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Research Report

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Ahrar al-Sham: The "Syrian Taliban"

Al-Nusra Ally Seeks Partnership with West

Guido Steinberg

President Bashar al-Assad's refusal to step down and open the door to compromise is not the only obstacle to a resolution of the Syrian conflict. Various Islamist groups focused on outright military victory also play a major role. Since 2012 they have come to dominate the uprising. The international community agrees that there can be no negotiations with the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), nor with the al-Nusra Front, which is close to al-Qaeda. The open question is how to treat Ahrar al-Sham, as the largest rebel group alongside ISIS. Its militant Salafist orientation, which makes it the al-Nusra Front's closest ally, speaks against involving it in talks. Although Ahrar has been seeking since 2015 to position itself as a partner for the United States and its allies, there is no sign that it intends to abandon its alliance with the jihadists.

Since 2012 Ahrar al-Sham ("The Free Men of Syria") has established itself as one of the strongest forces in the Syrian uprising. Like most other rebel groups it has suffered from the rise of ISIS since April 2013, and for some time its best days appeared to be over. Yet it managed to hold onto northern, central and southern parts of the country in 2013 and 2014. In spring 2015 a joint offensive by Ahrar and the al-Nusra Front captured the provincial capital of Idlib in the north. The territorial gains of the Islamist alliance – "the Army of Conquest" (Jaish al-Fath) – in north-western Syria presented such a threat to the regime that Moscow started deploying troops in April 2015 and began air strikes against the rebels at the end of September.

Rise of an Organisation

The emergence of Ahrar al-Sham can be traced indirectly to the regime's decision to amnesty prisoners, including many of the thousands of incarcerated Islamists. The later leader of Ahrar al-Sham, Hassan Abbud, and other leading figures were released from the notorious Saidnaya prison outside Damascus in May 2011. In June 2011 some of the Islamists, most of whom originated from Hama and Idlib, founded an armed formation calling itself "Battalions of the Free Men of Syria" (Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham).

Islamists soon represented the strongest current in the Syrian uprising, and by early 2013 Ahrar was already one of the most important groups. One reason for this was the group's judicious alliances, which have

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become one of its trademarks. In December 2012 Ahrar founded the Syrian Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islamiya as-Suriya), along with ten smaller Islamist and Salafist organisations. Although the constituent groups retained their independence, three of them merged into the dominant Ahrar the very next month, and Ahrar renamed itself the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of Syria (Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya). It was now able to expand its influence from Idlib and Hama to the city and province of Aleppo and later also to the east and south of the country. By summer 2013 it was present wherever Syrian rebels were fighting.

In the course of 2013 Ahrar al-Sham became the strongest force in the Syrian uprising, with ten to twenty thousand fighters. It participated in numerous major battles with regime forces, including the capture of several important military bases and the provincial capital of Raqqa in March 2013. Encouraged by its successes, the organisation abandoned its policy of strict secrecy. In an interview with the Qatari broadcaster *al-Jazeera* on 8 June 2013, Hassan Abbud – whose identity had until then been completely unknown – spoke freely about the organisation, its goals and ideology, showed his face and allowed his full name to be revealed.

This public turn was accompanied by an intensification of contacts with other Salafist groups, culminating in November 2013 in the founding of the second Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islamiya). As well as Ahrar and the other members of the first Islamic Front, this formation now also included the armed groups Suqur al-Sham (Idlib), Liwa al-Tauhid (Aleppo), Jaish al-Islam (Damascus and environs), Ansar al-Sham (Latakia) and Liwa al-Haqq (Homs). While Ahrar al-Sham remained the most important single group within the new alliance, it lost the dominance it had enjoyed in the first Islamic Front. Together with its new allies, Ahrar made an immediate mark in December 2013, capturing the crucial border crossing of Bab al-Hawa from the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Militant Salafists

Ahrar al-Sham belongs to the Islamist/Salafist part of the rebel spectrum. It aims to topple Asad and replace his regime with an Islamic state based on sharia. While its leadership has never spelled out in detail what the political system of such a state would look like, it is sure to be strongly authoritarian.

Until recently, Ahrar al-Sham regarded the armed struggle as the only means to achieve its ends. Well into 2015 it was still categorically excluding talks with the regime, and leading representatives regularly criticised the exile opposition's willingness to compromise. In this respect Ahrar closely resembles the al-Nusra Front, which also wants an Islamic state and whose concept of political order is probably largely identical with Ahrar's. One important difference is that Ahrar al-Sham pursues no objectives outside of Syria. Its arguments are largely nationalistic and its military activities to date give no grounds to suggest – if it succeeded in toppling Asad – that it would threaten neighbouring states.

