 2012 until 2016, when it joined the group called Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Later, in 2017, it merged with other factions and became part of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

<sup>12</sup> One example is the bombing of the water plant in al-Khafsah (the main plant of Aleppo). There were several culprits at the time, but Bellingcat notes that it might have been the Russian Air force. Triebert, Christian.

"Syria's Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry," *Bellingcat*. 11.12.2015.  
<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure/>

especially regarding the control of towns, water infrastructure and the area close to the line of battle. For example, in chapter 5.3, I used both Map. 1 and Map. 2 to understand the dynamic of the battle for Aleppo. However, as looked at both of the maps, I realized that the two did not compare in terms of al-Nusra-controlled territory for the specific date. This realization forced me to re-watch and read most of the sources on Aleppo, looking for the exact dates and names of areas in which al-Nusra controlled. Finally, it became clear to me that the person responsible for Map. 1 might have overseen the exact location of al-Nusra-controlled territory.

Therefore, due to uncertainties regarding the accuracy of some of my data sources my ambitions of creating a historic overview of water-related events connected to al-Nusra and IS, I had to be thorough in terms of dates and the location of the events. Due to the sometimes conflicting reports on dates, locations and perpetrators, I spent a significant amount of time on websites and online archives, in order to verify the information. Studying online archives and websites I learned, can be a central way of researching primary sources when trying to produce a historic narrative, which I have tried to do for this project.<sup>13</sup>

## **2.4. Source Material**

The sources utilized for this study is a combination of primary and secondary sources gathered from online archives and webpages of various organizations, as well as from books, articles, and journals. The primary sources used in this thesis is a combination of audio-visual material, news articles, written communiqués and statements, magazines, interviews, social media usage by the NSAAs, and investigative journalism by people with key access. Some documents are propaganda material produced by the jihadists themselves, others are internal or “official” documents from the groups and not intended for public release. The secondary sources are largely research reports and articles conducted by academics, think-tanks and various NGOs, as well as statistics from the different branches of the UN.

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<sup>13</sup> Vitalis, Robert. *The Past Is Another Country. In A Handbook for Social Science Field Research*, edited by Ellen Perecman and Sara R. Curran, 5–17. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006. 12



### 2.4.1 The Online Archives

My main source of information in terms of primary sources have been collected from two online archives, *Jihadology.net*<sup>14</sup> and *Reliefweb.int*<sup>15</sup>, both of which are open access. The former includes Arabic (and sometimes English translations) statements, announcements, magazines, official documents and videos that Salafi-jihadist groups either have released themselves or published by others. The online archive contains more than 13,000 articles and more than 750 gigabytes of video content.<sup>16</sup> The primary sources vary in content and quality, but those I have focused on consist mainly of professionally recorded propaganda videos, or written statements either as a correspondence between leaders and groups or official statements.

Reliefweb.int, on the other hand, is a humanitarian database and information channel of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The database consists of an archive of reports, infographics, and maps in English, from their own trusted sources, mainly from local or governmental entities, or policy institutions and the media. When I limited my search from 2011 to 2016 with the keywords “Syria” and “Water”, there were more than 530 reports written on the subject. Of those 530 reports, I mainly used a handful of the reports on the water situation in Syria and Iraq from 2011 until today, all of which contains valuable statistics from a certain period or analysis on the effects of the water shortage in the two countries.

### 2.4.2 Social Media & Jihadi Propaganda

One of the greatest assets of the modern-day jihadi group in terms of recruitment is the propaganda they produce. Yet, these jihadi videos are also among the least well-studied bodies of war propaganda, when comparing the amount of videos which has been produced.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, propaganda is not meant to portray the “truth” or “facts”, but rather portray the actor’s view of it or how the actor wants to be viewed, and should, therefore, be treated by the researcher as such. That is why it is vital for the researcher to try to verify the bulk of

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<sup>14</sup> *Jihadology* is an open access archive founded by Aaron Y. Zelin, with a focus on Sunni Jihadi primary sources from across the globe. *Reliefweb* is a database which includes reports, news updates, maps, statistics etc.

<sup>15</sup> The data is gathered by trusted sources on local and governmental levels of the societies, as well as the media and other local NGOs.

<sup>16</sup> Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). “Press release: 11<sup>th</sup> April 2019 – Launching an updated version of Jihadology to limit terrorist exploitation of the site”. 10.04.2019.

<https://www.gifct.org/press/jihadology-site-update/>

<sup>17</sup> Stenersen, Anne. “A History of Jihadi Cinematography,” in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 122-27.

information from the propaganda publications which could be useful, as well as try to contextualize it in the social and political system from which is being produced.

Yet, this does not mean that propaganda always lacks any truth. Meaning, propaganda can be of great use when trying to understand how NSAAAs like al-Nusra was operating in Syria – their organizational structure, governance focus, and presence in an area. In addition, the propaganda provided me with enough information regarding what their motives might have been while they controlled specific areas in Syria or laid the ground for an *intelligent guess or qualified opinion*. In the case of jihadists, propaganda can give the researcher an insight into the organisation's interests, ideological agenda and an idea of why they participate in conflicts. It can also highlight what jihadist groups focus on in terms of their governance strategies. This was certainly the case of al-Nusra. As a governing actor in different areas in Syria, al-Nusra tried to show that they spent a significant amount of time, and to some extent resources, on providing water to “their citizens”.

A big portion of the Arabic primary sources that I have used in this project is propaganda videos made by IS and al-Nusra's media centres, published through their media-channels and then linked to different YouTube-channels, Facebook pages or other social media similar platforms. Both groups, during the time of 2011 to 2016 had designated specific branches of their organization that focused on mass media outreach and social media messaging. One of IS's media centres, *al-Furqan*, which I have used for this project, was under the Department of Public Relations (*Diwan al- 'Alāqāt al- 'Āmma*). As for al-Nusra, they were publishing videos (before they merged with other groups), at least until 28<sup>th</sup> of August 2014, through an organization called *Hemm News Agency* which was one of their media centres.<sup>18</sup>

Jihadi groups have become more and more part of the social media world, by turning to Facebook and Twitter. Al-Nusra, the Islamic State and others started to use social media as a tool for recruitment, self-advertising and spreading their propaganda.<sup>19</sup> I have witnessed different accounts of it during my research, reading the posts from al-Nusra's Facebook group called General Directorate for Services (the GDS - *al- 'Idāra al- 'Āmma lil-*

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<sup>18</sup> Both are found on Jihadology.net.

<sup>19</sup> Stenersen, Anne. “A History of Jihadi Cinematography,” in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, 122-27.

*Khadamāt*).<sup>20</sup> The page is the “official Facebook page” for what was al-Nusra’s office which focused on repairing destroyed water wells, electricity networks and water pipes across certain parts of oppositional-controlled area.

Yet, unlike most of the social media accounts used by jihadists groups, such as Twitter and Facebook accounts, as well as YouTube-channels, the GDS are still active. One reason for this could be the “neutral” nature of the GDS’ image online. As I will argue later on in this thesis, the GDS have tried through their propaganda to keep an image where they provide public services without any form of Salafi-jihadist perspectives. The lack of Salafi-jihadist material on the Facebook-page could, therefore, explain while the groups still are accessible.

## **2.5 Ethics**

Violent conflicts include different actors with contrasting political agendas, which in the case of the war in Syria includes a vast set of different actors with elusive agendas and some of whom, have agents and cells in other countries that potentially could reach out to informants should they “been seen as a threat”. Thus, the information and data collected from conflicts via interviews or internet-communication could potentially be traced back to the informant or the researcher, and therefore be of some value or damage to the actor(s) involved in the conflict. That is why, while I conducted my interviews or collected potential sensitive information, I made sure that the informant was anonymized and that the information was not traceable before I used it – making sure that there was nothing relating him or her to the data provided. In addition, I decided to exclude interviewing any active or former active members of al-Nusra or IS in person while I was doing my fieldwork in Jordan, due to the uncertainties and difficulties it could have produced.

## **3. Theory**

This chapter aims to establish a bridge between the existing, state-centric theories on water management and conflict, on the one hand, and the developing literature on jihadi governance, on the other. I will present the existing, relevant literature and eclectically present fitting theories to understand how Jabhat al-Nusra turned water management into a tool of legitimacy, control, and governance.

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<sup>20</sup> See their page: Facebook, “الإدارة العامة للخدمات”, Last visited: 08.06.2019.  
<https://www.facebook.com/general.management.of.services/>

This chapter consists of three major parts. First, I address the existing literature regarding Salafi-jihadism. Second, I highlight the relevant theories of rebel governance literature. Third, I focus on the water literature and theories regarding non-state armed actors' ways of employing water during conflict, as well as define what I have labelled *jihadi hydro-governance*.

### 3.1. Salafi-Jihadism

To acquire a greater understanding of Salafi-jihadism, we must first define the concept "Salafism". Salafism is at the outset a Sunni phenomenon, and stems etymologically from the "pious ancestors" (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*), the first generations of the followers of the Prophet Mohammed<sup>21</sup>. The so-called Salafists practice their religion according to the perceived examples set by their predecessors, believing that the Qur'an and the *sunna* (the Prophetic tradition) are the only legitimate sources for religious conduct and should be read literally with no room for interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

The word *Jihād* is an Arabic and Islamic term meaning "struggle" or "holy war".<sup>23</sup> While western and Muslim liberal scholars, as well as the western media, use it mostly as a synonym for "violent Islam", conservative Muslims see this as an unfair association.<sup>24</sup> *Jihadism* is the most widely used term among academics and in the media discourse and is often used as an associated adjective; "*Jihadi*" or "*Jihadist*"<sup>25</sup>. Combined with Salafism, Salafi-Jihadism is an ideology in which Salafists theology is harnessed to justify violence to further political agendas<sup>26</sup>.

Salafism is a contested term, partly because it includes a wide spectrum of different types of groups and is a poor indicator of political reference.<sup>27</sup> Salafists are found across the

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<sup>21</sup> Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. London: Hurst, 2016, 7

<sup>22</sup> Hegghammer, Thomas. "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islam". in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer, 244-266. London/New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2009, 249

<sup>23</sup> It depends on how a Muslim interprets the term. Jihad can be described in three ways: 1) A believer's internal struggle to live according to the Muslim faith; 2) The struggle to build a good Muslim society; or 3) Holy war, meaning armed struggle to defend Muslim lands from foreign aggression and/or to expand the abode of Islam. Mainstream Muslim scholars usually restrict the right to declare jihad to state authorities, while Jihadi ideologues argue that "the duty to wage jihad" falls upon every adult Muslim individual since the contemporary world is occupied, directly or indirectly, by infidel forces, consisting of an evil alliance between apostate "Muslim" rulers and "Crusader" forces, the latter represented by the United States and the Western world.

<sup>24</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries?", 246

<sup>25</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries?", 245-246

<sup>26</sup> For more on the matter see Joas Wagemaker, *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016. And Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. London: Hurst, 2016

<sup>27</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries?", 245

world and work for different agendas and within different political contexts, both locally and globally. Thus, they are a difficult group to generalize.<sup>28</sup> The same can be said about Salafi-Jihadists. Salafi-Jihadism is one of three main currents of Salafism, according to Quintan Wiktorowicz: the “quietist” Salafi, the “politico” Salafi, and the “Jihadi” Salafi.<sup>29</sup>

However, even though Wiktorowicz’ typology is useful, the system is not without its problems and is not sufficient when trying to define the likes of al-Nusra and IS. The model is too broad, and therefore are not able to capture the actors’ relationship with power and the manner in which they engage with it.<sup>30</sup> Others, like Thomas Hegghammer, stresses that when trying to define Salafi-Jihadism it is not sufficient to only focus on the *theological* categorizations. There is a need for a rational or preference-based approach which focuses on the different groups’ priorities and strategies. More specifically, Hegghammer creates five *rationales* (Political aims and strategies), meant to categorize the Islamists’ reasons for acting.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Hegghammer himself underlines the problems related to terminology, and concludes that the choice of it, when studying jihadi-Salafist groups, depend on the purpose of the analysis.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar vein, Anne Stenersen also questions prevalent categorizations of jihadism as a unitary phenomenon, arguing that a typology of jihadism is needed to acquire a greater understanding of the core divisionary issues of contemporary jihadi movements.<sup>33</sup> While some Jihadi groups evolve and survive, other groups do not, and so does their form of jihadism. Hence, jihadism should be addressed as such, in development. As both Stenersen and Hegghammer stress, to understand the priorities and goals of present-day Salafi-jihadist groups, more precise typologies are needed, one in which the political context of the space in which the group operates is taken into account.

In terms of the Jihadis’ political agendas, it can be categorized broadly into two sub-categories: First, the *local* agenda, which is within the borders of a single country and where the so-called “near enemy” is fought (in this sense the Salafi-Jihadists pursue *revolutionary*

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<sup>28</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries?", 264

<sup>29</sup> Wiktorowicz, Quintan. "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, nr. 3 (2006): 207-239.

<sup>30</sup> Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, 9

<sup>31</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries?", 250-272

<sup>32</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries?", 264

<sup>33</sup> Stenersen categorizes jihadism across two scales; ‘takfirism’ and ‘pan-islamism’. Jihadists ensure their survival by shifting their position along the two scales. Stenersen, Anne. "Jihadism after the ‘Caliphate’: Towards a New Typology". *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, nr. 2 (2019): 1-20.

*struggle*).<sup>34</sup> The second agenda is *global* insofar as its proponents focus on external enemies, the enemy “far away”, usually foreign powers, occupying or dominating Muslim countries by their imperialist or colonialist regimes. This second dimension is more akin to a *liberation struggle*, rather than a revolutionary one.

Although it is important to address the role of ideology and its religious underpinnings when trying to understand jihadist groups, the governance practices of groups like al-Nusra and IS cannot be reduced to a question of ideological doctrines. Religion and ideology cannot be the only driving factor of jihadi governance, because it excludes social-political factors; how the jihadists react to problems like the availability of natural resources, lack of qualified staff in the governmental apparatus, etc.<sup>35</sup> Even so, it provides an interesting nuance to the equation: how the jihadi-Salafi ideology affected the governance of al-Nusra, more specifically how it affected governance through the means of water.

### **3.2. Rebel Governance & Ungoverned Spaces**

Rebels engaging in governance is not a new phenomenon. It is far more common than generally recognized and has occurred globally throughout history.<sup>36</sup> The last five decades the world has witnessed numerous rebel insurgencies attempting to govern populations under their command, in the absence of a strong state. Two well-known examples are Sudan’s SPLA (Sudan People’s Liberation Army) and Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers (LTTE).<sup>37</sup> The latter was at one point even dubbed “the most organized, effective and brutal terrorist groups in the world,”<sup>38</sup> reaching approximately 18,000 fighters and controlling up to 76 percent of the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka at their height in 2002.<sup>39</sup>

However, the number of militants in a rebel group does not tell us much about the organization, the sophistication, and development of governance, or their grasp on society. More important in the context of this study than the share number of militants, is instead the number of civilians in a rebel-controlled territory. Civilians are in need of security, access to

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<sup>34</sup> Hegghammer, "Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries: On Religion and Politics in the Study of Islamist Militancy, 244-266.

<sup>35</sup> Zeitoun, Mark et al., "Urban Warfare Ecology: A Study of Water Supply in Basrah". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, nr. 6 (2017): 904-925. December 5, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Mampilly, Zachariah Cherian. *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011, 2

<sup>37</sup> See Mampilly, Zachariah Cherian. *Rebel Rulers*, 93-128, for more information on the different ways in which these rebel groups governed.

<sup>38</sup> Pickert, Kate. "The Tamil Tigers". *Time Magazine*. January 4, 2009.

<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1869501,00.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Stanford University. "Mapping militant organizations - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam." 08.07.2015. <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/225>.

basic goods like food, water and electricity, but can also be employed as a potential labour force. If the rebels successfully provide security and basic needs, the civilians are also a key source of legitimacy.<sup>40</sup> One sector where a rebel group needs labour, for example, is in the extraction and utilization of natural resources.<sup>41</sup> Without sufficient laborers to extract valuable natural resources, or the skillset to refine, transport and export them, rebels will necessarily struggle to run the “state” in a coordinated and efficient manner. For one, it will affect the income of the rebel group. For another, in the case of water services, it may impact the quality and level of cleanness in the water which is necessary for it to be drinkable. Civilians are thus central factors in insurgent groups’ strategies of governing territory.

