

Biding Its Time: The Strategic Resilience of Ahrar al-Sham

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Ahrar al-Sham is one of the strongest insurgent groups in Syria, especially in the strategically vital north-western border region. As a radical Sunni Islamist armed group which cooperates closely with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and reportedly benefits from foreign support, Ahrar al-Sham is well-placed to expand its influence if the weakening of Daesh in Iraq heralds its decline in Syria too. Likewise, the fall of Aleppo will likely lead to further radicalisation of the insurgency, with fighters flocking to militarily capable groups like Ahrar al-Sham. This underlines the need to find a negotiated, comprehensive solution to the Syrian conflict. If not, the main protagonists in Syria may change, but the scale of bloodshed and suffering will not.

One of the most powerful, yet still relatively obscure, armed factions in Syria is *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah*, or Ahrar al-Sham for short. Ahrar al-Sham has established itself as one of the largest and most well-organised armed groups battling both Daesh and the Assad regime across Syria. Yet, the organization has received less attention than comparable armed groups such as JFS. International scrutiny of Ahrar al-Sham has tended to focus on whether the movement should be regarded as a legitimate armed opposition group or designated a terrorist group. The US has been particularly reluctant to support Ahrar al-Sham due to its Salafist ideology, and especially its cooperation with the erstwhile al-Qaeda ally, JFS. However, with the decline of Daesh and the defeat of moderate opposition forces in Aleppo, the prospect of Ahrar al-Sham expanding its influence in Syria is becoming increasingly likely.

Ahrar al-Sham was originally formed by *jihadi* hardliners – including veterans from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan – but over the past two years the group has actively sought to rebrand itself as an acceptable Sunni alternative, explicitly focusing on the Syrian conflict and distancing itself from the transnational ambitions of both Daesh and al-Qaeda. The group has also taken a less draconian approach than Daesh in its treatment of local civilians. However, the Salafi-Jihadi outlook of Ahrar al-Sham – which has partly modelled itself on the Taliban – arguably does not differ drastically from that of Daesh and misgivings about its true ideological aims persist.

Ahrar al-Sham has proven skilled at coalition building and has shown a willingness to engage in peace negotiations, making it a key actor within the insurgency and presumably an indispensable signatory to any future peace agreement.

While the group negotiated and adhered to some cease-fire agreements in 2015, during 2016 it pledged not to accept any deal that allowed President Assad to remain in power for a transitional period and it rejected the September 2016 cease-fire. Ahrar al-Sham has also shown significant resilience, built on local fighters, foreign aid, a robust organisation and access to a wide array of weaponry. Therefore even if Daesh declines further, the Syrian war will not draw to an end. Instead, it will be perpetuated by different actors with an ideology similar to that of Daesh, Ahrar al-Sham foremost among them.

The emergence of Ahrar al-Sham

Ahrar al-Sham was established as an armed movement in January 2012, through a merger of Sunni Islamist factions in north-western Syria following the uprising against the Assad regime. The early leaders of Ahrar al-Sham consisted primarily of former prisoners from the infamous Seydnaya prison in Syria, who were released alongside other Islamists in late 2011. Some of its founders had also fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, including Abu Khaled al-Suri, a former al-Qaeda member.

Ahrar al-Sham's co-founder and first leader was Hassan Abboud, a former insurgent in Iraq whose brother was a senior leader within JFS. Abboud was imprisoned in 2007 and released from Seydnaya prison in 2011. To this day, Ahrar al-Sham maintains its strongest presence in north-western Syria, its region of origin. However, the group has gradually expanded, in part by forming umbrella organisations with other Islamist groups and then absorbing smaller factions as the coalitions drifted apart. Allegedly benefiting from support from Qatar, and more recently



Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Ahrar al-Sham is an attractive partner for smaller armed factions.

