How Syria’s Islamists rule with guile and guns

They’re armed with Kalashnikovs, but a keen eye for delivering local services is also helping hardline groups gain ground.
The Syrian boys looked edgy and awkward. Three months ago their town, the eastern desert city of Raqqa, had fallen to rebel fighters trying to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad’s government. Now the four boys - clad in tight jeans and bright T-shirts - were whitewashing a wall to prepare it for revolutionary graffiti.

“We'll make this painting about the role of children in the revolution,” one of the boys told two journalists.

A white Mitsubishi pulled up and a man in camouflage trousers and a black balaclava jumped out and demanded that the journalists identify themselves. He was from the Islamic State of Iraq, he said, the Iraqi wing of al Qaeda linked to an Islamist group fighting in Syria called Jabhat al-Nusra.

The boys kept quiet until the man pulled away, and then started talking about how life has changed in the city of around 250,000 people since the Islamists planted their flag at the former governor’s nearby offices.

“They want an Islamic state, but most of us want a civilian state,” the boy said. “We’re afraid they’re going to try to rule by force.”

As he finished his sentence, the same white car roared back round the corner. This time two men, both in balaclavas and holding Kalashnikov assault rifles, stepped out.

“Painting is forbidden here,” one fighter said. The graffiti was too close to the group’s headquarters. One of the boys made a brief, almost inaudible protest.

“We’re sorry,” the fighter said. “But painting is forbidden here,” his comrade stroked his long beard and said: “We are not terrorists. Don’t be afraid of us. Bashar is the terrorist.”

The encounter captures an important shift underway in rebel-held Syria. Using a mix of intimidation and organisation, alliances of Islamist brigades are filling the vacuum in areas where Assad’s army has withdrawn and more secular rebels have failed to provide order, a 10-day visit to rebel-held Syria by Reuters journalists showed.

The Islamist groups include al Qaeda affiliates and more moderate partners, so the nature of their rule is complex. They administer utilities, run bakeries and, in a town near Raqqa, operate a hydroelectric dam. They are also setting up courts and imposing punishments on those judged transgressors.

The United States and other Western powers support the Syrian National Coalition, a group of opposition figures based in Cairo. But the coalition has very little influence on the ground in Syria, so locals are increasingly turning to the Islamists as their best alternative to chaos.

U.S. and European security officials say Jabhat al-Nusra is being financed by wealthy families from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Syrian Islamist rebels say foreign fighters bring in money and that Syrian expats and Gulf-based individuals who want to overthrow Assad are helping them. Members of Ahrar al-Sham, which has fewer foreign fighters than Jabhat al-Nusra, told Reuters that they make money through business ventures and by taking over banks.

So far the Islamists have won sympathy from many residents in Raqqa - including those who oppose their vision of a narrow moral code and an Islamic caliphate - with their apparent restraint.

Billboards put up by Jabhat al-Nusra show a figure in full veil and tell women “you are like a pearl in your chastity.” Yet unveiled women can still walk openly on Raqqa’s streets and one resident said he had no problem getting whiskey, as long as he drank it in private.

One evening in June, residents held an exhibit of homemade crafts to raise money for poor families. Men and women mingled as music played over a stereo system.

Reema Ajaji, a veiled women who helped organise the event, said the media had
unfairly maligned Jabhat al-Nusra. “They’re called terrorists, and we don’t accept this,” she said. “They’re our sons. Us and them, we’re one thing. They defend us, and we defend them.”

She waved around the room, indicating the women in brightly coloured headscarves and dresses, some unveiled. “We dress as we want. Do you see these girls?” she said. “Everyone is free to choose.” If Jabhat al-Nusra had wanted to impose their law on people, they would have shut down the exhibition, Ajaji said.

Other residents pointed to the university, which shut for about a month after rebels took the city but is now operating more or less normally. Inside the gated campus, young men and women chatted in the hallways and shared meals in the packed cafeteria. Armed groups are not allowed to enter.

Ahmed Jaber, a 22-year-old chemistry student and member of the student union, said some 80 percent of students were attending classes and exams were going ahead. Life in Raqqa had improved over the past few months, he said, although there were disputes between Islamist brigades and more secular units.

“It’s in everyone’s interests to resolve these differences,” Jaber said. After the rebels took Raqqa, some residents held protests to demand a civilian state. Others, siding with Jabhat al-Nusra, called for an Islamic government. But since then, they have agreed to hold protests calling only for Assad’s downfall.

“After the hell of the regime, we consider this an excellent situation,” Jaber said. “Yes, there’s a security vacuum, there’s chaos, and sometimes there are disputes. But it’s much better than before.”

Selwa al-Janabe, a veiled 27-year-old student, said the Islamists’ ideology was beside the point – at least for now. “I’m worried about something bigger than hijab or niqab,” she said, referring to the Islamic headscarf and the fuller veil, which covers the face. The important thing now, Janabe said, was “liberation and freedom. Real freedom.”

Mohammed Shaib, a 26-year-old member of a secular activist group, said he was sceptical of the Islamists but saw no alternative for now. “Right now we’re working under the principle that the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” he said.

**“WE HAVE OTHER GOALS”**

Ask anyone in Raqqa who runs the town, and they’ll usually tell you it’s Ahrar al-Sham, an umbrella group of conservative Islamist factions which has taken the most active interest among fighting groups in the problems of civilian administration.

The group, which works closely with Jabhat al-Nusra, has taken to calling itself a “haraka,” or “movement,” rather than a “liwa,” or “brigade.” The point, members say, is to make clear the struggle for Syria is not just about waging war.