Therefore, achieving control of territory requires an amiable relationship with the citizens of the area and to be able to protect the civilians living in their territory from the enemy at the same time.<sup>42</sup> This is what the rebel governance literature addresses; trying to understand what rebels do when they are faced with the task of governing civilian populations and not just fighting the enemy.<sup>43</sup> Hence, rebel governance during conflict can be defined as multi-layered power dynamics by the rebel organization with spheres of the state, market and civil society. These spheres include diversity and fluidity of actors, systems, institutions, boundaries and procedures at the international and domestic levels.<sup>44</sup>

Territorial control provides advantages for the rebel groups, along with a various amount of challenges, depending on what kind of territory they control. In some cases, institutions (or semi-functioning institution) for governing civilians emerge and forces regularized interaction with the civilians. In other conflict situations, insurgents are able to co-opt pre-existing institutions and networks into its administration and therefore use what was already present when they rose to power.<sup>45</sup> Or, according to Rana, rebels mix the pre-existing institutions with their own and creates a symbiotic relation between the local governance and the civil society, resulting in what she labels as *hybrid governance*.<sup>46</sup> Other

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<sup>40</sup> Weinstein, Jeremy M. *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 163

<sup>41</sup> Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 173

<sup>42</sup> Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 50

<sup>43</sup> For recent studies on rebel governance, see in particular: Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War*; Arjona, Ana, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly (eds.). *Rebel Governance in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> The definition is created based on Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, 24 and Rana Khalaf, “Governance Without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building During Conflict.” *Syria Studies* 7. Nr. 3 (2015): 37–72

<sup>45</sup> Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*, 72

<sup>46</sup> Khalaf, “Governance Without Government in Syria”, 39-43

rebel groups govern in a more democratic way and choose what Weinstein calls *power sharing*, while others do not include the population in their governing to the same extent, or at all.<sup>47</sup>

In the latter case, rebel groups can choose to govern through violent coercion methods and base their governance upon their military power, instead of inclusive rule. These kinds of groups, according to Weinstein, are more likely to encounter resistance or withholding of support among the population.<sup>48</sup> However, I would argue that the wish for resistance decrease drastically when we add two crucial factors to this equation: The type of war in which they find themselves in, and the constant cost-benefit analysis that comes with the first factor. Meaning, the type of war and the level of cruelty in which the war is being fought, is a crucial factor in whether or not the civilians are in a position to resist.

When studying governance during wartime, it is not possible to predict the outcomes by including a single variable or factor. The defining variables and factors directly influence the context in which the group operates in and vary; what kind of war they engage in, popular demands, availability of resources and how they use them, occurring events and attacks, the fight and competition for supremacy and control among themselves, and the devastating effects from war on infrastructure. All these factors are intertwined with the actions of non-state armed actors (NSAAs) and their desire and ability to “perform” like a state, as well as the acceptance and receptions from the population they govern.<sup>49</sup>

To understand the dynamics within the Syrian opposition, there is a need to recognize the importance of rebel rivalry, i.e. competition among the various opposition groups during a war. As long as there is a fight for supremacy among the competing rebel groups, the main focus tends to be on outbidding each other, how to empower oneself and become the most powerful player. Also, they might compete for the hearts and minds of the people, by proving themselves to be the ones who can provide safety and meet the civilians’ basic needs.<sup>50</sup> In some instances, these rebel groups create their own ways of providing public services or try

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<sup>47</sup> Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 163-165

<sup>48</sup> Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 172

<sup>49</sup> Martínez, José Ciro and Brent Eng. "Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War". *International Political Sociology* 11, nr. 2 (2017): 130–147. 131.

<sup>50</sup> Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*, 90-92



to continue the public services based on the infrastructures and practices which already was present.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.2.1 Rebel Governance in Syria

The most famous example today of a jihadi group trying to “perform the state”, is the Islamic State (IS). IS implemented a governmental system based upon their interpretation of Salafi-Jihadist ideology, which they sought to put into practice into every aspect of their governmental structures - through the ‘Caliphate’.<sup>52</sup> In the ‘Caliphate’, IS institutionalized their ideology by using the mechanisms of the newly set up institutions to strengthen the fighters’ cooperation through their shared beliefs and repeated interaction between them.<sup>53</sup>

Still, in many ways, IS’ governance and capabilities cannot be viewed as the norm in Syria, but rather an exception to the rule. After 2011, Syria has experienced a surge of rebel groups, especially in the northern parts. These rebels or non-state armed actors differed (or, differs - some still exist) in numbers, capabilities, and goals, as well as their ideological foundations. They consisted of a wide range of different groups that shared a common goal in fighting the Assad-regime, ranging from moderate groups like the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to the al-Qaida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. Some of the NSAAs, the FSA, Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra, for example, turned to governance while they controlled certain areas of the northern parts of Syria.<sup>54</sup> The form and extent of the NSAAs governance differed immensely across the northern parts. This variety created a unique situation; a range of similar jihadist movements operating in a large variety of structural contexts, and, thereby provided an occasion for drawing comparison between the diverse and localized governmental methods by the different NSAAs in Northern-Syria.<sup>55</sup>

To be able to address the various capabilities and the performance of NSAAs in Syria, the political-sociologist Teije Donker stresses the need to not only focus on how their actions are defined by their ideologies. This focus has been a general characteristic of scholarship on

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<sup>51</sup> This was the case for most militant groups turning to governance in oppositional controlled territories, as well as inside the so-called Islamic State, for which I return in Chapter 4 and 5.

<sup>52</sup> Lia, Brynjar. "The Jihādī Movement and Rebel Governance: A Reassertion of a Patriarchal Order?". *Die Welt des Islams* 57, nr. 3-4 (2017): 458-479. 458.

<sup>53</sup> Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 170

<sup>54</sup> Both Charles Lister and Martínez & Eng shed light on how the NSAAs governed in: Lister, Charles. "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra". *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, Nr. 24 (2016): 1-51. And, Martínez and Eng, "Struggling to Perform the State", 130-147

<sup>55</sup> Donker, T.H. "Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien (Jihadism and Governance in North-Syria)". *Mittelweg* 36, nr. 27 (2018): 58-85. 62

jihadism, either under- or overemphasize the influence of religion on the behaviour of these actors.<sup>56</sup> Donker argues that one needs to include the study of the interactions between jihadists and non-jihadists groups. What Donker finds in his study on jihadi governance among the opposition in Northern-Syria during the war, is that even though there is an impact of an Islamic ideology on some of the NSAAs, the practical implications and considerations of the NSAAs, while trying to perform as a state, often take the centre stage.<sup>57</sup>

The practical implications in terms of governance in the Syrian war and to some extent the Iraqi war increased gradually, in what became a contested space where the different NSAAs struggled for authority, in areas where the state normally operated. It is in this space al-Nusra and others slowly developed their governance structures in accordance with the war's nature.<sup>58</sup> In other words, all the actors involved in the Syrian war, were either forced to or gradually adapt their governing methods to the status quo of the war.

### 3.3. Water

To understand the water-related governmental practices by NSAAs during the Syrian war, it is crucial to shed light on the importance of water in the region. Water has always been a vital need for mankind. No city, society, or country throughout history have existed or developed without subjugating water in one form or another.<sup>59</sup> It is used for covering our daily basic needs like drinking, cooking and cleaning, as well as being essential for creating electricity, sanitary aid, irrigation and much more. Yet, the value of water varies and depends on the regional context and environment, because unlike other natural resources like oil or coal there are no alternatives to water.<sup>60</sup> The Scandinavian countries, for example, are used to free and good quality drinking water and the water sources as of today are less affected by climate-change than the Middle East. In countries like Jordan, Syria, and Iraq on the other hand, due to the scarcity of renewable drinking water or the decreasing quality of water in general, the

<sup>56</sup> Donker, "Jihadism and Governance in North-Syria", 2-3

<sup>57</sup> Donker, "Jihadism and Governance in North-Syria", 19

<sup>58</sup> Clunan, Anne L. and Harold A. Trinkunas (ed.). *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, 2010, 3-4

<sup>59</sup> Tvedt, Terje. "Introduction: Water History Is World History". In *A History of Water: Water Control and River Biographies*, Series I, Volume 1, red. Terje Tvedt and Eva Jakobsson, *A History of Water*. London: I.B.Tauris, 2006, 1-25.

[https://www.academia.edu/33828526/Introduction\\_Water\\_History\\_is\\_World\\_History\\_series\\_I\\_vol.\\_I](https://www.academia.edu/33828526/Introduction_Water_History_is_World_History_series_I_vol._I).

<sup>60</sup> Zahrān, 'īmān. "'Askarat Almiyyāh Kanumat Lilširā' Fī Asharq Al'awsat" [" Militarization of Water as a Pattern of Conflict in the Middle East"]. *The Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies*, Egypt (2016). <https://eipss-eg.org/عسكرة-المياه-كنمط-للصراع-في-الشرق-الأوسط/>

value of water is much higher. This means that the societies of the Middle East have to adapt their practices.<sup>61</sup>

This is the case even if the region is home to some of the most famous rivers throughout history and independent of geographical scope. The Nile, Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Jordan river, are all important rivers that have given birth to some of the oldest civilizations of our time. Even so, the quality of the rivers has been decreasing rapidly and other estimates conclude that the Middle East only contain 1 to 1,5 percent of the world's renewable water resources, which is the lowest in the world.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the 1 percent limit of renewable water resources, the region is the global hot spot of unsustainable water usage - the water resources are exposed to pollution partly due to the poor local water management of it and partly due to the effects of climate change.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, when in Iraq and Syria the difficulties of the long lasting wars are added to the already dire water situation, the results become dramatic. Disease, hunger, and malnutrition are only some of the severe consequences the population of both countries has been experiencing after years of war.<sup>64</sup> Although the war has aggravated the current water situation in Syria and has affected how it has been used as an important strategic resource during the war, most scholars that have studied the water situation in Syria agree that the origin of the problem started years prior to 2011.

The two main themes in studies, on the water situation in Syria before 2011, focus on two subjects; the effects of *climate change*, and the *mismanagement of water* in Syria. The first category, the effects of climate change, has been debated back and forth by several

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<sup>61</sup> World Bank. 2018. *Beyond Scarcity: Water Security in the Middle East and North Africa*. MENA Development Report. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/27659>. License: CC BY 3.0 IGO And Al-Ansari, Nadhir et al. "Water Quality within the Tigris and Euphrates Catchments". *Journal of Earth Sciences and Geotechnical Engineering* 8, nr. 3 (2018): 95-121 <https://urlzs.com/fpBDs>

<sup>62</sup> Al Humaid, Najeeb. *Water Shortages Drive Switch from Irrigation to Hydroponics*. Farrelly & Mitchell Insights: April, (2015). <http://farrellymitchell.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Insights-April-2015.pdf> And, Al-Ansari, Nadhir et al. "Water Quality within the Tigris and Euphrates Catchments", (2018): 95-121 <https://urlzs.com/fpBDs>. And: Joff , George. "The Impending Water Crisis in the MENA Region". *The International Spectator* 51, nr. 3(2016): 55-66, 55

<sup>63</sup> The world bank wrote a report in 2017 called *Beyond Scarcity: Water Security in the Middle East and North Africa*. The findings of the report were devastating in terms of the Middle East's future. In addition to the findings mentioned above it also includes; the increasing risk of floods and draughts, in most of the cases the water in transboundary which means that the water sources is located across two or more countries. The report also addresses the unhealthy and dangerous lack of wastewater recycling, which is as high as 82% (does not get recycled).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with WASH-expert in Jordan.

scholars.<sup>65</sup> One problem, which Jan Selby, Omar S. Dahi et al. points out in their study on the correlation between climate change and the outbreak of the Syrian war, is the politization of the debate itself.<sup>66</sup> In their article, they portray how politicians, academics, activists, politicians and a wide range of think tanks have argued that the draughts in Syria, which was caused by climate change were, in fact, one of the major factors that caused the Syrian war.<sup>67</sup> Selby et al. down-plays this claim.

First of all, they argue that these allegations have little empirical evidence, even though it did lead to large-scale urbanization.<sup>68</sup> There is in fact, a growing consensus in within the climate-conflict field today that no civil wars as of recent, have been directly started by climatic variables.<sup>69</sup> Most of the scholars who have written about the effects of climate change on the Syrian war, agree on its negative impacts, especially that the draughts forced a lot of the farmers to migrate to the cities.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, even though water disputes have provided justifications for going to war, it does not mean that water conflicts by itself have compelled nations or NSAAs to go to war.<sup>71</sup> It is however, a vital resource which usually actors involved in war tend to try to either protect, seize or control in order to accomplish their broader goals.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, when addressing the matter of the direct influence of the population in Syria on the water situation through their mismanaging practices either institutionally or individually, there is a certain consensus on the matter. Some scholars focus on the agricultural sector, either the outdated irrigations methods, extensive use of water or the privatization of the sector. Others focus on the lack of wastewater recycling, overuse of

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<sup>65</sup> Mazlum, Ibrahim. "ISIS as an Actor Controlling Water Resources in Syria and Iraq". *Violent Non-state Actors and the Syrian Civil War*, ed. By Oktav, Özden Zeynep, Emel Parlar Dal and Ali Murat Kurşun, 109-125. Istanbul:Springer, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Selby, Jan et al. "Climate Change and The Syrian Civil War Revised". *Political Geography* 60 (2017) 232-244. And, Gleick, Peter. H. « Water, Draught, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria". *Weather, Climate, and Society* 6, nr.3(2014): 331-340.

<sup>67</sup> The White House, "Remarks by The President at the United States Coast Guard Academy Commencement," 20.05.2015. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/20/remarks-president-united-states-coast-guard-academy-commencement>

<sup>68</sup> Peter H. Gleick stresses the notion that the Syrian war that began in 2011 was a result of complex interrelated factors, and that water was an important contributing factor. See: Gleick, Peter H. "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria".

<sup>69</sup> Selby, Jan et al. "Climate Change and The Syrian Civil War Revised", 233.

<sup>70</sup> Mazlum, Ibrahim, "ISIS as an Actor Controlling Water Resources in Syria and Iraq", 112

<sup>71</sup> Look at the Nile, for example. Egypt is at the moment in control of most water that the Nile provides. This has not escalated to war in recent years, but tensions have led to a rearrangement of the water distribution of the river.

<sup>72</sup> Mazlum, Ibrahim, "ISIS as an Actor Controlling Water Resources in Syria and Iraq", 109

groundwater or how Turkey is building dams that are decreasing the water flow into Syria and Iraq.<sup>73</sup>

### 3.3.1. Controlling the Water Resources Equals Power

As a result of climate-change related preconditions, mismanagement of water resources and the consequences of war on water infrastructure and quality, the access to water throughout Syria during the civil war became central issue to both the population living all across Syria and the governing bodies of the areas. All the actors involved - the GoS and, the various opposition groups, had to obtain some level of access to water, for them to be able to provide water to the population which was currently living under their rule.<sup>74</sup>

It is commonplace to claim that the one who controls water in the Middle East has “power over others”. In his book *Power and Water in the Middle East*<sup>75</sup>, Mark Zeitoun addresses the relationship between power and water. Even if his main focus in the book relates to transboundary water resources and the struggle for each state to obtain as much possible of the water resources, his study on the importance of hegemonic control of water sources is one of the theoretical foundations for this study. Zeitoun paves the way for a better understanding of the relationship between power and water, highlighting the importance of the location of the water source and the control over the means of distribution.<sup>76</sup>

As pointed out in the methodology chapter, I have been focusing on finding numerous incidents and events related water which included NSAAs in Syrian and Iraq, from the beginning of 2011 up to today. That is why I believe that the combination of Zeitoun’s

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<sup>73</sup> Al-Ansari, Nadhir et al. “Water Quality within the Tigris and Euphrates Catchments”, 95-112. And, Saadé-Sbeih, et al. “Post Conflict Water Management: Learning from the Past for Recovery Planning in the Orontes River Basin”. *Proceedings of the International Association of Hydrological Sciences*. Nr. 374, (2016): 17-21. and: Lund, Jay R. “Integrating social and physical sciences in water management”. *Water Resources Research* 51, nr. 8 (2015): 5905-5918.

<sup>74</sup> ISIS focused especially on natural resources, predominantly on oil and water. In terms of water, ISIS seized dams and water facilities in order to achieve their proclaimed objectives. See Mazlum, Ibrahim. “ISIS as an Actor Controlling Water Resources in Syria and Iraq”.

<sup>75</sup> Zeitoun, Mark. *Power and Water in the Middle East: The Hidden Politics of the Palestinian-Israeli Water Conflict*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Two examples of this is the Israeli hegemonic control over the water supply which Jordan, Palestine and to some extent Lebanon suffers from. The second example, which is mentioned later in this paper, is the problems related to the Euphrates and Tigris – where Turkey is the so-called hegemonic power and the upstream country where both of the two rivers begins. For more information see: Khairallah, Khalil. “al-širā’ ‘alā al-miyāh fī al-sharq al-’awsat”. *The Water Conflict in the Middle East*. Beirut: Al-markaz al‘Arabī lilbahūth al-Aanūniyya wa al-Qdā’iyya, 2016. <https://carjj.org/sites/default/files/ebooks/book.pdf> and Mark Zeitoun’s book *Power and Water in the Middle East*.

theoretical framework and the book called *Transboundary Hydro-Governance*<sup>77</sup> will be able to provide me with an eloquent framework and concepts to understand the various governmental practices applied by NSAAs in Syria. Furthermore, it will allow me to identify the boundaries of the governmental activities by IS and al-Nusra, as well as understand the extent and form of it.