Ahrar al-Sham also shares the sectarian hatred of the jihadists. Although Ahrar has repeatedly asserted that it has nothing in principle against the country's religious minorities, bigotry towards Christians, Alawites and Shiites is often apparent in its statements. This is even reflected in its vocabulary: the Ahrar leadership uses the negative term "Nazarenes" *(nasrani)* – which is popular among Salafists – to describe Christians, rather than the usual Arabic *masihi*. Alawites and Shiites are dismissed as *nusairi* and *rafida*. So when Ahrar describes the Asad regime as Alawite *(nusairi)* it is clearly thinking in the categories of religious strife. Ahrar regards the fight against Asad and the Syrian Alawites as a "holy war" against the expansion of Shiite Islam and Tehran's supposed plan to create a Shiite state extending from Palestine through Lebanon, Syria and Iraq to Iran.

Events during the August 2013 offensive by a broad alliance of rebel groups in the coastal mountains, in which Ahrar al-Sham

played a decisive role, demonstrate that these indications of an anti-Alawite and anti-Shiite ideology are more than mere rhetoric. In Alawite villages captured during the first days of the operation, the rebels committed numerous murders and other atrocities against innocent civilians and abducted more than two hundred to pressure the government. To this day the fate of most of the hostages remains a mystery.

Ahrar al-Sham demonstrated similar brutality against Shiite villages in Aleppo and Idlib provinces. Rebel groups including Ahrar al-Sham besieged Nubul and Zahra in Aleppo province from July 2012 to February 2016. The defenders, supported by the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias, succeeded in repelling repeated rebel assaults. The Islamic Front abducted at least fifty-six civilians from Zahra, few of whom have yet been released. The rebels also intentionally shelled non-military targets in Nubul and Zahra, causing many civilian victims and great harm to civil infrastructure. Ahrar al-Sham and its allies acted similarly in the siege of the Shiite towns Foua and Kefraya in Idlib province, which began in March 2015.

Conflict with ISIS

The prominence of Ahrar al-Sham as probably the largest rebel group and leader of the Islamic Front forced it to take sides in the conflict with ISIS (see SWP Comment 19/2014). After ISIS first appeared in April 2013, it quickly became clear that the new force had no intention of joining with existing anti-regime formations. Instead it first established itself in rebel-held areas, exhibiting no inhibitions against attacking other rebels. Rather than fighting Asad, ISIS concentrated on controlling territory and establishing a state.

Although it was clear by July 2013 that cooperation with ISIS was impossible, Ahrar al-Sham hesitated to respond, fearing that open confrontation would weaken the uprising as a whole. Moreover, many of Ahrar's fighters refused to turn against ISIS, having fought together with members of the new organisation when they still belonged to the al-Nusra Front or other smaller jihadist groups. Ideological affinities, too, discouraged many members of Ahrar from fighting against the jihadists.

Eventually, though, a confrontation was inevitable, spurred on by pressure from other members of the Islamic Front. By the end of 2013 they were demanding increasingly vehemently that Ahrar join the fight against ISIS. Gradually escalating skirmishes with ISIS began in December 2013 after the Islamic Front captured the border post at Bab al-Hawa. But the trigger for major conflict was the murder of the Ahrar al-Sham commander Husain Sulaiman (Abu Rayyan) later the same month. As Ahrar's emir in Maskana in eastern Aleppo province, Abu Rayyan had gone to ISIS as an emissary to negotiate over clashes between the groups there. He was abducted by ISIS members, brutally tortured, and killed.

In response, Ahrar al-Sham decided to openly fight ISIS. A broad campaign led by the Islamic Front began at the beginning of January 2014, with the participation of FSA groups and – after some delay – the al-Nusra Front. By the end of February this alliance had driven ISIS out of Idlib, Latakia, the city of Aleppo and the areas extending north of Aleppo to the Turkish border. The defeated ISIS forces withdrew to the east, where they overcame initial pressure to eventually win the battle for Raqqa. Although Nusra and Ahrar outnumbered and surrounded the ISIS forces, they pulled back, probably because they were unwilling to fight against the jihadists. Disunity within Ahrar was a crucial factor allowing ISIS to drive all its rivals out of eastern and northern Syria by July 2014 and consolidate its rule there.