“From the very beginning we wanted to create justice and security, things like distributing bread. This was a founding idea,” said Abu Muhammed al-Husseini, the 30-year-old head of Ahrar al-Sham’s political office in Raqqa.

The group helps provide electricity and water and its fighters secure grain silos, while others ensure that supply chains, from wheat fields to bakeries, function smoothly.
INSIDE REBEL SYRIA  HOW ISLAMISTS RULE WITH GUILLE AND GUNS

Much of the town still works as it did before the area was taken by rebels, Hussein said. “There are some groups that only care about fighting, we have other goals,” he said. They include making sure services are provided “side by side with the armed campaign against Bashar.”

He said Ahrar al-Sham had no major disagreements with Jabhat al-Nusra, who differed with them more on “operational details.” He declined to discuss what the future government of Syria might look like, but said Islam “has a vision for building a society.”

Of all the public services the rebels have set up, the Sharia Authorities, which function as a rudimentary justice system, are the most central. They help provide essential services and are the closest thing rebel-held areas have to a government.

The authorities are generally staffed by older men from the area. Community leaders hold discussions and appoint members from their own ranks, some members said. Each of the area’s largest fighting brigades sends representatives, who often work as civilians at the body. Islamist brigades tend to be represented much more heavily than secular groups, both because of their relative size and prowess and because they were among the first to get involved in setting them up.

For many Westerners, the term “sharia” can carry connotations of oppressed minorities, curtailed women’s rights, and punishments like stoning, lashing and beheading. But for Syrians in the conservative Sunni regions that rebels control, the perception is very different.

In part, rebel-run courts have been successful because much of what they deal with is mundane. They handle financial disputes, provide forms of property registration and, in some cases, licences for exporting and importing goods to and from rebel-controlled territory.

Even with serious crimes, most courts are not imposing harsh punishments because of a provision in Islamic law that such penalties can be suspended or lightened during wartime. Almost all cases are resolved by the payment of a fine to the victim or by a light jail sentence.

A Sharia Authority member in Raqqa who called himself Abu Omar stressed that the body did its best to be fair; it was not strictly Islamist and it worked regularly with non-Islamic groups. He flipped through a file of resumes of applicants for the emerging police force, noting they were nearly all university graduates, and said a Christian headed its wheat bureau. “We benefit from debate with all groups,” he said.

Nevertheless, the influence of Islamists on the courts is unmistakable.

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

In Salqin, a town in the northwestern Idlib province, Samer Raji is deputy head of the police. He said the main local rebel brigades, apart from Jabhat al-Nusra, sent officers to staff the police force of 30 men; but he added that the police sometimes called on the Islamist group as a “last resort” to enforce their rulings.

“One call from the emir of Jabhat al-Nusra to the commander of a brigade with a wanted man and he’ll show up at court.” He pointed to an unresolved case of a van being stolen, saying that Jabhat al-Nusra could be called on to get it back.

Members of the rebel-run authorities say the brigades are accountable to them, but fighters have sometimes taken the law into their own hands and their punishments can be severe.

In Aleppo on June 10, Islamic State of Iraq fighters executed a 15-year-old boy in front of his parents for making a comment they regarded as heretical, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an anti-Assad monitoring group. The Observatory quoted witnesses as saying gunmen whipped the boy, Mohammad Qataa, then brought him to a wooden stand and shot him in the face and neck.

“Whoever curses even once will be punished like this,” witnesses quoted an Islamic State of Iraq member as saying, according to the Observatory report.

The Islamist influence is notably strong in rebel-held areas of Aleppo. Jabhat al-Nusra has set up in the old children’s hospital there, hanging a black flag bearing the Islamic declaration of faith in white calligraphy: “There is no god but God and Mohammad is His prophet.”

The local Sharia Authority, which Aleppans simply call “the Authority,” is housed in the old national hospital next door. One sign outside warns that unveiled women will not be allowed to enter.

Inside, men and women shuffled through

TESTING TIMES: School students were sitting exams in Aleppo earlier this month and in Raqqa the university is operating almost as normal, say students. REUTERS/MUZAFFAR SALMAN
dark, cramped corridors, clutching papers. Abu Baraa, a 22-year-old fighter from Ahrar al-Sham who now works to register the names of prison inmates, told Reuters the court “doesn’t have limits,” and could arrest anyone who does something wrong. Such decisions are up to an executive body composed of members from each of the area’s four main brigades, including Jabhat al-Nusra.

Abu Baraa said the authority worked to the tenets of ultraconservative Islam and, while it had so far refrained from most harsh punishments, he hoped it would become stricter after the war. In some cases, people had been sentenced to lashings, he said, and three men were imprisoned for a couple days after they were caught drinking.

Asked about rape cases, he said he could only think of one, which was unresolved. The man was denying it, and so the court was investigating, asking about the woman’s reputation.

“If she is a good person, the girl, she wouldn’t accept to get laid with someone strange,” he said in English.

What goes on in this building, and the ambitions of people such as Abu Baraa running this nascent government, show what the future in rebel-controlled regions in Syria might look like.

Aleppo’s authority had started with around a dozen people who “wanted to do justice,” Abu Baraa said. Now it has about a dozen branches in the city and several more across Aleppo province. Eventually, Abu Baraa said, he hopes it will become the state.

“There has to be someone in charge,” he said. “We all were from Ahrar al-Sham. And then the other brigades joined us, and we were bigger and bigger. That’s how things work. You start small and get bigger and bigger.”