# *The Door Should Be Opened to Ahrar Al-Sham!*

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Are the ideologies and strategies of all Syrian militant-opposition groups fighting Assad forces similar to those of Islamic State group (ISIL)?

It can be said that politicians tend to simplify the jihadi phenomena in Syria – and elsewhere – by adopting a security approach, but reality dictates that explaining the phenomena is not so clear cut. Several forms of jihadi can be identified. Global jihadists, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIL), seek to establish a state with unlimited borders, while on the other side, local jihadists are limiting their actions to the confines of the recognised borders of Syria. The approach adopted to deal with the latter category should not be the same: the approach should be political inclusiveness!

When the Assad regime used brutal military force to crush the peaceful protestors in 2011, it left the peaceful opposition no choice but to resort to armed force, or a *militancy method*, to change the regime. Resorting to such instruments was inevitable for Syrians needing to protect their families and neighborhoods from arrest and murder by Assad troops and thugs (*shabieha)*. However, some Arab

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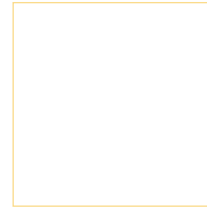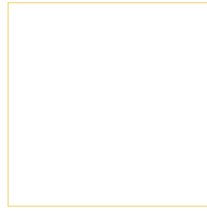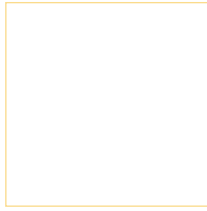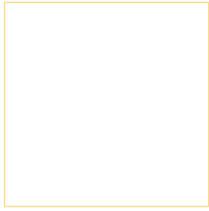
youths joined the Syrian militants after the democratic path encountered significant setbacks in their countries, such as in Egypt, where the Generals put an end to the country's democratic transition.

For effectiveness, the militancy method has been placed within the common contemporary frame of Jihad, even though not all revolutionaries initially adopted the Jihadi ideology. Many Syrian insurgents are local *homegrowns*, with no history of following the Jihadi path, or adopting the Jihad ideals that developed outside Syria. Hence, it was not long before a transformation in some militant groups' ideology emerged, discarding global Jihad and declaring the *Syrianisation* of their ideology and actions. The obvious example is the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant *Harakat Ahrar Al-sham Al-Islamiyya* (commonly known as Ahrar Al- Sham).

Ahrar Al-Sham was formed in December 2011. It is considered to be one of the most important Islamic groups in Syria that has engaged with several rebel alliances fighting Assad forces, in particular the powerful *Jaysh al-Fatah* Army of Conquest. The backbone of Ahrar Al-Sham's membership consists of Syrians, the majority of whom have no previous experience of militancy, along with Islamists and jihadists released from prison. Ahrar Al-Sham adopted revisions (*muraja'at*)[2] in its ideology during the very early stages of its involvement in the Syrian battle arena. This provided fertile ground for the spread of a new localised and nationalised version of the Jihad ideology, which rejected any type of involvement from beyond Syrian borders. A significant shift occurred when the group's President Hassan Aboud (or Abou Abdallah Alhamawy) signed the Revolutionary Honor Pact in May 2014, which limited the scope of group operations against the Assad regime, allied militias and ISIL to Syrian territory. Moreover, Aboud and other founders of the group, escalated their criticism towards Jihadist ideology to the point that the group's Vice-President Mohamed Al-Shami (or Abu-Yazan Al-shami) made a public apology on 2 September 2014 for the group's endorsement of the Salafi-Jihadist doctrine. He promised a substantial change in the group's ideology and actions. However, shortly afterwards Aboud and Al-Shami, with

the leaders and some of the group's main founders were killed in a mysterious blast on 9 September 2014.

After that dramatic incident, given the complex environment of civil war, the most optimistic analysts expected the group to dwindle, if not fade away. But, it seems that the shift from a globalised to a nationalised Jihadi ideology, and the institutionalisation of the group were neither an individual decision nor a tactical move adopted by the group's founders. After their death, the continuity of a nationalised group ideology could be witnessed, which was reflected when the movement changed its main slogan in March 2015 from the *Umma* project (a religious slogan referring to entire Muslim communities in the world and used by global jihadi adherents) to the revolution of *Sha'ab* (referring to Syrian people). Therefore, the group has recruited fighters from Syrian youth (*Shabab*) with less attention to the recruitment of foreign fighters (*Muhajireen*) who represent a non-significant number and have neither organisational high-ranking positions nor influence in the ideological direction of the group.

