

***'The End of the 'Revolution' (al-thawra) but not Revolutionaries (thuwwār)'*¹: Insights from Syrian Fighters**

Abstract

What drives individuals to join and remain loyal to armed groups amidst the chaos of the Syrian civil war? This article investigates this question by focusing on the Sham Front, offering a multi-level analysis that integrates external influences, group dynamics, and personal experiences. Based on extensive fieldwork in northern Syria and southern Turkey, including narratives from fighters, commanders, and local leaders, this study reveals how perceived emotional hardships and political uncertainties create distinct revolutionary subjectivities. By considering the macro-level influence of external actors, the meso-level group dynamics, and the micro-level motivations of individual fighters, this article provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping fighters' behavior. Incorporating theories of uncertainty-identity and the politics of emotions, the article challenges simplistic narratives, revealing how shared emotional bonds and collective memories sustain loyalty and combat engagement. Unlike many existing studies, this research prioritizes the firsthand accounts of fighters, offering a deeper exploration of their motivations. This study bridges significant gaps in existing literature, showcasing how deep-seated emotional and social factors drive the resilience and persistence of fighters in the ongoing conflict.

¹ A quote by Syrian fighter.

Keywords

Syrian fighters, emotions, uncertainty, revolutionary subjects.

Introduction

'Have we won the revolution? Or have we failed miserably? Or has Assad and Iran won? Or shall we say that Assad survived but not won and Iran will eventually lose in Syria! I don't really have an answer or know what is next for Syria!...but the only thing I am certain of is that I am a revolutionary and will stay a revolutionary or be remembered as a martyr' (F9)

'Like an orphanete, this revolution is an orphan with nothing but its sons...we are its sons...we are the revolutionaries' (F10)

In a rather secluded café in Kilis, a city in southern Turkey, heightened by the hot summer day and burning temperature, Syrian fighters navigated their emotions on why they are still fighting. With the Syrian civil war entering its 12th year and the almost certain clarity that international inaction persists and continues to prevail, these political uncertainties have created distinct 'revolutionary' realities and subjectivities as an alternative. While most recent studies focusing on the emergence of jihadist movements and non-state armed groups in the Syrian civil war have primarily revolved around the exploration of their mobilization and survival strategies,¹ others have also conceptualized the role of ideology as a driving factor in the mobilization strategies within armed groups.² The predominant focus of these studies has been on the macro and meso levels of analysis, aiming to understand how the internal structure and organization of these armed groups influence their sustainability. Another strand of literature within conflict studies has focused on political economy as a mobilizing factor for the emergence and sustainability of armed groups.³ This article

delves into the intricate experiences of fighters within non-state military factions, specifically examining the journeys of fighters in “Sham Front” as a case study.

In the Syrian context, scholars have devised a host of theories to explain the drivers underlying the violent conflict and the drivers behind mass participation in 2011 protests;⁴ however, there remain conceptual limitations in many of these analyses.⁵ There is, however, a notable gulf between scholarship that focuses on how sectarianism and material violence have contributed to the war in Syria and work that focuses on identity formation processes and the role of authoritarianism in hardening sub-state identities.⁶ In this article, I examine the evidence for prominent, competing arguments in the context of the Syrian civil war, drawing on a unique dataset that documents the attitudes and behavior of a group of Sham Front fighters. By taking Sham Front, one of the largest Syrian National Army (SNA) groups controlling northern Syria, as a case study, I argue that the analysis of rational costs and benefits among actors in the Syrian conflict is not in itself sufficient to explain fighters’ motivations to join armed groups.

Due to the multifaceted nature of such groups controlling northern Syria, the changes that take place during conflict following Turkey’s interventions and recently in autumn 2023 resulted in shifts in their internal military organization, with changes in leaders’ roles. These contextual factors vary considerably across the macro level changes within these groups. At the macro-level, Turkey has been a significant external determinant that shapes the faction’s structure, future directions, and the fate of other units; nevertheless, it is important not to view external actors solely as dominant controllers, despite the political climate that often emphasizes their influence on group hierarchies.⁷ As contextual factors vary considerably across the macro-level changes within these groups, measuring their impact on fighters’ loyalty at the micro level justifies the reliance on meso-level analysis, which helps us understand the dynamics of the group-individual

relationship. Fighters' motivations cannot be separated from the structural benefits offered by the military group, which influence their decision to continue fighting. This led me to explore the role of external actors in shaping the "formation," "emergence," or even "fragmentation" of Sham Front. Therefore, the motivations of fighters are unlikely to remain constant and can be influenced by various factors, including the role of external actors and their financial support, illicit economies, and internal conflicts within these groups, either due to ideological competition or utilitarian gains. Consequently, a more precise conceptual framework is needed to understand the drivers of violent behavior and fighters' motivations.

The international community's inaction and the intricate web of regional interests have undeniably fueled frustration and uncertainty among certain segments of the Syrian population. The prevailing political and military climate over the past 13 years has driven many young individuals to gravitate toward armed groups. However, it is important to avoid sweeping generalizations regarding fighters' involvement in these groups and to closely examine the unique characteristics defining each faction within the SNA. In examining the motivations of Syrian fighters, I adopt the conceptual **framework of ontological uncertainty as discussed by Alpa Shah**. Shah argues that the hesitation, doubt, and uncertainty observed among the revolutionary armed squads of the Maoist insurgency are foundational elements that lead individuals to join revolutionary movements.⁸ The parallels of Shah's findings resonate with the Syrian case, where the inaction and uncertainty surrounding the political process have likely played a significant role in the construction of a revolutionary subjectivity. It is important to note that my focus on how despair and uncertainty contribute to the construction of a devoted revolutionary subject does not aim to downplay or trivialize the tales of violence and immense

cruelty experienced by civilians under the control of Syrian armed groups. Inspired by Angela Ldrach's approach to violence as 'never the whole story,'⁹ this writing specifically about emotional bonds among fighters does not intend to negate or ignore the detrimental impact of violations perpetrated by the Sham Front in particular, and SNA factions in general. Rather, I acknowledge the complex entanglements of perceived grievances, loss, despair, and uncertainty that characterize these contexts and frame political action, marking them as 'knotty affairs.'¹⁰

While there has been growing attention to the various dimensions of how emotions of uncertainty shape individuals' perceptions of their identities, imagined political realities, and future decisions regarding military engagement,¹¹ specifically in the context of Syrian armed groups, to my modest knowledge, there are almost no scholarly efforts to challenge the dominant security-centric narrative.¹² This article is situated within ongoing conversations and emerging scholarship that integrates alternative conceptions of people's experiences of war and reactions to violence. Consequently, this study builds on previous literature on emotions and incorporates insights on how complex regional dynamics affecting the duration and outcome of a war feed into individualistic understandings of relational conceptions of subjectivity, war, and peace. Therefore, understanding the motivations of fighters can provide valuable insights into the causes, developments, and consequences of conflicts. It can also aid in the evaluation of strategies for conflict resolution and reconstruction. This study provides qualitative data related to individual motivations for participating in combat and seeks to clarify the connection between individual motivations (micro level) and the organizational control maintained by "Sham Front," its structure and governance (meso and macro levels), while emphasizing the importance of maintaining group cohesion.

I develop an analytical model that adopts a multi-level approach (MLA) of macro, meso, and micro-mobilization to address fighters' motivations and the complex interplay of incentives that drive them to keep fighting.¹³ This MLA approach allows us to examine the motivations of fighters at the micro level while also considering the influence of broader factors such as the groups' structure and the role of external actors at the macro and meso levels. This article specifically focuses on Sham Front, which is a group within the umbrella SNA—a network of separate groups that broadly cooperate on strategic objectives but have so far resisted full integration into a single entity. There has not previously been any research that delves into Sham Front's internal structure, governance, and its fighters' motivations to join or defect from the group. I root this in a theoretical discussion of the intersectional and reciprocal interplay between individuals, armed groups dynamics, the role of external actors such as Turkey as well as the changing situational context. The article unpacks the web of complex interactions between the micro, meso, and macro levels by looking at three central dimensions: Individual motivations for involvement, networks that facilitate the recruitment process.

This article challenges the notion of “objectivity” and reductive views that use one theoretical framework to explain fighters' choice to continue fighting. This study, which includes an examination of Sham Front's governance model and economics, finds that the case of the Sham Front shows unique **emotional factors and motives**. These factors affect the behavior of fighters at the micro level, directly influencing their reasons for their ongoing commitment to fight.

The primary aim of the micro-level examination is to explore two fundamental questions: “What motivates individuals to choose affiliation with this particular armed group over others and maintain their commitment?” And “**what role do emotions and perceived uncertainty play in ensuring fighters' loyalty and intergroup cohesion?**” **This is assessed by investigating the extent to**

which the construction of shared emotions among fighters, coupled with identity and socialization transformations, contributes to the construction of distinct ‘revolutionary’ subjectivities (*dhawāt thawriyya*).¹⁴ These questions delve into the influence of perceived emotional adversity on centering conceptions of the ‘revolution’ as a relational process of reconfiguring meanings and realities for emerging political subjects, in which rituals play a central role in group memory formation, resulting in military engagement. The study also explores how the organizational structure and governance of the military faction attract fighters and assesses the legitimacy of the faction from the fighters' perspectives. This includes exploring leader selection mechanisms and examining the faction's values in alignment with the fighters' orientations. As such, these questions are grounded in the theories of uncertainty-identity and politics of emotions,¹⁴ which aim to unravel the complex dynamics of loyalty and identity construction among "Sham Front" fighters.