### **3.4. The Ways of Using Water for Non-State Armed Actors**

To understand the relationship between power, water, and NSAAs, as well as understanding how NSAAs like IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, used water to their advantage, I believe there is a need for categorization. Based on my study, I have categorized the water-usage by NSAAs into two analytical categories pertaining to NSAAs' use of water in Syria: 1) Water as a tool of coercion & 2) Water as a *means of governance* or as I have decided to label it, *Jihadi Hydro-governance*. Both are two major analytical categories including several subcategories and draws the distinction between the weaponization of water and the governmental aspect of water.<sup>78</sup>

#### **3.4.1. Water as a Tool of Coercion**

The first category includes strategies some scholars call *weaponizing water*, *water as a weapon* or *the militarization of water*. This aspect of water usage by NSAAs has been by far the one which has been given the most attention. One of the reasons for this is the correlation between the attention IS was given during their prime years and the semantic attractiveness by buzzwords like "water wars" or "water weapon". In addition, as Tobias Von Lossow points out, a broad range of research done on water and conflict tend to lack a precise and consistent analytical framework, as well as the over-use or mistaken use of the concept of water wars.<sup>79</sup> Yet, this does not mean that the water hasn't been used as a weapon by NSAAs during the Syrian war. The prime example of this practice during the war in Syria has been IS. During their reign of four to five years in Syria and Iraq, IS cut off crucial water supplies,

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<sup>77</sup> Ganoulis, Jacques and Fried, Jean. *Transboundary Hydro-Governance: From Conflict to Shared Management*. Switzerland: Springer, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Von Lossow, Tobias. "The Rebirth of Water as a Weapon: IS in Syria and Iraq". *The International Spectator*, 51, nr.13(2016): 82-99

<sup>79</sup> Von Lossow, Tobias. "The Rebirth of Water as a Weapon: IS in Syria and Iraq", 82-83. Strategic Foresight Group. "Water and Violence: Crisis of Survival in the Middle East". 2014. [https://www.strategicforesight.com/publication\\_pdf/63948150123-web.pdf](https://www.strategicforesight.com/publication_pdf/63948150123-web.pdf), And, 'īmān." 'Askarat Almiyyāh Kanumaṭ lilṣirā' fī Asharq al'Awsat".

flooded large areas by using captured dams and contaminated water resources.<sup>80</sup> The effects were often felt by the enemies of IS which usually were Shias, other oppositional groups and Sunni areas which rejected the rule of IS. Sometimes these actions struck the energy or agricultural sector in whole areas, which led to severe consequences.<sup>81</sup>

However, labelling water as a weapon does in some cases exclude other ways which NSAAs and state actors during the Syrian war has been using water or targeted water sources by bombing the infrastructure. I included the weapon aspect with other negative and damaging ways of using water and therefore created the broad category, *water as a tool of coercion*. In fact, by including the weapon aspect with the rest of coercive ways IS and others have used water against others, we can identify a large number of incidents fitting into this category.<sup>82</sup>

### 3.4.2. Hydro-Governance

All of the authors mentioned above touch upon either the governance or the water-use by NSAAs. Still, none of them combine the two. The water studies reflect either the state-centric approach or the weapon approach but lack a specific focus on the governance aspect of water, which is the topic of this study. What I have called water management as a means of governance by jihadi rebels will from now on be labelled as *jihadi hydro-governance*.<sup>83</sup>

Jihadi hydro-governance is meant to shed light on the ways in which jihadist NSAAs, and al-Nusra in particular, have used water as a governance strategy. It includes both the ideological aspect of it, as well as the pragmatic and socio-political aspect of their governance.<sup>84</sup> In addition, the term is meant to highlight the governing strategies which include water and should be viewed as a part of a broader governance practice.

I could have labelled it *rebel hydro-governance* as well, but since I am going to include the ideological aspect of hydro-governance (i.e. how the ideology of Salafi-Jihadism has affected the hydro-governance), I decided to narrow the term down as much as possible.

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<sup>80</sup> Von Lossow, Tobias. "The Rebirth of Water as a Weapon: IS in Syria and Iraq", 82. And Mazlum, Ibrahim, "ISIS as an Actor Controlling Water Resources in Syria and Iraq".

<sup>81</sup> Strategic Foresight Group. "Water and Violence: Crisis of Survival in the Middle East"

<sup>82</sup> Strategic Foresight Group. "Water and Violence: Crisis of Survival in the Middle East", V-Vi

<sup>83</sup> However, I have decided to abbreviate the term to hydro-governance in the next chapters. The jihadi is from now on implicit in the label.

<sup>84</sup> I do not know however, to what extent the group prioritized water over other governmental practices, but I aim to show that there was a certain focus on it.



The term hydro-governance is not new, but like most of the other water-related literature, it has previously been used mostly with regards to transboundary and state-centric studies.<sup>85</sup>

Some of the recent studies on the Syrian opposition's governmental tactics of which I have utilized for my understanding in regards to hydro-governance are by the likes of Jose Ciro Martinez, Brent Eng, and Teije Donker. All of them have studied the ways in which NSAAs have provided welfare services and govern certain oppositional areas during the war, as well as the underlying military and political concerns that states and NSAAs face when they compete for state-like legitimacy.<sup>86</sup> Like other NSAAs before them, they were met with urging issues when they tried to perform the state, due to the lack of general goods, equipment or personnel with the knowledge needed to operated facilities, machines, etc.<sup>87</sup>

## **4. Al-Nusra's Evolution & The Consequences of War on Water**

This chapter consists of three main parts. The first part aims to provide the historic development of the Syrian war and al-Nusra's entrance into it. In the second, I will highlight Jabhat al-Nusra's organizational structures and governance, and what the evolution of the group's organization might tell us, in terms of hydro-governance. Third, I will address the problems wars bring to hydro-governance: water distribution, infrastructure and quality.

### **4.1. The Entrance into Syria**

Al-Qaida is an international terrorist network which was founded in the mountains of Peshawar by Osama bin Laden in 1988, as part of the resistance against the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan. The term al-Qaida (*al-Qā'ida*) translates to "The Base" and refers to an ideological movement in the "global jihadi movement". The core of AQ's ideology is the presumption that the Muslim world is under attack from an aggressive Christian-Jewish civilization. Hence, it is mandatory for all Muslims to join their jihad (the armed struggle) to defend the Muslim world against the West's political, economic and cultural dominance.<sup>88</sup>

Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the group consisted of an informal network of radical groups and individuals which supported the ideology, attacking western or western friendly targets

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<sup>85</sup> In the book "*Transboundary Hydro-Governance*", Ganoulis, Jacques et al. p. 79-107, addresses the importance of cooperation over borders when it comes to water management, but the book and its definition of hydro-governance do have some interesting aspects in terms of studying water in the Middle East.

<sup>86</sup> Martinez and Eng, "Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War", and Donker, "Jihadism and Governance in North-Syria"

<sup>87</sup> Donker, "Jihadism and Governance in North-Syria", and Martinez and Eng, "Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War"

<sup>88</sup> Stenersen, Anne, "al-Qaida," *Store Norske Leksikon*. 6.09.2018. <https://snl.no/al-Qaida>



across the globe. Today, the core organization is led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, but due to the escalation of United States' attacks against the group during the war in Afghanistan, the group been forced to reorganize. As a result to these attacks on its core organization in Afghanistan, AQ has moved more underground and developed into an organization operating through several major local affiliates like al-Shabaab, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and Jabhat al-Nusra (until 2016), etc. By operating through affiliates across the Middle East and parts of Africa, it seems that AQ has moved its focus from its global jihad to local conflicts and struggles.<sup>89</sup>

During the aftermath of the invasion by the US-led coalition, Iraq witnessed an increase in violent Salafi-Jihadist groups. Members from the Saddam regime's armed forces continued their fight against the US, by joining the more and more powerful Jihadist groups. AQ's affiliate in Iraq, a group which was known as The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) by 2006, had been growing as part of the increase in violence against "the western oppressors".<sup>90</sup> The group accumulated support among the Sunni population and Saddam's former military forces due to the growing grievances in the country. The grievances were directed towards the West and its allies at the time, the Shia regime and the Shia population which is the majority of the country. Since then, ISI's practice of perpetrating local actors like the Shias became the norm, which evolved into ISIS, ISIL and IS.

By 2011 when the Syrian revolution broke out, AQ in the form of ISI had already been present in a conflict-affected Iraq for more than half a decade and developed an organizational structure which was capable of exploiting the conditions in Syria. As the war escalated and seemingly had no end, the conditions created an abundance of jihadist groups fighting inside Syria with different motives. Furthermore, during the winter of 2012-2013, the northern parts of Syria experienced a gradual Islamisation of the opposition, due to the growing numbers of new fighters into Salafi-Jihadist in Syria.<sup>91</sup> The shift of the Syrian revolution toward militarization was a critical juncture for Salafi-Jihadist movements, as

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<sup>89</sup> According to Hassan Hassan, this view became clear when reading the 200-page training manual for newly recruited fighters in Jabhat al-Nusra. Hassan, Hassan, "Sunni Jihad is Going Local," The Atlantic.

<https://urlzs.com/QXfrQ>

In addition, see the interview on Al-jazeera by al-Nusra's leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani called "Whithout Borders", were he points out the local struggle and the group's focus. Al-Jazeera.net. "Without borders- Abu Muhammed al-Jolani Prince of Jabhat al-Nusra". 27.05.2015.

<https://www.aljazeera.net/reportslibrary/pages/0ff4461d-72aa-4d5e-bb79-2c05ed15e559>

<sup>90</sup> Stanford University. "Mapping militant organizations – The Islamic State."

[https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state#highlight\\_text\\_12395](https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state#highlight_text_12395)

<sup>91</sup> Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and The Evolution of An Insurgency*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2017. 83-85

militarization transformed these movements from being unwanted actors to a welcomed ally in the war against the violent Assad-regime.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4.2. Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Syrian War

Peaceful protests broke out across Syria in 2011 against the regime of Bashar Assad. Syrian authorities responded with violence by the hands of its security forces, some areas more brutal than others, as for example in the governates of Idlib, Homs, Hama. The degree of violence against Syrian demonstrators was to characterize the brutality of the uprising, which developed into a full-scale civil war in later that year.<sup>93</sup> According to Human Rights Watch by 2018, the war in Syria has claimed more than 400,000 casualties.<sup>94</sup>

Approximately six months after the Syrian civil uprising erupted, in the late summer of 2011, seven military commanders entered north-eastern Syria through the Iraqi border. Intending to exploit their already-existing ties with Syrian jihadi networks in Syria, to establish a Syrian wing of the Iraqi militant group called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Heading the delegation, on the orders from ISI's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was a Syrian by the name of Abu Mohammed al-Jolani.<sup>95</sup>

Al-Jolani and his jihadi compatriots stay in Syria throughout September and October of 2011 resulted in the creation of a group called Jabhat al-Nusra (an abbreviation of *Jabhat al-Nuṣra li-Ahl al-Shām min Mujāhidī al-Shām fī Ṣāḥat al-Jihād* – The Support Front for the People of Greater al-Sham from the Fighters of al-Sham in The Field of Jihad). Although the group did not formally announce their formation before the 23rd of January 2012.<sup>96</sup> The group announced its formation was through a movie entitled “For the People of Syria from the Mujāhidīn of Syria in the Fields of Jihād”.<sup>97</sup> The movie contained three thematic focuses: The declaration of war against Assad, allegiance to God and al-Nusra's domestic Syrian

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<sup>92</sup> Muṣṭafā, Ḥamza. “Jabhat al-Nuṣra 'Ahl al-Shām: min al-Ta'sīs 'ilā al-Naqṣām”. *Al-Markaz al-'Arabiyy lil-'Abḥāṭ wa Dirāsāt al-Siyāsāt*. (2014): 1-22. [https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/document\\_E0926D90.pdf](https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/document_E0926D90.pdf), 5

<sup>93</sup> BBC, “Syria Profile – Timeline.” 14.01.2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>

<sup>94</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Events of 2017.” <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria>

<sup>95</sup> Lister, Charles. “Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra.”, 5

<sup>96</sup> The formation happened after absorbing smaller jihadi cells in Syria in previous months. For more information see: Stanford University, “Mapping militant organizations – Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.” 14.07.2017. <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>. And Lister, Charles. “Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra.”, 9-10

<sup>97</sup> Jihadology.net, “For the People of Syria from the Mujāhidīn of Syria in the Fields of Jihād.” Video. 24.01.2014. <https://urlzs.com/J3HTN>

character and the willingness to die for the Syrian people.<sup>98</sup> Al-Nusra intended to show the Syrian people and opposition that even though they were affiliated with al-Qaida, their intention was to help their Syrian brothers in their fight against Assad.

Al-Nusra and the Syrian jihadi scene benefited from the series of prisoner releases done by the Assad regime from March to June 2011, which had the purpose of labelling the opposition as an extremist opposition. This was a move which provided al-Nusra and other similar groups with an influx of new members and fighters, with much-needed experience.<sup>99</sup> In terms of their military campaign, they began conducting operations in cooperation with other opposition groups (mainly the Islamic based ones in the beginning) against the Assad regime, proving themselves a potent military opposition actor in Syria.

As the Syrian crisis escalated into a civil war by the beginning of the summer 2012, al-Nusra had already established an active presence in the growing power vacuum of a variety of areas all across Syria.<sup>100</sup> From mid-2012, according to Charles Lister, the group was transforming itself internally from a limited terrorist organization only carrying out sporadic bombings, to an organized insurgency group with the capabilities of carrying out sophisticated and guerrilla-like operations. Al-Nusra kept on steadily growing, mostly due to the funding from ISI in Iraq and the growing amount of recruits joining during the continuation of the Syrian turmoil, eventually becoming a nationwide actor cooperating and coordinating attacks with factions from the Syrian opposition. Yet, it was still an unpopular actor among the Syrian opposition, due to the perception of the group's link to AQ, which were damaging the Syrian opposition's reputation.<sup>101</sup>

However, the jihadist movements of the opposition faced a problem on the 8th of April, when ISI's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi tried to consolidate his power by announcing the merger of the Iraqi based ISI and their so-called "Syrian wing" al-Nusra.<sup>102</sup> In the audio message released by ISI's media channel *al-Furqān Media*, he stated that al-Nusra was merely an expansion from the Islamic State of Iraq, and from now on they were part of the

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<sup>98</sup> The announcement video includes several pictures and videos of jihadists declaring allegiance to al-Nusra from seemingly different places around Syria. The majority of its context is showing the atrocities of the Assad regime, and that al-Nusra's solution to it is their version of Islam.

<sup>99</sup> Lister, Charles R. *The Syrian Jihad*, 51-62

<sup>100</sup> Al-Jazeera, "Red Cross declares Syria conflict a civil war," 16.07. 2012.  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/07/2012716231913738.html>

<sup>101</sup> To the north; Aleppo, Idlib and Hama. To the south; Damascus and Deraa. To the east; Deir al-Zour, as well as in Homs. Lister, Charles R. *The Syrian Jihad*, 79-80

<sup>102</sup> Al-Jazeera.com, "Iraqi al-Qaeda and Syrian Group 'merge'." 09.04.2013.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/201349194856244589.html>

new organization called “*The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham* ”.<sup>103</sup> Al-Baghdadi’s announcement would later turn out to have major consequences for al-Nusra and the AQ-leadership. For the first time in Syria, al-Nusra and the jihadist movement faced an existential threat from within, which caught AQ’s and al-Nusra’s leadership by surprise. Both al-Jolani and al-Zawahiri disputed al-Baghdadi’s request for the merger of ISIS and al-Nusra<sup>104</sup>, and al-Jolani pledged *bay’at* (allegiance) to al-Zawahiri instead.<sup>105</sup> The rejections from the two jihadi leaders fell on deaf ears, because al-Baghdadi had already set his plan in motion.<sup>106</sup>

As ISIS grew stronger and started to take over oppositional gains in 2013-2014, al-Nusra along with the majority of the opposition and IS turned on each other. This split between al-Nusra and the rest of the opposition with the group that now had labelled themselves “The Islamic State”, became a turning point and a defining moment for al-Nusra. The conflict between IS and al-Nusra slowly turned violent, but the key event happened in February 2014 when AQ’s leadership disowned IS.<sup>107</sup> From thereon, instead of trying to “outbid” IS, Tore Hamming argues that AQ and its affiliate in Syria chose to take another path: not following IS’ brutality and offensive conquest, but turning their attention towards labelling themselves as part of the Syrian opposition and a protector of the Syrian people.<sup>108</sup>

In 2016 however, al-Nusra cut their remaining ties to al-Qaida, then reorganized and rebranded itself into the group called Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (*Jabhat Fataḥ al-Shām* – “the

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<sup>103</sup> Jihadology.net, “Announcement of The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shām.” Audio. 09.04.2013.