Ahrar al-Sham initially cooperated with Daesh, but the groups clashed in January 2014, after Abboud criticised Daesh leader Baghdadi for rejecting reconciliation efforts between Sunni militants. Ahrar al-Sham and JFS even temporarily drove Daesh out of Raqqah in January 2014, but Daesh swiftly recaptured the city. In September 2014, Abboud was killed in a blast at a high-level Ahrar al-Sham meeting in Idlib in north-western Syria. A large number of the group's top leadership at the time was killed, fuelling numerous rumours about the event, including that it was an attack perpetrated by Daesh.

Surprisingly, Ahrar al-Sham managed not only to quickly recover from the loss of its leadership, but this Salafist group has since expanded and established itself as one of the pre-eminent armed groups in Syria. With a new leadership in place, the group, together with a coalition of rebel forces, seized Idlib city only a few months after the death of Abboud. This coalition, the 'Army of Conquest' (*Jaish al-Fateh*, established in January 2015), included Ahrar al-Sham's closest ally in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (later JFS), which until recently was the formal representative of al-Qaeda in Syria. In January 2016, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra even proposed a full merger of the groups in *Jaish al-Fateh* into one organisation. When the merger was rejected, in July 2016 Jabhat al-Nusra changed its name (to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS)) and formally cut its affiliation to al-Qaeda, pledging to focus exclusively on Syria. While analysts remain sceptical about the significance of the change of name, it is thought to have been made to facilitate collaboration with Ahrar al-Sham, which welcomed the change. However, no merger has yet occurred and tensions persist inside the coalition, partly over ideology.

Objectives, strategy and critical tensions

Ahrar al-Sham is a Salafist armed organisation with an ideology similar to that of JFS and indeed Daesh. From its establishment in 2012 up until early 2014, Ahrar al-Sham promoted an overtly hardline, jihadist ideology in its propaganda. More recently there has been a change of tune, however, in particular since the death of Abboud. Even influential Ahrar al-Sham ideologues have begun to publicly distance themselves from their past as Salafi-jihadi hardliners. The successor to Abboud, Abu Jaber, continued

the work of trying to rebrand Ahrar al-Sham as a more moderate Islamist organisation, as has the current leader, Abu Yahya al-Hamawi.

During the past two years, Ahrar al-Sham has continued to distance itself from the brand of transnational jihadism promoted by Daesh and al-Qaeda, reportedly with the backing of Turkey. For instance, the group's head of foreign political relations, Labib Al Nahhas, has published op-eds in international newspapers arguing that Ahrar al-Sham has been "falsely accused of having organizational links to al-Qaeda and of espousing al-Qaeda's ideology", adding that "nothing could be further from the truth". In May 2016, Ahrar al-Sham's deputy leader, Ali al-Omar, likewise distinguished the group from "the Salafi-jihadist doctrine of al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State".

As noted by Aron Lund, the shift by Ahrar al-Sham towards a more pragmatic and moderate Islamist attitude "seems to have been triggered by the onset of two crises at once". First, the group was beginning to lose much of its foreign support as the United States pressured Qatar – and most likely also Turkey – to distance itself from Ahrar al-Sham and designated its main ally, JFS, a terrorist organisation. Second, Ahrar al-Sham began fighting Daesh, "forcing it to grapple seriously with the problem of jihadi ultra-extremism and to redefine Ahrar al-Sham's own identity in opposition to it." These efforts have been driven by a pragmatic ambition to secure continued support from regional sponsors and have thus often been opportunistic in character. Hence, "Ahrar is clearly still rooted in Islamist militancy" and most likely continues to espouse a "uniquely hardline, militant outlook", according to Lund.

Capabilities, allies and assets

In 2014, US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper identified Ahrar al-Sham – alongside JFS and Daesh – as one of the most effective insurgent groups in Syria. Similarly, more recent analysis has found that Ahrar al-Sham is the most powerful insurgent group in north-western Syria, and perhaps in the entire country. Estimates of its size quoted in the international media range from 10 000 to 20 000 members. Importantly, as the group has proven adept at forming umbrella groups, Ahrar al-Sham has repeatedly been a dominant actor within larger units, making it a key player among insurgents fighting both Assad loyalists and Daesh.

