

Education and Flags: Pivotal Tools for Winning the Hearts and Minds of Syria's New Generation?

Ola Rifai

Prior to the uprising of March 2011, school students all over Syria had to study Ba'ath secular ideology as a core module of the broader subject of *Qaumiyya* ('nationalism'). Before starting a typical school day, students would gather in their school yard to salute the Syrian and Ba'ath flags while chanting 'long live Assad, long live Ba'ath'. Since the uprising, there have been some radical changes made to this practice. Children in the so-called 'liberated areas' (areas that are under the control of the opposition) now start the school day by saluting Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi flags and chanting in praise of the Islamic Caliphate and the prophet Mohamed. This situation is a prime example of the ongoing debate between various theorists of identity and nationalism concerning the role of materialistic and symbolic elements in crafting identity and in excluding or including members of a particular community. Materialists, like Ernest Gellner¹, emphasise the significance of material factors (such as education and the media) in constructing identities. On the other hand, ethno-symbolists like Anthony Smith², argue that only symbols (such as those projected by flags and folk tales) can harness the necessary amount of emotional power for shaping identities. The aim of this article is to analyse the interaction between education and flags in fostering a Salafi and a Salafi-Jihadi identity among school students aged between 8 and 17 years old in the 'liberated areas'. The article argues that the interaction between both variables plays a significant role in drawing the line between 'us' and 'them' in Syrian society. The article focuses on four cases; two concern Salafi groups (Liwa al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham) and two concern Salafi-Jihadi groups (Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Sham and Iraq). The first part of this article provides a brief summary of the state of the education system during the conflict. The second part focuses on the attempts of Salafi groups to project their identity by using education and flag; the third part examines the Salafi-Jihadi group's quest to forge a Jihadi identity using these tools.

¹ See Ernest Gellner *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1983).

² Anthony Smith *Ethnos-symbolism and Nationalism: A cultural approach* (U.S.A. Routledge, 2009)

Syria's future generation; the most vulnerable to the process of violent polarisation.

In March 2013, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) issued a detailed report, entitled '[Syria's Children: a lost generation?](#)'. In this report, UNICEF warns that Syria's current state of conflict is pushing future generations to the very brink of the abyss. The report revealed that one in every five schools in Syria has been destroyed and that half of the affected population are children. Moreover, hundreds of children who are supposed to be in classrooms are being conscripted, particularly by the Islamist militias. The report went on to argue that "[Children's] dreams and opportunities for the future are being lost...and their views of their neighbors are coloured in ways that can create future generations of self-perpetuating violence". The UNICEF is providing educational aid in a few of the accessible areas in Syria, as well as in refugee camps in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan. Nevertheless, this aid is limited to supplying educational tools and building makeshift schools rather than managing the educational process *per se*. In fact, the students at the refugee camps and those studying inside Syria follow different curriculums. For example, students at Zaatari refugees' camp in Jordan study the Jordanian curriculum, and students in Lebanon are enrolled in Lebanese schools. Likewise, makeshift schools at refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq teach the Kurdish curriculum. However, schools at refugee camps in Turkey teach the same Syrian curriculum that is being taught in areas controlled by the regime, yet "any lesson or module that talks about the regime and reflects the Ba'ath ideology has been excluded from the curriculum, such as the *Qaumiyya* module and many lessons in the history books".³ In addition, all pictures of the Syrian flag (with two stars)⁴ on the school books have been altered to that of the Syrian revolutionary flag (with three stars).⁵ An activist at the Atmeh refugee camp in southern Turkey confirmed that the revolutionary flag is flown in the schoolyard, where children gather to "chant freedom slogans and

³ Author's interview via Skype with a resident of Atmeh refugee camp in Turkey, 22/1/2013.

⁴ See appendix 1.

⁵ See appendix 2.

popular revolutionary songs”.⁶ Meanwhile, their fellow students at schools in the regime-controlled assemble beneath the Syrian flag to chant Ba’athist slogans.