<https://urlzs.com/b2P9D>

<sup>104</sup> Officially was al-Nusra silent on the matter, but the leader of the group al-Jolani wrote a secret letter to AQ’s leader al-Zawahiri to intervene. For more, see: Aron Lund’s article “As Rifts Open Up in Syria’s al-Qaeda Franchise, Secret Spill Out.” <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/60973?lang=en>

<sup>105</sup> Al-Jazeera.com, “Iraqi al-Qaeda and Syrian Group ‘merge’.” 9.04.2013.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/201349194856244589.html>

<sup>106</sup> al-Baghdadi had already, by the time of his announcement, sent one of his deputies (Haji al-Bakr, also known as the Knight of the Silencers) into Syria to set up networks, collect valuable information, and recruit from the ranks of established jihadist organizations such as al-Nusra. Resulting in a division of the jihadi opposition in Syria on a large scale, which had been unprecedented up until now.

<sup>107</sup> Which initially turned into an *inter-movement* conflict among the jihadi groups in Syria according to Hamming, Tore. “The Al Qaeda-Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation”. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, nr.3 (2017): 1-18.

<sup>108</sup> This focus towards being the “protector of the Syrian people” is clear in al-Jolanis interview with al-Jazeera and in their announcement video. See Al-Jazeera. “Nusra leader: Our mission is to defeat Syrian regime”. 28.06.2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/nusra-front-golani-assad-syria-hezbollah-isis-150528044857528.html> And in the video posted on Jihadology.net; “Declaration of the Support Front (Jabhat al-Nuṣrah): For the People of Syria from the Mujāhidīn of Syria in the Fields of Jihād”.

Levantine Conquest Front”, acronym: JFS).<sup>109</sup> Half a year later, the groups merged with Ahrar al-Sham and other smaller factions and, becomes what is known today as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is still present in the Idlib province.

#### 4.2.1. The Evolution of al-Nusra’s Governance

At the beginning of al-Nusra’s existence, the group had a cellular structure and lacked the clear-cut organizational structure which it subsequently obtained at a later stage.<sup>110</sup> The group’s focus during its early stages was mainly on conducting occasional raids in Syria.<sup>111</sup> However, the Syrian opposition groups won a series of major strategic victories in Damascus, Idlib, Aleppo, Hasakah, and areas around Raqqa by autumn 2012, against the regime forces of Assad. These victories presented the Syrian opposition with a new task, namely to control and govern rural and urban areas in parts of Syria. In some opposition-controlled districts of Aleppo around December 2012, the group seized the control of flour production. Al-Nusra had “successfully” integrated itself in parts of the city and taken over infrastructure. As part of its integration and will to provide governance, the *Qism al-Ighātha* (The Department of Relief) was established, to provide a more affordable and efficient provision of food to the residents.<sup>112</sup> In early March the following year, the opposition managed to capture Raqqa completely, including the water infrastructure in the city, opening the curtains further for the opposition in the north in terms of governance.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, al-Nusra alongside other jihadi groups, seized the control over the oil and gas-rich area of Deir ez Zour in southeast Syria, providing the group with additional income.<sup>114</sup>

As the Syrian opposition expanded their territorial control through their military conquest, al-Nusra benefitted from the results.<sup>115</sup> The first and the most obvious result was the influx of new fighters from within the Syrian opposition and from abroad, saw their

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<sup>109</sup> Jones, Bryony et al. «Al-Nusra rebranding: New name, same aim? What you need to know.” *CNN*. 02.08.2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/01/middleeast/al-nusra-rebranding-what-you-need-to-know/index.html>

<sup>110</sup> The time and place of which al-Nusra became more organized are to this author not certain. However, during this chapter I will present some indications of when and how it happened.

<sup>111</sup> The group’s first major formal attack took place in December the 23th, when two of its members blew themselves up in Damascus’s southern district of Kafr Souseh. Lister in «Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra», 10

<sup>112</sup> Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad*, 102

<sup>113</sup> Al-Jazeera.com, “Syria rebels capture northern Raqqa city.” 05.03.2013. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/03/201334151942410812.html>

<sup>114</sup> Al-Jazeera.com, “Rebels take largest Syria oilfield: activists.” 23.11.2013. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/11/rebels-take-largest-syria-oilfield-activists-20131123151912731899.html>

<sup>115</sup> Wright, Robin et al. “The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, al-Qaeda and Beyond”. *United States Institute for Peace*, (2016):1-48. 12.12.2016. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/12/jihadi-threat-isis-al-qaeda-and-beyond>, 19

organization grow in terms of numbers. The three main recipients of approximately 13,000 foreign fighters were Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS.<sup>116</sup> The second, started to show in the city of Aleppo, where al-Nusra turned their energy to the social aspect of life in controlled areas. Most notably, in three ways; the implementation of *Sharī'a* law, public services and humanitarian aid, as well as *da'wa* (religious preaching /outreach). In fact, due to the group's strong influence in Aleppo, al-Nusra was able to “test the waters” in terms of governmental strategies, which later became a visible strategy across controlled territories.<sup>117</sup>

At the beginning of 2013, it became clear that the Assad-regime would not collapse any time soon. In addition, the damages on the Aleppo's infrastructure became a serious problem for the population living in the area. The opposition reacted with institutionalized initiatives, some of which were mere duplicates of previous structures which the Syrian regime already had established prior to 2011.<sup>118</sup> Al-Nusra, as part of this progress, developed into a tightly structured organization led by the Emir, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, and his deputy Dr. Sami al-Oraydi. Encircling al-Nusra's senior leadership was The Shura Council (*Majlis al-Shūrā*), consisting of twelve members, which included several al-Qaida veterans. Together, they were responsible for determining the group's overall strategy, as well as communication with the al-Qaida leadership.<sup>119</sup>

Two oppositional institutions were founded in Aleppo; the Local Council of Aleppo City (*al-Majlis al-Mahallī li-Madīnat Ḥalab*) and the Islamic Board in Aleppo (*al-Hay'a al-Shar'iyya bi-Ḥalab*). Both were established to ensure the needed deliverance of electricity, water, security, and food. Yet, in terms of capabilities and performance, the Islamic Board had financial and armed support from some of the bigger jihadist groups, while the Local Council lacked an influential backer. According to Donker, al-Nusra obtained a certain level of control over the Islamic Board, due to its members' experience in fighting, governance (from Afghanistan and Iraq) and their governing visions for the city.<sup>120</sup>

However, al-Nusra's seemingly governance hegemony ended 9<sup>th</sup> April 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham

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<sup>116</sup> Barret, Richard. “Foreign Fighters in Syria”. *The Soufan Group*, 2014. <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>, 6

<sup>117</sup> Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad*, 102-103

<sup>118</sup> Bacsko, Adam, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Arthur Quesney. “Building a Syrian State in Time of Civil War.” *The Carnegie Paper*, 2013. [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian\\_state.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_state.pdf), 5

<sup>119</sup> Lister, Charles. “Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra.”, 29

<sup>120</sup> Donker, T.H. “Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien”. 9-10



(ISIS).<sup>121</sup> The move did not only create a conflict within the Syrian Jihadists movement in Syria, but it might also have pushed al-Nusra from mainly focusing on fighting their enemies to increase their focus governance, as part of their broader strategy in Syria. One example of their increase in governance can be found in the fighting over the control for the city of Aleppo in 2012. Even though ISIS' presence ended when they were cleared out of the city in mid-2012, ISIS' great focus on governance might have affected the remaining oppositional groups' mode of conduct.<sup>122</sup>

The impact of ISIS started when the group created state-like structures with specialized offices called *dīwān*, devoted to different aspects of governance in the 'Caliphate'.<sup>123</sup> The introduction of these special offices weakened the Islamic Board, which were fighting for Islamic legitimacy with ISIS, and prompted the other Syrian nationalist factions to come together under one administrative umbrella in Aleppo. Al-Nusra's response was, in a similar fashion to ISIS, creating its own General Directorate for Services (*al-'Idāra al-'Āmma lil-Khadamāt*). In addition to the GDS, the other two main administrative bodies which were developed by al-Nusra was the Judicial Body (*Dār al-Qaḍā'*) and the Da'wa and Guidance Office (*Maktab al-Da'wa wa al-'Irshād*). The GDS started to take over crucial equipment, infrastructure and buildings needed for service provision. One particular incident which is of great relevance here was the seizing of the water station, Bab al-Nayrab - a station which was one out of five water stations in Aleppo.<sup>124</sup> These water stations became more and more crucial for Aleppo's population as the general situation in the city deteriorated, due to the ongoing battle with the Assad-regime.<sup>125</sup> The general task of the GDS was to cover governance areas like water and electricity and other public services.<sup>126</sup> This was made possible in Aleppo and in other areas, like Raqqa prior to the IS take-over, due to the fact that al-Nusra had acquired most of the available vehicles needed for repairing damaged

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<sup>121</sup> Jihadology.net, "Announcement of The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shām." Audio. 09.04.2013. <https://urlzs.com/b2P9D>

<sup>122</sup> Donker, T.H, "Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien", 11.

<sup>123</sup> *Dīwān* according to *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, is a term used during the time of the Caliphate, eventually administrating taxes, people etc. for the empire.

<sup>124</sup> See Donker's, and Al-Jazeera's articles: Al-Jazeera.com. "taḥādīyāt tuwājīh al-'idāra al-'āmma lil-khadamāt biḥalab". <https://urlzs.com/1X8Zu>, and see the See their page: Facebook, "الإدارة العامة للخدمات", Last visited: 08.06.2019. <https://www.facebook.com/general.management.of.services/>

<sup>125</sup> See map 1 in the Appendix for the location of the water stations.

<sup>126</sup> Youtube.com. "ṣīyānat khaṭ miyāh fī ḥayy al-mīsir". 08.02.2015. <https://urlzs.com/3QMoz>

infrastructure and distributing water – al-Nusra at one point obtained the only vehicle for repairing electricity cables in Aleppo, as well as several water trucks.<sup>127</sup>

The infighting over service provision continued amongst the opposition's two administrative bodies - The Local Council of Aleppo on the one hand, and the General Directorate for Services on the other. Al-Nusra launched a project called *the Life Project* in early 2016, which at this point were trying to expand and win the hearts and minds of Aleppo's population. According to their own propaganda outlet *al-Manārah al-Bayḍā'* (Foundation for Media Production), al-Nusra were giving the citizens of Aleppo free and drinkable water in town squares and to their homes.<sup>128</sup> The growing discontent and competition between al-Nusra and IS would soon lose its importance in Aleppo. The Russians had the year before, joined the war on Assad's side, and were tipping the scale in his regime's favour. Russian and Syrian forces embarked on a devastating military campaign in November 2016, resulting in the collapse of the rebel's hold of Aleppo in December 2016. The offensive stopped effective forms of governance in Aleppo.<sup>129</sup> Al-Nusra (which had rebranded themselves to JFS in July 2016) alongside the rest of the opposition, were forced to relocate southwards to the Idlib-province. In terms of governance structures, JFS and later HTS developed it even further. The GDS was developed into including special sub-directorates, designated to certain services: Mills and Bakery Services, Electricity Services, Water and Sanitation Services, etc.<sup>130</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Al-Nusra's Organizational Structure

The evolution of al-Nusra's organizational structure is arguably the first step towards a better understanding of how and why the group began providing hydro-governance in Syria. The first indication of governance came in December 2012, through The Department of Relief, when al-Nusra seized the control and production of bread in opposition-controlled districts in Aleppo. The seizure was, according to Charles Lister, part of a two-folded plan to outbid the

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<sup>127</sup> Both their page: Facebook, "الإدارة العامة للخدمات", Last visited: 08.06.2019.

<https://www.facebook.com/general.management.of.services/> and Teije Donker provides proof of how al-Nusra seized needed equipment to be able to repair vital infrastructure. In addition, one of my online interviews with a citizen of Raqqa, during the opposition's control, claimed that al-Nusra quickly seized control over all the repair vehicles and several water trucks.

<sup>128</sup> Jihadology.net. "The 'Life' Project to Secure Drinking Water in Aleppo City". 24.02.2016.

<https://jihadology.net/2016/02/24/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-life-project-to-secure-drinking-water-in-aleppo-city/>

<sup>129</sup> Al-Dasūqī, 'Imān, "al-Hukm al-Maḥallī li-Hay'at 'Taḥrīr al-Shām' wa Manzūrḥā lil-Majālīs al-Maḥallī". *Markaz al-'Imrān lil-Dirāsāt al-'Istrāṭijīyya*, (2017): 1-16. 23.06.2017. <https://urlzs.com/6N7Rp>

<sup>130</sup> The governmental structure became especially clear when the group rebranded and reshaped itself into what is known today as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). For more on their governmental structures, see the report written by Al-Dasūqī, 'Imān.



Assad regime, militarily and in terms governance – which included implementing *Sharī‘a* law.<sup>131</sup> A strategy which arguably becomes clearer in Aleppo the following year, when al-Nusra turned its attention to humanitarian aid and *da‘wa* as well.

Yet, as one of my informants who were living in Raqqa up until 2014 claimed, al-Nusra’s governance in the early stages lacked efficiency. In fact, the informant claimed to not have encountered any al-Nusra members performing governance, except when they had to go and visit their offices. The lack of openly governing in Raqqa might not have been the case in Aleppo, nevertheless it might shed light on the capabilities and priorities of the group during the early stages: focusing on the battlefield instead of governing.

The second incident of significance is arguably the introduction of ISIS, which later became IS, and the group’s focus on governing. One of the key goals of IS became rapidly clear the moment they announced their ‘Caliphate’, partly due to the name of the organization which includes “State” and partly because they already had started their state-building efforts prior to their declaration. Donker states in his study on Aleppo, that ISIS had superseded the Islamic Board’s projects in the city with their state-building efforts, which not only found resonance among the population living in the city but also in the ranks of al-Nusra. This resonance among its fighters led to a large number of fighters, arms and resources falling in the hands of ISIS during this period.<sup>132</sup>

However, it is not clear whether al-Nusra’s further development of their governance came as a response to ISIS, or if it was a deliberate strategy from early on, from the top of the organization. If it was the latter, a strategy to win the “hearts and minds” of the Syrian population, one could argue that there should have been more information and propaganda to back up their governance ambitions. Since, al-Nusra at a later stage used a significant amount of resources on producing propaganda videos of themselves governing. If it was the former, it might explain the lack of propaganda from an early stage. In addition, this line of thinking is in accordance with the information from my interviewees.

Nonetheless, it is clear that al-Nusra developed a form of governance in Aleppo from early stages, from The Department of Relief late 2012, the “cooperation” with the Islamic Board, to the development of the GDS in 2014. In addition, it is possible to look at the development of the public service’s administration of the two later issues of al-Nusra. Both

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<sup>131</sup> Lister, Charles. *The Syrian Jihad*, 102-104

<sup>132</sup> Donker, T.H, “Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien”, 11

JFS and later HTS developed their governing bodies further, which could be an indication of the leadership's understanding of the importance of governance when trying to win a war. Further, this development shows on the one hand that al-Nusra to some extent prioritized the provision of public services, but did not provide sufficient information on to what extent and why they did it.

### **4.2.3 Al-Nusra and IS' Administration Compared**

The capabilities and the scope of al-Nusra's governance become clearer when compared to that of IS'. Aymenn al-Tamimi compares the two administrations in a post on Jihadology.net by looking at what was at that time, unseen Islamic State administrative documents.<sup>133</sup> He claims that al-Nusra's administrative structures lacked the comprehensiveness and consistency of which IS had. In addition to the lack of similar contiguous territory and urban strongholds. More importantly however, Tamimi states that al-Nusra (as of 2015) did not claim to be a state. In comparison, IS in 2015 claimed to be a functioning state with departments dedicated to every aspect of daily life.<sup>134</sup> Even though evidence on IS' governing clearly states that their governing practices lacked merits, the organization did manage to effectively operate some aspects of their controlled lands.<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, Tamimi points to the blurred lines of al-Nusra's three major branches of administration among themselves and in cooperation with other councils, during 2015. He explains the blurred lines by the absence of each administrative body in every place where al-Nusra were present. For example, the Judicial Body turned to the provision of public services in Sarmada, where they were undertaking a project to rebuild the main road.<sup>136</sup> In addition, unlike IS, al-Nusra allowed civilian local and service councils to provide public services. In

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<sup>133</sup> Al-Tamimi, Aymenn. "The Archivist: 26 Unseen Islamic State Administrative Documents: Overview, Transliteration & Analysis," *Jihadology.net*. 24.07.2015. <https://jihadology.net/2015/08/24/the-archivist-26-unseen-islamic-state-administrative-documents-overview-translation-analysis/> The documents from IS are posted on Tamimi's own webpage: <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/03/archive-of-jabhat-al-nusra-dar-al-qaa-documents>. On the page it becomes evident that the first document from the Judicial Body are from August 2014, which might indicate that the office was developed not long before the date.

<sup>134</sup> Al-Furqān Media, "The Structure of the Caliphate." <https://jihadology.net/2016/07/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-structure-of-the-caliphate/>

<sup>135</sup> Callimachi, "The ISIS Files."