Resistant Structures

Despite massive losses in that conflict, Ahrar al-Sham remained the strongest group alongside ISIS, because it was very well organised, structured and disciplined.

Since 2012 Ahrar's main area of operations has been Idlib and the northern part of Hama province, which are also the areas where most of its fighters and leaders come from. Its headquarters also lies in this region. Ahrar al-Sham's leadership manages to control all parts of the organisation, despite it having been joined by numerous smaller groups in almost all parts of the country (especially the north and centre). Communication with local subgroups appears to function without a hitch, and its top and broader leadership are able to meet in person.

While many of the rebel groups are commanded by single authoritarian leaders, Ahrar has a number of influential figures organised in a shura council (Majlis al-Shura). These are Syrians with long records in the Islamist opposition, most of whom were imprisoned at Saidnaya until 2011.

Until his death Hassan Abbud (alias Abu Abdallah al-Hamawi) was the "general leader" (al-qa'id al-amm) of Ahrar al-Sham. Before mid-2013, when the group abandoned its strict secrecy, he was known only under his nom de guerre. From then on, in a series of interviews in particular with *al-Jazeera*, he presented his organisation's goals and ideology and outlined his views on the conflict in Syria. Within a few months Abbud had become one of the best-known faces of the Syrian uprising.

On 9 September 2014 Abbud and thirteen other leaders – almost the whole of Ahrar's top leadership – were killed at a meeting in Idlib province. To this day it is unknown what and who caused the explosion, although ISIS remains the prime suspect. In the subsequent months Ahrar demonstrated astonishing resilience. The largely unknown Hashim al-Shaikh (alias Abu Jabir) was named as its new leader, Abu Salih al-Tahhan its new military chief. Most observers expected Ahrar to be significantly weakened, but that turned out not to be the case. In spring 2015, together with the al-Nusra Front, it achieved significant gains in fighting with the regime, and retained its presence wherever rebel forces were strong. Abbud and his comrades had plainly created a structure capable of surviving grave losses of individual leaders and fighters.

Abbud's successor Hashim al-Shaikh was replaced in September 2015 by a new leader, Muhannad al-Masri (alias Abu Yahia al-Hamawi).

Alliance with the al-Nusra Front

Ahrar al-Sham has cooperated closely with the al-Nusra Front since 2012. One reason for this is that while both organisations are concentrated in the northern provinces of Aleppo, Idlib and Hama, neither was ever strong enough to resist the regime forces on its own. Both therefore sought broad alliances. The ideological closeness of Ahrar and Nusra facilitated that process.

Most of Ahrar al-Sham's military successes derived from this cooperation. They included the storming of Taftanaz air base in Idlib province in January 2013 and the capture of Raqqa in March 2013 (the only provincial capital taken by the rebels before 2015). But the alliance's greatest moment to date came in March 2015, when Ahrar al-Sham, the al-Nusra Front and numerous smaller groups joined forces in the "Army of Conquest" (Jaish al-Fath) to launch a major offensive in Idlib province. In quick succession between March and May 2015 they captured Idlib city, Jisr al-Shughur and Ariha, bringing the province almost completely under their control.

Ahrar and Nusra operated in unison but divided tasks between them. The al-Nusra Front possesses between five and eight thousand fighters, considerably fewer than Ahrar whose strength today is still estimated to lie between ten and twenty thousand men. The jihadists initiated assaults with suicide attacks at regime checkpoints and entrances to military bases. Then the numerically much stronger forces of Ahrar and its allies followed to take control of strongholds and settlements. Neither Ahrar nor Nusra would have been capable of achieving such successes without the other. The alliance has now lasted about four years.

One reason why the 2015 spring offensive was so effective was that shortly beforehand Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar had stepped up their support for Ahrar al-Sham. Turkey and Qatar have been supporting Ahrar since 2012/13, and appear to have selected it as their most important recipient of arms and funding. Despite frequent reports in 2014 that Ankara and Doha had reduced their assistance in response to US pressure, both abandoned any caution following the assassination of the Ahrar-al-Sham leadership in September 2014. Additionally, after King Salman succeeded to the throne in January 2015, the new Saudi leadership noticeably relaxed relations with Turkey and increased its support for the rebels in northern Syria in concert with Ankara. This policy shift left the groups comprising Jaish al-Fath better armed than ever, including with armour-piercing weapons.