According to a teacher in one makeshift school in the Atmeh refugee camp: “it is impossible to keep the same curriculum which praises and promotes Ba’ath and Assad while these students fled their homes because of the regime’s artillery. It is also impossible to keep using the flag which symbolises the regime...we should raise our children in line with the goals of the revolution, and they should adhere to it... it is a new phase in Syria’s history. Thus, it needs a new education that goes in line with it”.⁷ However, given its many fractures and inherent flaws, the Syrian opposition neither has an appropriate strategy nor the necessary financial support for tailoring the curriculum to suit the ‘new phase’ in Syria’s history. Although the Syrian National Coalition – the main political body representing the opposition - established an ‘[Office for Learning and Higher Education Affairs](#)’, it failed to develop a clear educational scheme. Nevertheless, Salafi armed groups inside Syria (who possess the necessary military and logistic capabilities to successfully implement an education policy) seem to be primarily interested in indoctrinating the minds of students with their ideology.

Education and flags on Salafis’ quest for power: the cases of Liwa al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham.

The rise of Salafism is a key dimension of the Syrian uprising and Salafis proved to be a powerful actor capable of crafting a power triangle consisting of arms, money and public support. [Salafism](#) is a strict form of Sunni Islam that seeks to revive *al-salaf al-salih*, which adheres to the way of life as practiced by the first Muslim communities. Salafism rejects secular concepts like nationalism and democracy, and prioritises the regulation of state and society in accordance with Sharia Law. More importantly, it displays a hostile logic towards other Islamic sects, particularly the Shiites. During the three-year conflict in Syria, the growth of Salafi groups mushroomed. These groups are now attempting to mobilise their followers and to reconstruct the Salafi identity for Sunni Syrians. This type of Salafi identity excludes all Syrians who hold different religious views. Among these groups, Liwa al-Islam (‘Islam Brigade’) and Ahrar al-Sham (‘Freemen of the

⁶ Author’s interview via Skype, 23/1/2013.

⁷ Author’s interview via Skype, 22/1/2014

Levant’) are the most influential. Each of these groups promotes the Salafi identity by using various tools, of which education and flags are particularly significant.⁸

Liwa al-Islam was founded in September 2011 by Sheikh Zahran Alloush, a former prisoner who was given a presidential pardon in June 2011. The Brigade comprises some 45,000 fighters and its strongest foothold is in eastern Ghuta in the suburbs of Damascus, where it has established a quasi-state. The [Education Committee](#) in Liwa al-Islam is responsible for “managing the educational process” in eastern Ghuta. It comprises various offices such as the security, the censorship and the *dawa’a* (‘Proselytism’) Office. This Committee instituted 90 schools in which some 20,000 students are enrolled”. *Iqra`* (‘Read’), *Anwar al-Islam* (‘Islam’s Lights’) and *shabab al-Ghad* (‘Tomorrow’s Youth’) are the main organisations working under the umbrella of this Committee. However, the *Iqra`* organisation is the strongest, running around 20 schools and 20 institutions teaching primary, secondary and graduate level students.

The Education Committee revised the curriculum for all levels. It cut the *Qaumiyya* and history modules while retaining the exact same curriculum for Arabic literature, maths and sciences. However, The Committee altered the Islamic religious module and added more compulsory teaching hours in an effort to educate students about Islamic principles. Naturally, these principles were taught from a Salafi perspective. On a [video-report](#) uploaded to the *Iqra`* [Facebook page](#), Mohamed Abu Ziad - the deputy manager of the *Iqra`* organisation - stresses that the curriculum focuses especially on religious affairs and attempts to “raise a generation that has a sense of pride in its religion”. In schools, female teachers wear strict Islamic costume: a dark hijab and a long coat.⁹ Additionally, female students are not allowed to mix with their male peers. Owing to logistic difficulties and the danger of Syria’s current war-torn state, students do not gather in the schoolyard and the schools do not fly flags. Nevertheless, posters of revolutionary and Salafi flags and Islamic slogans adorn the walls of classrooms. One example is a poster that reads: “Mohamed is our leader, Allah Akbar is our slogan and freedom is our demand”.¹⁰ Another reads: “the gun is the mujahed’s weapon and pencil [referring to education] is this generation’s weapon”.¹¹ A female teacher in a *niqab* surrounded by young students appears in the same [video-report](#), assuring

⁸ See appendix 3 and 4 for Salafi flags.