<sup>136</sup> Jihadology.net. "Report on the Project to Reform the Main Road in Sarmadā". 11.06.2015. URL <https://jihadology.net/2015/07/11/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-report-on-the-project-to-reform-the-main-road-in-sarmada/>

Sarmada Tamimi shows evidence of al-Nusra allowing hydro-governmental practices by a civil actor, repairing a broken water pipe.<sup>137</sup>

Yet, IS strategy in terms of governance was governance through co-optation. Meaning, whenever IS seized control over an area, especially urban, they immediately co-opted such bodies into their own structures. In Raqqa for example, from the takeover in 2014 until the fall of Raqqa to the coalition in October 2017, there only existed one body which controlled the matter of public services – The Department of Services (*Dīwān al-Khadamāt*). The situation for the two can arguably be said to have differed in terms of competition of governance in their respective areas of ruling. Al-Nusra on the one hand, was operating in a more complex field where they had to relate to, and to some extent compete with, other similar groups for legitimacy and space.<sup>138</sup> The group's body lacked a uniform presence in the areas of control, and most likely lacked the needed amount of personnel to govern across its territory. IS on the other hand, seemed to both have the capacity (to some extent) and the personnel to govern vast areas of territory.

However, IS became officially defeated at the beginning of 2019 - after having been driven out of their territorial strongholds like Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. Their days of governance were gone. Al-Nusra on the other hand, after a series of rebranding and restructuring, are still present in Northern Syria and has developed their governance to a great extent since its introduction to the war in 2011.<sup>139</sup>

### **4.3. The Consequences of War on Water**

The government's mismanagement of the water resources from rivers or natural phenomena such as flash rain or draught, contributed to the difficult conditions in which Syria finds itself today. Yet, none of these factors has arguably had an impact on the Syrian population as the Syrian war in general. The country was already predisposed to water shortages in certain areas and was increasingly experiencing the effects of climate change in the early 2000s.<sup>140</sup> The negative effects of the war added to these problematic developments. The war has

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<sup>137</sup> The document was found in Tamimi's article "The Archivist: 26 Unseen Islamic State Administrative Documents", and pictures repairs of a pipeline: <https://justpaste.it/sarmadaservices1>

<sup>138</sup> Al-Tamimi, Aymenn. "The Archivist: 26 Unseen Islamic State Administrative Documents: Overview, Transliteration & Analysis," *Jihadology.net*. 24.07.2015. <https://jihadology.net/2015/08/24/the-archivist-26-unseen-islamic-state-administrative-documents-overview-translation-analysis/>

<sup>139</sup> For more information regarding al-Qaida and how it has developed since its earlier days, see Saleh, Stenersen and Charles Lister.

<sup>140</sup> Selby, Jan et al. "Climate Change and The Syrian Civil War Revised". *Political Geography* 60 (2017) 232-244.

created additional extra water-related challenges, which all the actors involved in the Syrian war had to take into account.<sup>141</sup> The United Nations estimated that as many as 7.6 million people in Syria were in acute need of WASH assistance (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Services) in 2018. According to the report, the districts in most need were Aleppo, Idlib and rural Damascus (UN), which had been under oppositional control and experienced the regime's destroying bombardments for over four years.<sup>142</sup>

Yet, these consequences were cumulated in a relatively brief period. An example of the long-term consequences on water networks by the war, is found in the southern region of Iraq. Mark Zeitoun shed light on the devastating results, as he and his team address the consequences of war on water's quality and distribution in Basra after three decades of conflict. The contamination from the abandoned war equipment from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the invasion by American and allied troops in 2003, has left the water quality poor. As a result, drinking water services are unable to provide the population in the southern region sufficient, safe and clean water.<sup>143</sup> In terms of comparison, Iraq and Syria are in this case similar, or at least could be in the near future, if water infrastructure and water networks are neglected during conflict over a longer period of time. One reason for it, is the presumably lasting and devastating effects of war on public services, both urban and rural, in which Syria finds itself in today.<sup>144</sup>

As much as the consequences of war are devastating for the environment, and therefore prevents people from obtaining basic services, however, it also leaves a physical impact on the vital infrastructure purifying and distributing the water. During the war in Syria, the infrastructure that provided water to areas has been a target by all the involved actors in the conflict. Hence, when areas were under attack the water infrastructure was damaged or destroyed, which made it almost unbearable to stay in the area. In Aleppo for example, the access to water decreased during the battle of Aleppo from 2012 to 2016. Water pipes from the al-Khafsa-purification plant, as well as the plant itself, was for example

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<sup>141</sup> Khairallah, Khalil. "al-ṣirā' alā al-miyāh fī al-sharq al-'awsaṭ". *The Water Conflict in the Middle East*. Beirut: Al-Markaz al-'Arabī lilBahūth al-Aanūniyya wa al-Qdā'iyya, 2016.  
<https://carjj.org/sites/default/files/ebooks/book.pdf>, 76

<sup>142</sup> Humanitarian Need Overview. "Syrian Arab Republic - 2018". 27.11.2017.  
[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018\\_syr\\_hno\\_english.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018_syr_hno_english.pdf)

<sup>143</sup> Zeitoun, Mark et al., "Urban Warfare Ecology: A Study of Water Supply in Basrah". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, nr. 6 (2017): 904-925. 918

<sup>144</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, "Urban Services During Protracted Armed Conflict". 2015.  
[https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file\\_plus\\_list/4249\\_urban\\_services\\_during\\_protracted\\_armed\\_conflict.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/4249_urban_services_during_protracted_armed_conflict.pdf)

damaged numerous during the war.<sup>145</sup> The situation therefore became difficult for all parties involved, meaning that the governing bodies of cities like Aleppo increase their preservative services to keep the water running. In some incidents, the water plants and stations lacked the required spare parts or trained personnel to restore the plant's operations. Other incidents, the governing bodies were forced to change or repair water damaged pipes, as well as try to provide enough electricity and gas needed to operate the relevant equipment, which has turned out to be impossible to manage without any form of help.

## **5. Hydro-Governance in the Times of War**

In this chapter, I aim to discuss al-Nusra's hydro-governance policies to highlight the importance of water for the group between 2011 and 2016. I will address the different ways al-Nusra provided water services in urban and rural context, and analyse the role of the group's hydro-governance in Syria. Secondly, I will then proceed to discuss al-Nusra's pragmatic cooperation with antagonistic forces and groups – a precondition for the organization to provide water to the people of Aleppo. I finalize this chapter by exploring what way al-Nusra's ideology and religion affected the group's distribution of hydro-governance. Answering the sub-question: is it possible to Islamize hydro-governance?

### **5.1. Al-Nusra's Ways of Providing Hydro-Governance**

Jabhat al-Nusra's hydro-governance consisted mainly of two features: providing water to the public and maintaining, or repairing the infrastructure of water. The group has participated as a warring party throughout most of the Syrian civil war, early obtaining its presence in cities such as Idlib, Aleppo, and Raqqa, as well as in various rural areas in Syria since 2011 up until today. In fact, the Syrian opposition's presence was mainly rural territory. Their presence in these various areas has initially given al-Nusra (whom today are largely part of HTS) a governing experience in wartime, as well as the means to tackle problems regarding delivering basic services.<sup>146</sup>

#### **5.1.1. Water Trucking**

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<sup>145</sup> See Map 1 for explanation on the location of the plant. In addition, see Triebert, Christian. "Syria's Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry," *Bellingcat*. 11.12.2015.

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure/>

<sup>146</sup> See the link under "Alexpl" in the bibliography, for an animated map of the Syrian war, including who controlled what and where during certain periods. The map is made by Alexpl and found on Wikimedia Commons, which is a free media repository.

Water trucking has been vital for states and NSAAAs engaged in hydro-governance in Syria throughout the war. Several experts whom I interviewed in Jordan and Norway confirmed to me that water-trucking had been the most common tool for distributing water to the public, besides tap water in most of the cities. Water trucking was especially important in areas outside the major cities such as the rural areas around Aleppo, Hama, Daraa and Deir ez-Zour, where the population had limited tap water and therefore needed an alternative way of meeting their demands. The water trucks were usually seized by a NSAA when the opposition took over cities. In some instances, non-military citizens kept the ownership of the trucks. These drivers were given the choice to either continue operating under the protection of a powerful NSAA, or to lose their vehicles to the NSAA. Al-Nusra was one of these actors controlling the water trucks through a mixture of enlisted cooperation and coercion. Additionally, due to the limited amount of trucks, they were often forced to label their trucks with the logo of their patron so the beneficiaries would know who provided, and was responsible for, the service.<sup>147</sup>

### **5.1.2. Repairing Damaged Water Infrastructure**

A second main activity in which al-Nusra engaged as part of its hydro-governance strategy was repairing damaged infrastructure. This part of hydro-governance increasingly became important as the war continued, as vital infrastructure in urban areas was often bombed.<sup>148</sup> The reliance on the water infrastructure, especially in urban settings, made the need for swift repairs important. Yet, for al-Nusra to be able to repair damages on the infrastructure, they had to obtain the necessary resources: personnel, cars, and equipment such as drills, spare parts, chlorine, etc.<sup>149</sup>

One should note that water infrastructure (and therefore hydro-governance) depends on power infrastructure as water is pumped through a distribution network, which requires electricity. This electricity is usually provided by power stations; or, in their absence, with the help from generators powered by fossil fuel. This process is vulnerable, especially in war.

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<sup>147</sup> Donker, T.H, “Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien”

<sup>148</sup> There are several reports and news coverage that shows vital infrastructure like hospitals, power plants and water stations were targeted by Syrian regime forces. See for example, The Guardian. “Stop the carnage: doctors call for an end to Syria hospital airstrikes”. 02.06.2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/02/doctors-global-appeal-stop-syria-bombing-hospitals-idlib>

<sup>149</sup> On example of this importance can we see in this document, which was released by al-Nusra’s GDS were they are in need of hiring people with certain skills (engineers and technicians in water, electricity etc). The document was found on Ayman al-Tamimi’s webpage, I have labelled it “Job Vacancy” in the Bibliography.

Hence, rural areas and cities like Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama have dug, developed, and maintained wells as an essential safety net in case the infrastructure becomes damaged.<sup>150</sup>

As noted earlier in this study, al-Nusra took control of crucial equipment and infrastructure required to engage in state-like public services when gaining control of a particular area. The appropriation of these crucial resources gave al-Nusra authority in vital aspects of daily civilian lives and made the group increasingly relevant for Syrian civilians as the civil war persisted. A case in point, in Aleppo early 2014, whenever an electricity line or post was damaged, al-Nusra was one of few actors that provided the required vehicle for such a repair. The explanation is the following: al-Nusra was in possession of the only vehicle immediately following its split with the *Islamic Board*<sup>151</sup> and the creation of its own directorate, the General Directorate for Services (the GDS).<sup>152</sup>

As one of the strongest military actors in Aleppo in 2014, al-Nusra was a dominant actor in what became a “proxy war over service provisions” among the oppositional militant factions.<sup>153</sup> One important building block for the governance project of al-Nusra, was the water station in the Bab al-Nayrab neighbourhood. This was a station securing water for the entire Old City of Aleppo, as well as for al-Arqob, Karm al-Jabal, al-Hamidiya, and al-Sayed Ali.<sup>154</sup> Al-Nusra consequently became one of the leading actors by obtaining control of several water stations, who providing hydro-governance in Aleppo through military conquest.

## 5.2. Rural & Urban Hydro-Governance

After watching numerous al-Nusra produced videos portraying the life of water trucking or repairing infrastructure, I developed a working assumption that both services were

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<sup>150</sup> World Bank Group. “Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib. March 2017. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/530541512657033401/pdf/121943-WP-P161647-PUBLIC-Syria-Damage-Assessment.pdf>

<sup>151</sup> As explained in the former chapter, The Islamic Board was one of two local councils in Aleppo, created by four of the most powerful jihadist groups at the time: al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, al-Tawhid Brigade and Suqour al-Sham. For more information see Donker’s study on Jihadism & Governance in North-Syria.

<sup>152</sup> See their page: Facebook, “الإدارة العامة للخدمات”, Last visited: 08.06.2019.

<https://www.facebook.com/general.management.of.services/>, where they posted pictures of themselves repairing the electricity in controlled areas. In addition, see: Jihadology.net. “Report #26: Repairing Water Wells and Electrical Transformers to Benefit the Muslims - Dar ā”. 28.10.2013. ULR: <https://jihadology.net/2013/09/28/new-video-message-from-himam-news-agency-report-26-repairing-water-wells-and-electrical-transformers-to-benefit-the-muslims-dara/>

<sup>153</sup> Donker, T.H, “Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien”, 12

<sup>154</sup> Syrian Arab Crescent. “Repairing the Generator Set of Bab al-Nayrab Station“. 20.10.2016. <http://sarc.sy/repairing-generator-set-bab-al-nayrab-station/>

complementary and were performed in accordance to the need of people living the area and the group's capability.

Yet, when I interviewed two sources online about the life in the city of Raqqa from 2011 until 2014, they claimed that water trucking was unusual in the city, even though the city started to experience a decrease in its water supply as the war continued. In fact, one interviewee stated that until 2014, they had not experienced any water trucking at all in the city of Raqqa.<sup>155</sup> The statement prompted me to review my material. In accordance with the propaganda posted by al-Nusra, it did not include any form of water trucking from the city. The same was true from Hama and Aleppo from the same period, including the propaganda videos from Daraa, (up until around 2014-2015). Was water trucking only a rural phenomenon, or was the lack of reporting a pure coincidence?

I argue that the answer lies in the importance of the location of the water resource and the town, city or area. That is, whether the service was urban or rural often defined the character of the water services in the area through pipes, canals, or water trucking. In addition to, the distance of the location to the water resource or the distribution point of it. If a location was reliant on one or two water plants located far away from the receiving end, or reliant on a close water resource, either a river, lake or a water purification plant. Yet, the urban/rural divide of hydro-governance became less relevant as the war persisted, due to increasingly damaged water infrastructure.

### **5.2.1. Raqqa**

The city of Raqqa, known as the breadbasket of Syria due to its grand agricultural sector, is located on the north-eastern side of the Euphrates and therefore has abundant access to clean water. The city had thus developed a sufficient infrastructure to distribute water, both to the areas of agriculture and to private homes. This meant that the citizens of Raqqa drank tap water and saw no need for water trucks, which could possibly explain their absence.

However, as the war persisted, the water situation as well as other public services, became direr and accessibility declined. The citizens of Raqqa were without water for more than three

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<sup>155</sup> The two interviewees from Raqqa stayed in the city different amount of time. One was living in Raqqa when the war broke out, and stayed until 2014 – experiencing the control of Assad, the opposition (with al-Nusra) and then IS. The other one, were only present in Raqqa for some months in 2014 prior to the overtaking by IS. However, the person had been living in the area prior to the war, resulting in the experience of first Assad prior and then the opposition during 2014.



to four days at the time in 2014, forcing the civilians to carefully manage their water.<sup>156</sup> The reasons are not clear. According to Donker, the takeover of Raqqa was done with minimal damage to its infrastructure.<sup>157</sup> One explanation to the water shortages experienced by the civilians in 2014 could be the “spoils” of victory and the looting of vital governmental offices and infrastructure (parts, treatment chemicals, etc. were looted from water plants and stations) which happened after the Syrian opposition seized the city, in 2013.<sup>158</sup> The looting happened, as mentioned, due to the fierce competition between rival rebel factions fighting over control of the city. The most powerful of these commenced either co-opting or cooperating with civil actors of the society to provide public services. For al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham in order to gain the upper hand in terms of governance and control in the city, they needed to seize the equipment, vehicles and infrastructure of importance.<sup>159</sup>

The competition and the seizure of water infrastructure do not explain why al-Nusra did not al-Nusra use water trucks as a substitute when the water quantity declined, however. The answer could be that the NSAAs primarily kept the governing structures and practices already present in the different areas they controlled, and therefore continuing the mode of governance which the city of Raqqa was used to. I believe this tactic was done, out of necessity and lack of governing capabilities during the first years of the war, rather than an active choice. In fact, at least during the three first years of the war, most of the evidence agree that when the NSAAs took control over previously controlled regime-territory the quality of services dropped.<sup>160</sup>

The drop in public services quality could be explained, just like a normal consequence of war which gradually affects it in a negative way. Alternatively, the explanation might be found in the newly set up administrations, which lacked the know-how and technical expertise. Hence, the al-Nusra organizations lacked the capacities to meet the residents’ needs and did not devote enough funding to carry out these functions.<sup>161</sup> Even IS, the world richest terror organization at one point, struggled when they turned their controlled lands into a

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<sup>156</sup> Told by one of the interviewees. And see, Mazlum, Ibrahim, “ISIS as an Actor Controlling Water Resources in Syria and Iraq”. 115

<sup>157</sup> Donker, T.H, “Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien”. 13

<sup>158</sup> Zeitoun, Mark et al., “Urban Warfare Ecology: A Study of Water Supply in Basrah”, 909

<sup>159</sup> Donker, T.H, “Dschihadismus und Governance in Nordsyrien”. 14-17

<sup>160</sup> The report written by United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) claims that the country, in 2013, had been taken back 35 years in terms of its past progress, mainly due to the deteriorating health, education and income indices. For more specifics on how the Syrian war affected the socioeconomic situation of the country, see: The United Nations Relief and Works Agency. “The Syrian Catastrophe: Socioeconomic monitoring report”. 2013. <https://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2013071244355.pdf>

<sup>161</sup> Mazlum, Ibrahim, “ISIS as an Actor Controlling Water Resources in Syria and Iraq”. 115

“state”.<sup>162</sup> For instance, when ISIS took the city of Mosul in June 2014, they initially cut off water and electricity supply, only to realize that the citizens of Mosul were starting to flee because of it. The exodus of people prompted ISIS to turn back on the supplies, to retain support among the local citizens.<sup>163</sup>

The same might have happened in Raqqa, after IS took over the city completely in 2014. With the takeover of Raqqa, they seized the water facilities in and around the city. IS claimed to have been operating these water stations as well as being in charge of repairing or laying new water pipes in the area. The statement and the propaganda seemed plausible at first, due to the group’s reputation of having a massive bureaucratic capability in terms of providing services.<sup>164</sup>

However, Christiaan Triebert (the owner of the investigative journalism website called Bellingcat.com) claims that IS lacked the necessary expertise and competence to provide their own staff for the water facilities in Raqqa. Triebert also states that it was the Assad regime who provided the services and personnel to the facilities, and not IS themselves, which they claimed to have done.<sup>165</sup>

### 5.2.2. Aleppo

As for the city of Aleppo, it is not located close to a water source and is therefore dependent on the water being delivered through water pipes from the Assad lake and to the water stations located across the town.<sup>166</sup> The city was in the middle of the war, which meant that the infrastructure of the city experienced years of bombardment from the Government of Syria (the GoS), unlike Raqqa, which was far from the worst lines of combat.