The successful offensive was to have dramatic consequences for the war in Syria. In early summer 2015 the rebel coalition advanced into the Ghab Plain in northern Hama province and quickly posed a serious threat to regime positions in the coastal mountains and the centre of the country. Concerns that the regime's forces were facing collapse led Moscow to begin sending troops to Syria in April 2015, with Russian air strikes against the rebels beginning at the end of September 2015. Despite assertions to the contrary, the air strikes were directed above all against Jaish al-Fath rather than ISIS positions.

The "Syrian Taliban"

On account of its ideological closeness and almost symbiotic relationship with the al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham is frequently described as the "Syrian Taliban". Ahrar al-Sham's position vis-à-vis the al-Nusra Front is indeed similar to that of the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. Like the Taliban, Ahrar is the numerically stronger formation, and profits from the al-Nusra Front's terrorist expertise and the willingness of its many suicide bombers to sacrifice their lives. Like the Afghan Taliban, Ahrar is in the main a nationalist formation, but has a strong wing tending more towards al-Qaeda's international jihadism. Other shared features are strong hatred of non-Sunni Muslims and outbursts of religiously and politically motivated violence against Alawites and Shiites.

Further evidence of Ahrar's particular affinity to the Taliban is found in the career of its commander Abu Khalid as-Suri (originally Muhammad Bahaia, killed 2014). For a long time he served as the right hand of the jihadist strategist Abu Musab as-Suri, and prior to 2001 was a trainer for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. But he appears never to have joined al-Qaeda, belonging instead to a group of Arab jihadists that were closer to the Taliban. After his release from Saidnaya Prison it was logical to join Ahrar al-Sham, where he advanced to become an important leader. In June 2013 al-Qaeda leader Aiman al-Zawahiri appointed him his envoy in Syria, to mediate between the al-Nusra Front and ISIS.

The comparison with the Taliban also reveals a number of differences, however. Ahrar is more reserved than the Taliban in its use of violence against military adversaries and civilians, and leaves suicide attacks to the al-Nusra Front. Nor does it attempt to impose its Salafist interpretation of Islam and Islamic law by force, instead seeking to win over the civilian population by offering protection from regime forces and doing its best to provide services. Whether that would remain the case if it – like the Taliban in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 – actually came to power remains speculation. Since 2013 Ahrar has more or less openly asserted that political power in Syria must lie in the hands of (Sunni) Islamist Muslims. As suggested by its atrocities during the coastal offensive and actions against Shiite villages in Aleppo and Idlib, it is dubious whether that would leave any future in Syria for the hated Alawites and Shiites.

A PR Offensive

The charge that it was acting as an enabler for al-Qaeda in Syria became an increasing problem for Ahrar al-Sham (and its foreign backers). It felt forced to correct its public image and present itself as a moderate Islamist group that had not the slightest intention of imposing an Islamist dictatorship, and would also protect the rights of religious minorities.

Such ideas were already circulating in 2014, following reports that Qatar had reduced its support under pressure from Washington. The fighting with ISIS may also have played a role, as many jihadists who had previously fought with Ahrar al-Sham now switched to ISIS and thus weakened Ahrar's more militant wing. Ahrar also found itself forced to take a stance against its openly hostile new rival and seek new allies.

The first signs of "moderation" in Ahrar al-Sham came in 2014, with the process accelerated by the loss of almost the entire leadership in September 2014 and the emergence of new figures to replace them. In a widely noted interview with *al-Jazeera* in April 2015, the new Ahrar al-Sham leader Hashim al-Shaikh expressed veiled criticism of the al-Nusra Front: Its ties to al-Qaeda, he said, harmed the Syrian people because they supplied the "international community" with an excuse to fight the Syrian "revolution" as "terrorism". He promised religious minorities "their rights" in a future Islamic Syrian state, but underlined that such a state's political leadership belonged purely in the hands of Sunni Muslims. One would have to be very sympathetic towards Ahrar al-Sham to regard these statements as any real retreat from its Salafist course and alliance with the al-Nusra Front. But even this cautious criticism was a new departure.

