

Ahrar al-Sham

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 2011

Disbanded: Group is active

First Attack: November 1, 2012: Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra attacked the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, killing several Syrian army soldiers and seizing weapons and vehicles (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹

Last Attack: May 21, 2019: Ahrar al-Sham, using munitions supplied by Turkey and fighting alongside HTS and Jaish al-Izza, captured the town of Kafr Nabudah, which had been taken by Syrian government forces several weeks prior (unknown killed, unknown wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Ahrar al-Sham is a Sunni Salafist militant group operating in northern Syria that was established in 2011 by amnestied Islamist prisoners in 2011. The group's primary goal is to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government but has struggled to fulfill this goal as more effort has been focused towards overcoming rebel oppositions within the Idlib province. Ahrar al-Sham was a key actor in several prominent coalitions and umbrella groups since its formation that bolstered its influence, and eventually garnered the support of Turkey. However, since its peak in 2015, Ahrar al-Sham succumbed to in-fighting and splintering, losing influence within northern Syria as other rebel opposition groups surpass it in strength and importance.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Ahrar al-Sham, also known as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, or the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant, is a Sunni Salafist militant group operating in Syria that aims to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government.³ Hassan Abboud and other former prisoners of the Assad Regime founded Ahrar al-Sham in late 2011 after Assad freed them in an

effort to placate religious protestors during the Arab Spring.⁴ The group initially operated in the Idlib governorate but quickly expanded throughout Syria.⁵ Although it conducts operations across the nation, Ahrar al-Sham remains most active in North and West Syria.⁶

Ahrar al-Sham has a long history of cooperating with other armed groups in Syria. Since 2012, Ahrar al-Sham has primarily coordinated attacks against the Syrian army and other militants sympathetic to the Assad Regime with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. Both groups became prominent by pioneering the use of IEDs in Syria as well as the practice of targeting military bases in order to capture weapons. In 2014, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence considered Ahrar al-Sham and HTS among the most effective Syrian opposition groups.⁷ Ahrar al-Sham is also known for uniting Islamist opposition forces under larger umbrella organizations. It led the formation of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) in 2012 and co-created the Islamic Front in 2013, which had 40,000-70,000 fighters and was Syria's largest umbrella group.⁸ When these groups drifted apart, Ahrar al-Sham absorbed many of the fighters from smaller factions within the umbrella organizations. In 2015, Ahrar al-Sham expanded its operations against the Assad Regime by co-creating the Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) umbrella organization, which pushed the Syrian army out of the Idlib governorate in June 2015.⁹ As a result of Jaysh al-Fatah's victory, Turkey and Saudi Arabia began funding Ahrar al-Sham in order to bolster Syrian opposition forces.¹⁰

Ahrar al-Sham worked with the Islamic State (IS) until January 2014 when tensions between the two groups escalated. Cooperation ceased when IS killed an Ahrar al-Sham fighter after the group's leader, Hassan Abboud, criticized IS commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for rejecting reconciliation efforts between Syrian Sunni militant groups and classifying other jihadists as infidels.¹¹ The two groups engaged in a series of small skirmishes. Violence escalated when Ahrar al-Sham and its allies, including Jabhat al-Nusra, began to actively target IS within Raqqa, a city in northwestern Syria, and drove IS out on January 6, 2014.¹² IS allegedly retaliated in February and September of 2014 with attacks that killed almost all of Ahrar al-Sham's leaders, including co-founders Abu Khalid al-Suri and Hassan Abboud.¹³ Ahrar al-Sham and IS reached an agreement in which Ahrar al-Sham would remove its fighters from IS-dominated Raqqa if IS removed its fighters from Ahrar al-Sham-dominated Idlib as well.¹⁴ Since the withdrawal of their forces out of the respective cities, there is little evidence of further violent clashes between Ahrar al-Sham and IS.

In addition to its combat operations, Ahrar al-Sham played a crucial role in negotiating ceasefires with the Assad regime despite its original resistance to peace talks. As a member of the Islamic Coalition, it wanted the opposition's political activities to be run only by groups fighting inside Syria.¹⁵ However, Ahrar al-Sham eventually agreed to its first ceasefire with the Syrian Army and Hezbollah on August 12, 2015. The ceasefire was brokered by Turkey and Iraq on behalf of Ahrar al-Sham and the Assad Regime, respectively. As part of the ceasefire, Ahrar al-Sham suspended hostilities for 48 hours in the southwestern city of Zabadani, as well as cities within the Idlib province: Al-Foua and Kefraya.¹⁶ Additional ceasefire talks were held in September 2015 between Ahrar al-Sham, which represented Idlib's Sunni militant groups, and Iran. During these talks, Ahrar al-Sham negotiated a six-month ceasefire between the Syrian Army and Hezbollah and opposition forces in Zabadani, Al-Foua, and Kefraya. It also agreed to a

population exchange that moved Shiites from Idlib to government-controlled areas and allowed Sunni militants to return to the province.¹⁷