Building on my field work in northern Syria, the analysis draws upon newly collected data gathered from fighters’ narratives and in-depth interviews with central commanders (CC), administrative military commanders (Q), civil society leaders (CS), and experts (E). In addition to illustrating the difference between material incentives and different forms of psychological and political grievance, this study illustrates how these grievances interact with fighters continued loyalty to the “Sham Front.” The micro-level examination of fighters as a primary sample has been noticeably lacking in research and scholarly attention. This gap in the academic discourse can potentially result in oversimplifying the role of fighters and reducing it to a mere political consideration in Syria’s future. This dearth of research can likely be attributed to the challenges associated with acquiring trustworthy primary data and conducting field studies in the region. Existing studies tend to be either purely descriptive or quantitative in nature.¹⁵ This study instead

focuses on the firsthand accounts of fighters themselves, incorporating them into extensive interviews made with military commanders and administrators associated with Sham Front.

This article is structured into four parts. The first part starts with a methodology section and sample selection strategy. The article then provides a meso-level analysis of the Front's historical background, covering its early establishment, military strongholds, governance model, and the evolution of its organizational structure. This section also chronicles the decisions made by their commanders and their positions on military and political matters. This contextual background aims to provide a nuanced analysis at the meso and macro levels. The article then moves into a theoretical overview of how the formation of revolutionary subjects is interwoven with experiencing emotional adversities that result in combat engagement. This overview of drivers of violent behavior at the micro-level is followed by two detailed thematic sub-sections that focus on fighters' narratives and perceptions of war and peace.

Methodology and Sample Selection

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on 34 in-depth interviews conducted with members of Sham Front: Three key central commanders (CC), seven administrative military commanders (Q), two leaders from local councils in areas of the Front's control (LC), three from civil society organizations with the Front's areas (CS), five military experts (E), Minister of Defense of the Syrian Interim Government, and twelve current fighters (F) aged 25 to 59 with diverse educational backgrounds.¹⁶ Establishing trust and rapport with the participants was a time-intensive process. The sample selection strategy involved engaging with a key intermediary, or "gate keeper." For this limited-group case study, participants were identified and recruited through a snowball sampling approach.

The initial data collection was done through deep, open, and semi-structured interviews, which provided the opportunity to ask predetermined questions and follow-up questions. I presented the main objectives of the research to the participants and obtained their consent to transcribe the interviews. Each interview began by asking the participants about their personal backgrounds, familial ties, and upbringing. The interviews then moved on to more detailed questions about various aspects of socialization, including recollections of the onset of protests in Syria, political inclinations and activities, interactions with peers and media, their initial involvement in protests, and the pivotal moment they committed to military action. To gain a comprehensive understanding of these experiences and perspectives, I occasionally interjected with questions directed at other individuals who were interviewed in-depth. These included first, second, third, and fourth-line commanders, central commanders, military administrators, media and political representatives, as well as experts on the various SNA factions.

To gain insight into identity socialization processes, I used the long interview method, which is recognized as one of the most powerful methods in qualitative research that gives us the opportunity to see and experience the world from the participant's perspective.¹⁷ As such, the interviews, which were transcribed verbatim and anonymized, typically spanned two and a half to three hours in duration. The analytical process commenced with a thorough review of interview transcripts, followed by a meticulous coding process. In line with this phenomenological approach, my methodological framework was also based on a relational and humanist-oriented framework.¹⁸ Lee Ann Fujii argues that adopting a relational research approach is fundamentally humanist and is guided by the researcher's commitment to reflexivity, which includes the ethical treatment of interlocutors.¹⁹ This method goes beyond merely "gaining access" to participants or building rapport. Instead, it intentionally focuses on the relationships that are "negotiated between the

interviewer and interviewee and shaped by the interests, values, backgrounds, and beliefs that each party brings to the exchange.”²⁰ In practice, this involved the identification of noteworthy narratives and their constituent elements, subsequently organizing them into “meaningful units” to construct a comprehensive portrayal of the research participants’ experiences.²¹ This phase was followed by axial and selective coding, during which I identified more abstract patterns, and gradually incorporated previous theorems into the analysis results. I used qualitative content analysis, applying a “guided approach” and an “open coding” to determine the focus of words and terms related to the theoretical framework and research questions.²²

In addition to the data collected through interviews, raw information was also gathered through direct observations, involving interactions with the research participants and physical visits to their locations. This approach was complemented by data triangulation techniques. In the context of case study research, triangulation was employed to cross-reference information from various sources, through reviewing documents, research, newspaper articles, brochures, and websites.²³ To enhance the credibility of the research, I received ethical approval from King’s College and I took measures to involve the research participants in the process. Specifically, I shared the transcripts of their initial interviews and the preliminary draft of the analysis on the relevant topics with them.

Early Formation of Sham Front, Governance and Leadership

Between 2011 and 2013, as the peaceful uprising deteriorated into an armed conflict, Syria saw for the first time in its modern history the development of numerous armed and Islamist groups.²⁴ The organized military opposition in Syria can be traced back to the announcement of the

formation of the Free Syrian Army on July 29, 2011. By 2012, rival rebel groups emerged, challenging both the Syrian regime and foreign-backed factions like Hezbollah, Iraqi, and Iranian forces. The complexity intensified with the rise of extremist groups like ISIS in 2013.²⁵ Since 2018, major factions like the designated terrorist faction Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) controlling Idlib, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria, and the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in northern Syria have dominated the scene.²⁶ In this context, the meso and macro level analysis necessitates an exhaustive exploration of governance efficacy within Sham Front, taking into account the role of external actors and the organization's economic resources. This investigation is critical to understanding the intricacies of its internal structure, the management of economic assets, and the strategic interplay that underpins efforts to cultivate and maintain fighter loyalty.

Sham Front came into existence at the close of 2014 through the merger of five Aleppo-based factions,²⁷ initially consisted of diverse ethnic groups (including Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen nationalities) but later primarily including fighters from its controlled areas, mainly northern Aleppo and Afrin, with parts of Idlib. Additionally, some fighters had been forcibly displaced from other regions across Syria, ultimately forming the demographic makeup of the "Sham Front".²⁸ One of the largest armed groups within the SNA, it later became the largest faction within the Third Corp.²⁹ In northern Syria, the administration and governance of these territories were significantly shaped by the dynamics of power and influence on the ground. Following the withdrawal of state institutions, coordination and revolutionary councils were established by local factions to manage the regions. These councils operated as civil mobilization units, providing local services before the Syrian Interim Government's (SIG) establishment in 2013 (E4).³⁰

From its inception to the present day, the “Sham Front” has primarily focused its battles on combating the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), ISIS, and the Syrian regime. In its early days, it was among the factions supported by the “Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi ” (MOM),³¹ and this support directly influenced the bloc’s structure through a series of mergers and splits that aligned with American interests.³² A few months after its formation, the “Sham Front” welcomed the U.S.-backed “Hazm movement”, albeit for just two months, with the intention of providing protection from Al-Nusra Front (later HTS).³³ In 2015, internal defections began, partly due to U.S. pressure and allegations against its leader, Abdul Aziz Salameh.³⁴ This led to its dissolution and later restructuring under new leadership, including Muhammad Ali al-Harkoush (Abu Amr).

In 2016, the “Sham Front” found itself engaged on three fronts: one against ISIS, another against the SDF, and a third against the Syrian regime. This year marked a significant milestone in shaping the structure of the “Sham Front” as we know it today. Its organizational strength was bolstered by the residents of Aleppo, who joined its ranks under the banner of the "Revolutionaries of the Levant" battalions, with the primary goal of intensifying the fight against ISIS.³⁵ However, as the events of that period unfolded, most of the fighters from the “Revolutionaries of the Levant” battalions defected from the Sham Front on June 10, 2016. This defection was in line with the evolving circumstances during that time. Subsequently, the Sham Front actively participated in the Turkish "Euphrates Shield" operation against both the SDF and ISIS.³⁶ As a result of this operation, several cities in northern Syria, including the cities of Jarablus and al-Bab, came under the control of the Sham Front. Conflict with HTS in early 2017 led to further factional shifts, with the Sham Front joining the Third Corps of the Syrian National Army.³⁷ During this period, the structure of Sham Front solidified, consisting mainly of fighters from rural Aleppo. Before the close of 2017, Sham Front handed over the Bab al-Salameh crossing to the SIG, led by Jawad Abu Hatab.³⁸

Expansion through the Turkish backed Olive Branch and Peace Spring operations in 2018 and 2019 led to a shift in governance, with Sham Front influence surpassing that of the SIG in regions where its leaders and fighters held sway, such as Izaz and Mare. This significantly impacted sectors like local governance, judiciary, education, healthcare, and community institutions, especially in focal points like Izaz (E4). While Turkish involvement in northern regions led to direct Turkish control over key domains, local councils became administratively linked to the SIG. However, Sham Front retained influence, notably in the appointment of individuals to civilian roles (E1; E3; LC1). Additionally, local councils became administratively subordinate to the respective Turkish authorities and structurally linked to the SIG (LC2). However, this did not signify the complete end of Sham Front's management of its territories. Rather, it continued to exert a subtle yet noticeable influence on the local population and fighters, manifested through the nomination of individuals for civilian roles and positions. Consequently, most employees in these administrative positions had affiliations with Sham Front (SC2; E3).