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<sup>162</sup> Even though they try to show that they were trying to deliver hydro-governance services, they admitted that the water situation in Raqqa was difficult (they blamed Turkey and their dams). Jihadology.net. “Water: The Source of Life – Wilāyat al-Raqqah”. 12.05.2015. <https://jihadology.net/2015/05/19/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-water-the-source-of-life-wilayat-al-raqqah/>.

<sup>163</sup> Massih, Nadia. “ISIS gains highlight ‘aggressive’ use of water as a weapon,” *The Daily Star*. 21.06.2014. <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Jul-21/264554-isis-gains-highlight-aggressive-use-of-water-as-weapon-of-war.ashx>

<sup>164</sup> Callimachi, “The ISIS Files.”

<sup>165</sup> Triebert, Christian. “Syria’s Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry,” *Bellingcat*. 11.12.2015. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure/>

<sup>166</sup> The pipeline from lake Assad is approximately 80km long and includes pumpage and treatment facilities. It was built via the help of the World Bank. The project started in 1977, See: The World Bank. “Project Audit Report Syrian Arab Republic: Aleppo Water Supply Project”. 27.06.1986. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/774681468915310316/pdf/multi-page.pdf>

Aleppo's water infrastructure was well developed, and according to one report published by the *REACH initiative*<sup>167</sup>, the public water supply systems covered around 95% of the urban households and 80% of the rural ones, at the beginning of the war.<sup>168</sup> However, both the water and electricity infrastructure in the city was heavily damaged during the siege, resulting in the increased difficulties of providing basic services to the citizens.<sup>169</sup> As the war over Aleppo continued and the conditions worsened (damaged infrastructure, lack of supplies, etc.), other means than regular tap water for the households from the Assad lake, where needed. At the beginning of 2016, al-Nusra seemingly started what they called the "Life" -project, providing some of the civilians in the western part of the besieged Aleppo with water via water wells connected to the infrastructure.<sup>170</sup> The project is of significance because it shows how al-Nusra performed hydro-governance services; repairing, managing and securing the water flow in the city's taps. However, since the video was released through their own media channel, it is uncertain how the project affected the population, how much water it actually provided and how they managed to implement it.

An explanation to the life project and the "sudden" capability to provide water in the city, which would bring more nuance to events other than the propaganda posted by al-Nusra, could be the fact that the UN (through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent - SARC) were providing WASH-assistance to Aleppo at that time.<sup>171</sup> The UN agencies, alongside several local NGOs, were boosting their provision of goods and equipment into Syria, as the war persisted and worsened. The increase of provision via humanitarian agencies in Aleppo, which was until December 2016 in the midst of the war between the GoS, IS and the Syrian opposition, might have occurred as part of a deal between them and the controlling groups in the city (al-Nusra,

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<sup>167</sup> Which is a Geneva-based association, aiming to facilitate planning by aid actors through the provision of assessment, database and mapping services in countries that are in crisis or at-risk of crisis, according to their webpage: <http://www.reach-initiative.org/>

<sup>168</sup> The study was done by a second-hand actor called Early Warning Alert and Respons Network (EWARN), "taqyīm naw'īyya al-miyāh – madinat ḥalab". 2015. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Water%20Quality%20Assessment%20Report%20%E2%80%93%20Aleppo%20City%20AR.pdf>

<sup>169</sup> World Bank Group. "Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib. March 2017. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/530541512657033401/pdf/121943-WP-P161647-PUBLIC-Syria-Damage-Assessment.pdf>

<sup>170</sup> Jihadology.net. "The "Life" Project to Secure Drinking Water in Aleppo City". 24.02.2016. <https://jihadology.net/2016/02/24/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-life-project-to-secure-drinking-water-in-aleppo-city/>

<sup>171</sup> OCHA. "Syrian Arab Republic: Aleppo Sitrep Report no. 1". 1.12.2016. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20SITREP%20Aleppo\\_1%20December.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20SITREP%20Aleppo_1%20December.pdf)

Ahrar Al-Sham and other jihadi groups).<sup>172</sup> The help, according to my understanding, was often given indirectly to these NSAAs due to the guidelines of the NGOs.<sup>173</sup>

In terms of water trucking in Aleppo, some reports indicate that several trucks were delivered to the city of Aleppo as part of this operation to help the citizens, somewhere during 2015 prior al-Nusra's "Life" project. The deliverance of these trucks could be part of the explanation for the sudden capability of providing the needed water to the civilians in the city. The extent of the damages on the infrastructure of the city was high, which meant that the water pipes did not provide enough water. An indication of the severity of the situation is the fact that in the urban areas of Aleppo water trucking had until then been highly unusual.<sup>174</sup>

### 5.2.3. Rural Hama

In the **rural** areas on the other hand, mainly the outskirts and smaller cities surrounding, the areas lacked the sufficient water infrastructure needed to provide drinking water. In the areas around Aleppo, Idlib, Hama or in the Deir ez-Zour area, water trucking in addition to the existing water wells, was more common prior to 2011, and therefore became the main way for the ruling NSAAs to provide water.<sup>175</sup> Seemingly, al-Nusra kept on delivering water services to rural areas, and attested several times via their propaganda videos that they were able to keep up the repair work and meet the demands of the people; with electricity and water.

Yet, in the rural Hama area, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) claims that the water infrastructure had been neglected throughout the war, resulting in limited access to water. The damages by the war and the neglect of the present water infrastructure, as well as the low rainfall, meant that the majority of the wells and water resources in 2018 were no longer functional. Even though, NGOs like the International Humanitarian Relief

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<sup>172</sup> The Government of Syria takes over Aleppo in December 2016. Al-Jazeera.com. "Syrian government recaptures all of Aleppo city". 22.12.2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/syria-government-recaptures-aleppo-161222184428465.html>

<sup>173</sup> Two of my expert interviews indicated that the NGOs tried not to work directly with the jihadist groups, but sometimes they had to do it indirectly because they were the ones who controlled the area.

<sup>174</sup> Most of the reports on reliefweb.int regarding water trucking in Aleppo starts around 2015-2016, due to the threat of the GoS and its besiegement of Aleppo from 2014. It made it difficult for outside actors to provide aid. See for example: REACH Initiative. "Urban Factsheet Eastern Aleppo: Food, Health and Water Assessment". 17.07.2014. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/factsheetsyria-crisis-needs-overview-food-health-water-eastern-aleppo>

<sup>175</sup> Interview with one of the experts on water in Syria. February 2019. Oslo, Norway. In addition, see the video from rural Idlib; Jihadology.net. "Faith Campaign for Water in the Month of Ramaḍān in the City of Sarqāqib in Rural Idlib". 04.07.2016. <https://urlzs.com/zPHWt>

(IHF) in 2015 started a project to reactivate the pumping of water through the water networks in the area to provide drinking water to the households.<sup>176</sup>

UNICEF's claim is in contradiction to what al-Nusra declares in one of their propaganda videos from the area, however. Al-Nusra states in the video from March 2016, that through their "Life"-project administrated by the local branch of GDS in rural Hama, they were able to continue their hydro-governance, making it possible for people to stay put in the surrounding towns and villages.<sup>177</sup> Moreover, they claimed to have been able to react to the water shortages which the area was experiencing, due to the damages done on the infrastructure, by repairing the necessary water plants and wells:

...from the largest station near Khan Sheikhun, we have witnessed continuously the speed and wisdom of the Bureau of Services (the GDS) when it comes to administrating... (this was) done by completing the repair and operation of the water plants, which stopped working for several reasons, not long ago. Filling large wells and then pump (the water) through via land extensions (pipes) to homes, shops and hospitals...<sup>178</sup>

In addition, the video focusses on the existing water infrastructure and do not mention anything about water trucking. This indicates that Hama, at least the areas close to the town, were used to water pipes from wells. The focus on water infrastructure correlates with other projects operating in and around the city of Hama. For example, Oxfam claims to have initiated projects meant to improve the water situation in the Hama-province. The NGO, operated in the town of Kafr Zita located in the northern parts of the province, reported in August 2015 that they had built a water plant. The desalination plant was built in the town of Kafr Zita with the consultation of the "Water Establishment" and the community in Salamiyah and was meant to have provided water for up to 35,000 people with drinking water from a previously redundant well.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> International Humanitarian Relief. "Water Sanitation & Hygiene". <http://www.ihrelief.org/en/wash/>

<sup>177</sup> Jihadology.net. "Life Project: Delivery of Electricity and Water to the Liberated Areas". 31.03.2016. <https://jihadology.net/2016/03/31/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-life-project-delivery-of-electricity-and-water-to-the-liberated-areas/>

<sup>178</sup> Jihadology.net. "Life Project: Delivery of Electricity and Water to the Liberated Areas". 31.03.2016. <https://jihadology.net/2016/03/31/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-life-project-delivery-of-electricity-and-water-to-the-liberated-areas/>

<sup>179</sup> OXFAM International. "OXFAM improving access to safe water in Syria". 27.08.2015. <https://oxf.am/2AxIM6l>

Furthermore, al-Nusra in 2015, as a response to the growing shortage of water north of Hama, claimed to have been the one who fixed the water problems which occurred in the town of Khan Sheikhoun (17km north from Kafr Zita).<sup>180</sup> In a public announcement to the people of Khan Sheikhoun, al-Nusra responded by allowing the people of the town some “extra water activities” as a result of their achievements.<sup>181</sup> Hence, al-Nusra openly indicated that they were in charge of the hydro-governance, and could therefore allow the town’s citizens the comfort of washing their cars, streets and clothes.

Was al-Nusra responsible for the return of water? Or, did they just take the credit for someone else’s act? According to UNICEF’s claim mentioned above, the actors who had been present in rural Hama had neglected the water infrastructure, up until 2018.<sup>182</sup> The wells lacked pure and drinkable water, as well as the water networks were destroyed. The undrinkable water according to UNICEF, meant that it had not received any chemicals or repairs during the war.

Yet, both Oxfam and al-Nusra claim to have initiated projects meant to improve the water situation in the Hama-province. The former, which operated in the town of Kafr Zita located in the northern parts of the province, reported in August 2015 that they had built a water plant.<sup>183</sup> The latter, had been operated in Khan Sheikhoun, repairing and maintaining the water infrastructure in the area.<sup>184</sup> Both cases, show strong evidence of working in parts of rural Hama, performing repairs on water infrastructure.

Moreover, UNICEF revealed that they had used water trucks as the means of distributing water in 2018, which might indicate that their assessment of the water infrastructure was accurate. Both Oxfam and al-Nusra’s evidence is dated in a time period between 2015 to 2016, while UNICEF’s claim is made two years after in 2018. The time gap

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<sup>180</sup> Jihadology.net. “Life Project: Delivery of Electricity and Water to the Liberated Areas”. 31.03.2016. <https://jihadology.net/2016/03/31/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-life-project-delivery-of-electricity-and-water-to-the-liberated-areas/>

<sup>181</sup> The picture is found on Ayman Jawad al-Tamimi’s own webpage, and pictures a declaration from the GDS. It explains the extra water activities which the citizens are allowed to do after a lengthy water shortage: 21) Water Wastage, 22) washing cars, 23) washing Streets 24) using water systems in their home (washing machine etc.) See “Return of Water” in the Bibliography.

<sup>182</sup> The Hama and Idlib provinces have been under the Syrian opposition’s control until 2019, which discard both IS and GoS hydro-governance during that time.

<sup>183</sup> It is likely that al-Nusra controlled the town of Kafr Zita, since they already were in control of Khan Sheikhoun during the same period. As shown on this map found on Wikimedia Commons (created by MrPenguin20), both areas were under oppositional control in 2014 and the opposition kept both towns under their control until today (mid-2019).

<sup>184</sup> Both the public announcement and the video are supposedly from Khan Sheikhoun, and can be seen as an indication of al-Nusra’s hydro-governance in the area.

of two years might be an explanatory factor to the contradicting claims. The water infrastructures of the area could have been destroyed during the two years period, which would justify some of the critique by UNICEF. Additionally, it would have forced the humanitarian NGOs to adhere to water trucking, to provide the needed water, due to the lack of operative infrastructure.

I believe, on the other hand, it could indicate that the needed infrastructure was controlled by an actor who did not want UNICEF operating openly on what they viewed as “their” property. Al-Nusra, which most likely were the dominant group in the area and responsible for governance, did not want their legitimacy reduced or challenged by the overt help from an outside non-Islamic NGO. If an actor could provide better hydro-governance services than al-Nusra, the group would probably think the NGO was a threat to their image of being a protector and provider for the people in Hama. Their image, which I have portrayed in the previous chapter, was arguably one of the core elements of al-Nusra’s Syrian campaign.<sup>185</sup>

As for the validity to al-Nusra’s claim of being the ones who returned the water to the city of Khan Sheikhoun, there is a big possibility that they were given outside help but took the credit for it themselves. One must remember that the area around Hama has been a centre of offensives from all the sides in the war, the Syrian opposition, IS and the GoS, which would therefore have left the infrastructure in general severely damaged. Also, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, al-Nusra usually lacked the expertise to repair and operate water stations and wells, which meant that the group could have received help to restore the water by Oxfam, UNICEF or an actor like it.

Whether al-Nusra contributed to the repairing these facilities, or if they relied completely on outside help, however, is not certain. What it might indicate, is a firm level of pragmatism. Al-Nusra could have, as part of an outreach strategy towards the Syrian population, agreed with these NGOs on providing the necessary staff and equipment so that they could keep their hegemonial position in the town. Although, only on the premise of not having outside actors fixing the infrastructure on their behalf, but for them in secrecy.

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<sup>185</sup> The theme was one of three major themes in the video where they announced their formation. For more, see the former chapter.

#### 5.2.4. Level of Danger and its Effect on the Masses

It is plausible to argue that the distance to a water resource was a crucial factor in terms of hydro-governance in rural areas, as this scenario was most certainly the case for areas around Hama, as well as a possibility for the water distribution services in Aleppo. In addition to the distance and the mentioned rural / urban divide, as part of a possible explanation of the modes of hydro-governance I see the need of adding another factor to the two previous ones (the location- rural/urban and the distance to the water source), namely the *level of danger* of which the area finds itself in during wartime.

The level of danger in a city, town or area is likely to define the matter in which hydro-governance is being performed. If the area is in the midst of an offensive or in between two or three militant actors, the focus of the ruling actor of the area is going to be on the military aspect of it, rather than governance. There is also the scenario which happened in Aleppo, where the battle for the area occurred over several years (2012-2016). In a scenario like that, there was no possibility for the defending Syrian opposition to neglect the aspect of governance, due to the number of civilians living in the city during the siege. In addition, the level of danger in an area, resulted in a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) moved to safer areas inside Syria. In fact, the large scale of IDPs which had reached around 6.2 million people in 2019, could have affected al-Nusra's strategies towards hydro-governance.

The reduction of civilians in their controlled territories would have resulted in them losing their Syrian constituencies and therefore a reduction of their legitimacy. This scenario would mean that their presence in the areas like rural Hama would have had little significance. Initially, ending up controlling lands with hardly any population and lose their role of being a representative of the Syrian people (according to themselves). The big amount of IDPs could arguably have forced al-Nusra to concentrate its governance to areas with existing infrastructure and a higher concentration of people, but as what al-Nusra's propaganda and public announcements seemingly shows, they stayed put and kept on performing hydro-governance in areas with reduced infrastructural capabilities

The most likely explanation to their continued rural presence, is the fact that the opposition mainly controlled rural areas, and therefore continued their governance of it throughout the war. All the major cities in which the Syrian opposition had a presence, are



conceded to the Syrian government, except for the northern city of Idlib.<sup>186</sup> Aleppo was lost in 2016 to the GoS and Homs in 2014, while Raqqa was seized by IS in 2014.