In December 2015, Ahrar al-Sham withdrew from peace talks that were hosted by its ally, Saudi Arabia, after citing concerns that the parties were too sympathetic to the Assad Regime. Shortly thereafter, Ahrar al-Sham signed a statement with its allies that declared their intent to negotiate peace terms with Assad in 2016, but stated they would not allow him to remain in power for a transitional period after the war.¹⁸ Ahrar al-Sham was also not party to the February 2016 national ceasefire, and it supported the umbrella group Jaysh al-Fatah's May offensive in Aleppo.¹⁹ In October 2016, Ahrar al-Sham agreed to a ceasefire with Jund al-Aqsa. Jund al-Aqsa is a prominent Sunni-Salafi opposition group that was initially a subunit within Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Fatah al-Sham) formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. The ceasefire was brokered after Jund al-Aqsa merged into Fatah al-Sham.²⁰

In late 2016, Ahrar al-Sham began to splinter. Disagreements arose over the group's participation in Operation Euphrates Shield, a Turkish-led military operation against the Islamic State, and over merger negotiations with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Fatah al-Sham). Although Ahrar al-Sham's leaders issued a fatwa permitting the group's participation in Operation Euphrates Shield, many Ahrar al-Sham fighters argued that the necessary religious conditions to issue a fatwa had not been met. Simultaneously, members of Ahrar al-Sham's Shura Council disagreed on whether to merge with Fatah al-Sham, leading to contested leadership elections. Although a majority of the Shura Council elected Ali al-Omar as the group's leader, pro-Fatah al-Sham members refused to accept candidates other than former leader Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh or military commander Abu Saleh Tahhan as the group's new leader.²¹ Following the election, eight of the Shura Council's 22 members suspended their membership, and Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh formed an independent sub-faction within Ahrar al-Sham known as Jaysh al-Ahrar.²²

In January 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Fatah al-Sham) began attacking militant groups in the Aleppo and Idlib governorates that sent representatives to peace talks with the Assad Regime in Kazakhstan. Ahrar al-Sham did not participate in the peace conference. As a result of these attacks, Jaysh al-Mujahedeen, the Levantine Front's Aleppo-based fighters, and Jaysh al-Islam's Idlib-based fighters merged with Ahrar al-Sham.²³ Fatah al-Sham's attacks also prompted Jaysh al-Ahrar to leave Ahrar al-Sham and join Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. On February 9, 2017, Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh released his first public statement since becoming HTS's leader and called for unity in the Syrian insurgency.²⁴ These attacks prompted Ahrar al-Sham to target HTS, particularly in the Idlib governorate.²⁵

Although the groups occasionally clashed with each other, both Ahrar al-Sham and HTS collaborated with other Sunni opposition groups in a March offensive to capture territory in the Hama governorate from the Assad Regime. In April 2017, both groups offered protection to journalists who wished to cover the aftermath of the Assad Regime's chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun in the Idlib governorate.²⁶

In May 2017, the relationship between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham again started to fracture, apparently based on Ahrar's increased support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA).²⁷ These clashes over imagery were backgrounded by intensifying economic and military competition;

disagreements between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS arose over the provision of electricity in Idlib and control of strategically-significant transport routes and towns.²⁸ Additionally, Ahrar al-Sham and HTS were in a near constant contest over the control of armed opposition factions, and many soldiers defected back and forth between the two groups.²⁹ By June, Ahrar al-Sham had won over more recruits and was widely considered to have a larger force than HTS by a few thousand fighters. Though superior in quantity, Ahrar al-Sham lagged behind HTS in quality. Ahrar al-Sham was not able to properly integrate its newly acquired forces, while HTS successfully recruited higher quality forces with better equipment.³⁰

Open conflict between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS broke out in July 2017 in Eastern Idlib and South Aleppo. Ahrar al-Sham reportedly tried to protect the FSA from HTS' attempts at consolidation, and the conflict quickly expanded across Northwest Syria.³¹ Despite the considerable gains in manpower Ahrar al-Sham had made in the months leading up to the outbreak of conflict, these groups were not coordinated enough to mount the necessary defense.³² HTS quickly became the dominant force in Idlib at the expense of Ahrar al-Sham, which rapidly lost hundreds of fighters.³³ After a few days, HTS asserted its victory by way of a ceasefire. The ceasefire reallocated several pieces of territory that had been under Ahrar al-Sham's control. This included the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which Ahrar al-Sham had leveraged to make a profit of over one million USD a month. In losing control of this border cross, Ahrar al-Sham also lost a significant portion of its income.³⁴