In one initiative, Sham Front promoted education among its fighters (CC1; CC2; CC3; Q1; Q2),³⁹ introducing a grant program and providing financial support to all those seeking to complete their education. At one point, they offered financial grants to each fighter who attained a baccalaureate degree (Q3; Q6). They also extended full or partial university scholarships to interested fighters. It is worth highlighting that the Front played a significant role in funding the establishment of a university in the Izaz area (E4).

Initially, Sham Front's material benefits, like spoils from clashes or financial gains from control points, attracted fighters (F1; F3; F2). During military stalemates, when spoils were scarce, a Ministry of Defense fund gathered profits and spoils, but this proved inadequate as the Front was

receiving funds for half of its registered fighters. Interviews with fighters highlighted that earlier, spoils from overrunning regime barracks were significant, but the current military stagnation has left them reliant on insufficient grants (F4; F5; F6; F7; F8). This aspect became evident in interviews with fighters, where they expressed the following sentiment: “At the outset of the revolution, storming the regime's military barracks resulted in spoils that belonged to the fighters, so the material aspect was better than the current situation. However, with the current military stagnation in the region, fighters are left with only a grant that is insufficient for their needs” (F3).

In terms of economic resources, Sham Front’s capacity to sustain control hinged significantly on its formidable financial capabilities, which originated from its initial control of the Bab al-Salama border crossing with the Turkish state of Kilis. However, the “Sham Front” handed over the Bab al-Salameh crossing to the Syrian Interim Government, led by Jawad Abu Hatab. Subsequently, it joined the formation of the Syrian National Army of the Interim Government, known as the "Third Corps." Although it ceded control of the Bab al-Salama crossing to the SIG in 2017, it did so intending to preserve Syrian administration and advance its own interests as efficiently as possible (E1; E2; E4; CC1). Sham Front was also able to invest its resources in various economic sectors within the areas under its control (Q5; Q6; E3).⁴⁰

Following the establishment of the “Azm Room”, the growth of Sham Front’s financial capacity in 2021 led to the expansion of its fighters’ base (CC1; CC3; Q3; Q4;).⁴¹ However, it later faced significant challenges in June 2022, beginning with clashes between the “Sham Front” and “Ahrar al-Sham,” resulting in the splintering of the 32nd Division, which included Ahrar al-Sham's Eastern Sector, comprising about 1,700 fighters.⁴² These conflicts also included disputes over the “Al-Hamran” crossing, which is a vital economic route in the areas controlled by these factions (CC2). Subsequently, in October 2022, further tensions and infighting erupted, this time

between the Corps and the Hamzat Division, following the assassination of activist Muhammad Abu Ghannoum and his wife in the city of Al-Bab.⁴³ Following this conflict, HTS intervened in the fighting, leading to a retreat in the areas controlled by the “Sham Front.” the battle was primarily aimed at depleting its financial resources (CC1). As such, the Front’s method of governance underwent a significant transformation several months after the HTS attack, when the latter advanced towards the outskirts of Kafr Jannah and Azaz, the Front’s stronghold. During this period, its governance shifted to an indirect hybrid model, mainly focused on providing direct educational support and incentives to fighters. This change coincided with a reduction in its financial resources, as the SNA ceased to send salaries to more than half of Sham Front’s fighters, replaced by grants distributed at least every 50 days (E1; Q2; Q3).

Additionally, its control of the Al-Hamran crossing, which was handed over to SIG, was revoked.⁴⁴ A military commander, in an interview, characterized the aftermath of the battle by stating: “I consider it a battle against the revolution because it nearly exhausted the resources of Sham Front, which previously funded military operations, security checkpoints, reserves, and other military expenditures. Before this conflict, Sham Front used to provide more support, but due to the crisis and the challenging financial situation, its contributions have significantly decreased” (Q1).

In line with this, fighters expressed a consensus during interviews that the financial grants they receive, which range from 500 to 1,000 Turkish liras and arrives every 50 to 70 days, falls far short of meeting their needs. Consequently, all fighters seek additional sources of income. As one fighter explained, “700 liras hardly cover anything. For a fighter, this amount barely sustains them for a week, and it is insufficient. Therefore, they are compelled to pursue other employment

opportunities while remaining committed to their revolutionary objectives, principles, and the ethics of the revolution, to which all of this is attributed” (F4).

Despite Sham Front’s indirect influence over governance in the regions under its control, civil society has managed to establish a presence. In Izaz alone, there are at least 113 teams and civil organizations actively operating, marking a significant number of registered teams within a single area (LC2; CS1, CS3). The faction refrains from meddling in community services that pertain to individual welfare and support (Q3; CS3; CS2). Therefore, the effectiveness of governance within Sham Front is intertwined with the faction’s internal legitimacy and its acceptance at the civilian level. However, when we examine the survival of fighters at the micro level, it cannot be solely attributed to the theory of material interests, often referred to as “greed.” The Front does not offer substantial financial incentives that would motivate fighters to stay compared with other factions from the second Corp.

Here the emergence of an external actor became evident, as Turkey has curtailed Sham Front’s direct governance role and eliminated the significance of material incentives within this context. The role of Turkey became more evident in its ability to trigger a third restructuring of Sham Front, which began with the resignation of Muhannad al-Khalaf, also known as Abu Ahmed Nour, from the leadership of the Third Corps and the Front. Hossam Yassin was re-elected by the shura council as the commander, and the leadership of the Third Corps was separated from Sham Front. Azzam Gharib, known as Abu al-Ezz Saraqeb, was appointed as the new commander of Sham Front.⁴⁵

However, the unique aspect of Sham Front lies in its ability to navigate this dynamic relationship between the external actor and the faction itself, further solidifying its affiliation with and commitment to its “revolutionary” ideals through managing the enforced changes within its

organizational structure as overseen by Turkey (Q3).⁴⁶ These significant changes at the meso and macro levels necessitate an examination of their impact on the Front's microstructure. External actors have sought to restructure and institutionalize the SNA factions as part of a broader series of transformations referred to by the SIG Minister of Defense, Hassan Hamadeh, as "the train of reform." This restructuring aims to centralize financial resources under the control of the SIG, as part of the ongoing process to transform the fragmented factions into a structured army, akin to the regular armed forces.⁴⁷

Although Hassan Hamadeh has asserted "Our internal structure is no different from any regular army around the world," he also hinted at one of the most significant challenges facing them, which is factionalism primarily rooted in material concerns. However, the specificity of the Front goes beyond that to extend to its regional and geographical dimension at the micro level of the fighters. It is worth noting that this new structure reflects the Front's commitment to a rigorous process for selecting leaders and representatives of the fighting groups within the newly formed leadership council, with an emphasis on considering its diverse components." One of its leaders emphasized this approach during an interview, stating: "There are five or six individuals on the council, representing the largest military blocs from different regions. Educational qualifications are not the sole criteria; individuals are selected based on their power and influence within their respective groups" (Q1). Simultaneously, the influence of external actors in determining the acceptability of a leader should not be underestimated. As such, we can infer that the selection process operates along two interconnected and concurrent dimensions: Vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension involves the influence exerted by external actors, while the horizontal dimension entails the selection of the Front's top leadership in alignment with the preferences of the fighter base (Q2; Q1; Q3).

In the case of the “Sham Front,” the leadership structure is characterized by its capacity to exert influence and guide the various fighting groups. When it comes to the acquisition of power through the three methods of heredity, bureaucracy, and charisma, I find that the leadership of the Front initially began as an heir to the Tawhid Brigade — Abdul Aziz Salama, also known as "Abu Juma'a," was appointed as the first commander of the Front. However, this hereditary pathway came to a halt in 2015, with the leadership structure shifting exclusively to hereditary leadership within the Shura Council (Q3; Q1; CC4).⁴⁸ For example, the members of the Council include the founders of the Tawhid Brigade and the first factions that formed the Front. They collectively take on leadership roles and participate in the selection of the overall commander (Q1; Q3; Q6; Q7). The selection of a leader for the Levant Front requires approval from the Shura Council and acceptance from second- and third-tier leaders. This process plays a pivotal role in maintaining hierarchical cohesion and aligning with the faction's current stage, considering internal circumstances and the preferences of Turkey. Throughout the Front's journey, five leaders have risen to the pinnacle of the leadership hierarchy, following a systematic progression in the ascent to power (Q2; CC2). These five individuals wield significant influence over military leaders and central figures within the Front.