⁹ See appendix 5

¹⁰ See appendix 6

¹¹ See appendix 7.

the camera that “the school day starts with reading Quran and the daily *Duaa*, before beginning tutorial sessions on math and Arabic literature”. She emphasises that teachers “seek to apply a religious dimension to all teaching modules, as much as they can”. According to her, the school day would end with ‘recreational’ activities, such as the singing of religious songs.

On October 2013, the Education Committee of Liwa al-Islam organised a [festival](#) to honor top students, which was broadcasted live on the Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel. This was attended by students, teachers, clergymen and military officials. Quoting from the Quran and Hadith, a spokesman for the Education Committee initiated the ceremony by signifying the importance of education in the Islamic doctrines and stressing that education is “an obligation for each Muslim”. Sheikh Abou Abdul Rahman, the Chief of the [Sharia Committee](#) (which works under the umbrella of Liwa al-Islam and seeks to impose Sharia law) calls on teachers to educate the students about Islamic principles, and emphasises that all sciences should be used to serve Islam. For him, the teachers’ main mission is to “bring back the generation from [Ba’ath] decades of darkness to the lightness of Islam [...] to bring back the generation which was raised on Ba’ath and atheism [ideologies] to Islam”. Cheerful students appear chanting an [Islamic song](#) that summarises the Sheik’s points:

“A dawn shines on our tomorrow... it tells the glory of our civilization...Islam’s flag came back [to us] to restore the glory of our nation...our life will flower by religion...and by education, we shall build the country in a way that satisfies our lord”.

Using a similar rhetoric to that of Liwa al-Islam (albeit in a less organised and more radical manner) [Ahrar al-Sham](#) manipulates education and the use of the flag in order to reproduce a Salafi identity. This Salafi armed group comprises between 10,000 to 20,000 fighters, whose [main goal](#) is to establish an Islamic state in Syria. Sheikh Hassan Aboud - who was a [prison mate](#) of Zahran Alloush, and who currently collaborates with Alloush under the umbrella of the [Islamic Front](#) - established Ahrar al-Sham in late 2011 just after his release from prison. Given the vigorous competition for hegemony between the different militias on the ground, Ahrar al-Sham does not have absolute power in any particular town. Rather, its presence is limited to a few villages across the rebel areas in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Al-Raqa and the northern suburbs of Damascus. Although it has not customised the existing curriculum nor founded an independent educational office,

Ahrar al-Sham utilises education to indoctrinate students with Salafi ideology. It has rehabilitated a few schools in northern Aleppo and instituted makeshift schools in many mosques. Largely, their lessons focus on Islamic sciences because, as one teacher [emphasises](#): “[the aim of education is] to raise a new generation that is different from the previous one, a generation that has an inherent Islamic personality”. A [televised report](#) uploaded on the [Ahrar al-Sham website](#) shows dozens of students gathering at a mosque in Aleppo that was converted to a school and decorated with massive Salafi flags. The curriculum is “centered on the Quran and Hadith sciences, in addition to maths, Arabic literature, and foreign languages”. All female teachers wear the *niqab*, and some students wear a Salafi headband while reading from the Quran and chanting Islamic slogans.¹² Another [video](#) reveals footage of a makeshift school at a mosque in al-Raqa, where young students gather around a male teacher wearing Islamic costume.¹³ Also, Ahrar al-Sham rehabilitated two schools in [al-Houla](#), Northern Homs, in which the Salafi flag hangs in each classroom. On May 2013, the group held a [graduation ceremony](#) for its students at a mosque in Madaya town, Northwest Damascus. Soldiers, Sheikhs, teachers and students attended this event, in which students competed in a quiz about Islamic principles. In a similar vein is the *ma’had ashbbal al-‘akida* (‘the [Islamic] doctrine cubs’) institution, which is directed by the Ahrar al-Sham militia in Sahel al-Ghab in the suburbs of Hama. The institution organised a [festival](#) to honour students who successfully memorized parts of the Quran. Huge Salafi flags were flown during the event, and 500 Syrian Lira (around 2.50 GBP) was given to each student as a prize.

Creating tomorrow’s Jihadis; the Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Sham and Iraq.