Following heavy attrition from its conflict with HTS, Ahrar al-Sham tried to recoup by selecting Hassan Sawfan as its new organizational leader. Sawfan came from moderate Islamist thinking, believing that attacking opposition groups would not further Ahrar al-Sham's cause; instead, Sawfan believed the group needed to unify other Islamist factions within Syria. ﷲ³⁵ With calls for unification from the Syrian Islamic Council, Ahrar al-Sham backed the idea of a unified national army to bolster the strength of the fractured rebel groups against HTS and the Assad regime.³⁶ It appears, however, that Ahrar al-Sham persisted in its military cooperation with HTS against regime targets despite the competitive nature between the two groups³⁷

In February 2018, Ahrar al-Sham grew stronger when the Sunni Islamist group Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement merged under Ahrar al-Sham's banner and together, aligned under the umbrella group Jabhat Tahrir Souriya (JTS),³⁸ Sawfan maintained his position as leader of Ahrar al-Sham, while Sawfan's deputy leader Jaber Ali Basha was selected as leader of JTS, and the leader of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement was chosen to be JTS deputy commander.³⁹ HTS quickly attacked JTS, but JTS resisted the assault and reportedly seized control of 36 strategically valuable cities from HTS after just a few days.⁴⁰ In August, JTS joined a Turkish-led coalition called the National Liberation Front (NLF), a prominent rival of HTS in the Idlib province.⁴¹ The NLF posits its affiliated civilian arm, the "interim government," as the rightful administrator of Idlib, which HTS counters with its own body, the "salvation government."⁴²

Several months of fighting between JTS and HTS seemed to conclude in January 2019 when HTS successfully strengthened its control over most of northwestern Syria and reached a ceasefire with its opponent.⁴³ Under the terms of the deal, HTS expanded its control over much of northern Syria. This included the Ghab plain, where Ahrar al-Sham agreed to dissolve its presence as part of the ceasefire, and other territory that had formerly been under the control of

Ahrar al-Sham and other NLF-aligned groups.⁴⁴ Although Ahrar al-Sham lost significant territory to HTS in the ceasefire, it (along with the NLF-aligned Saqour al-Sham) retained control over two cities, Maarat al-Nouman and Ariha, and a few other towns in northwestern Syria.⁴⁵ In addition to this exchange of territory, the deal also included a limited handover of weapons from Ahrar al-Sham to HTS.⁴⁶

In March 2019, media outlets reported that Ahrar al-Sham had resumed violent conflict with HTS, including a battle for the town of Umm Seir in southern Idlib governorate.⁴⁷ Two months later, in May 2019, other sources indicated that Ahrar al-Sham had begun collaborating with HTS to fight the Assad regime in Idlib. As the government's forces encroached further on Idlib, the two militant groups acted in concert to resist their attacks.⁴⁸

In November 2020, Ahrar al-Sham struggled with internal splintering after Jaber Ali Basha, the leader of the group, dismissed the head of the military wing. This dismissal led to some military personnel demanding the reinstatement of the former leader Hassan Sawfan who held closer ties to HTS at the time of his resignation.⁴⁹ With the military wing positioning themselves towards Sawfan and HTS, the leadership and ideological wings stayed closer to JTS, creating a persisting division in the group. Following Amer al-Sheikh's appointment as Ahrar al-Sham's leader in 2021, around 1,000 key fighters allegedly defected. Their reasons for defection included Sheikh's apathy towards their demands about specific positions in the council and internal interests, in addition to allegedly not paying some of the key fighters in the organization.⁵⁰

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

With the exception of the group's early leaders, Ahrar al-Sham's commander is usually elected by a majority vote of its 22-member Shura Council and typically serves for a one-year term.⁵¹

Abu Khalid al-Suri (Unknown to February 23, 2014): Suri, also known as Abu Omeir al-Shami, was one of Ahrar al-Sham's co-founders. He also acted as Al Qaeda's (AQ) representative in Syria and was charged with facilitating reconciliation among regional Islamist militants. Suri was killed in an alleged IS suicide bombing against Ahrar al-Sham's headquarters in February 2014. Following his death, AQ published a eulogy for the fallen Ahrar al-Sham leader. It also posted a video documenting his participation in Al Farouq training camp in Afghanistan, including photos of him with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁵²

Hassan Abboud (2012 to September 9, 2014): Abboud, also known as Abu al-Hassan or Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, co-founded and subsequently led Ahrar al-Sham. He also led the political office of the Islamic Front, which was the largest alliance of armed groups to operate in the Syrian civil war. Abboud made no public appearances during Ahrar al-Sham's rise, but he established a consistent media presence after emerging in mid-2013 with an interview on Al Jazeera. He was killed in an alleged IS car bombing in Idlib that also killed other senior leaders in the Islamic Front.⁵³

Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh (September 11, 2014 to September 2015): Sheikh, also known as Abu Jaber, became Ahrar al-Sham's interim leader after Hassan Abboud's death. Prior to the Syrian civil war, Sheikh was imprisoned by the Assad Regime in 2005 for transferring foreign fighters to Iraq but was released in September 2011. Before he joined Ahrar al-Sham's Shura Council, Sheikh commanded units in the Free Syrian Army and Ahrar al-Sham battalions in Aleppo. Under his leadership, Ahrar al-Sham launched a successful military campaign in Idlib and moderated its rhetoric in an attempt to appeal to the West. In September 2015, Sheikh stepped down as commander in order to found Jaysh Halab, an umbrella organization of Aleppo-based militant groups that includes Ahrar al-Sham. In late 2016, Sheikh formed a sub-faction with Ahrar al-Sham known as Jaysh al-Ahrar in response to contested leadership elections. Sheikh ultimately defected from Ahrar al-Sham to become the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Despite this position, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the previous head of al-Nusra and the current head of military for HTS, is widely considered to be the 'true' leader of HTS.⁵⁴

Abu Yahya al-Hamawi (September 2015 to November 29, 2016): In September 2015, Hamawi, also known as Muhannad al-Masri, succeeded Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh as Ahrar al-Sham's commander. Hamawi is from Qalaat al-Madiq, a populous Sunni Arab community in northwestern Syria, and is trained as a civil engineer. He was imprisoned several times by the Assad Regime until his final release in March 2011. After his release, Hamawi commanded many opposition units, including a brigade within the Syrian Mujahedeen, until he became Ahrar al-Sham's head of operations in rural Hama in January 2014. In September 2014, Hamawi became Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh's deputy commander, a position he held until he replaced Sheikh as Ahrar al-Sham's commander, serving from September 2015 to November 29, 2016.⁵⁵

Labib al-Nahhas (September 2014 to Present): Nahhas, also known as Abu Ezzeddine, is Ahrar al-Sham's Foreign Affairs Director. Nahhas lived in western countries for 15 years before returning to Syria in 2010. In 2014, Nahhas joined Liwa al-Haq, a faction that merged with Ahrar al-Sham in late 2014. He became Ahrar al-Sham's Foreign Affairs Director shortly after an attack killed most of the group's leaders in September 2014. In addition to visiting with western diplomats, Nahhas has published opinion pieces in The Washington Post and The Telegraph that call on the West to engage with Ahrar al-Sham.⁵⁶

Ali al-Omar (November 29, 2016 to August 1, 2017): Omar, also known as Abu Ammar al-Omar, succeeded Abu Yahya al-Hamawi as Ahrar al-Sham's commander. Prior to his succession, he served as Abu Yahya al-Hamawi's deputy commander.⁵⁷

Hassan Safwan (August 1, 2017 to August 2018): Safwan was appointed as Ahrar al-Sham's leader following clashes between HTS and Ahrar in July 2017. He became the leader of JTS when it was formed in 2018. He was a former inmate of the Sednayya prison.⁵⁸ Safwan was expected to revitalize the group following losses in combat to HTS and defections of its own members to HTS.⁵⁹ He resigned from his position in August 2018.⁶⁰

Jaber Ali Basha (August 2018 to January 9, 2021): Following Safwan's resignation, Ali Basha was selected by the group's senior leadership, known as the Shura Council, to serve as

its top commander. He holds a master's degree in Islamic Shariah from Damascus University. Ali Basha served within Ahrar al-Sham's leadership prior to Safwan's accession to the top post, at which point he was demoted.⁶¹

Amer al-Sheikh (January 9, 2021 to present): Sheikh, also known as Abu Ubaidah Qatana was appointed as Ahrar al-Sham's new leader after organizational worries about leadership succession due to a division between Basha and Safwan's military wing. Sheikh was also a former inmate of the Sednaya prison, like Sawfan, and allegedly maintains close ties with Turkey.⁶² His tenure as Ahrar al-Sham's leader has led to 1,000 fighters defecting because of his avoidance of their leadership demands.⁶³

B. NAME CHANGES

In January 2013, Ahrar al-Sham absorbed several smaller groups and lengthened its formal name to Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham). However, it continues to be called by its short form, Ahrar al-Sham. When it merged with Nour al-Din al-Zinki, it formed an umbrella group known as Jabhat Tahrir Souriya (JTS).⁶⁴ JTS later allied with the Turkish-backed National Front for Liberation to incorporate many of the northwestern rebel groups.⁶⁵ The group continues to be frequently identified in news reports as Ahrar al-Sham, in addition to JTS or NLF.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

Due to the nature of Ahrar al-Sham's affiliations, some of these size estimates may represent the total number of total fighters in various umbrella groups rather than Ahrar al-Sham specifically.