This brings us to the third notable factor in the leadership transition process, which is the absence of a permanent charismatic figure at the core of the Front. Despite the presence of charismatic individuals within the Front, such as Muhannad al-Khalaf, known as "Abu Ahmed Nour," interviews with fighters have revealed that a substantial group of them do not place significant emphasis on the current commander's individual persona (F1-8). Instead, they prioritize the Shura Council's consensus around the leader, as will be elaborated on later.

It is important to emphasize that this historical continuity, rooted in emotional and ideological ties, aligns with the senior leadership's strategy within the “Sham Front” to preserve its legacy. This continuity also mirrors the perception of the fighters, who continue to view the Front as an extension of the Tawhid Brigade. This perspective persists despite the inclusion of new factions and human elements within the Front's structure (E1; E2; Q1; Q3). Our interviews with front-line commanders, central commanders, and security officials within the “Sham Front” reveal that their mechanism for selecting leaders is adaptable, as it takes into account both the faction’s base and the hierarchy of external actors (Turkey) (CC1; Q3). According to one central commander, “We don't have anything that forces a fighter to fight with us. Let's say we have a battalion commander with 100 fighters. If, for instance, the regime or ISIS or any enemy advances on us and suppose those 100 fighters did not want to fight, nothing on earth can force them. It’s purely voluntary” (CC2). They must have the conviction to fight, based on their confidence in the leader and his patriotism (CC1). Another central commander emphasized that fighters are represented by a leader of their choice (CC3). Most fighters express their preferences, and they convey their voices to the leadership (ibid.). This is the standard of the “Sham Front”, “where representatives come from all provinces and ideological backgrounds, with each ethnic or territorial segment having a party or person representing it” (Q3). This was reflected in the interviews with fighters and experts on the ground (F3; F4; F5; E5).

This organizational dimension significantly influences the motivation of fighters. When I posed questions to the fighters about the mechanism for selecting leaders and the new organizational structure, they expressed a strong belief in the utility of the new organization, without knowing the names of the new leaders or the significance of these changes. It was the psychological and emotional aspects of the fighters that played the central role in this, as will be

explained further — regarding identity transformations and the construction of collective memory. These emotional and psychological factors had the most significant impact on understanding the drivers of mobilization and the ongoing engagement in combat at the micro level. The fighters' responses primarily revolved around issues such as the control of border crossings and their opposition to the Sham Front sending fighters to Azerbaijan and Libya (F1-82; Q4; E1). The absence of an ideological leadership within the Sham Front — compared to ISIS or HTS — along with the lack of a charismatic leader or ideological authority to serve as a source of internal legitimacy, has hindered the development of a coherent strategy to determine the faction's direction, literally and metaphorically. This deficiency has made it susceptible to the influence of external actors such as Turkey in the management of human resources, potentially leading to internal divisions.⁴⁹

Although the SNA is often viewed as a proxy for Turkey, it is crucial to examine the empirical evidence presented in this article that highlights the Sham Front's relative autonomy within the SNA. For example, the Sham Front's decision to refrain from deploying its fighters to Libya, in contrast to other factions within the Second Corps, exemplifies its capacity for independent decision-making. This deviation from Turkey's directives highlights a relationship characterized by both co-optation and autonomous military decisions. However, this independence has come at a cost, such as the removal of its charismatic leader Abu Ahmed Nour and the pressure to transfer control of the Hamran Crossing to the Interim Government (CC4). While these actions align with the fighters' perception of their 'revolutionary project,' they also reflect the intricate dynamics between Turkey's role as a principal agent and the Sham Front's management of its internal and external relations with other SNA factions.

On the contrary, the structure of the “Sham Front” plays a secondary role in retaining fighters. Respondents consistently expressed their aversion to internal conflicts and turning their weapons against other factions (CC1-3; Q2; F1-8). This underscores the significance of emotional and moral drivers in the mindset of the fighters, the decentralization of the faction's structure and its emphasis on good governance as factors that motivate the average fighter to remain engaged.

When I inquired about HTS’s recent attack on the “Sham Front,” some fighters articulated the Front’s approach to conflicts by stating: "The Sham Front does not aim to eliminate or erase another faction. It may engage in conflict with a faction due to differences, but the goal has never been to eradicate that faction" (F4). This sentiment reflects the Front's willingness to engage in disputes based on ideological or strategic differences rather than pursuing the elimination of rival factions. Another fighter, in a separate interview, emphasized the impossibility of fighting against one who has fought against a common enemy. Therefore, he would not battle with someone who has fired even a single shot at Bashar al-Assad's army (F2). This sentiment underscores the fighter's strong commitment to their values and the principles of the “revolution,” which often includes a degree of restraint in engaging in conflict.

Based on the information presented, the organizational structure of the “Sham Front” can be categorized into centralized and decentralized strategies. This hybrid model exhibits centralization, but it maintains a degree of decentralization at the decision-making level, especially when it comes to appointing leaders. As such, The Front employs a decentralized strategy to manage its members, relying on a less rigid network compared to a centralized system, with effective hierarchical leadership. While there is a hierarchical structure within the faction, the influence of Turkey on the faction weakens its control over internal decisions. In this context, the

Front plays a crucial role in appointing leaders for smaller groups, fostering group cohesion, and ensuring the loyalty of its fighters, despite the limitations of hierarchy within the faction.

It is worth noting that this hybrid structure exposes the faction to the risk of internal divisions or splits. However, our interviews revealed that the senior leadership of the Front is aware of this challenge and has adopted a bottom-up approach to control. They do so by instilling in fighters a set of beliefs that align with the leadership's own values (Q1;Q2). This approach is aimed at ensuring that if the leadership were to be replaced, fighters would continue to uphold the faction's strategy. Regional affiliations play a significant role in this strategy (F6). One fighter illustrated the strong bond he shares with his direct commander, emphasizing that their relationship is akin to that of brothers. He recounted how his commander supported him when he was imprisoned by HTS and how he would readily follow his commander's orders without hesitation (F1). This constructed bonds among fighters and their direct leaders as sustained by the high commanders in the Front and their mechanism in choosing military commanders that are close to the base' social background has resulted in more cohesion of the faction. This was emphasized by all fighters, quoting (F3) who described described his division as consisting mostly of individuals from the same area who embarked on their revolutionary journey together in the Al-Fath Brigade in Aleppo's countryside and continue to fight side by side today, as will be further elaborated in later sections.

Dissecting Drivers of Revolutionary Action in Armed Groups: The Role of Emotions and Uncertainty

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, a plethora of studies have approached its onset and evolution into a prolonged civil war that is complex and multifaceted by focusing on heightened sectarian narratives among different political factions.⁵⁰ This fetishization in scholarly discourse often examines how sectarianism fuels extremist actions or the ways in which repressive tactics used by the Syrian regime drove the resurgence of violence and consequently the emergence of an armed opposition. Others have relied on instrumentality as an analytical tool to explain how regional actors hinged on these armed groups to maximize their national interests and security.⁵¹ On the other hand, prominent discussions have emerged focusing on extremist attitudes and drivers of radical behavior within terrorist factions such as ISIS and HTS.⁵² While these analyses have merit, they are conceptually limited in terms of dissecting the drivers of individuals' perceptions of what counts as 'revolutionary action' and its adjunct boundary makings and remakings of 'revolutionary subjects.'⁵³ Sune Haugbolle and Andreas Bandak's theorization of 'the ends of revolution' is highly relevant in this context. They argue that revolutionary ideology is not fixed but is instead a dynamic interplay between meaning and practice.⁵⁴ This perspective draws on defining the notion of ideology as a cultural system and emphasizes the role of language, emotions, and symbols in shaping political visions and actions. By conceptualizing revolutionary action as driven and framed by shifts in political imagination and social imaginaries, moments of crisis, hesitation, doubt, and uncertainty are crucial in forming revolutionary subjectivities, which are characterized by the ability to envision and strive for radical change.