As for Hama city and some of the surrounding areas, the World Bank reported that even though Hama experienced an increase of IDPs, Hama's public water supply system managed the pressure. There were setbacks and discrepancies in the water supply in 2013 and 2014 due to fighting, but generally the city was able to provide water.<sup>187</sup>

### 5.3. Hydro-Governance Through Cooperation

While I conducted my fieldwork in Jordan, I discovered a particular series of events of which I found interesting, and later became a defining finding for this study. The events included all the major actors in the Syrian war and have supposedly happened in this case around the city of Aleppo.<sup>188</sup> These events are part of my second aspect of al-Nusra's hydro-governance which I have focused on, namely what al-Nusra did in the "shadows", to keep the water flow continuing into Aleppo during the battle for Aleppo.

#### 5.3.1. The Battle for Aleppo

The Battle for Aleppo, or the Battle of Aleppo as it is referred to in Arabic (*Ma'arakat Ḥalab*),<sup>189</sup> lasted from 2012 until the end of 2016, when the Syrian government with the help from the Russian military, recaptured the city. The damages done on the city and its infrastructure was according to a report written by the World Bank, the highest done to a Syrian city as of the beginning of 2017.<sup>190</sup> In the beginning it was a battle between two fronts, the opposition and the GoS, but in 2014 when IS declared themselves a 'caliphate', it became a battle between three. In the end, the favour shifted for the regime and its allies, who initially had surrounded opposition-controlled eastern parts of Aleppo during the summer of 2016.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Al-Jazeera.com. "Syria's war: Who controls what?". 13.03.2019.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/05/syria-country-divided-150529144229467.html>

<sup>187</sup> World Bank Group. "Syria Damage Assessment: of selected cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib. March 2017.

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/530541512657033401/pdf/121943-WP-P161647-PUBLIC-Syria-Damage-Assessment.pdf>, 42

<sup>188</sup> These events were firstly presented to me in Jordan, and later confirmed by a second interviewee, with no connection to the former. The time period for these events are somewhat uncertain, but I was informed that it happened between 2014 and the fall of Aleppo to the GoS in 2016.

<sup>189</sup> Al-Jazeera.com. "Ma'arakat Ḥalab .. min al-bidāya ḥattā "al-qiyāmat" ". <https://urlzs.com/ce3vD>

<sup>190</sup> However, I am not certain how the damages are compared to the damages in Raqqa – as IS was bombed out of the city by the Syrian Democratic Forces and the US-coalition which supported with airstrikes. The battle of Raqqa lasted until 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

<sup>191</sup> See map 2.

In the midst of devastating fighting for Aleppo was the vital network of water and power infrastructures, which was meant to supply 95% of the city with water and electricity. The main water source of the city, the Assad lake, is located approximately 100km to the east. Adjacent to the lake, on the west side of it, is the al-Khafsa water treatment plant, which main task is to treat the water and make it drinkable for the citizens of Aleppo. The water is then carried from al-Khafsa with pipes to al-Bab, which pumps the water further into the city. The water gets divided to Aleppo's eastern parts of the city where Bab al-Nayrab water pumping station and Suleyman al-Halabi pumping station is located. The latter station carries the water further into the western, northern and southern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, to the Tishreen Reservoirs.<sup>192</sup>

The pipes carrying water from the water source in al-Khafsa purification as well as the plant itself were repeatedly damaged during the fighting.<sup>193</sup> The situation became difficult for all parties included and meant that the governing bodies of Aleppo had to step up their maintenance services to keep the water running. The governing ownership and therefore the responsibility to repair the infrastructures changed accordingly to the dynamic of the fight, resulting in all the major actors involved performing to hydro-governance during the battle.<sup>194</sup> In 2016, as portrayed on map 2 in the Appendix, the GoS controlled most of the pipes into Aleppo and al-Bab, as well as the western stations of Aleppo. The Syrian opposition on the other hand, controlled Bab al-Nayrab and Suleyman al-Halabi pumping station, which was crucial parts in the water network in terms of distribution to the rest of the city.<sup>195</sup> While IS, controlled the al-Khafsa water treatment plant over 100km away, until March 2017.<sup>196</sup>

### 5.3.2. The Role of al-Nusra During the Battle for Aleppo

Al-Nusra was one of the major NSAAs operating in Aleppo during the battle for the city, seemingly fighting and governing simultaneously. In accordance with al-Nusra's propaganda,

<sup>192</sup> See map 1 for explanation regarding the location of the infrastructure. I have changed i to y in the names, as they are commonly written with an y.

<sup>193</sup> Triebert, Christian. "Syria's Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry," *Bellingcat*. 11.12.2015. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure/>

<sup>194</sup> According to the report written by the World Bank, the GoS started repairing the Suleyman al-Halabi pumping station when they took control over it in November 2016. As for al-Nusra, the Facebook page of the GDS shows the group repairing pipes in Aleppo in 2015. See their page: Facebook, "الإدارة العامة للخدمات", Last visited: 08.06.2019. <https://www.facebook.com/general.management.of.services/>

<sup>195</sup> The Suleyman al-Halabi pumping station was retaken somewhere between 30 September and 30 November, as the pro-Assad news agency SANA stated that the Minister of Water Resources visited the location on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November: <https://sana.sy/en/?p=94885>

<sup>196</sup> Reuters. "Syrian army captures water station supplying Aleppo from Islamic State". 07.03.2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo/syrian-army-captures-water-station-supplying-aleppo-from-islamic-state-idUSKBN16E0WT>

the group performed the hydro-governmental tasks needed to keep the water running for the population in Aleppo. They repaired damaged pipes in the district of al-Misir and Qarlaq east of Aleppo,<sup>197</sup> and implemented a project to keep the water running in the city.<sup>198</sup>

Yet, taking into account the damages on the water stations and pipes, how were they able to continue the hydro-governance when the World Bank reports that Aleppo was one of the cities in Syria which experienced the most destruction? More crucially, how where al-Nusra (as part of the opposition) able to keep the water running in the city when the GoS and IS controlled parts of the network located in other areas?

It seems rather unlikely that Al-Nusra was capable of repairing, obtaining spare parts and operating the facilities during the lengthy battle of Aleppo. Part of a possible explanation might lie in the water trucking assistance of which I mentioned in the section of Aleppo under al-Nusra's hydro-governance, but water trucking would not have been able to provide enough water to the citizens of Aleppo city.

After interviewing people with first-hand experience from the field in Syria, I discovered there were more pieces to the bigger picture. It turned out that all the major parties involved in the battle for Aleppo had been cooperating in secrecy via a third-party actor (or actors), in order to repair and deliver water to the different parts of Aleppo.<sup>199</sup> According to two experts, the third-party actor included personnel with the required expertise to repair and get the facilities up and running again. In addition to the personnel, the third-party actor(s) provided fuel for the water trucks and the aggregates, as well as the needed spare parts for the power and water plants. There is also reason to believe that it might have been several operations, due to the vast damages on the different plants and pipes across the area. The extent would require several trips and numerous operations.

Yet, I have not been able to find any information regarding this cooperation in al-Nusra's propaganda or announcements. In comparison to how al-Nusra has framed some of their earlier hydro-governance practices through the propaganda, there seems to be silence when it comes to how they were able to provide water during the latter part of the battle for

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<sup>197</sup> See their page: Facebook, "الإدارة العامة للخدمات", Last visited: 08.06.2019.

<https://www.facebook.com/general.management.of.services/>

<sup>198</sup> Jihadology.net. "The "Life" Project to Secure Drinking Water in Aleppo City". 24.02.2016.

<https://jihadology.net/2016/02/24/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-life-project-to-secure-drinking-water-in-aleppo-city/>

<sup>199</sup> I was not given the specifics of the personnel operating, but I believe the personnel were most likely water technicians and engineers. It is also uncertain who mediated these operations, from all sides, since the event were done in secret.

Aleppo, apart from the “Life”-project video. What becomes clear by watching the video in the light of these new findings, is that they do not provide any explanations regarding how they were able to provide the water, other than the general improvement of the water situation. The video contains only some pictures of two dilapidated water stations, an employee of the GDS turning on electricity and mostly pictures of people obtaining water from the water faucets.<sup>200</sup>

### **5.3.3. Cooperation is Key**

A way of addressing the lack of information from al-Nusra’s part and the general secrecy regarding the cooperation with their enemies, is to ask: what did al-Nusra, and inasmuch GoS and IS as well, gain by keeping the cooperation a secret? A supplementary question could be, why did they not want the public to know about the cooperation?

First of all, what has become evident throughout this study is that al-Nusra’s methods of performing hydro-governance have to some extent, depending on the location of the territory, been dependent on outside help. The outside help could be interpreted as the means for al-Nusra to meet the needs of the civilians in need, which seems to have been essential to the group’s presence in Syria. The reason behind al-Nusra’s compliance is uncertain, but the events occurred. Nonetheless, the help which has been provided for the group has been neglected consistently in the way al-Nusra has portrayed their hydro-governance to the public, which makes the lack of coverage on the cooperation in and around Aleppo normal, in terms of their overall propaganda strategy.

What is different with the events in Aleppo however, is the fact that they were not only cooperating with a NGO or a local actor to repair or provide water to the locals, but the operations included their enemies. Mainly, the Assad regime and IS.<sup>201</sup> One plausible explanation for the lack of coverage might have been because al-Nusra, and most likely the opposition as a whole, did not want anyone to know they were cooperating with the enemy on a large scale. Another explanation could be due to the fact that al-Nusra did not want the public to know their lack of capabilities in terms of hydro-governance, which could reflect their capabilities of governing in general. If the majority of the Syrian population perceived

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<sup>200</sup> Jihadology.net. “The “Life” Project to Secure Drinking Water in Aleppo City”. 24.02.2016.

<https://jihadology.net/2016/02/24/new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-life-project-to-secure-drinking-water-in-aleppo-city/>

<sup>201</sup> It is worth noting that most of the cooperation seemingly happened with an outside part (the personnel from a NGO) and not directly between IS, the GoS and al-Nusra. If there was an event where the GoS, IS or al-Nusra directly worked together, I have not seen or read any information to that regard.

al-Nusra as non-capable of ruling, the legitimacy of the group could have decreased further.<sup>202</sup> Hence, al-Nusra continued the focus on the provision of hydro-governance in Aleppo.

### **5.3.4 Cutting off the Water in Aleppo**

Yet, according to some sources al-Nusra during 2014, deliberately cut the water supplies from a pump distributing water both to rebel-held east and governmental-held west of Aleppo.<sup>203</sup> The incidents left people in both areas without water, and was part of a long decrease in the accessibility of water.<sup>204</sup> At the time, the group controlled the stations of Bab al-Nayrab and Suleyman al-Halabi, both of which are connected to either the southern or western parts of Aleppo, and could therefore have been used as part of their cut off.

What the collective punishment of both governmental and rebel-held territories in Aleppo by turning off the water might tell, is the level of prioritization hydro-governance was to al-Nusra during the battle in 2014. Al-Nusra, as part of a cost-benefit analysis, would probably prioritize their strategies in accordance to what they believed could help them win the war in Aleppo, which in this case was to cut off the water to regime-held territories that also happened to be the same pipe as some of their own territories. Jabhat al-Nusra was primarily a warring party with a fierce reputation in the Syrian civil war. Thus, providing public services was prioritized as long as it did not conflict with the groups interests on the battlefield.

## **5.4. The Islamization of Hydro-Governance**

The last matter of interest to this study, is the question of the Islamization of public services, more specifically in terms of the provision of hydro-governance. Usually, Salafi-jihadist movements tend to have a strong commitment to their interpretation of Islam of which they try to preach throughout their organization. Thus, when these Salafi-jihadists turn to governance, they have a holistic Islamic approach in their way of doing it in practice. I have chosen to address the matter by not only focusing on the aspect of the provider, which in this case are al-Nusra and IS, but also the recipient of these services.

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<sup>202</sup> What I mean by further is that the group had been, due to its affiliation with al-Qaida, looked upon as a jihadist group. Moderate Syrians, including two of my interviewees, were sceptical of al-Nusra and its long-term project in Syria, which they claimed were usual among the residents of Raqqa at the time.

<sup>203</sup> The National. "Syrian rebels cut off water supply to both halves of Aleppo". 11.05.2014.

<https://www.thenational.ae/world/syrian-rebels-cut-off-water-supply-to-both-halves-of-aleppo-1.243612>

<sup>204</sup> #ChildrenofSyria. "Voices from the Front Line – Water cuts for war-weary civilians in Syria's largest city of Aleppo. 23.07.2015. <http://childrenofsyria.info/2015/07/23/voices-from-the-front-line-water-cuts-for-war-weary-civilians-in-syrias-largest-city-of-aleppo/>

The most clear-cut example of an Islamized service in Syria was created by IS. The group designated a special moral police called the Hesbah (*Hisbah*).<sup>205</sup> This task force was ruthless in its conduct when it made sure that the citizens of the ‘Caliphate’ followed IS’ interpretation of Islam.<sup>206</sup> Al-Nusra created a similar religious police force in areas like Aleppo, banning alcohol and making prayer compulsory. This kind of public service was Islamized to its core, where the fundamental task of the officers was to enforce a strict form of Islamic rule (Sharia).<sup>207</sup>

Yet, there are some services which are more difficult to Islamize than others. The provision of electricity or water can be difficult, if not impossible to Islamize. These kinds of public services rely mainly on the infrastructure and the expertise of the personnel working at the power plant or water station. The reliance on these two factors means that there is only a certain amount of people who can perform this kind of work. Hence, during the war in Syria, the reliance on certain personnel by the NSAAs became an increasing challenge for the likes of al-Nusra, as the emergence of “brain drain” of technicians and engineers occurred. The “brain drain” resulted in the need for filling these empty vacancies with qualified personnel.<sup>208</sup>

These vacancies became one of the ways in which al-Nusra saw the possibility to Islamize their hydro-governance, by creating specific Islamic guidelines which the workers had to fulfill. The other aspect of the Islamization of hydro-governance which NSAAs were able to implement their Salafi-jihadist ideas was in their distribution. Thus, I have categorized the Islamization of hydro-governance into two: *recruitment* and *distribution*. One example of the former, is found in one recruitment call from the GDS in 2015,<sup>209</sup> which shows al-Nusra were in need of personnel to fill the void of qualified personnel that had fled the country. The list of requirements which al-Nusra prioritized was in the following manner:

<sup>205</sup> Lafta, R et al. “Living in Mosul during the time of ISIS and the military liberation: results from a 40-cluster household survey.” *Conflict and health* 12, nr.31 (2018): 1-8.

<sup>206</sup> Raqqa Tuğbah Bışamat. ““Hesba” waives its work for money”. 11.02.2015. <https://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/?p=514>

<sup>207</sup> Alami, Mona. “Vice and virtue police rule Syria rebel-held region”. *USA TODAY*. 16.05.2013. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/05/16/syria-vice-virtue-police-rebels/2161465/>

One personal note: The concept of Sharia is a contested one, and to my understanding it is to a certain point relative, which means that the way IS “conducted” their interpretation of Sharia are different from the way the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt would do it for example. It even differed to some extent from al-Nusra’s vision of it. Hence, the conduct of Sharia should be understood in the context of which it is interpreted and by whom.

<sup>208</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, “Urban Services During Protracted Armed Conflict”. 2015. [https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file\\_plus\\_list/4249\\_urban\\_services\\_during\\_protracted\\_armed\\_conflict.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/4249_urban_services_during_protracted_armed_conflict.pdf). 21

<sup>209</sup> The specimen was found on Aymenn al-Tamimi’s website, labelled “Job Vacancy” in the Bibliography.

electricity, water, mechanics, environment, accounting, media and drivers. What is evident is their two first priorities, electricity and water, which was al-Nusra's two main modes of governing in terms of public services. In addition, al-Nusra lists three conditions of acceptance: 1) His work should be sincere in devotion to God, 2) Should be able to handle the pressure of work, 3) Should not smoke. At first, I believed that only three conditions of the two (1 and 3) had roots from al-Nusra's view on Islam, but then I realized that all of them excludes hiring women. This kind of interpretation, where they implicitly do not want to hire women for certain kinds of jobs, was also part of the Islamization of their hydro-governance services.

However, it is difficult to know in what ways conditions 1 and 3 were practiced. All NSAAs who governed people in Syria from 2011 until today, were lacking the adequate amount of personnel to operate and repair the water infrastructure during the war.<sup>210</sup> Hence, I have an assumption that most of the NSAAs when having acquired a certain technician for one water plant, they could not afford to imprison or kill the person for not following the three conditions.<sup>211</sup> The NSAAs could not afford to not provide vital public services during the war, thus the personnel was key.