- 2013: 10,000-20,000 (BBC)⁶⁶
- 2013: 10,000-20,000 (The Economist)⁶⁷
- 2014: 10,000-15,000 (Washington Post)⁶⁸
- 2014: 20,000 (Al Jazeera)⁶⁹
- 2015: 20,000 (The Independent)⁷⁰
- 2017: 20,000 (Asia Times)⁷¹
- 2017: 18,000-20,000 (Foreign Policy)⁷²

D. RESOURCES

Ahrar al-Sham made most of its money by charging trucks a toll to cross the Bab al-Hawa border with Turkey until the group surrendered the border—and income source—to HTS in 2017 after several days of fighting.⁷³ It also receives funding from sources outside of Syria.⁷⁴ Ahrar al-Sham first received foreign funding from Islamist networks in the Persian Gulf that were reportedly linked to the Qatari government.⁷⁵ Through these networks, Salafi fundraiser Sheikh Hajjaj al-Ajami became one of the group's key donors in 2012.⁷⁶ In 2014, Qatar began funding Ahrar al-Sham. In response to Qatar's move to support Ahrar al-Sham and other groups in Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar.⁷⁷ However, in 2015, Saudi Arabia and Turkey began funding Ahrar al-Sham in a joint effort to promote the Jaysh al-Fatah umbrella group and bolster Syrian opposition forces.⁷⁸

Foreign support is less apparent with respect to recruitment. Prior to 2013, Ahrar al-Sham accepted foreign fighters in order to supplement its forces. Since then, reports on Ahrar al-

Sham's stance regarding foreign fighters have varied.⁷⁹ Ahrar al-Sham's military effectiveness has allowed the group to recruit a high number of local Syrian fighters.⁸⁰

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

At its inception in 2012, Ahrar al-Sham operated primarily in Idlib.⁸¹ In 2013, Ahrar al-Sham expanded its operations to Aleppo, Hama, Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, Deir al-Zour, Daraa, and Latakia.⁸² Ahrar al-Sham began operations in Quneitra in 2014 and expanded to Homs in 2015.⁸³ As of mid-2018, the group primarily operated in Idlib.⁸⁴

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

Ahrar al-Sham seeks to establish a Sunni Islamic state in Syria. Unlike the Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham emphasizes that its campaign is limited to Syria and that it is not pursuing global Jihad.⁸⁵ To combat the impression of extremism, Ahrar al-Sham began rebranding itself as a moderate group in 2015. With Turkey's help, Ahrar al-Sham has sought to convince the United States that it is a better option for post-war Syria than IS or the Assad Regime.⁸⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In September 2013, Ahrar al-Sham joined the Islamic Coalition, a political group that called for opposition to the Assad Regime to be run only by groups fighting inside Syria and opposed the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.⁸⁷ In December 2013, Ahrar al-Sham's leader Hassan Abboud stated that the group would not abide by the results of the Geneva II peace conference, a UN-sponsored conference that included the Assad Regime and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.⁸⁸

Despite its original hostility to negotiations, Ahrar al-Sham eventually agreed to its first ceasefire with the Syrian Army and Hezbollah on August 12, 2015. Under the ceasefire, Ahrar al-Sham agreed to suspend hostilities for 48 hours in Zabadani, Al-Foua, and Kefraya.⁸⁹ This agreement was brokered by Turkey, who represented Ahrar al-Sham, and Iran, who was acting on behalf of the Assad Regime. In September 2015, Ahrar al-Sham again engaged in ceasefire talks, this time directly negotiating with Iran. During these talks, Ahrar al-Sham agreed to a six-month ceasefire under which its forces in Zabadani, Al-Foua, and Kefraya would not mount attacks against the Syrian army or Hezbollah. It also agreed to a population exchange that expelled Shiites from Idlib and allowed Sunni militants to return to the province.⁹⁰

In December 2015, Ahrar al-Sham withdrew from peace talks that were hosted by its ally, Saudi Arabia, after citing concerns that the parties were too sympathetic to the Assad Regime. Shortly thereafter, Ahrar al-Sham signed a statement with its allies that declared an intent to negotiate peace terms with Assad in 2016. However, this statement also made clear that they would not allow Assad to remain in power for a transitional period after the war.⁹¹

Several militant groups signed a national ceasefire in February 2016, but Ahrar al-Sham was not party to this agreement.⁹² In December 2016, Ahrar al-Sham denied signing onto a ceasefire brokered by Turkey and Russia, however the group allegedly signed onto the nationwide agreement with many rebel groups in Syria.⁹³ Several months later, Russia, Iran, and Turkey created another ceasefire that included the de-escalation of zones within Syria, including Idlib, however it is unclear if Ahrar al-Sham was one of the rebel groups who explicitly opposed this agreement.⁹⁴

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

Ahrar al-Sham was one of the first groups in Syria to use IEDs and to target military bases in order to capture weapons.⁹⁵ From 2012 to 2014, its primary targets were the Syrian army, militants who supported the Assad Regime (e.g., Hezbollah), and select Kurdish brigades. In 2014, Ahrar al-Sham began targeting the Islamic State.

