



## Ahrar al-Sham

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, commonly referred to as Ahrar al-Sham, is a coalition of multiple Islamist and Salafist units that coalesced into a single brigade in order to fight against the Syrian Government led by Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian Civil War. Ahrar al-Sham was led by Hassan Aboud until his death in 2014. In July 2013, Ahrar al-Sham had 10,000 to 20,000 fighters, which at the time made it the second single most powerful unit fighting against al-Assad, after the Free Syrian Army. It was the principal organization operating under the umbrella of the Syrian Islamic Front and was a major component of the Islamic Front. With an estimated 20,000 fighters in 2015, Ahrar al-Sham became the largest rebel group in Syria after the Free Syrian Army became less powerful. The group along with Jaysh al-Islam are the main rebel groups supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The group aims to create an Islamic state under Sharia law, and was for a time openly allied with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front, an affiliate of al-Qaeda) until a rift in January 2017 that has since been healed.

### Ideology:

Ahrar al-Sham has defined itself in this way:

The Islamic Movement of Free Men of the Levant is an Islamist, reformist, innovative and comprehensive movement. It is integrated with the Islamic Front and is a comprehensive and Islamic military, political and social formation. It aims to completely overthrow the Assad regime in Syria and build an Islamic state whose only sovereign, reference, ruler, direction, and individual, societal and nationwide unifier is Allah Almighty's Sharia (law).

The group has a Syrian leadership and "emphasizes that its campaign is for Syria, not for a global jihad". However, according to US intelligence officials, a few al-Qaeda members released from prisons by the Syrian government have been able to influence actions of the group, and install operatives within the senior ranks of Ahrar al-Sham. Such ties were not disclosed publicly until January 2014, when a former senior leader of

Ahrar al-Sham, the now deceased Abu Khalid al-Suri, acknowledged his long-time membership in al-Qaeda and role as Ayman al-Zawahiri's representative in the Levant.

In its first audio address, Ahrar al-Sham stated its goal was to replace the Assad government with an Sunni Islamic state, however it acknowledged the need to take into account the population's current state of mind. It also described the uprising as a jihad against a Safawi plot to spread Shiism and establish a Shiite state from Iran through Iraq and Syria, and extending to Lebanon and Palestine. Ahrar al-Sham has claimed that it only targets government forces and militia and that it has cancelled several operations due to fear of civilian casualties. It provides humanitarian services and relief to local communities, in addition to pamphlets promoting religious commitment in daily life.

Ahrar al-Sham leader Hassan Aboud stated that Ahrar al-Sham worked with Nusra Front and would have no problems with Nusra as long as they continued fighting Assad. Aboud also said Ahrar worked with Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in some battles, but that their agenda was disagreeable. Aboud also said all parties shared the same objective of establishing an Islamic State, whether they were ISIS, Al Nusra, the Islamic Front, or the FSA, but they differed as to the "tactics, strategies or methods". Aboud claimed that in Syria "there are no secular groups". Aboud condemned democracy in an interview with Al-Jazeera, saying that "Democracy is people governing people, according to rules they please. We say that we have a divine system whose law is Allah's for his creatures and his slaves who he appointed as viceregents on this Earth."

Mohamed Najeeb Bannan, an Islamic Front Sharia Court Judge in Aleppo, stated, "The legal reference is the Islamic Sharia. The cases are different, from robberies to drug use, to moral crimes. It's our duty to look at any crime that comes to us... After the regime has fallen, we believe that the Muslim majority in Syria will ask for an Islamic state. Of course, it's very important to point out that some say the Islamic Sharia will cut off people's hands and heads, but it only applies to criminals. And to start off by killing, crucifying etc. That is not correct at all." In response to being asked what the difference between the Islamic Front's and ISIS's version of sharia would be, he said "One of their mistakes is before the regime has fallen, and before they've established what in Sharia is called Tamkeen [having a stable state], they started applying Sharia, thinking God gave them permission to control the land and establish a Caliphate. This goes against the beliefs of religious scholars around the world. This is what [IS] did wrong. This is going to cause a lot of trouble. Anyone who opposes [IS] will be considered against Sharia and will be severely punished."

Ahrar al-Sham, and the Islamic Front in general, issued condolences for Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar upon his death.

In August 2015, Ahrar al-Sham commander Eyad Shaar said "We are part of Syrian society and the international community. We want to be part of the solution."