In the Syrian context, experts have not given sufficient attention to the role of emotions, ritualistic memorization during combat, and uncertainty while making in-depth analysis of the utilitarian benefits to actors operating within the Syrian civil war. We must not underestimate the significance of these emotional motives, which become deeply entwined with the identity formations that emerge as a result of the war. This strand of literature has highlighted the need to move beyond structural and material explanations for conflicts and mobilization and centered its analysis on the role of emotions on fighters' motivations to join combat.⁵⁵ It highlights the inadequacy of imposing behavioral models that are solely based on material factors. This literature has played a vital role in reigniting academic discourse by challenging the tendency to reduce fighters' motivations to material incentives.⁵⁶ In this article, emotion will be defined as a residual effect of an event, whether it occurred in the past or is anticipated in the future, which significantly impacts an individual's emotional and perceptual state. Essentially, emotions are what linger after an experience has taken place.⁵⁷

Central to this scholarly inquiry into the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity in the Syrian context are tracing shifts in political imagination and social imaginaries. For fighters in Sham Front, these shifts created new possibilities for radical change despite the prevailing sense of crisis and uncertainty. They further emphasize the importance of moments of crisis, hesitation, doubt, and uncertainty in the development of revolutionary subjectivities. These elements are central to the process of joining and sustaining revolutionary movements. In this context, as individuals navigate and interact with emerging political realities, the ways in which people conceive of political action and the future prompt them to question their current realities and envision alternative futures, driving them toward revolutionary action. Ronald Suny and Harvey

Whitehouse provided significant insights regarding the role of emotions in shaping the subjective identities of individuals engaged in combat, and their perceptions of their current identities, reactions, and choices.⁵⁸ They suggest that certain emotions arise from personal experiences or the experiences of those around an individual, which can influence their decisions to participate in various forms of armed rebellion.⁵⁹ These findings align with Salwa Ismail's conceptualization of the Hama massacre in the context of Syria, which emphasizes the significance of collective memory formed through such events and influenced Syrians' expectations of the regime's reactions in 2011.⁶⁰

This was evidenced in the narratives of fighters and central commanders where the Hama massacre was mentioned in every interview. The remembrance of the massacre was reflected in their experiences of having a close relative, neighbor or friend being imprisoned for years by the regime or eventually executed without a trial.⁶¹ Michael Hogg further emphasizes that the prolonged duration of war heightens the allure of belonging to such groups, stemming from the clear emotional frameworks these groups provide, which enable individuals to maintain a sense of self-assurance and ontological security throughout the war.⁶² In this article, I define 'revolutionary subjectivity' as a constant process in the making, where social identity configuration involves a reconfiguration of political imagination. It is characterized by the ability to envision and strive for radical change, often in response to a profound sense of crisis and dissatisfaction with the current status quo. This leads me to employ two theories, specifically the uncertainty identity theory and identity fusion, as a conceptual framework for explaining the interconnectedness of several key factors.⁶³

I have identified five interconnected analytical variables that are closely related to these two theories by incorporating five variables into qualitative and in-depth interviews conducted with the sample (fighters). These components (emotional incidents, identity transformation, socialization and memorialization, and religious/territorial belonging). As such, this study introduces a novel theoretical approach discussed within the context of Syria, focusing on the “Sham Front.” In particular, the article underscores the importance of emotional motives, as they play a crucial role in a fighter’s decision to remain within the group, particularly in terms of shared emotional experiences, the construction of collective memories, identity shifts due to war and the structural elements of regional and psychological belonging that results in the creation of a ‘revolutionary subject.’⁶⁴ In the next two sections, I focus on deconstructing the narratives of fighters and examining how war conditions, defections, social divisions, and political polarization impact fighters’ identity perceptions and decision-making processes. This analysis involves contextualizing the perceived meanings of the ‘revolution’ (*thawra*) according to these fighters and how their construction/reconstruction of ‘revolutionary’ ethos (*qiyam al-thawra*) is relational and subject to how individuals in war seek to reduce uncertainty about themselves, thereby reinforcing their need for belonging and forming strong bonds with a group experiencing similar emotional adversities.

The ‘Revolution’ as a Reconfigured ‘Revolutionary Subject’

‘The revolution is us (al-thawra nihna)...even if others say it ended years ago...it is in every breath we take...as long as we are still breathing...it continues’ (F12), one fighter affirmingly states. It is within this heightened political uncertainties, emotions rise as not merely remnants of past experiences but are cognitive agents that shape motivations for military engagement.⁶⁵ These

remnants of emotional experiences influence the trajectory of conflicts, with emotions being a primary force shaping subjective motivations for engaging in military actions. Emotions are not merely aftermaths; they form a collection of cognitive agents and inclinations that directly influence the formulation of 'revolutionary' actions and impact how an individual gathers information and forms beliefs.⁶⁶ There are three emotional determinants crucial to the decision to participate in combat: the experience of violence, the stigma and prejudice endured, and the reversal of stigma through armed resistance.⁶⁷ These determinants are echoed in the context of Balkan conflicts and resonate with the narratives of Syrian fighters, transcending political and regional specifics and highlighting common emotional threads at a micro-level.

The sentiment of societal stigma, another key determinant, emerges when an individual feels powerless to defend themselves, their family, or their group. This stigma is often counteracted by reshaping the perceived social hierarchy through armed self-defense, resulting in a heightened emotional sense of superiority.⁶⁸ According to Harvey Whitehouse, emotions play a significant role in shaping the subjective identities of individuals involved in combat, influencing their perceptions of self, reactions, and decisions. These emotions often arise from personal or observed experiences, shaping an individual's choices to engage in armed rebellion.⁶⁹ Negative emotions may also stem from past events that foster expectations of similar outcomes in the future.⁷⁰ Malesvic defines emotions not as pre-existing entities that are merely triggered by violence, but as dynamic processes shaped and transformed through violent experiences.⁷¹ Emotions like fear, anger, shame, and pride are not always the catalysts for violent actions but are generated through the violence itself and the social dynamics surrounding it. In this way, emotions are created and molded within the context of shared experiences of violence. Therefore, the anticipation of future events can evoke emotions rooted in direct or indirect past experiences.

The Sham Front fighters' narratives embody these emotional responses to grievance and hardship. One fighter's account reflects a deep sense of injustice and political awareness, saying, "We felt injustice, and we are well aware of modern Syria's history, and how Assad seized power. We had a strong urge to overthrow this oppressive regime" (F6). Another fighter expressed a similar sentiment, "Anyone living in this country understands the nature of the regime; it's oppressive! When the Arab revolutions were happening, and neighboring countries were undergoing change, we believed that the regime was also about to disappear. It seemed impossible for the status quo to persist. Something new had to occur in people's lives; they needed to break free from this dynastic rule. Change was an imperative" (F1).

Sectarian discrimination adds another layer to these grievances, with one fighter articulating, "Of course, I live in Syria! I witness firsthand the injustice, persecution, and tyranny of the regime's security apparatus. I have personally experienced multiple instances while serving in the army. There's a clear sectarian bias between us and the Alawites, and this has left a significant impact on me. We were treated as if we were nothing and with no status" (F5).

A fighter who had been a political prisoner of the regime shared, "I was a former political prisoner of the regime. I spent five years in Sednaya prison in 2000 simply because I held a political opinion" (F4). The restriction of religious freedoms, especially in Aleppo, added to the grievance, as another fighter mentioned, "I know many people who were either sentenced in political cases or detained due to their political views. My sister's husband was even arrested briefly just for praying in one of the army's administrative facilities" (F5). The regime's response to protests, characterized by violence and arrest of even children, is another aspect of the fighters' grievances. "I was just a kid of 14 years old when I took part in the protests in my neighborhood, I was young and not fully aware of my decisions...but when I was detained for nine months...I experienced

the real meaning of what a revolution is and why we must keep revolting against this regime," said one fighter, highlighting not only the regime's atrocities against rebellious areas, but how his consciousness of 'revolutionary action' is interlinked with the emergence of his 'revolutionary' identity (F2).

Another individual affirmed the consequence of his protest involvement, recounting personal losses as essential drivers shaping his decision to join the armed protests and revolution: "I no longer have a family! I lost my cousins, and I can estimate that we've had about a hundred martyrs among my family and relatives" (F2). Another fighter laments "I lost one of my brothers and a niece due to the bombing of Kafr Batna. In addition to that, my cousins, aunts, and other relatives were martyred in the chemical strike on Ghouta. In total, my family has lost 42 victims" (F4). Systematic displacement in northern Syria has reinforced the ongoing grievance among fighters, stemming from their sense of honor and the humiliation endured by their women. One fighter, concerned for his wife and daughter's safety, stated, "I'm concerned about the safety of my wife and daughter. We, along with others, are fighting and sacrificing our lives to secure a better life for them" (F4).

The reasons fighters give for taking up arms span a spectrum from emotional hardships and direct grievances to material losses. "At the start of the revolution, I wasn't in Syria. I returned to participate in the early protests, but as we started being targeted and attacked with weapons, we had no choice but to bear arms. We were compelled to fight and defend ourselves," said one fighter (F9). Another simply stated, "To be honest, we have nothing more to lose; we have lost everything" (F4), while a third remarked, "Our homes and lands in Saraqib are all gone" (F2).