As its weapons arsenal expanded, Ahrar al-Sham began conducting more large-scale assaults. The group allegedly has a Technical Division devoted to cyberattacks.⁹⁶ As of 2022, there are no reports of Ahrar al-Sham using suicide attacks despite its close ties with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which regularly utilized this tactic until its organizational adjustment in 2020 towards moderation.⁹⁷

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

As of March 2022, there is no observable evidence that Ahrar al-Sham has committed a major attack since 2019.

November 1, 2012: Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra) attacked the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, killing several Syrian army soldiers and seizing weapons and vehicles (unknown casualties).⁹⁸

December 2012: Ahrar al-Sham rescued NBC correspondent Richard Engel from the North Idlib Falcons Brigade, a Sunni militant group associated with the Free Syrian Army that had taken Engel as a hostage (unknown casualties).⁹⁹

March 8, 2013: Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra seized Raqqa from government forces, making it the first provincial capital to come completely under the control of opposition forces (unknown casualties).¹⁰⁰

August 4, 2013: Ahrar al-Sham, the Islamic State, Al-Nusra, Jaysh Muhajireen wal-Ansar, and Suqqor al-Izz attacked Alawite villages as part of a Latakia offensive. They killed 190 civilians, while Ahrar al-Sham only lost 3 fighters. IS and Jaysh Muhajireen wal-Ansar took 200 hostages (193+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁰¹

January 6, 2014: Ahrar al-Sham coordinated with Al-Nusra, Islamic Front units, and battalions from the Supreme Military Council to drive IS out of Raqqa. IS retook Raqqa in July 2014 (100 dead, unknown wounded).¹⁰²

June 9, 2015: Ahrar al-Sham coordinated with the umbrella organization Jaysh al-Fatah to drive the Syrian army out of Idlib province (45 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁰³

August 7, 2015: Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra clashed with Assad Regime forces in al-Qarqor near Idlib province. The militants killed Ali Kan'an, a prominent Syrian army field commander (1+ killed, unknown wounded).¹⁰⁴

April 28, 2016: Ahrar al-Sham and other militants attacked members of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, an umbrella organization of Kurdish and Arab fighters. Ahrar al-Sham and its allies lost 53 fighters, which represents the largest opposition death toll from clashes with Kurdish forces during the Syrian War (64 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁰⁵

May 12, 2016: Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra seized Al-Zara, a predominantly Alawite village in the Homs governorate, from government forces as part of an operation known as "revenge for Aleppo." The militants kidnapped and executed 42 civilians (49 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁰⁶

August 7, 2016: Ahrar al-Sham coordinated with the Jaysh al-Fatah umbrella organization and the Fatah Halab control room to break through the Assad Regime's siege on the city of Aleppo. On August 10, the Assad Regime reportedly retaliated with a chlorine attack on opposition-held areas in the city of Aleppo (unknown casualties).¹⁰⁷

October 2016: After a period of rising tensions, Ahrar al-Sham claimed that Jund al-Aqsa, a former member of the Jaysh al-Fatah umbrella organization, had ties to IS and launched an offensive against the group. As a result of this offensive, Jund al-Aqsa merged into Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. Fatah al-Sham leaders also negotiated a ceasefire with Ahrar al-Sham (unknown casualties).¹⁰⁸

January 2017: Ahrar al-Sham fought a few brief skirmishes with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.¹⁰⁹

March 24, 2017: Ahrar al-Sham began a campaign against the Syrian army in the Hama governorate that coincided with an attack by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. By March 31, all opposition began to retreat following their failed attacks (unknown casualties).¹¹⁰

July 2017: Ahrar al-Sham fought with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) for several days. HTS managed to push Ahrar al-Sham out of many strategically significant positions in Idlib.¹¹¹

February 2018: Jabhat Tahrir Souriya (the umbrella group formed by Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zinki) fought Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, managing to take 36 strategically valuable cities from HTS after just a few days (unknown casualties).¹¹²

October 29, 2018: Ahrar al-Sham attacked a Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham base in northwestern Aleppo, killing two HTS commanders (two killed, unknown wounded).¹¹³

March 18, 2019: Ahrar al-Sham fought Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham for control of the town Umm Seir in southern Idlib governate (unknown casualties).¹¹⁴

May 21, 2019: Ahrar al-Sham, using munitions supplied by Turkey and fighting alongside Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Jaish al-Izza, captured the town of Kafr Nabudah, which had been taken by Syrian government forces several weeks prior (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹¹⁵

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

Ahrar al-Sham is not designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, or the European Union.