Ahrar al-Sham's political representative stated in December 2015 that Ahrar al-Sham are "not related with al Qaeda, we only fight with them against Assad and ISIS".

In an Amnesty International report in July 2016, Ahrar al-Sham, along with the al-Nusra Front, was described as having "applied a strict interpretation of Shari'a and imposed punishments amounting to torture or other ill-treatment for perceived infractions." A political activist was abducted and detained by Ahrar al-Sham for having not worn a veil and accused of affiliation with the Syrian government. At least three children have been recorded to be abducted by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham between 2012 and 2015, two of them were still missing. Lawyers and political activists have faced reprisal attacks by Ahrar al-Sham and other Islamist rebel groups due to their political activities and perceived religious beliefs.

In May 2016, Ahrar al-Sham released an address by then deputy general director Ali al-Omar in which he distinguished Ahrar al-Sham's militancy from the Salafi jihadism of al-Qaeda and ISIS, and defended its political engagement.

#### **Group History:**

Ahrar al-Sham started forming units just after the Egyptian revolution of January 2011, and before the Syrian Revolution started in March 2011. Most of the group's founders were Islamist political prisoners who had been detained for years at the Sednaya prison until they were released as part of an amnesty by the Syrian Government in March–May 2011. At the time of its establishment in December 2011, Ahrar al-Sham consisted of about 25 rebel units spread across Syria. By July 2012, the group's website listed 50 units, and by mid-January 2013, the number had increased to 83 units. Most of these units are headquartered in villages in Idlib Governorate, but many others are located in Hama and Aleppo Governorates. Some Ahrar al-Sham units that have been involved in heavy fighting include the Qawafel al-Shuhada and Ansar al-Haqq Brigades

(both in Khan Shaykhun), the al-Tawhid wal-Iman Brigade (Maarat al-Nu'man, Idlib), the Shahba Brigade (Aleppo City), the Hassane bin Thabet Brigade (Darat Izza, Aleppo), and the Salahaddin and Abul-Fida Brigades (both in Hama City).

Members of the group are Sunni Islamists. Ahrar al-Sham cooperates with the Free Syrian Army; however, it does not maintain ties with the Syrian National Council. Although they coordinate with other groups, they maintain their own strict and secretive leadership, receiving the majority of their funding and support from donors in Kuwait.

In March 2015, the Suqour al-Sham Brigade merged with Ahrar al-Sham, but left in September 2016. Later that same month, the Brigade joined the Army of Conquest, a group which has Ahrar al-Sham as a member.

Mohannad al-Masri, known by the alias Abu Yahia al-Hamawi, was appointed leader in September 2015. Ali al-Omar, known by the alias Abu Ammar al-Omar, was appointed leader in November 2016.

In October 2015, Abu Amara Brigades left the Levant Front and joined Ahrar al-Sham, having joined the Levant Front in February 2015.

On 26 February 2016, Jaysh al-Sunna branch in Hama merged with Ahrar ash-Sham, though its northern Aleppo branch was not a part of this merger.

In September 2016, Ashida'a Mujahideen Brigade left Ahrar al-Sham due to Ahrar's support of Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield and lack of willingness to be closer to Al-Nusra Front.

Ahrar Al-Sham was praised by Tawfiq Shehabeddine in October 2016.

On 10 December 2016, 16 Ahrar al-Sham units under Hashim Sheikh, known by the alias Abu Jaber, formed a quasi-independent group within Ahrar called Jaysh al-Ahrar, or the Free Army, for similar reasons as Ashida'a Mujahideen Brigade leaving 3 months prior.

On 21 January 2017, five factions from Ahrar left to join Al-Nusra Front: Jaish al-Ahrar, Al-Bara, Dhu Nurayn, Al-Sawa'iq and Usud Al-Har Battalion. On the same day, it was announced that Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham Brigade, Jabhat Ahl al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and Fastaqim Union would established a joint operations room to combat Al-Nusra and its subfaction Jund al-Aqsa.

On 23 January 2017, the al-Nusra Front attacked Jabhat Ahl al-Sham bases in Atarib and other towns in western Aleppo. All the bases were captured and by 24 January, the group was defeated and joined Ahrar al-Sham.

