

## ‘From Jihad to Caliphate’: Islamist Mergers & The Battle for Legitimacy in Syria

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### Abstract:

‘The merger between Ahrar Al-Sham and Suqour Al-Sham highlighted an interesting development in the strategic coalition between various fractions of ‘Islamist groups’ in Syria. This research will attempt to analyse the reasons behind this merger and the potential outcomes this may have in terms of the dynamic between Ahrar Al-sham and Jabhat Al-Nusra. Will they form an alliance and gain both territory and power together as they did in Idlib or will Ahrar Al- Sham become a ‘buffer’ as such, to the more hardline Islamist stance of Al-Nusra.. A strategic alliance or balancing dynamic? ‘.

## Introduction

On March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015, the Syrian war saw the creation of a merger between Suqour Al-Sham into Ahrar Al-Sham under the name Islamic Ahrar Al-Sham movement. Both groups have been consistently amongst the most influential rebel groups fighting against the Assad regime, since mid-2011. The merger has increased Ahrar Al-Sham's numbers up to 'approximately 15,000 fighters across Syria, with active operations in 10 of Syria's 14 governorates'<sup>1</sup>.

Ahrar Al-Sham is one of the larger and more hardline Islamist factions of the opposition, but previously remained distinct from Al-Qaeda linked Jabhat Al-Nusra. Suqour Al-Sham brigade was formed in September 2011 under the leadership of Ahmed Abu Issa in the town of Sarjeh in the Jabal Al-Zawiya region of Idlib Governorate. The group's fighters are a mix of military defectors and civilian volunteers. The complete merger of Suqour Al-Sham into Ahrar Al-Sham saw two of the oldest and most established opposition groups in the Syrian conflict came

together in order to 'reaffirm [their] commitment to the path of '[the] Revolution...working to overthrow the criminal regime''<sup>2</sup>.

It is clear that this merger occurred at a time when both groups were struggling to keep their positions as key players in the conflict, due to a number of factors that shifted both groups internal and external dynamics over the past 6-12 months. Suqour Al-Sham began to decline in late 2013-early 2014 as powerful leaders; local allies and former members defected to the Islamic State or were killed through infighting. Similarly, Ahrar Al-Sham took a massive hit, when on September 9<sup>th</sup> 2014, dozens of its leaders, including founder and emir, Hassan Abboud, were wiped out in an explosion in Idlib.

Both groups share the Salafi ideology and call for a Sunni theocracy in Syria, relying on foreign sympathisers in Turkey and Qatar to fund their efforts. This merger comes at a crucial time: there has been a serious cut in funding from supporters in Turkey and Qatar, during a period when the group is attempting to push back the Islamic State. "The regional financing it used to get has weakened, and the loss of its leaders has brought this new alignment

driven not by ideology but on strengthening its internal structure," said Hassan Abu Haniyah, a prominent Jordanian jihadist scholar<sup>3</sup>.

The majority of opposition forces remain reliant upon Al-Nusra for an effective front to be present against the regime. This merger has been seen by various experts on the Syrian conflict as a clear sign of Ahrar Al-Sham's active strategy to reassert its position in the

Syrian war. In terms of practical logic, Ahrar-Al Sham has been able to carry out various military efforts against the Islamic State with its military ally Al-

Nusra. The various Islamist mergers in Syria have been analysed as signs of the strengthening of opposition groups' dynamics in the conflict.

The Suqour Al-Sham and Ahrar Al-Sham merger is consistent with this strategic alliance process to strengthen Ahrar Al-Sham's stronghold in the insurgency. However, the alliance between Ahrar Al-Sham and Al-Nusra provides a more complex relationship. Whilst this relationship is largely pragmatic, there seems to be a level of strategic balancing by Ahrar Al-Sham

in terms of checking and balancing the more extremist ideology of Al-Nusra. The evolution of Al Nusra as a more extremist 'Jihadist' group in rivalry with the Islamic State, caused an Ahrar Al-Sham leader in late 2014, to describe the 'the group as leading the revolution down the wrong path'. Charles Lister, a writer for the Brookings Institution claimed that several Syrian Islamist officials described the March 2015 merger as an attempt to balance Al-

Nusra's growing power, specifically in Idlib<sup>4</sup>. However, it seems that Ahrar Al-Sham do not want to create a divide between them and Al-Nusra- as the Al-Qaeda

affiliate is far too powerful in the North and has a lot of support across Syria. The majority of opposition forces remain reliant upon Al-Nusra for an effective front against the Assad regime.