The UN Security Council attempted to include Ahrar al-Sham as a designated terrorist organization several times between 2015 and 2016. Russia, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and the UAE supported the classification of Ahrar al-Sham as a terrorist group, but the Security Council did not receive a unanimous consensus each time the debate was raised.¹¹⁶

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Like many opposition groups in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham has been active in providing public services to the communities under its control.¹¹⁷ It maintains a relief office that engages in humanitarian missions and provides the population with food and fuel. The organization also operates water pumping stations, dams, and a road and bridge repair team.¹¹⁸ As of 2022, it is unclear if Ahrar al-Sham is still providing these public services.

In June 2015, Ahrar al-Sham intervened to end a Jabhat al-Nusra massacre that killed 20 Druze villagers in Idlib.¹¹⁹ In July 2015, Ahrar al-Sham announced in a Washington Post opinion piece that it would protect Syria's minority communities.¹²⁰

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Many Ahrar al-Sham members are sympathetic to Al Qaeda (AQ), but there is not a formal alliance between the two groups.¹²¹ In 2014, AQ posted a video and photos documenting Ahrar al-Sham leader Abu Khalid al-Suri participating in the Al Farouq training camp in Afghanistan, including photos of him with Osama bin Laden and current AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹²² AQ also claimed that Hassan Abboud had been in contact with Zawahiri, and that it sent experienced fighters to assist Ahrar al-Sham in Syria.¹²³ Despite its early leaders' ties to AQ, Ahrar al-Sham has not emphasized its relationship with AQ. However, it worked closely with former AQ affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.¹²⁴

Ahrar al-Sham has had both a close and complicated relationship with HTS. Both groups are part of the Jaysh al-Fatah umbrella organization, which was formed in 2015.¹²⁵ However, tensions arose between Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra in January 2016 when Ahrar al-Sham rejected a

merger with Al-Nusra. The leadership of Ahrar al-Sham claimed Al-Nusra's AQ ties and pursuit of global jihad were counterproductive to the Syrian revolution. Most of the group rejected the merger, though a sub-faction, known as Jaysh al-Ahrar, ultimately left Ahrar al-Sham to join HTS.¹²⁶ Days after the merger failed, a fight broke out between Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra in Idlib province. Several insurgents on both sides were killed before other militant groups brokered a ceasefire.¹²⁷ Although the groups continued to cooperate throughout 2016, fighting resumed in early 2017. A series of skirmishes and attacks by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in the Idlib and Aleppo governorates led some prominent opposition groups to merge with Ahrar al-Sham.¹²⁸ Since these mergers, Ahrar al-Sham has frequently fought against HTS, especially in the Idlib governorate.¹²⁹ In 2019, the group's relationship with HTS has seen repeated upheaval. After military victories by HTS, the two groups agreed on a ceasefire in January.¹³⁰ Under the terms of this deal, Ahrar al-Sham made significant concessions to HTS.¹³¹ In March, however, the news media reported that the two militant organizations had resumed violent conflict.¹³² Two months later, in May, other sources attested that Ahrar al-Sham and HTS had begun collaborating to fight the forces of the Syrian government in Idlib.¹³³

Ahrar al-Sham's relationship with the Islamic State has changed throughout its lifetime. Initially, Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic State cooperated with each other. However, tensions between the two groups grew after Ahrar al-Sham's leader Hassan Abboud criticized IS commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for rejecting reconciliation efforts between Syrian Sunni militant groups and classifying other jihadists as infidels.¹³⁴ After receiving this criticism, IS killed a member of Ahrar al-Sham in January 2014. A series of small skirmishes ensued, and Ahrar al-Sham and its allies, including Jabhat al-Nusra, began to target IS and drove it out of the Syrian city of Raqqa.¹³⁵ IS allegedly retaliated in February and September of 2014 with attacks that killed almost all of Ahrar al-Sham's leaders, including co-founders Abu Khalid al-Suri and Hassan Abboud.¹³⁶ Since these assaults, Ahrar al-Sham periodically clashed with IS in northern Syria following 2014 but there is little evidence of recent conflict as of 2022..¹³⁷