Not all the NSAAs in Syria attained this level of pragmatism, however. IS in comparison to the others NSAAs, had its own dogmatic way of governing. They did not allow other actors to operate in their areas in the same manner as al-Nusra.<sup>212</sup> IS co-opted and subdued all their competitors and made sure that the only actor who provided services to the people were themselves. Whereas al-Nusra opted for the pragmatic way of governing on the local level. For example, al-Nusra allowed water trucking through private individual actors, or at least allowed them to operate as an extension of their own organization, which was in contrast to their jihadi counterpart's way. IS' holistic way of governing was partly made possible due to the continuing influx of foreign fighters, some of whom were doctors, nurses,

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<sup>210</sup> The claim comes from two different interviews with experts in the field of WASH in Syria.

<sup>211</sup> I have not been able to address this matter further, but based on the information I have acquired for this study I have made this assumption. I do not claim however, that this has been universal across Syria or for the majority of al-Nusra's mode of governance.

<sup>212</sup> See the former chapter under 5.2.3 for the incidents regarding Sarmada.



engineers etc<sup>213</sup>, which meant that they had an advantage when they tried to govern in a state-like manner.<sup>214</sup>

The other category possible to Islamize in terms of hydro-governance, is the distribution of water. By Islamization of the distribution of hydro-governance services, I refer to the categorization of whom to deliver water to or not, which in this case could be defined based on who the NSAA sees as its enemy. In regards to this category, I have reason to believe that the tactics of hydro-governance by IS and al-Nusra differed, even though I have presented cases with similarities above. In the case of IS, there are numerous examples of them discriminating through the provision of water, which means it was a deliberate tactic. One example is their use of dams. The group famously used their upstream position on the Euphrates and Tigris to reduce the water flow to the Shia-inhabited areas further south of IS' location, which had major consequences for the populace living southwards.<sup>215</sup>

As for al-Nusra, I believe they did not use discrimination as a deliberate tactic. The reason being, even though the group cut off water to regime- and oppositional-held territory in Aleppo in 2014, this incident seems to have been one of few cases where al-Nusra did anything similar.<sup>216</sup> Hence, if it had been a deliberate tactic from al-Nusra, there is a big probability that there would have been more news coverage and al-Nusra-made propaganda to shed light on these events. The lack of reporting and propaganda on the matter, could be an indication of the group not implementing discriminating tactics as a war strategy, but these few incidents being the exceptions. As for the discrimination inwards, between the Syrian opposition, or the pro and anti-Nusra areas, I have not been able to find information on the matter. In addition, I have not been able to identify to what extent al-Nusra prioritized their areas of control over other Syrian opposition-controlled territories.<sup>217</sup>

Yet, one can assume that al-Nusra, like most of the other NSAAs operating in Syria, prioritized their own forces and members to some extent. The level of this prioritization is to

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<sup>213</sup> Vogel, Lauren. "Why are doctors joining ISIS?". *CMAJ* 188, nr.3 (2016): 177-178.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4754176/>

<sup>214</sup> Caris, Charles and Reynolds, Samuel. "ISIS Governance in Syria". *Middle East Security Report* 22, (2014): 1-41.

<sup>215</sup> The reduction of the waterflow was done via dams which they controlled on the two rivers. Zahrān, 'Imān. "'Askarat Almiyyāh Kanumaṭ Lilṣirā' Fī Asharq Al'awsat" ["Militarization of Water as a Pattern of Conflict in the Middle East"]. *The Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies*, Egypt (2016). <https://eipss-eg.org/عسكرة-المياه-كنمط-للصراع-في-الشرق-الأوسط/>

<sup>216</sup> The National. "Syrian rebels cut off water supply to both halves of Aleppo". 11.05.2014.

<https://www.thenational.ae/world/syrian-rebels-cut-off-water-supply-to-both-halves-of-aleppo-1.243612>

<sup>217</sup> Due to the limitations of this assignment, I did not have the time to explore oppositional newspapers like Enab baladi, or any other English ones.



this author unknown. It is arguably understandable for a NSAA while fighting a war against a state on several fronts, as well as competing with other rebel groups, that they do not have the manpower and resources to effectively provide hydro-governance to areas evenly. Making the question of prioritization an understandable matter.

## 6. Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to shed light on Jabhat al-Nusra's hydro-governance policies, its evolution throughout the Syrian civil war, and to identify the extent to which al-Nusra provided hydro-governance services. I have presented various pre-existing and developing variables which affected the governance strategies of the group. The main variables presented in this study has been: climate-change, water mismanagement and war's effect on water infrastructure, such as pipes, water stations, etc. Additionally, I have tried to establish a bridge between the existing, state-centric theories on water management and conflict on the one hand, and the emerging literature on jihadi governance on the other, to understand how Jabhat al-Nusra turned water management into a tool of legitimacy, control, and governance. Most notably, al-Nusra provided hydro-governance services in two ways *water trucking* and *repairing damaged water infrastructure*.

As for my hypothesis<sup>218</sup>, I believe it still holds merit, but is somewhat incomplete and partial. Whereas I still believe al-Nusra understood the importance of providing hydro-governance, the group could not have provided access to water at this level without the help from, and in cooperation, with NGOs and outside experts. Secondly, al-Nusra's focus on governmental practices and public services, provides an indication of the importance of water to the group, a focus which started as early as 2012 and was developed during the war. The evolution of al-Nusra's water management policies was evident in cities like Raqqa and Aleppo, where it established special branches within the organization to address the social aspect of life in the cities. These branches evolved further after 2016, when the group rebranded and reorganized itself. In addition, there is a case to be made that the introduction of IS and their extensive focus on governance impacted on how al-Nusra provided their services, due to IS' highly publicized and "successful" ways of addressing the needs of civilians. Thirdly, most of the NSAAs in Syria, when they took control of populated areas, continued using governmental practices and structures already present, but often lacked the

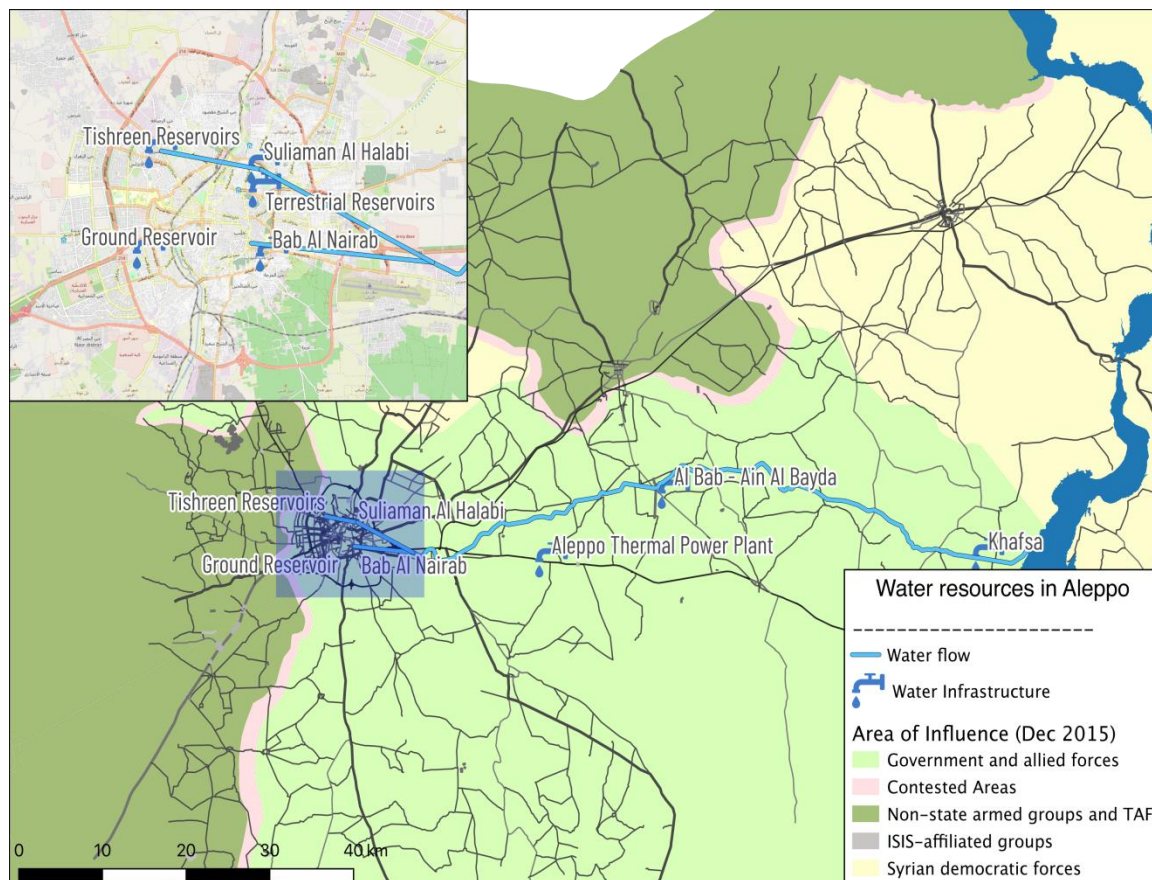
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<sup>218</sup> "al-Nusra turned to hydro-governance because they understood the importance of basic services to cover the need of the Syrian people, in order for them to strengthen their ideological claim in Syria".

experience and the capabilities to provide the services at the same level as the Syrian state had before the war. Additionally, Jabhat al-Nusra used the provisions of services to strengthen their ideological claim in Syria. It carefully highlighted successful incidents and used them to portray their investments in governance, through their propaganda agencies. The evidence in this study shows that al-Nusra operated in Syria with a high level of pragmatism. This was most notably, in the different forms of cooperation with other actors, both local and regional, as well as in its leniency regarding the Islamization of the group's hydro-governance. In both cases, al-Nusra acted with a great amount of pragmatism, unlike IS, which seemingly took a more dogmatic stance on governance.

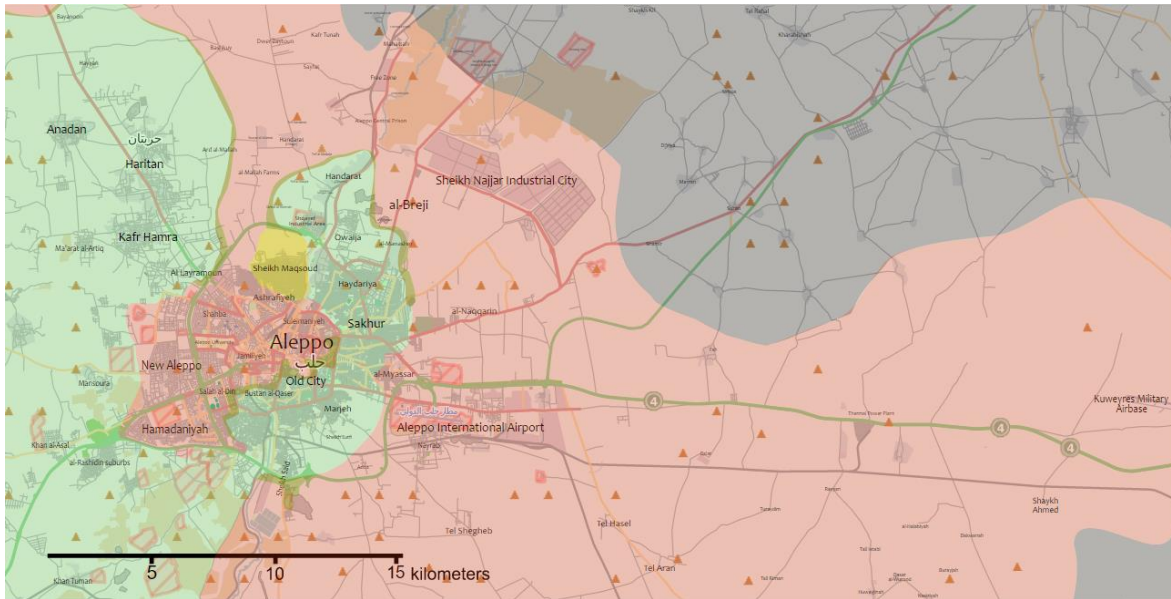
Like most other MA-thesis, this study has certain limitations. First, I believe access to a larger number of local Syrian interviewees from the specific areas would have raised the quality and the depth of this study. Second, I would have liked to explore in more detail how other non-state actors in the Syrian civil war engaged in cooperation in the area of hydro governance. Third, the Islamification of hydro-governance services warrants further study. The question of how, and to what extent, Syrian oppositional groups used public services to favour, or discriminate against, specific groups and constituencies could also be an interesting research topic which should be pursued in the future.

## 7. Appendix



Map 1:

The map shows the vital infrastructure, both water and power, for the city of Aleppo, and the area of influence by the different actors in December 2015. However, the area of influence on the map are most likely inaccurate, due to the fact that the Syrian opposition according to both the GoS, BBC and several other NGOs were in 2015 controlling parts of eastern Aleppo. The map was made for me personally by an individual with GIS experience, with the main focus on the water infrastructure.



Map 2: The map illustrates the situation in Aleppo 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016. The green is the Syrian opposition, the red is the Government of Syria and the black is the Islamic State.

Source: By BlueHypercane761 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=55265913>

## Timeline

### Afghanistan

**August 11. 1988** – Osama bin Laden establishes Al-Qaeda (AQ)

**June 2001** - the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) lead by Ayman al-Zawahiri merge formally with bin Laden's AQ

**2001** – Abu Musab al-Zarqawi starts to train jihadists in Herat, Afghanistan. Forming Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad (JTJ)

**October 7. 2001** – The U.S military launches *Operation Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan as a response to the 9/11 attacks – forcing al-Zarqawi to flee the country

### Iraq

**April 2002** – al-Zarqawi enters Iraq after being in Iran and Jordan

**March 20. 2003** – The American-led coalition begins invading Iraq, called *Operation Iraqi Freedom*

**May 1. 2003** – The war formally ends, Iraq establishes one of many successive transitional governments in Iraq

**October 2004** – Zarqawi formally joins Al-Qaeda, renaming his organization Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn Zarqawi, known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)

**June 7. 2006** – Zarqawi killed in an American airstrike

**June 12. 2006** - Abu Ayub al-Masri (aliased Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) is appointed as AQI's new leader

**August-December 2006.** al-Masri merges AQI with other insurgent groups and declares the establishment of *Dawlat al- 'Irāq al- 'Islāmiyyah* - the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), in order to label the organization more Iraqi, due to the local criticism. Appoints Abu Umar Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi as the head of ISI (not to confuse with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi which becomes the leader of IS/ISIS/ISIL later).

**2008-2010** – The American-led coalition with coalition of local security forces carries out campaigns against AQI. Killing and capturing over 10,000 AQI affiliates during the first year. 34 out of AQI's leadership killed or captured

**2007 – 2011** – The withdrawal of U.S military forces from Iraq begins. Formally out in 2011

**April 18. 2010** – Both al-Masri and al-Baghdadi killed in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid

**After April 2010** - Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai aka Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is appointed leader and emir by the Shura Council in Iraq

**May 2011** – U.S Navy Seals kills Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan

**June 2011** – Al-Qaeda's second in command Ayman al-Zawahiri appointed leader of Al-Qaeda.

**June 9. 2013** – Ayman al-Zawahiri rules against the merger between al-Nusra and ISIS

**June 10. 2013** - ISIL takes control over Iraq's second biggest city, Mosul

**January 14. 2014** – ISIS takes control of Raqqa from al-Nusra and its allies

**June 29. 2014** – ISIL changes name to the Islamic State (IS) and establishes the caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its Caliph

## **Syria**

**March to July 2011** – Protests, civil uprising and defections from the Syrian Armed Forces starting,

**March, May & June 2011** – The Syrian regime conducts a series of prisoner releases, trying to shape the opposition as extremists. Subsequently hundreds of Syrian Islamists either joins or creates Islamists or extremist movements.

**July 29. 2011** – The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was created, transitioning the conflict from civil uprising to armed insurgency. Marking the beginning of The Syrian Civil War

**September & October 2011** – Secret meeting led by al-Jolani where they agreed to establish Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as absorbing small jihadi cells in Syria

**January 2012** – Announces the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra as a unit of ISIS in Syria

**April 8. 2013** – al-Baghdadi transforms ISI into the Islamic State of Iraq and al-sham /Syria (ISIS), and decides to join the war against the Assad regime in Syria.

**April 9. 2013** – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announces merger with al-Nusra in order to form the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)

**April 2013** – ISIS “does” the first ever split of an affiliate from the Al-Qaeda network

**June 9. 2013** – Ayman al-Zawahiri rules against the merger between al-Nusra and ISIS

**January 14. 2014** – ISIS takes control of Raqqa from al-Nusra and its allies

**October 2014 to February 2015** – al-Nusra begins targeting other moderate rebel forces in Idlib and Aleppo

**March 9. February 2015** – al-Nusra reaffirms its allegiance to Al-Qaeda

**September 2015** – Russia begins its military intervention on the Regime's side, transforming the war dramatically in Assad's favour

**July 28. 2016** – al-Nusra rebrand and reorganize, establishing the group called Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, acronym: JFS. Officially split from Al-Qaeda

**January 28. 2017** – JFS absorbs smaller factions and changes name to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, acronym: HTS (the Assembly for the Liberation of Syria)

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