One analysis is that the Ahrar Al-Sham merger, and their consequent alliance with Al-Nusra, is a move that has occurred due to the lack of support from the US and European allies for moderate opposition groups. As a result of Al-Qaeda's involvement in the conflict, the Western military support

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for moderate opposition groups has diminished. This may have acted as a catalyst for the rise of more extreme Jihadist groups, that are now predominant players in the conflict, such as Al-Nusra and the Islamic State<sup>5</sup>. More simply, Al Nusra provides Ahrar al-Sham and other opposition groups with an option where very few alternatives remain.

### **Ahrar Al-Sham checking and balancing Al-Nusra?**

Two days after the merger, Ahrar Al-Sham increased their military cooperation with Al-Nusra in Idlib province where they were able to retake the city. For both groups this victory was vital, as it extended their territorial control and therefore their influence in the area, whilst presenting a more unified and effective rebel front against the Assad regime<sup>6</sup>. The Idlib victory on March 28<sup>th</sup> 2015 is one of the biggest rebel victories since the fall of Al-Raqa to Al-Nusra and rebel forces in March 2013<sup>7</sup> and has been claimed to “represent a turning point in the Syrian Civil War that is likely to alter the trajectory of the conflict in coming months, with implications for how rebels wage war in 2015,” the Institute

for the Study of War stated in a recent report<sup>8</sup>. They went on to suggest that the success of Idlib is likely to ‘provide momentum to the JN-Islamist axis in Syria at the expense of moderate rebel forces, and hinder efforts to foster a political solution to the conflict’<sup>9</sup>. With Al-Nusra becoming an increasingly important and established player in the fight against the regime, their success in Idlib and most recently in Jisr Al-Shughour in Northwestern Syria on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April<sup>10</sup>, has led numerous rebel groups to deepen their cooperation with Al-Nusra in order to increase the unity and success of the rebel insurgency against Assad<sup>11</sup>. However, with increasing cooperation occurring between Al-Nusra and the Islamic State, specifically their coordination in the capture of Yarmouk camp, this might threaten the cohesiveness of rebel groups with Al-Nusra. Part of the appealing attraction that this organisation offers, is their assistance and lead role in the revolution against Assad but also their ability to successfully gain more territory which as a result reduces the Islamic State expansion in rebel terrain<sup>12</sup>. With Al-Nusra and the Islamic State working more closely together this may threaten support for Al-Nusra.

Neither Ahrar Al-Sham nor Al-Nusra would have been able to win this victory without the other; their mutually beneficial alliance can be seen as one that has a number of motives. Firstly, both groups benefit from one another in terms of military engagement throughout Syria and in increasing their military clout and improving their capacity on the ground<sup>13</sup>. Yet, Ahrar Al-Sham, now a stronger and more effective rebel faction, after its absorption of Suqor Al-Sham, has allied itself with Al-Nusra for two more important reasons it seems; to counter balance and keep in check the more extremist narrative Al-Qaeda holds over Al-Nusra and to work together with the Nusra Front to counter-balance the Islamic State<sup>14</sup>. This is a strategic counter-balancing move by Ahrar Al-Sham both militarily and to a certain extent, ideologically.

Since their takeover of Idlib province, the coordinated force was created under ‘Jaysh al-Fatah’ (‘The Army of Conquest’) that includes Ahrar Al-Sham and other Islamist groups within the Al-Shamia Front. Since their capture of Idlib, civil councils have

been established to oversee law and order and the coordination of public services<sup>15</sup>. Al-Nusra declared that Sharia law would be imposed in Idlib with the leader, Abu Mohammed Al-Julani stating that Al-Nusra would not be the only one ruling-there and that there would be a ‘Shura’ (consolation) and a civil council<sup>16</sup>.

Are we now seeing a more moderate adaptation of ‘Islamist ideology’ from

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the Nusra Front, and is this in part due to the influence of Ahrar Al-Sham on the organisation? Al Jolani’s pledge that

he did not seek to monopolise power in Idlib should not be seen as a concession but rather a pragmatic approach to maintain a cooperative and unified rebel front. The creation of a joint security body for the city and Al-Nusra agreeing to a joint judicial and administrative structure with Ahrar Al-Sham and other rebel factions shows a shift in previously more hard line Sharia-law dominated impositions that Al-Nusra had enforced before. If Al-Nusra intends to maintain its growing popularity and sustain a level of legitimacy, at least in the North, then it must moderate the active application of

its extremist ideology if it wants to maintain rebel group's support in the future. Perhaps this can be seen as a successful level of counter-balancing by Ahrar Al-Sham of some of Al-Nusra's behaviours, from a governance standpoint. Or rather, some would argue that Ahrar Al-Sham remains hard line in their ideology and that the rebel faction now represents a more unified Salafist-Jihadist coalition. They have been able to influence Al-Nusra in Idlib, enabling a marginal yet important shift away from more extreme Islamist legal and social codes, which Ahrar Al-Sham have previously avoided actively implementing. Ahrar Al-Sham have backed the Islamic Commission governance body, which includes a network of courts that implement the Unified Arab Code, a written interpretation of Sharia law that extremist factions have rejected<sup>17</sup>.