In addition to its relationships with individual groups, Ahrar al-Sham has been an active leader in several Syrian Islamist umbrella organizations. It formed three prominent umbrella organizations—the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), the Islamic Front, and Jaysh al-Fatah—and often absorbs smaller groups when these organizations drift apart. Ahrar al-Sham formed its first umbrella organization, the SIF, in December 2012 in order to unite Syrian Islamic opposition forces and pursue a Syrian government that implements Shariah law.¹³⁸ While the SIF refused to come under the command of the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) Supreme Military Council (SMC), it regularly coordinated military maneuvers with SMC affiliated brigades.¹³⁹ In January 2013, three smaller SIF members (Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya, and Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila) merged into Ahrar al-Sham, making it the SIF's largest member.¹⁴⁰

In December 2013, Ahrar al-Sham dissolved the SIF and worked with six other militant groups (Suqqor al-Sham, the Tawhid Brigade of Aleppo, Jaysh al-Islam, the Haq Brigade of Homs, the Kurdish Islamic Front (KIF), and Ansar al-Sham) to co-create the Islamic Front, the largest alliance of Syrian opposition forces that has existed in the Syrian Civil War. The Islamic Front sought to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government and had 40,000-70,000 fighters at its peak.¹⁴¹ Ahrar al-Sham led the Islamic Front's Shariah and Political Offices. The group remained one of the organization's most influential members until the Islamic Front drifted apart

in mid-2014 due to disagreements between Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam.¹⁴² After the Islamic Front collapsed, Ahrar al-Sham absorbed the Haq Brigade of Homs and the KIF, a brigade it allegedly helped to create in order to dismiss the impression that the Islamic Front's conflict with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) was ethnically motivated.¹⁴³

In spring 2015, Ahrar al-Sham absorbed the sizeable Suqour al-Sham faction and co-created the umbrella group Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and other smaller brigades (Ferliq al-Sham, Ajnad al-Sham, Jaysh al-Sunnah, al-Haq Brigade, and Jund al-Aqsa).¹⁴⁴ Since it claimed control of Idlib province in June 2015, Jaysh al-Fatah has remained a prominent umbrella organization by expanding its operations to other regions in Syria, such as Aleppo.¹⁴⁵ In addition to Jaysh al-Fatah, Ahrar al-Sham is part of Jaysh Halab, an umbrella organization that was created by former Ahrar al-Sham leader Sheikh Hashim al-Sheikh in February 2016. The group includes five Free Syrian Army factions (the 101st Division, the 16th Division, the First Regiment, the Mountain Falcons Brigade and the Sultan Murad Division) and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, but excludes HTS. It is unclear if Jaysh Halab has conducted any attacks.¹⁴⁶ On June 23, 2016, Ahrar al-Sham absorbed Jaysh al-Sham.¹⁴⁷

In February 2018, Ahrar al-Sham grew stronger when Nour al-Din al-Zenki merged under Ahrar al-Sham's banner and joined Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS). Safwan continued as Ahrar al-Sham's leader, Basha was chosen to be the leader of the new group, and the leader of Zenki was chosen to be deputy.¹⁴⁸ HTS quickly attacked JTS, but JTS proved to be able to resist the assault and even managed to take 36 strategically-valuable cities from HTS after just a few days.¹⁴⁹ In August of 2018, JTS joined the Turkish-led coalition called the NLF.¹⁵⁰

As of 2022, Ahrar al-Sham continues to compete with HTS in light of recent defections due to leadership disputes within the military wing.¹⁵¹ Ahrar al-Sham has maintained its connection to JTS and NLF for material support from Turkey and other rebel organizations within the umbrella groups.

D. EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AND STATE SPONSORS

Qatar began providing Ahrar al-Sham with weapons and money in early 2014.¹⁵² In 2015, Saudi Arabia and Turkey began sending Ahrar al-Sham weapons and money in a joint effort to promote the Jaysh al-Fatah umbrella group and bolster Syrian opposition forces.¹⁵³ Turkey has also pressured Ahrar al-Sham to distance itself from Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁵⁴

In August 2018, Ahrar al-Sham, as part of Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (JTS), joined an umbrella group organized by Turkey, the National Liberation Front (NLF). The NLF includes about a dozen factions of the Free Syrian Army enjoying Turkish support, as well as the umbrella group JTS, Jaysh al-Ahrar, and Suqour al-Sham.¹⁵⁵ Consequently, Turkey has since acted as a state sponsor for JTS and Ahrar al-Sham and has furnished the group with weapons for its operations in Idlib.¹⁵⁶ Since Ahrar al-Sham lost much of its claims in Idlib due to advances by HTS, Turkey has funneled more resources towards HTS as Ahrar al-Sham attempts to overcome internal divisions.¹⁵⁷

MAPS

- Syria

- Aleppo

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