Violence, sectarian polarisation, class conflict, regional and international struggle for hegemony, the failure of Syria’s opposition and the policies of the Syrian regime are the chief factors that have led to the increasing dominance of Jihadism in Syria. Various Jihadi groups have surfaced during the conflict, amongst which the Nusra Front (NF) and the Islamic State in Sham and Iraq (ISIS) are the most solid. The ISIS and the NF call for the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, and adopt an anti-secular and anti-western agenda. This agenda differs

¹² See appendix 8 and 9.

¹³ See appendix 10.

from that of Salafi groups in that it advocates global Jihad. In contrast, Liwa al Islam and Ahrar al-Sham limit their jihad to the Syrian state. NF and ISIS also conduct similar approaches in their attempts to establish footholds in post-Assad Syria. To this end, they deploy both soft and hard power tactics. On the one hand, they provide people with security and bread; on the other hand, they rule with an iron fist and are remorseless in their hostility towards secular and other Islamist rivals. More importantly, both groups manipulate education and the use of flags in order to construct and project a Jihadi identity.

[JN](#) is an al-Qaeda affiliated group that was formed in January 2012. Since then, it has conducted several successful military operations, which has increased its legitimacy in the eyes of some Syrians. As a resident of Idlib puts it: “JN comprises the best fighters, who are always on the frontline”.¹⁴ Although JN has the appropriate capacities and support with which to assert itself, it does not have absolute control over any particular city or town in Syria, unlike the ISIS and Liwa al-Islam. Nevertheless, [JN’s fighters](#) are distributed throughout various Syrian cities, specifically in the suburbs of Damascus, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo, Latakia, Homs and Dar’a, where they endeavor to promote Jihadi ideology in their manipulation of education and flags.

In late 2013, for example, JN instituted *ma’had ansar al-dyn* (‘partisans of religion’s institution’) in Dar’a, which enrolls male students aged between 10 and 15 and teaches them Jihadi ideology, in addition to maths and Arabic literature. In a [video-report](#) uploaded to JN’s [YouTube](#) channel, dozens of students - some wearing Salafi headbands - chant “our master Mohamed is our leader forever” in a classroom that is decorated with Salafi-Jihadi flags and Islamic posters.¹⁵ The main mission of this school, according to one of its teachers, is to: “counter all attempts by God’s enemies who seek to prevent people in Sham from coming back to the right religion and ideology, and who instituted mixed schools which teach inappropriate curriculums. We are obliged to [counter these attempts] because as Islam’s Shikh Ibn Taimiyya¹⁶ says ‘religion would not flourish without a book that would guide and a sword that would prevail’. So we inaugurated this school to raise the generation in a good way and to teach [students] what they were deprived of it for decades”. The video shows two teachers in Salafi clothing who are

¹⁴ Author’s interview via Skype, 1/8/2012.

¹⁵ See appendix 11.

¹⁶ Ibn Taimiyya is a mediaeval Islamic scholar (d. 1328) who issued a controversial *fatwa* stating that Alawite and Shiites are not Muslims.

examining students on religious affairs. It is to be assumed that the teaching of this topic is heavily biased in favour of Jihadism. One teacher stated that entertainment activities include visits to *mujahedeen* and classes on using weapons. At the end of one school day, students gathered under a Jihadi black flag. One of them shouted “what is our goal?” In response, the others pointed their index fingers up to the flag¹⁷ and chanted: “it is Jihad, it is Jihad, it is Jihad”.¹⁸

In the same way, JN establishes schools and runs educational processes at mosques in the suburbs of Idlib, Aleppo and al Raqa. According to a resident of al-Tabaqa, western al-Raqa: “parents send their children to JN schools either because they do not have any other option or because they believe in JN ideology. Given the wide popularity JN enjoys in my area, I suggest the second motive as being most likely”.¹⁹ JN also orchestrates festivals in which students usually take the stage alongside armed fighters. For example, on October 2012 JN organised a [ceremony](#) to celebrate Eid in Binish, northwest Idlib. During the ceremony, one of JN’s young students sang to the audience “we are your soldiers, Osama [bin laden], we are martyrdom seekers”, while other cheerful students waved Jihadi flags.