The multilateral approach that Al-Nusra has adopted in its immediate governance of Idlib, might enable the group to expand its influence and power within the rebel groups and more broadly against the Islamic State as the conflict goes on<sup>18</sup>. However, it remains important to remain sceptical towards this supposed shift in Al-Nusra's move to strengthen its legitimacy as an

Islamist rebel group. Al-Nusra remains closely affiliated to Al-Qaeda and they remain loyal to their creation of an 'Islamic Emirate' in Syria.

It is the shift in governance, that leads onto the second perhaps more suggestive concept, the idea that effective rebel mergers and alliances may be able to counter-balance the sustainability of more 'jihadist ideology' in Syria. This will provide the biggest challenge towards the progression and sustainability of the Islamic State, Al-Nusra's direct rival. Extremist Islamist groups such as Al-Nusra and the Islamic State have used 'jihad', 'jihadism' and 'jihadist' rhetoric for two important and strategic reasons; firstly to mobilise and recruit foreign fighters and secondly to gain international attention and to incite 'fear' both within Syria and globally. Al-Nusra wants to create either an 'Islamic Emirate' and for the Islamic State an, 'Islamic Caliphate'.

Whilst the Islamic State upholds its jihadist identity as such, and has used violent tactics to assert it aims, to impose a caliphate, one thing remains vital if they want to have longevity in the future of Syria- the support of the people of the state, Syrian civilians

themselves. Civilians in Syria have encountered the biggest losses but also remain an important element in the successful creation of a caliphate. The strategic importance that mergers are having in terms of potentially catalysing a shift towards legitimacy of certain opposition groups in the conflict is important to note. If Islamist rebel groups such as Ahrar Al-Sham continue to strengthen and align with Al-Nusra this may allow the Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria to gain more legitimacy and popularity, and even longevity. What

this means, is that it is important and strategically key to pay close attention to Islamist mergers, and the development of Ahrar Al-Sham. Whilst also, analysing the increasing rivalry between Al-Nusra and the Islamic State, as this may represent a second conflict in the Syrian war - a battle for ideological legitimacy and pragmatic relevance, where the only guaranteed outcome are more civilian losses and a deepening of the conflict.

## **ABOUT THE PROGRAMME:**

### *Scope & Rationale:*

Jihadists represent a fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Although Jihadism is ‘lethal’, it does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. One silver lining for Al Qaeda, however, is its affiliate organizations. In Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, and Egypt, Al Qaeda has won over formidable local allies to its cause, expanding its reach, power, and numbers in the process. This string of mergers is not over. In places as diverse as the Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria, Al Qaeda-linked organizations are emerging. In retrospect; the death of Osama bin Laden, the onslaught of global war on terror, the Arab revolution and post Arab-revolution crises etc. have seriously impacted on Jihadists landscape which is constantly changing. Jihadism today is neither transnational such as Al-Qaeda central, nor national i.e. Hezbollah, but regional. It is also increasingly more sectarian. As the Jihadists’ landscape changes; the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of ‘Neo-Jihadism’.

*“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith’s mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.*

### *Methodology & Research areas/questions:*

This programme aims to conduct fact-based analyses of actual and potential uses of militancy and Jihadism as a tactic and belief and the changing concept of ‘war’ in the Muslim world; so that we may provide policy guidance to government officials and private sector decision-makers with alternative policy analyses. The key research questions are:



- How has Neo-Jihadism developed?
- Is Neo-Jihadism a new concept of war or culture?
- How Jihadism is perceived within the Islamic world and does it still carry meanings of a ‘just war’?
- How do its adherents maintain and facilitate it to transcend borders?
- Why have neo jihadi leaders been struggling to advance a coherent and effective response to the events of the Arab Spring and what trends are emerging
- Why, despite strong rhetoric of militancy, have we witnessed little action on the part of Neo-Jihadi groups that have emerged in countries that underwent regime change as a result of the Arab Spring?

*Programme Deliverables:*

1. Mapping the interplay between militant groups, the states and other external actors
2. A conflict and forecast analysis on current and emerging threats that might change the Jihadist landscape
3. In depth situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Strategic foresight for business and stakeholders that might be involved in the crisis affected regions

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)**

**IISA** is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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