These narratives underscore the significance of emotional hardship and uncertainty in the fighters' decisions to continue the struggle. The intersection of these elements with the structural

role of grievances in the fighters' imagination, and how individuals relate, navigate and interact with these new political realities and uncertainties become critical in shaping the process of the identity alterations brought about by war. Within this context, the emergence of new political subjectivities in the crucible of war is substantiated by the erosion of national identity to the rise of sub-state affiliations, such as ethnic, sectarian, or tribal identities. Scholars debate whether the waning of national identity feeds into internal conflicts and if exploiting sub-identities complicates a society's fabric, potentially leading to new sub-national identities. This debate encompasses two intertwined dimensions: the conflict's intensity and its influence on personal identity perceptions. Hinnebusch notes that conflict exacerbates ethnic or sectarian divides, undermining the national identity's unifying perception. In Syria, a Baathist-enforced national identity led to exclusion and an emphasis on homogeneity over citizenship or state belonging, weakening national solidarity.⁷⁵

The fighters I interviewed consistently identified themselves as "revolutionaries," a term that trumped "fighter," "mujahid," or "soldier." "I describe myself as a revolutionary," said one (F3), while another expanded: "I am a revolutionary, a rebel against injustice. Everyone here is rebelling against injustice" (F4). This indicates a shared identity formed not just from shared experiences but from a collective understanding of the injustice imposed by the regime. The fighters' narratives did not delve into civilian or democratic institutions or how military action could foster a civil society. Instead, their revolutionary identity was forefront, pending the fall of the regime. A fighter shared, "Personally I'm rebelling against the regime... I seek a just state... His Islam wouldn't justify his injustice towards me; he would be no different from the regime" (F1), separating their fight from religious extremism.

The identity transformation of the Front's fighters hinged on the cessation of the regime's injustices. This role in shaping identities, memories, and emotional bonds through rituals and

socialization suggests identity is not fixed but fluid, influenced by experience and shared revolutionary symbolism. Leadership within the Front has cultivated this identity, with one leader explaining how youth are drawn to their cause: "Many young people come to join us... it's enough that the Front stands for a revolutionary cause" (Q1). New recruits undergo training, both military and moral, at the "Martyr Abdul Qadir Al-Saleh School," with over 3,000 fighters trained annually, emphasizing the Front's dedication to its cause (Q7; Q6).

Training extends beyond the mentioned camps, with each unit having specialized programs tailored to their needs, ensuring a comprehensive preparedness for all members (Q2; Q6; Q7; Q1). These programs aim not only to improve military capabilities but also to strengthen camaraderie, as one fighter detailed: "I have attended three training camps... It was quite intense" (F3).

The importance of ritual, such as revolutionary songs, is unanimously recognized among the fighters for fostering shared belonging and reinforcing collective identity. Songs by Saeb Basah Al-Nazzal and Abdul Basit Sarout resonate deeply within them, echoing the spirit of their struggle (F2; F3).

Literature from various conflict zones echoes the significance of "fighting together" for group cohesion, as seen in Whitehouse and Lanman's work on Libyan fighters.⁷⁶ The "fusion" with the group through battle experiences and self-sacrifice fosters a unity transcending traditional kinship bonds, forming a shared destiny within the group. Larsen's exploration of war symbolism and the construction of collective "memories" further underlines how conflict shapes a fighter's identity.⁷⁷ The battlefield's victory and defeat influence identity, which is also molded by shared experiences and emotional bonds, beyond just the political or territorial. These bonds are exemplified by stories of sacrifice, like a fighter recounting an ambush survival: "My relationship

with him changed. It became stronger and closer" (F7), or narratives of intense battles where fighters risk their lives for each other, embodying the solidarity that has formed (F8).

Such acts of solidarity have transformed pre-war tribal disputes into alliances against a common enemy, as one fighter recalled: "In one of the battles... I found myself in a situation where I needed to survive, and he bravely covered the fire to help me escape" (F1). The phrase "common path" (*al-maṣīr al-wāḥid*) recounted and echoed by many participants signify the solidarity and bonds among them, strengthening their mobilization (F2). The shared destiny evident among the fighters reinforces every aspect of their lives, shaping even their interactions with the youth and their conduct in battle. "During battle... We must protect our comrades from death; it's either death or victory," one fighter declared (F4).

Collective memory construction through shared battlefield experiences forms a critical part of the fighters' identity fusion with the group. The sense of "family" among them, often stronger than blood ties, drives their willingness for self-sacrifice, contributing to our understanding of military engagement behavior. This analysis leads to broader questions about the Front's structure, the alignment of its values with the fighters' beliefs, and its role in sustaining loyalty over time, offering a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted nature of combatant loyalty and identity in the Syrian war.

Loyal Subjects in the Making

Beyond experiencing these grievances and their impact on crafting a Syrian revolutionary subject, it remains questionable the extent to which the Front's structure, its leadership hierarchy, and the mechanisms for leader selection is a central concern in understanding its internal dynamics.

Despite Turkey's significant influence over the restructuring and governance of the Front, flexibility remains a key trait in leader selection for small groups. Through analyzing fighters' narratives, I discerned that organizational restructuring did not undercut the Front's governance or affect individual loyalty. The fighters conveyed a unanimous trust in leadership decisions, despite not prioritizing leadership changes or internal hierarchy. This trust is pivotal and remains undisturbed by a lack of knowledge about the Front's political representatives within the coalition, indicating a robust affiliation and loyalty that transcends informational gaps. It is a striking observation that, according to these fighters, the upper echelons of the Sham Front's leadership seem to matter less to them than their immediate commanders.⁷⁸ This dynamic can be attributed to the numerous defections and changes of allegiance experienced by fighters, including their transitions into various SNA groups, throughout the course of the revolution and war.

Differentiating coercion from genuine compliance and acceptance becomes a nuanced challenge. To grasp the nature of the fighters' loyalty, I probed their emotional narratives since 2011, along with the Front's strategies and narratives, including moral guidance tools and combat preparation camps. Despite internal and external structural shifts impacting military alignments, key events have fortified loyalty at the micro level, resonating with the fighters' perception of their "revolutionary project" and aligning with the Front's leadership stance. For example, the Front's rejection of deploying its base to fight abroad bolstered fighters' allegiance. One fighter stated, "Why should we go to Libya?! We have many fronts here. We don't own anything in Libya" (F2). The Front's consistent revolutionary stance, despite pressures, reinforced positive perceptions among its members, "The 'Sham Front' did not deviate from the revolutionary background, as it did not send fighters to Libya or Azerbaijan" (F3).

Legitimacy is multifaceted, incorporating both top-down and bottom-up elements, and cannot be attributed solely to rational actions. The legitimacy enjoyed by the Front also stems from grassroots emotional consecration, evident in the unanimous identification of enemies: "The primary enemy is Bashar al-Assad and his regime, Russia, and Iran" (F6), and "My ultimate enemy is Bashar al-Assad" (F1;F2;F4). Furthermore, the Front's appeal lies in its revolutionary project, which distinguishes it from other factions perceived as corrupt or subservient to external directives. Fighters' commitment to the Front is unwavering: "Honestly, there's only this path. We either die or triumph" (F4).

Drawing on Stouffer's work on shared experiences and Siebold's studies on emotional solidarity in militarization, I argue that intense combat experiences forge strong emotional bonds, akin to familial ties.⁷⁹ This micro-level solidarity within the Front is resistant to structural changes and remains aligned with the 'revolutionary' concept upheld by the leadership. Fighters' responses about trust revolved around their belief in the Front's revolutionary project. "The 'Sham Front' is heading in the right direction... I am fully convinced that their path aligns with the ideals of the revolution" (F2). This sentiment underpins their loyalty, transcending individual affiliations to factions and focusing on the broader revolutionary cause: "My commitment is to the revolution" (F6). The Front's revolutionary ethos also entails a rejection of internal conflicts that distract from the primary goal. Fighters stress that conflicts with other factions are aimed at resolution rather than eradication: "The 'Sham Front' does not wish to eliminate any faction entirely" (F3). While it was apparent that fighters expressed unwavering support to Front's overall project, this loyalty was conditional upon Front's maintaining and keeping its adherence to overthrowing Assad. As one fighter expresses: 'I don't follow my group blindly! We are not like Assad's shabiha! The

Front is not sacred from committing mistakes...if I witness the leadership is changing in terms of our revolutionary goal...I will defect' (F10).

In-depth interviews with the Front's leadership and security officials reveal a congruence between the strategic orientations at the command level and the fighters' sentiments (CC1; CC2;CC3). Despite potential constraints from Turkey, the fighters' expressed alignment with the Front's Leadership strategies. Delving into the Front's evolution in northern Syria brings to light that the largest contingent within the Front comes from rural Aleppo, a fact recognized by the fighters. "I want to emphasize that the majority of the Front fighters are from rural Aleppo. Over time, we were joined by fighters from other Syrian regions, and the revolution brought us together," a fighter from the group stated (F5). While Eck's research has indicated that ethnic or regional affiliations are pivotal in mobilization and can heighten conflict intensity, the Front's scenario presents a nuanced picture.⁸⁰ The emotional narratives of these fighters transcend regional identities, forging a collective unity in the face of adversity.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the Syrian conflict, where displacement has led to a mosaic of regional identities within the Front. Billig's notion that regional identity is a modern construct, providing emotional belonging, becomes more fluid in wartime. Conflict reshapes this connection, transforming deep regional ties into a shared allegiance to the immediate, lived-in place.⁸¹ The interviews with Front fighters revealed an overarching sense of unity, superseding their original regional ties. "They cannot eliminate us (Sham Front) because our elimination would mean the end of the revolution. We are the last remaining revolutionary faction, and we have our own decision-making and independence, encompassing people from various regions, including Damascus, Homs, Idlib, Deir ez-Zur, and all regions" (F6). Another fighter emotively expressed how despite being forcefully displaced from rural Damascus to northern Syria

in 2015, he states, 'The Front became my new home and my comrades are my family' (F11). This sentiment is indicative of a broader identity that prioritizes the revolutionary cause over regional origins.