Moreover, Ahrar al-Sham has developed a different Islamic discourse to distinguish itself from Jihadi groups. It identifies itself as a *Mujahedeen* movement rather than as *Jihadeen Jihadists* fighting to abolish an autocratic repressive regime. In the same vein, unlike the ISIL ideology and Jihadist militant orthodoxy of other groups, which widen the scale of blasphemy (*takfir*) to encompass any Muslim and any group, including other jihadi factions who do not follow their ideology, Ahrar al-Sham discourse neither vets Muslim beliefs based on religious grounds nor imposes religious mores on local people. This has been perceived positively by the Syrian population in the free territories as it has attracted a number of youth (*shabab)* to join one of its offices.[3] The new discourse allows the group to maintain good relations with other rebels, whether they have a jihadi ideology or not, which in turn allows Ahrar Al-Sham to play a vital role as a mediator among insurgent groups that operate in the free territories of Syria.

The institutionalisation of the group, initiated by the previous leadership, has effectively continued at all levels

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2.   Meaning 'revisions'

3.   The group operates through three main offices: a political office; relief and services offices; and the militant arm.

of the group whether political or militant. The group is operating through three main offices: a political office; relief and services offices; and the militant arm. The offices work with civilian organisations to strengthen civilian rule in the free territories through Local Governance Councils (LGC), which represent an alternative to the absent civilian government in areas that were freed from regime control and that are run by the people living in the area. The institutionalisation of the group has allowed it to operate effectively in the battle areas and to gain public satisfaction in the free territories, as well as to be involved effectively in the negotiation arena. Also, with the absence of a charismatic leadership, as was Aboud's case, the centre of the group's power has shifted smoothly from the presidency to the Shura council, which has in turn strengthened the group's institutionalisation.

It seems that Ahrar al-Sham has set a model that encompasses: revisionist ideology countering *manhaj* Salafi-Jihadism, particularly global *manhaj*; an inclusive approach to dealing with other political groups and militias; and a strong institutional structure that does not exist in other groups. These components shape the character of Ahrar al-Sham.

Thus, it is not surprising to find that other Syrian jihadi groups have attempted to adopt such a model. The pragmatic leadership of the al-Nusra Front has not only tried to adopt it, but to hijack it by assuming populist ideological sectarian discourse as a group defending the Sunni population in Syria. Consequently, al-Nusra's actions to dissociate from the al-Qaeda group took a new name (the Levantine Conquest Front or *Fateh al-Sham*) which, after some months, integrated with other armed factions into a new entity, the organisation for the *Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham* Liberation of the Levant (HTA). However, the changes have remained superficial and have not yet reached the essence. This, due to Fateh's self-perception, has built on its acquisition of 'the righteous *manhaj*', which makes it superior to any Islamic group operating on the ground. Such superiority gives Fateh an ethical justification to seek to control other groups and to confiscate their properties (weapons and offices), relief organisations' money and impose its thoughts on the local population. In fact, Fatah al-Sham's path towards its new entity to conduct real transformation in terms of *manhaj*, dealing with people in the free areas as well as other armed groups in both battle and political arenas, is arduous.

While it is obvious that, until now, the Fateh-al-sham change has been a tactical strategy to avoid the international alliance forces in Syria targeting its members and offices, it is not the case that Ahrar Al-Sham is going through a constructive transformation. They know that such a constructive shift would come at a high cost. It is likely that the loss of loyalty among their members and sponsors will constitute the immediate main cost. Tracing the movement's transformative process shows that Ahrar al-Sham is not a static but a dynamic movement, and that its thought-frame and actions are affected by interaction with local environment, i.e. popular incubators *(al-hadinah al-sha'biyyah)*, the new reality on the ground, and in the regional and international atmosphere.

Against this backdrop, further steps can be made by European policy-makers. Not only can a door be unofficially kept open to Ahrar al-Sham, but Ahrar al-Sham can also be part of dialogue rounds and be officially recognised as a legitimate Syrian armed group that has its place in diplomatic and political processes of arrangements for the future of Syria. Such inclusiveness would first provide further incentive to encourage Ahrar al-Sham and other groups to continue the transformative process, and second, it would weaken the extremist groups' discourse that underlines that western governments would not accept Islamic movements as part of a political game.[4] Moreover, it is recommended that the EU seeks to convince the U.S. administration that it should not list Ahrar al-Sham as a terrorist group, because such an action would hamper the internal mechanisms towards enhancing the nationalisation of the group's ideology and developing it into a political movement of tomorrow's Syria.

The views expressed in the brief are solely those of the author

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4.   The extremist groups build their discourse based on European governments' positions towards some events in the Middle East, such as the implicit support for the military takeover in Algeria in 1992, the isolation of Hamas in Palestine despite its success in the 2006 elections, and the gradual normalisation of the relationship with the coup leadership in Egypt since July 2013.

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