On 25 January 2017, several factions from Jaysh al-Islam based in Aleppo left to join Ahrar, establishing the al-Anasar Regiment. On the same day, the remaining Fastaqim Union members of its Aleppo branch joined Ahrar.

On 25 January 2017, Suqour al-Sham Brigade along with the Idlib branch of Jaysh al-Islam and the Aleppo branch of the Levant Front joined Ahrar al-Sham. On the following day, al-Miiqdad Brigade also joined Ahrar.

Tariq Abdelhaleem complained that religion was absent from and a nationalist secular state was proclaimed in the Astana conference by Russia in a new constitution. He called it "shame" and said Ahrar was one of the "Astana factions". He called the Geneva and Astana as "treacherous conferences" and claimed there was a Turkish Russian western alliance behind these factions. Tariq Abdelhaleem used insults like "dwarves", attacking Ahmad Najeeb, defending Hani al-Siba'i and referred to Ahrar al-Sham as the "Movement of Evil people" and calling him a corrupter.

On 4 February, American aircraft killed the terrorist al-Qaeda member Abu Hani al Masri. In the 1980s and 1990s, he operated in Afghanistan and instructed there as part of Al-Qaeda. He was killed in Idlib's Sarmada region by a drone strike, and he was an Egyptian. Egyptian Islamic Jihad was co-created by him. Thomas Joscelyn pointed out that the publication Al Masra of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula talked about Abu Hani Al Masri. He was also a military commander of Ahrar ash-Sham. In Egypt he was jailed for several years and he was in Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Somalia. In 2012 he was let out of jail in Egypt. In Chechnya several Russian prisoners once appeared in a video with Abu Hani al Masri. Tariq Abdul Haleem tweeted his condolences upon the death of Abu Hani al Masri.

Jaber Ali Basha was made one of the deputy leaders of Ahrar al-Sham along with Anas abo malek.

#### **Foreign support:**

Discussions about foreign support in the media often center on the weapons that foreign powers provide to their proxies. Money is just as important as weapons though. As soon as a soldier / rebel has to fight away from his home, the rebel group has to pay at least his sustenance, and in practice some more. For Ahrar the amount of financial aid it got from abroad might be the very reason it became so

powerful. After the December 2013 suspension of all U.S. and the U.K. non-lethal support, which included medicine, vehicles, and communications equipment, to the Free Syrian Army after the Islamic Front, a coalition of Islamist fighters that broke with the American-backed Free Syrian Army, had seized warehouses of equipment. In 2014 the U.S. was considering indirectly resuming non-lethal aid to the moderate opposition by having it "funneled exclusively through the Supreme Military Council, the military wing of moderate, secular Syrian opposition" even if some of it ends up going to Islamist groups. Several European states have attempted small-level engagements with individual Ahrar al-Sham political officials in Turkey.

Donations from supporters abroad were important for Ahrar's growth. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have been actively supporting Ahrar al-Sham. A statement issued by Ahrar al-Sham thanked Turkey and Qatar for their help.

By 2013, the Kuwaiti private fund Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People, managed by Sheik Ajmi and Sheik, Irshid al-Hajri had supported Ahrar with US\$400,000, for which Ahrar recorded a public thank you.

The Islamic Front and Ahrar al-Sham in particular have received weapons from Turkey, according to German intelligence.

#### **Campaign of violence:**

Ahrar al-Sham was credited for rescuing NBC News team including reporter Richard Engel, producer Ghazi Balkiz, cameraman John Kooistra and others after they were kidnapped in December 2012. While Engel initially blamed pro-Assad Shabiha militants for the abduction, it later turned out that they were "almost certainly" abducted by an FSA affiliated rebel group. There were around 500 people in Ahrar al-Sham in August 2012.

#### *December 2012 Ahrar joins the Syrian Islamic Front:*

In December 2012, a new umbrella organization was announced, called the Syrian Islamic Front, consisting of 11 Islamist rebel organizations. Ahrar al-Sham was the most prominent of these, and a member of Ahrar al-Sham's, Abu 'Abd Al-Rahman Al-Suri, served as the Front's spokesman.

In January 2013, several of the member organizations of the Syrian Islamic Front announced that they were joining forces with Ahrar al-Sham into a broader group called Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham). In September 2013, members of ISIL killed the Ahrar al-Sham commander Abu Obeida Al-Binnishi, after he had intervened to protect a Malaysian Islamic charity; ISIL had mistaken its Malaysian flag for that of the United States.