Ahrar al-Sham has reportedly received support from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and has maintained its own leadership structures. Beyond external support, Ahrar al-Sham also generates income locally from border crossings into Turkey, particularly the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. The group is notably well-armed, and anecdotal evidence even suggests that Ahrar al-Sham has provided JFS with some of its weaponry. The group has furthermore grown partly due to its fighters' discipline and ability. It was also one of the first groups to use improvised explosive devices and to target the regime's military bases to capture weapons. With other groups joining Ahrar al-Sham, by January 2014 the group had 83 units spanning the whole country. Ahrar al-Sham's weaponry includes tanks, mobile artillery, anti-tank missiles, and rocket and grenade launchers, while the group has largely abstained from suicide attacks. As its arsenal has expanded, Ahrar al-Sham has begun conducting more large-scale assaults.

In an insurgency that has been exceptionally factionalised and characterised by incessant internecine fighting, Ahrar al-Sham has been comparatively adept at collaborating effectively with others. The group has formed three prominent umbrella organisations – Syrian Islamic Front (SIF, active in 2013), Islamic Front (active in 2014) and *Jaish al-Fatah* (active 2015 to present). As these organisations have drifted apart, Ahrar al-Sham has repeatedly absorbed some of the smaller groups in the coalition into its organisation.

Even so, Ahrar al-Sham too has been involved in several internecine conflicts with other Sunni armed groups. It has repeatedly collaborated closely with JSF in major operations, and the groups are typically considered close allies, at least by the Byzantine standards of the Syrian civil war. In the clash between Daesh and JFS, Ahrar al-Sham has also squarely sided with the latter. Even so, Ahrar al-Sham and JFS clashed violently in January 2016, after the former rejected a proposed merger, arguing that the JSF ties to al-Qaeda were damaging to the Syrian revolution. In October 2016, Ahrar al-Sham also clashed with Jund al-Aqsa, which had formerly been part of the *Jaish al-Fatah* coalition, accusing the smaller group of secretly sympathising with Daesh. The conflict was resolved through arbitration by JSF, which also absorbed Jund al-Aqsa into its fold. These schisms between allies, together with growing tensions within Ahrar al-Sham itself over its nominally moderate

ideological stance and external support, pose a threat to the operational efficiency of the insurgency. Should these tensions again boil over into open confrontation, this could be devastating for the anti-government resistance as localised, internecine conflicts have often precipitated defeat at the hands of Assad loyalists.

Popular support and propaganda

Assessing popular support for armed groups is notoriously difficult in the Syrian conflict, where loyalty is often enforced at gunpoint. That said, Ahrar al-Sham is clearly *attempting* to build popular support. The group provides social services and humanitarian aid to civilians residing in territories it controls. Ahrar al-Sham's deputy commander Ali al-Omar also draws key distinctions vis-à-vis other Salafists such as Daesh and JFS, emphasising the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the population. Furthermore, analysts such as Sam Heller claim that in much of northern Syria, "it is Ahrar that defends journalists, activists, and civil society against predatory jihadists, and over the past several years Ahrar has made serious efforts to integrate itself with the revolutionary political mainstream". The group has also sought to portray itself as a "Sunni alternative to both Assad and [Daesh]", proposing to govern following Sunni rules and customs while respecting minority rights.

Ahrar al-Sham defines itself as a Syrian movement with mainly Syrian members. Its political and military aims are also limited to Syria alone. This arguably forms the main distinction between Ahrar al-Sham and other Salafist organisations such as Daesh and (until recently) JFS, which have wider regional or even global ambitions. In mid-2014, the group signed the so-called "Revolutionary Covenant", an initiative by Syria's Islamist groups. According to researcher Ali El Yassir, "the Covenant did not call for an Islamic State and instead sought to establish 'a state of justice, law and freedom.' It also included commitments to limit the conflict within Syrian territory [...] and preserve Syria's territorial integrity". That said, it is likely that Ahrar al-Sham's attitude to the establishment of an Islamic State in Syria has more to do with political realities and pragmatism than any actual scepticism regarding the legitimacy of Sharia. Even so, in May 2016 the US (along with UK and France) blocked a Russian initiative in the UN through which Ahrar al-Sham would have been blacklisted as a terrorist organisation. This may indicate that while Western



powers have serious misgivings about the true ideological aims of Ahrar al-Sham, the group's attempts at rebranding may be paying off, at least for the time being.