In Syria's northwest, with its significant population of internally displaced persons, regional identity often gives way to a collective revolutionary identity. The fighters' responses emphasize survival and unity: "What binds us now is Syria. We share the same goal and an inevitable destiny, which is the liberation of all of Syria, regardless of where we come from" (F3). Malesevic's analysis of collective bonds and combatant behavior suggests that micro-level solidarity is shaped by individual experiences within the broader group ideology and structure.⁸² However, this perspective may not fully capture the reasons behind the fighters' sustained loyalty to the Front. Their commitment seems to spring from a profound emotional connection and a shared vision of the revolutionary goal, rather than strict ideological adherence. The Front's rejection of deploying its fighters abroad resonated strongly with its base, enhancing loyalty by aligning with their local revolutionary commitment. "Why should we go to Libya?! What do we have there? We have many fronts here. We don't own anything in Libya," expressed one fighter (F2). Another fighter demonstrated his loyalty to the Front in a logical manner by comparing it with other factions from the Second Corps, highlighting the manipulation of those armed groups within the Second Corps that sent fighters to Libya (F12). This local focus has been a cornerstone in maintaining the Front's internal cohesion and the fighters' positive perception of the group's priorities.

In exploring the nature of loyalty, it is clear that the Front benefits from a two-way legitimacy, both through top-down leadership actions and bottom-up emotional consecration from the fighters themselves. When asked about their primary adversary, a consensus emerged, focusing

on “The primary enemy as Bashar al-Assad and his regime, Russia, and Iran, while others are considered lackeys of the enemy” (F6). Moreover, the distinction was made between the regime's soldiers, often seen as compelled participants, and the regime’s leadership: "The soldiers within the ranks of the regime's army are not the enemy... My ultimate enemy is Bashar al-Assad" (F8).

The Front's organizational structure, which combines flexibility in leader selection with a staunch commitment to the revolutionary cause, is reflective of its fighters' ethos. This structure has adapted to accommodate both the hierarchy imposed by external actors and the internal solidarity among the fighters. Fighters’ descriptions of their relationships with fellow members are laced with familial terms, indicating a bond that transcends regionalism: "They are like parents to me... Better than my relationship with my own family" (F2), "blood brothers" (F3), "brotherly relationship" (F4), "we are brothers" (F8), "they are like brothers, and our bond is stronger than family ties" (F5), "they are like brothers to me, I would give up everything for them, even stronger than my relationship with my own parents" (F1). The study, therefore, challenges the prevailing notion that regional identities become more rigid during conflict. Instead, it demonstrates that the emotional bonds forged through shared revolutionary experiences are the primary unifiers. "Our battalion remained united because we all hail from the same village and share a common national identity, including nearby villages belonging to Hraytan" (F3).

The collective revolutionary project emerges as a unifying factor, even in the face of regional diversity. "Belonging is not determined by ancestry or blood. It's about the emotions we share, the unity from the experiences we've gone through together," explains one fighter (F1). As such, the Front's fighters exhibit a complex sense of belonging that has evolved beyond regional affiliations to encompass a shared commitment to their cause. This reimagined sense of identity,

crafted in the crucible of war, showcases the resilience and adaptability of loyalty within the faction.

Conclusion

The significance of the timeframe in which this study was conducted lies in the fact that it corresponds to a period marked by military stalemates on various fronts. During this period, there were limited spoils available to distribute among the fighters. For these contextual reasons, the article commenced with examining the motivations of fighters within the “Sham Front,” with the recognition of existing literature that highlighted ideology, illicit economy, and material resources as pivotal factors in the engagement of individuals with armed groups. The selection of the “Sham Front” aimed to delve beyond these narratives, shedding light on the personal motivations of its fighters. Through systematic interviews with its central commanders, military leaders, civil society persons, military experts and fighters, this research sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of what drives these individuals to continue fighting.

As such, this article employed a multi-level analysis to dissect motivations across macro (broad organizational and external actor influence), meso (internal organizational structure and governance), and micro (individual) levels, offering a nuanced view of individual fighters' motivations within the broader context of organizational and external factors. The study highlighted the significance of socio-cultural backgrounds, regional or ethnic affiliations, access to resources, and geographical factors, underscoring Turkey's influential role in the restructuring and governance of the “Sham Front.”

This investigation also pointed to the diverse factors at play in maintaining a military faction's survival and loyalty, emphasizing the necessity of meso-level analysis to grasp the dynamics between group and individual relationships. The motivations for joining military groups, often debated within academic circles, prompted an exploration into the role of external actors in shaping the formation and dynamics of these factions, arguing against the simplistic view of external actors as mere dominant controllers. As such, I identified two primary pathways influencing individual combat motivations. The first pathway suggests that transformative emotional experiences shared among group members, particularly during adversities, significantly shape both personal and collective identities. These experiences, often manifested in collective rituals like self-sacrifice for land and family, become integral to the individuals' life histories and their identification with the group. The second pathway focuses on "local fusion" dynamics, predicated on shared kinship, emotional, or regional characteristics, which lead to intense group cohesion. This is evident in the strong familial bonds within the "Sham Front," where members perceive each other as brothers, fostering a sense of collective interdependence. Such local fusion is closely linked to the willingness to fight and even sacrifice oneself when the group is under threat.

Additionally, my findings challenge three prevalent misconceptions about combatant motivations in armed groups. Firstly, the essentialist view of motivations as involuntary and monolithic at the micro-level. Secondly, the outdated analytical frameworks in security studies that fail to account for the unique nature of post-Cold War conflicts at macro-level. Lastly, the confusion between an individual fighter's agency and the structural dynamics of the group, leading to oversimplified assumptions about the reasons behind their participation in conflict at meso-level. As such, the findings, encompassing multi-level analysis, affirmed the base's

significant yet nuanced influence on the “Sham Front,” which extended beyond tangible structures to include social and symbolic rituals that enhance acceptance and continuity within the Front. Despite challenges from external actors and rival factions, the Front's persistence underscores a complex interplay of factors affecting fighter loyalty and group cohesion.

Moreover, the research uncovers the importance of understanding the emotional bonds and collective identities that emerge within such groups, transcending mere structural or external influences. These findings call for a deeper examination of the motivational framework of fighters, considering the evolving nature of conflict and the complex web of influences shaping individual and collective motivations. This comprehensive analysis, by exploring the “Sham Front” across various dimensions and levels, reveals the intricate dynamics at play within non-state military groups. It emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of fighter motivations, the influence of external actors, and the potential of these groups in contributing to post-conflict peacebuilding and stability, highlighting individual agency in shaping the future of these factions. In summary, this research highlights the complexity of combat motivations and stresses the need for nuanced analyses that consider both individual experiences and broader group dynamics within conflict settings.

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Primary Resources

Fighters (F)

1. (F1) KH.A.Q
2. (F2) A.F
3. (F3) S.S
4. (F4) Sh. B
5. (F5) S.O
6. (F6) J. G
7. (F7) A. H
8. (F8) A. M
9. (F9) S.H.I
10. (F10) R.S.M
11. (F11) H.KH
12. (F12) ABD.MKH

Central Commanders (CC)

1. (CC1) J.J
2. (CC2) A. H
3. (CC3) A. R
4. (CC4) ex-central commander of the group.

Administrative Military Commanders (Q)

1. (Q1) S.O

2. (Q2) B.A
3. (Q3) A.A.H
4. (Q4) B.A
5. (Q5) M
6. (Q6) A,A
7. (Q7) A. M

Local Councils (LC)

1. (LC1) Member of al-Baab Local Council
2. (LC2) Member of Jarablus Local Council

Civil Society Leaders (CS)

1. (CS1) Member of al-Hooz Center for Social Development in Izaz
2. (CS2) Member of Molham Team
3. (CS3) Member of al-Mar'a Organization

Experts

1. (E1) N.H former member of Syrian coalition
2. (E2) S. Sh
3. (E3) Q. H
4. (E4) H. M
5. (E5) X media officer in northern Syria