In August 2013, members of the brigade uploaded a video of their downing of a Syrian Air Force MiG-21 over the Latakia province with a Chinese-made FN-6 MANPADS, apparently becoming the first recorded kill with such a weapon.

*November 2013 Ahrar joins the Islamic Front, open war against ISIL:*

In mid-November 2013, after the Battle for Brigade 80 near the Aleppo International Airport, fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant beheaded a commander of Ahrar al-Sham forces, mistaking him for an Iraqi Shiite pro-government militiaman.

In November 2013, the SIF announced that it was dissolving, and that its components would henceforth operate as part of the newly formed Islamic Front.

In December 2013, there were reports of fighting between ISIL & another Islamic rebel group in the town of Maskana, Aleppo; activists reported that the Islamic rebel group was identified as Ahrar al-Sham.

On 23 February 2014, one of the top commanders and al-Qaeda representative, Abu Khalid al-Suri, was killed in a suicide bombing in Aleppo, organized by ISIL.

*September 2014 - a bomb kills most of Ahrar's leadership:*

On 9 September 2014, a bomb went off during a high level meeting in Idlib province, killing Hassan Abboud, the leader of the group, and 27 other senior commanders, including military field commanders, members of the group's Shura council, and leaders of allied brigades. There was

no claim of responsibility for the attack. The day after the bombing Abu Jaber was announced as replacement leader. Ahrar ash-Sham received condolences from the al-Qaeda organization Nusra. Ahrar received condolences from other al-Qaeda members. The son of Abdullah Azzam, Huthaifa Azzam, commented on the death of the Ahrar leaders.

*November 2014 meeting with al-Nusra Front:*

In early November 2014, representatives from Ahrar al-Sham reportedly attended a meeting with al-Nusra Front, the Khorasan Group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and Jund al-Aqsa, which sought to unite the groups against the Syrian government. However, by 14 November 2014, it was reported that the negotiations had failed.

During the night of 6 November 2014, a US airstrike targeted the group for the first time, hitting its headquarters in Idlib governorate and killing Abu al-Nasr, who was in charge of receiving weapons for the group. On 24 November 2014, a US airstrike on the ISIL headquarters building in Ma'dan, Raqqa killed another Ahrar al-Sham fighter, who was being held prisoner by ISIL.

*March 2015 killing of Christians:*

The New York Times reported that the pro Al-Qaeda Saudi cleric Abdullah Al-Muhaisini ordered that Christians in Idlib were not to be killed, and that Christians were being defended by Ahrar al-Sham. However, there were subsequent reports of Ahrar al-Sham executing Christians in the city.

On 26 April 2015, Ahrar al-Sham, along with other major Aleppo based groups, established the Fatah Halab joint operations room.

On 14 July 2015, two suicide bombers blew themselves up at an Ahrar al-Sham Movement headquarters killing Abu Abdul Rahman Salqeen (an Ahrar al-Sham leader) and 5-6 others in Idlib province.

On 21 October 2015, the Jund al Malahim operations room was created as an alliance of Ajnad al Sham, Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra in Rif Dimashq.

*February 2016 Bombing of Russian base:*

On 25 February 2016, a car bomb was detonated at the Russian military base in Idlib, Syria. Ahrar al-Sham claimed responsibility on their website alleging "dozens" of casualties among Russian officials. On the following day, Jaysh al-Sunna's branch in Hama merged with Ahrar al-Sham, though its northern Aleppo branch was not a part of this merger.

On 13 May 2016, Amnesty International named Ahrar al-Sham as one of the groups responsible for "repeated indiscriminate attacks that may amount to war crimes" and reported allegations of their use of chemical weapons.

*May 2016 Zara'a killings and kidnappings:*

On 12 May 2016, militants of the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham attacked and captured the Alawite village of Zara'a, Southern Hama Governorate. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed that civilians had been kidnapped and the Red Crescent confirmed that 42 civilians and seven NDF militiamen were killed during the militant attack. Additionally, some pro-Syrian government news sources reported that around 70 civilians, including women and children were kidnapped and taken to Al-Rastan Plains. Some of the captured were pro-government troops. A number of houses were destroyed and local property was looted following the rebel capture of the village.

**Date: 23-03-2017**