Biding its time – The resilience and strategic trajectory of Ahrar al-Sham

Current strategic trends in Syria and Iraq suggest that Ahrar al-Sham may expand its influence in Syria over the medium to long term. In Mosul, Daesh is launching an all-out, scorched-earth defence against Iraqi forces and their allies. Even though that terrorist group has shown remarkable resilience to date, it will not emerge unscathed from this battle. Instead, Daesh will probably lose a large proportion of its fighters, weaponry, financial assets and presumably morale.

Simultaneously, an operation is underway to drive Daesh out of Raqqah, its main remaining urban stronghold in eastern Syria. The offensive is being led by the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab armed groups, supported by US air power and 500 special operations forces. While SDF has battled Daesh successfully, the coalition is dominated by the Kurdish YPG and other rebel factions are overwhelmingly hostile to the force, making it difficult to envision a broad coalition including SDF. Hence, even though the US military are planning for Raqqah to be liberated by local fighters and the SDF emphasises that the town will be governed by its citizens following liberation, the long-term feasibility of this plan remains uncertain. Over time, it is not inconceivable that Ahrar al-Sham – which was part of the coalition that originally wrested control of the city from Assad – could have a growing influence in Raqqah and other parts of eastern Syria.

In Aleppo, Assad loyalists are advancing swiftly, supported by indiscriminate air operations, and resistance inside the city seems to have been effectively ended. Ahrar al-Sham participated in one of the coalitions defending the city, but the resistance was mainly led by more moderate rebel factions. As Chris Kozak notes, the surrender of eastern Aleppo will “likely drive these groups into deeper partnership with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham and other Salafi-Jihadist groups in order to preserve their military effectiveness”. This continues a pattern in which the brutality of the Assad regime, and the extensive support provided to extremist rebel factions, has resulted in

gradual radicalisation of the conflict, making it ever more intractable. Creating a choice between an inhumane regime and extremely radical Islamists has been part of the Assad regime's strategy since the outset of the conflict. However, this strategy may now have outlived its usefulness, as the Assad regime may ultimately be forced to strike a deal with groups it considers unacceptable, Ahrar al-Sham foremost amongst them.

Conclusions

Daesh is currently being weakened and forced to retreat, but those most likely to benefit in Syria in the medium to long term are not the Syrian authorities, and certainly not the civilian population, but rather broadly like-minded Sunni extremist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham. Hence, while the weakening of both Daesh and more moderate rebel groups in Aleppo may eventually herald a change among the main protagonists in the Syrian war, there is still no conceivable military solution to the conflict.

Given these developments, Ahrar al-Sham will most likely expand its already significant influence in Syria. Furthermore, given its focus on the Syrian conflict, local fighters, military clout, antagonism to Daesh and skills at coalition building, Ahrar al-Sham may well prove to be an indispensable signatory to any future peace agreement. While Daesh and JSF will presumably be unacceptable as participants in negotiations, defeating them militarily remains an extremely taxing undertaking. Thus even though Western powers continue to have serious misgivings about the long-term ideological aims of Ahrar al-Sham, for now the group remains on the roster of possible participants in any future peace negotiations. Without its participation, it is difficult to see how any peace agreement could be sustainable over time, as the group is powerful enough to launch a continuous insurgency on its own. The strategic resilience of Ahrar al-Sham has helped it to survive a grinding, multi-front civil war, but also to position itself as a key player in the continuing battle – and presumably also in any future Syrian peace.