Like the NF, the ISIS utilises education and flags in order to encourage young students to adopt a Jihadi identity. [ISIS](#) was formed in April 2013, when some fighters defected from JN to expand the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) - an al-Qaeda affiliate group which has been very active in Iraq since 2006 - to include Sham. Hence, the ‘S’ that was added to the acronym ISIS stems from the Arabic word ‘Sham’ which, in the context of global Jihad, refers to the Levant. The ISIS took over al-Raqa only one month after JN and other Islamist groups took control of the city, and the ISIS came to be the *de facto* authority there. Additionally, its fighters are present in the suburbs of Aleppo, Idlib and Deir al-Zour, where they established schools to teach Jihadi logic. A school was established in September 2013 in Jرابلس town, northern Aleppo, and hundreds of male students were enrolled there.²⁰ The school teaches Islamic sciences as core modules alongside maths, Arabic literature and English language. However, it excludes any module that focuses on Syria’s history. Another school was inaugurated in Northeast Aleppo in late 2013. A [video-report](#) of this school shows students gathering around

¹⁷ A jihadi hand sign, which usually denotes the quest for martyrdom.

¹⁸ See appendix 12.

¹⁹ Author’s interview via Skype, 20/1/2014.

²⁰ Author’s interview via Skype, 29/1/2014. Also see the report video about this school on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I57SVkoF8ik>

a Jihadi tutor, who is teaching them the Quran.²¹ A young student appears in the [video](#) declaring his admiration for Jihad: “I wish to become a mujahed when I grow up, in order to fight all tyrants who do not rule according to God’s law”. Dozens of students then hold up large Jihadi flags while chanting fervently: “God is our leader... America is their leader...Allah Akbar”.²² In al-Raqa city, ISIS monitor all schools, ban the teaching of history modules and segregate female and male students in schools. ISIS also seized many [churches](#) and transformed them into makeshift schools for teaching Jihadi ideology. According to an activist in al-Raqa: “parents enroll their children at ISIS schools because they fear ISIS fighters, yet some people also believe in ISIS ideology and hence they want their children to be educated at ISIS schools”. Indeed, ISIS attempts to create a personality cult for itself by using banners as visual propaganda, and by spreading fear amongst the people. A resident of al-Raqa described the all-pervasiveness of the ISIS presence: “You can see ISIS fighters hanging out in the city while wearing explosive belts and holding guns. Banners, flyers and posters that reflect their ideology are everywhere”. This situation could have many fatal implications for children. In the first place, there is the devastating psychological effect that witnessing violent trauma firsthand would have on children, some of whom are already suffering from different types of trauma. Secondly and more importantly, the presence of the fighters contributes to the styling of the mujahed (by whom they are taught) as heroes and role models. In this light, ISIS attempts to endear itself to children by organising festivals, in which fighters - wearing Islamic clothing and explosive belts - distribute toys and play with children, while black Jihadi flags flutter in the air. In September 2013, for example, hundreds of children and men gathered in the al-Raqa main square, where ISIS launched a massive festival. In a [video report](#) for this festival, children can be seen joyfully chanting Jihadi songs having listened to the story of a Finnish ISIS fighter who decided to join the Jihadis in Syria after he saw the ‘murder’ of his fellow Muslims. The Finnish fighter assures the audience that he came to institute the Islamic Caliphate. In his words, “those who wish to go to hell should chose democracy, while those who wish to go to heaven should be patient and support the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate”.

²¹ See appendix 13.

²² See appendix 14.

Conclusion

In their struggle for empowerment and search for a permanent place in post-uprising Syria, Salafi groups on the ground instrumentalise education and flags to construct identities for Syria's new generation. This identity includes and excludes other Syrians according to its religious principles. By teaching Salafi logic instead of Syrian history, and by waving Salafi flags instead of the Syrian flag, students are more likely to associate themselves with Salafism rather than with Syrianism. This would surely pose fatal implications for Syria's already fractured national identity. This new generation that will have to rebuild the war-torn country is being subjected to a relentless process of polarisation; its members are being forced to pledge their allegiance to different flags. How can Syrian students who are used to saluting the revolutionary, Salafi, Salafi-Jihadi or the Syrian flags be made to salute one national flag? What new curriculums can be taught to a generation that has been indoctrinated with conflicting ideologies (Salafi and Baathist)? A solid strategy to address these questions should be among the top priorities of any future Syrian government if it genuinely wishes to build a strong Syria with a cohesive community.