A great deal more effective were the activities of the organisation's new spokesman, Labib an-Nahhas (Abu Izzaddin al-Ansari) from Homs, whose group Liwa al-Haqq only joined Ahrar in December 2014. His mother was Spanish and he lived and studied in the United States, Britain, the Netherlands and France before returning to Syria in 2010. After Liwa al-Haqq joined Ahrar he became its chief of foreign political relations in 2015, working to present Ahrar as a moderate Islamist group in numerous discussions with Western politicians. He even succeeded in presenting his views in two widely noted opinion pieces in the *Washington Post* and the British *Telegraph*. In line with this stance, Ahrar also abandoned its uncompromising rejection of talks with the regime and participated in the meeting of opposition representatives in Riyadh on 9 and 10 December 2015, which established a "high negotiations committee" to select a delegation for the planned talks in Geneva.

Negotiations in Riyadh and Geneva

Ahrar's internal divisions were exposed during the Riyadh talks, in the preparations for Geneva and in the actual negotiations on a cease-fire and its implementation. Supporters of negotiations and cooperation with the non-Islamist opposition faced off with jihadist hardliners and supporters of the alliance with the al-Nusra Front.

Despite the efforts to garner international recognition, the hardliners remained a significant force in 2015 and 2016, as evidenced by the continuing close alliance with the al-Nusra Front. While proponents of more moderate positions were found above all in the politburo, military figures and religious scholars took the harder line. The opponents of a moderate course were led by the well-known military chief Abu Salih Tahhan and the prominent preacher Abu Muhammad al-Sadiq.

The vehemence of the conflict was impossible to overlook at the Riyadh conference. Although Ahrar agreed to the talks and sent Nahhas as its representative, the organisation pulled out shortly before the conclusion of the discussions. Nahhas stayed anyway and signed the final declaration, creating great confusion. Senior leaders in Turkey and Syria insisted that they rejected the agreement. Whether and how Ahrar would participate in further talks

remained uncertain in the subsequent months.

Ahrar's attitude towards the cessation of hostilities that came into effect on 27 February 2016 after agreement between the United States and Russia also remains unclear. While Ahrar stands on the list of ninety-three groups that have signalled their willingness to observe the cease-fire, known hardliners like Sadiq and Tahhan have spoken out against it. A public clarification in the name of the organisation has not been forthcoming. But with the Russian leadership, in whose eyes Ahrar is a terrorist organisation, nonetheless including it the cessation of hostilities, the agreement has initially held.

Another factor driving this internal conflict is pincer-like pressure from the al-Nusra Front and Turkey: Nusra continues to reject any talks with the regime, whereas Turkey supports them. Ahrar's leaders plainly fear that taking a clear position would harm internal cohesion and relations with one or other of its two most important allies.

A Dual Strategy

There is no golden rule for dealing with an organisation like Ahrar al-Sham. The West finds it extremely difficult, and that is unlikely to change in the longer term. At the same time, anyone interested in a resolution of the conflict in Syria must find a way forward.

The main reason to allow Ahrar to participate in the Geneva talks is that it is the strongest rebel group apart from ISIS. Although the role of the Islamic Front as an alliance has declined, Ahrar still influences numerous partners and possesses great support in the Syrian Sunni population. Without it, the search for a solution will become even more difficult than it already is. Also, the movement in Ahrar's positions since 2014 demonstrates that change is possible.

One factor speaking against talks with Ahrar is that that would indirectly strengthen the al-Nusra Front and thus al-Qaeda. The alliance between Ahrar and Nusra remains intact and both know they are dependent on one another if they wish to continue to enjoy military successes against the regime and defend themselves against ISIS. Another is that Ahrar itself uses terrorist means such as car bombs against regime forces, and has been responsible for numerous crimes against innocent civilians during its assaults on Alawite and Shiite towns and villages.

This constellation speaks for a dual strategy towards Ahrar. Firstly, it should participate in talks with the regime and the international community, if it is willing to. It is an important success that the cease-fire of 27 February 2016 held for several weeks before it collapsed in April. It would be a positive side-effect if that caused tensions between Ahrar and Nusra to grow.

The second objective of Western policy should be to bring about a break between Ahrar and Nusra. It must be made clear to Ahrar that its alliance with the al-Nusra Front – and its own crimes – will have consequences. It is therefore right for Germany to criminalise membership of and support for Ahrar as a terrorist organisation, and it should seek to persuade its partners in the EU and ideally also in NATO to do the same. At the same time Germany should clearly communicate that Ahrar al-Sham's classification as a terrorist organisation could be reversed if it changed its behaviour.

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