Hassan Hamadeh. Minister of Defense of Syrian Interim Government

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- ¹ Kazimi, *Syria Through Jihadist Eyes*, 6, 32-34; Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 6; Lund, 'Syria's Salafi Insurgents', 10; Brønd, 'Sectarianism, Revolutionary Subjectivity, and War', 19-30; Celso, 'Hama's Ominous Shadow,' 94.
- ² Al-Mustafa, 'From Arms to Negotiations'; McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens*, 219-222.
- ³ Regan and Norton, 'Greed, Grievance, and Mobilization', 319-322.
- ⁴ Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay, *Civil war in Syria*, 65-70.
- ⁵ Hinnebusch, 'Sectarianism and Governance'; Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehension*; Üngör, *Mass Violence*.
- ⁶ Phillips, 'Sectarianism and Conflict'; Aldoughli 2021a; Aldoughli 2021b.
- ⁷ Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms*, 19-20.
- ⁸ Shah, 'In Search of Certainty in Revolutionary India.'
- ⁹ Ledrach, *Feel the Grass Grow*, 17.
- ¹⁰ Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*, 11.
- ¹¹ Matfess, "New Frontiers in Rebel Socialisation"; Porter, "Moving toward 'Home'"; Schulz, Apio, and Oryem, "Love and Care in the (LRA). "
- ¹² Zelin, "The Case of Jihadology and the Securitization of Academia, " 230-231.
- ¹³ Kozłowski and Klein, 2000.
- ¹⁴ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*.
- ¹⁵ Gade et al., 'Fratricide in Rebel Movements'.
- ¹⁶ One participant with no formal education, four with basic education degrees, and five who hold university or master's degrees. Regarding their entry into armed conflict, six of them joined in 2012, while four joined in 2013. The fighters come from different yet neighboring regions: five from rural Aleppo, two from Idlib, and four from rural Damascus.
- ¹⁷ Brounéus, 'In-depth Interviewing', 130.
- ¹⁸ Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research*, 3-6
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 1.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 3; see also Aldoughli, "Missing Gender."
- ²¹ Yazan, 'Three Approaches to Case Study Methods', 142.
- ²² Hsieh and Shannon, 'Three Approaches', 1278, 1281-3.
- ²³ Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 9, 107.
- ²⁴ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*.
- ²⁵ Brookings, 'The Jihadist Counter-Revolution in Syria'.
- ²⁶ Neil Grinstead, 'Rebel Infighting in Northern Syria: The War of Abolition', *ACLEDA*, 5 May 2018..
- ²⁷ Namely, the 'Islamic Front,' the 'Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement,' the 'Mujahideen Army,' and the 'Authenticity and Development Front.' It is important to note that Sham Front is not a designated terrorist organization, unlike other factions such as HTS and ISIS. While its fighters primarily come from a Sunni-Islamic background, the instructional materials disseminated to them by the group focus on Islamic values without adopting the same extremist ideological stance found in other Syrian-related radical groups. For more information about Third Corp in SNA, see Aldoughli, "Fighting Together."
- ²⁸ *Al-Jazeera*, 'The Levant Front, Unites Opposition Factions in Aleppo'.
- ²⁹ There are three corps that make up the Syrian National Army (SNA) factions.
- ³⁰ *Al-Arabiya*, 'Ahmed Tohme as President of the Syrian Interim Government'.
- ³¹ This operation room was under the supervision of various regional and international entities, with the United States of America being the most notable. The Military Operations Center (MOM) played pivotal roles in the orchestration and guidance of the armed conflict in Syria. The MOM was responsible for overseeing and directing operations on the northern front. Pinpointing the precise inception date of these operations rooms is challenging. However, it is believed by some that their informal beginnings trace back to the latter half of 2012, despite the lack of an official announcement.
- ³² Zakizelcik, 'The Syrian National Army', 5.
- ³³ *Al-Jazeera*, 'Hazm Movement'; *The New Arab*, 'Hazm' from Beginning to End'. HTS is an extremist militant organization related to al-Qaeda, which arose prior to ISIS and eventually developed into HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham).

- ³⁴ *Jerusalem*, 'Agreement Between Al-Shamiva and the People'.
- ³⁵ Revolutionaries of the Levant operating in the areas (Sheikh Najjar, Hanano sector, Amriya sector, Marea sector, Al-Kalassa sector, western countryside, southern countryside, Mallah platform, Jabal Azzan); (For more: "Revolutionaries of the Levant" battalions merge with the "Levant Front" in Aleppo, Enab Baladi, published on 27/1/2016 See: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/62268#ixzz7zJS4iOHd>).
- ³⁶ *Anatolia*, 'Operation Euphrates Shield'; Operation Euphrates Shield (August 24, 2016 to March 20, 2017) was launched in response to ISIS's escalating attacks on border areas and Turkish towns.
- ³⁷ *Al-Arabiya*, 'Syrian Factions'; The former Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, of which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is the largest component.
- ³⁸ *Enab Baladi*, 'Interim Government'.
- ³⁹ Based on the data obtained through interviews, the educational profile of fighters recruited within the Front faction reveals a distribution as follows: 17.5% possess university degrees, 32.5% have completed higher education beyond primary level, 40% have attained a primary education level, and 10% exhibit a state of illiteracy.
- ⁴⁰ Hamadeh, 2023
- ⁴¹ *Syria TV*, 'The Third Corps'; Azm Room is a merger between the 'Sham Front', 'Jaysh al-Islam,' 'the Glory Corps,' the '51st Division,' the 'Peace Brigade,' and the 'Al-Malik Shah Division,' operating under the umbrella of the Third Corps Financial Fund.
- ⁴² *Al-Modon*, 'Aleppo Countryside'.
- ⁴³ *The New Arab*, 'Go to Dismantle the "Hamzat"'.
⁴⁴ *Enab Baladi*, "'Temporary' Receives the "Al-Hamran"".
- ⁴⁵ *Syria TV*, 'Appointment of Hossam Yassin'.
- ⁴⁶ Hamadeh, 2023
- ⁴⁷ Hamadeh, 2023
- ⁴⁸ Shura Council was restructured in August 2023. It is composed of 20 members. It also contains individuals delegated by their respective fighting groups to represent the blocs that have joined the Front. These individuals are the key actors within the Shura Council, which later came to be known as the 'leadership team.' To be part of this council, members are required to have a lengthy revolutionary history that is determined by his early participation in early fighting when the revolution turned into an armed conflict, exhibit good conduct, and hold influence within their factions (CC1; SC1).
- ⁴⁹ It should be noted that Turkey allows charismatic leadership in other factions such as Hamza Division and Sulieman Shah due to their full obedience and loyalty to Turkey. The Turkman ethnicity of these groups plays a role in this dynamic. Charismatic leadership is permitted when these leaders (particularly from the Second Corp) adhere to Turkey's military and strategic plans such as recruiting Syrian fighters to join foreign conflict in Libya and Niger
- ⁵⁰ Abdo, *The New Sectarianism*; Naser, *Shia Revival*.
- ⁵¹ Darwich and Fakhoury, "'Casting the Other as an Existential Threat.'"
- ⁵² See Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*.
- ⁵³ Whitehouse, 'Emotion, Memory, and Religious Rituals', 2005.
- ⁵⁴ Haugbolle and Bandak, "The Ends of Revolution."
- ⁵⁵ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.
- ⁵⁶ See for example, Brond's account of 'revolutionary friendship' in the Syrian context as a mode of sociality, "The Most Beautiful Friendship," 287.
- ⁵⁷ Petersen, *Western Intervention*.
- ⁵⁸ Suny, 'Why We Hate You'; Whitehouse, *Dying for the Group*.
- ⁵⁹ Whitehouse et al., 'Brothers in Arms'.
- ⁶⁰ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*. See also Aldoughli, 'Fighting Together.'
- ⁶¹ All fighters and Central Commanders expressed this. I myself have my uncle imprisoned because his friends were accused of affiliation with Muslim Brotherhood. My uncle was released after 6 months and as a result of severe torture, he was released with psychotic disorder and stayed on medication till 2015 when he passed away.
- ⁶² Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty', 24.
- ⁶³ Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty', 24; Gomez et al., 'On the Nature of Identity Fusion'; Gomez et al., 'Recent Advances'; Swann et al., 'When Group Membership Gets Personal'; Whitehouse, 'Emotion, Memory, and Religious Rituals'.
- ⁶⁴ Hogg, 'Self-uncertainty', 24; Whitehouse and Lanman, 'The Ties that Bind', 677.
- ⁶⁵ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, 6.
- ⁶⁶ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, 10.
- ⁶⁷ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, 11.
- ⁶⁸ Petersen, *Western Intervention*, 14-19.

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- ⁶⁹ Whitehouse 2014: 111.
- ⁷⁰ Jong et al., 'Shared Negative Experiences'; Kavanagh et al., 'Positive Experiences'.
- ⁷¹ Malešević, 'Is it Easy to Kill?', 305-310.
- ⁷⁵ Hinnebusch, 'Sectarianism and Governance in Syria,' 59.
- ⁷⁶ Whitehouse and Lanman, 'The Ties that Bind', 677.
- ⁷⁷ Larsen, 'Landscape, Identity, and War', 470; Hedetoft, 'National Identity and Mentalities', 282-284.
- ⁷⁸ For more information about the role of mid-level commanders and their role after the end of conflict, see Sharif, 'Can the Rebel Body Function without its Visible Heads?'
- ⁷⁹ Stouffer, *The American Soldier*; Siebold, 'Military Group Cohesion', 185-201.
- ⁸⁰ Eck, 'From Armed Conflict', 369-370.
- ⁸¹ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 77.
- ⁸² Malešević, *Why Humans Fight*, 282.