

9

AHRAR AL-SHAM'S POLITICISATION DURING THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Jérôme Drevon

A substantial number of independent Salafi armed groups emerged after 2011.¹ This remarkable development contrasts with the affiliation of most Salafi-jihadi groups to al-Qaida in the 2000s.² The most widely covered case was the Islamic State (IS), which emancipated from al-Qaida and claimed to revive the caliphate with uninhibited violence.³ But Islamic State only represents the most extreme trajectory. Many Salafi armed groups have distanced themselves from al-Qaida and developed more realistic political approaches during the conflicts that have plagued Libya and Syria since 2011. These illustrate the polarisation of armed Salafism, the dissociation of many Salafi armed groups from al-Qaida and the Islamic State's coup over al-Qaida's international leadership. This chapter defines the most perceptible trend characterising armed Salafism after 2011 as *politicisation*. This concept empirically accounts for the development of realistic tactical and strategic objectives, durable alliances with other actors including foreign states and non-state armed groups, as well as the normalisation of these groups' interactions with the population.

Salafi-jihadi groups such as al-Qaida or Islamic State pursue political objectives. Fighting the US presence in the Middle East and re-establishing the caliphate are inherently political ambitions. But the choice of the term 'politicisation' accentuates armed groups' involvement in political matters,⁴ in contrast to the pursuit of utopian and ultimately unreachable objectives.

Politicisation underlines the alignment between clear political and military objectives, beyond al-Qaida's excessive focus on the military dimension of jihad, or Islamic State's uncompromising internal theological debates. The concept instead stresses armed groups' engagement with other armed groups (especially non-Salafi) and the international system of states, which jihadi-Salafism vilifies on theological grounds.⁵ While the politicisation concept can be contested, it reflects these groups' own internal discourse on balancing political versus military objectives and means.⁶ It is also more appropriate than the concepts of moderation,⁷ or de-radicalisation,⁸ which are not applicable to armed groups that still use violence.

The Syrian Salafi armed group Ahrar al-Sham epitomises the most prominent case of politicisation. By 2014, Ahrar al-Sham was the leading insurgent group in Syria, with the largest number of soldiers, presence throughout Syrian opposition-held areas and relatively strong ties to foreign countries, including Turkey and Qatar. Ahrar al-Sham explicitly rejected al-Qaida's legacy and developed a more inclusive approach to other groups and the population. This chapter traces the group's emergence and development to demonstrate how pre-war developments and a de-centralised alliance-based expansion underpinned its politicisation over the years. This case-study also contends that politicisation was sustained by the group's internal institutionalisation, which ultimately explains its successes and failures during the conflict. This chapter is based on extensive field research interviews in Turkey and northwest Syria in 2019 with an array of leaders and members of Ahrar al-Sham, armed opposition groups and independent Syrian Islamists.

Ahrar al-Sham's Roots in the Syrian Islamist Social Movement

Ahrar al-Sham is largely the off-shoot of the Syrian Islamist Social Movement (ISM). The group's embeddedness in the Islamist Social Movement facilitated its expansion, in comparison with other armed opposition groups that could not rely on any type of structured organisation given the weakness of Syrian civil society before 2011. Embeddedness in the Islamist Social Movement has framed Ahrar al-Sham's ideological developments and shaped its de-centralised organisational structures. It has eased the group's initial expansion in contrast to local armed groups that failed to expand beyond

their geographical areas, but also in comparison with Jabhat al-Nusra (Front of Support), which initially embraced a covert mode of organisation.

The Syrian Islamist Social Movement has been historically formed around many individuals, conservative families and informal groups sharing a broad collective identity and politico-religious views despite internal ideological divergences.⁹ While repressive state policies prevented its public consolidation, low-level informal connections throughout the country existed between informal groups of friends, students, university graduates and locals. The Islamist Social Movement pervaded most of Syria. It was particularly influential in some areas around Aleppo, Hama and the neighbourhood of Duma in Damascus. Although the regime had long tried to divide Syrian Islamists by manipulating the clergy¹⁰ and supporting Sunni Islamists abroad – such as Hamas in Palestine – the Islamist Social Movement had the potential to transform into a ‘radical milieu’, defined as a local environment that ‘shares [insurgents’] perspective and objectives, approves of certain forms of violence, and (at least to a certain extent) supports the violent group morally and logistically’.¹¹

The founding military units (brigades, *katā’ib*) of Ahrar al-Sham emerged in the Islamist Social Movement of northern Hama and Idlib before expanding throughout the country. This region was the epicentre of the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, which peaked in 1982 when the city of Hama was ravaged by regime forces causing up to 40,000 casualties.¹² State repression effectively incapacitated the Brotherhood in the region at the time, but subsequent constraints on political Islam curbed neither the religiosity of the population, nor the emergence of new religious trends not affiliated with the organisation. The next Islamist generations, including Muslim Brotherhood families formerly repressed by the regime, were influenced by domestic and regional debates on matters ranging from the *Ṣaḥwa* religious movement in Saudi Arabia¹³ to the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹⁴

Emerging in northwest Syria was a comparative structural advantage. Other geographical areas, especially around the cities of Damascus and the opposition stronghold of Homs, were quickly besieged by regime forces or proved unable to maintain strong connections with one another and with foreign supporters of the opposition (both states and individuals). Syrian insurgents in the south of Syria were restrained by strong Jordanian control,

while the east of the country was ultimately swayed by Islamic State, benefitting from its Iraqi strategic depth. Northwest Syria was comparatively widely connected to foreign supporters and logistical support from the early days of the uprising and benefitted from the Turkish *laissez-faire* attitude.

In comparison to other armed groups which similarly emerged in northwest Syria, Ahrar al-Sham was the first group to agglomerate the majority of early Islamist brigades that spread in the region after 2011. These Islamists created the first military brigades in their villages and cities by gathering together friends, neighbours and trusted contacts – a mobilising pattern shared with non-Islamist groups at the beginning of the uprising. But, in contrast to the nationalist and less-ideological groups that only gradually endorsed violence to protect the mass protests and in reaction to repression, the Islamist brigades wanted to face the regime from the onset, since they believed that non-violence would not lead to regime change. More importantly, they (1) shared similar ideas and world-views and (2) were already connected through loose social networks. These characteristics contrast with other local factions that emerged in certain geographical areas or for the purpose of specific military battles, but which were quickly plagued by administrative issues.¹⁵

Ahrar al-Sham's characteristics shaped the group's early ideological and organisational construction. The group's early cells emerged before the congregation of many independent brigades into the Free Syrian Army. The Syrian Islamists who created Ahrar al-Sham in northwest Syria started with clearer objectives and worldviews that contrasted with more nationalist and local gatherings, which did not necessarily embrace a coherent political project. Ahrar al-Sham's early brigades convened many meetings at the beginning of the conflict in order to coordinate their efforts and gather resources. Early interactions between an array of Islamists from diverging ideological backgrounds required a consensual approach to prevent internal dissent. Considering their lack of organisational experience, the leaders of Ahrar al-Sham's early cells had to agree that they should define their ideological principles and make decisions in consensus in order to remain united.

This choice imposed a horizontal hierarchy among the group's early brigades, whose leaders gained a seat in the group's newly formed leadership council and were thus endowed with responsibility for strategic decision-making (Ahrar al-Sham's *majlis al-shūrā*).¹⁶ This contrasted with most

brigades, which remained centred on one geographical stronghold (for example, a city or inter-connected villages) and did not easily share power with brigades from other areas, often splitting up over people and resources. Ahrar al-Sham's early networking structure moreover developed a mainstream ideological frame that every sub-leader could embrace. It positioned the group in mainstream Islamism, despite pre-2011 divergences of opinion. Although widely labelled as 'Salafi-jihadist', differences of religious traditions between more scholastic or jihadi approaches to Salafism, for instance, became irrelevant when the immediate objective was to face a regime committed to repressing a popular uprising. This choice was reinforced by the joining of many Syrians who previously fought jihad abroad while opposing al-Qaida's choice to confront Western countries.

These key features explain the network effect underpinning Ahrar al-Sham's quick development during the first year of the conflict. The network effect reflects a self-fulfilling dynamic that bolstered Ahrar al-Sham's expansion: being a large group helps to gather more funding, recruits and popularity, which in turn boosts the group's attractiveness to other armed factions and sustains further organisational growth. Not relying on a single geographical stronghold or a strongman who had gathered local social networks into a single faction notably facilitated the integration of new sub-groups, which could quickly find their place under Ahrar al-Sham's broader umbrella network. Moreover, Ahrar al-Sham's mainstream approach to Islamism did not imply the imposition of strict ideological demands on newcomers, in contrast to other groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra where stronger ideological commitments and a personal individual allegiance (*bay'a*) to the group were initially required.

Ahrar al-Sham gradually institutionalised by formalising pre-existing agreements into the group's newly created organisational structures. During the first year, Ahrar al-Sham's military brigades worked independently and only used the name 'Ahrar al-Sham' when claiming responsibility for specific armed attacks. Individual leaders maintained connections to sub-groups situated in Syrian provinces disconnected from northwest Syria. Ahrar al-Sham started to become a tangible group when sub-brigades began to provide each other with weapons and resources.¹⁷ Cross-brigade interactions reinforced solidarity with one another, and this feeling of belonging to a shared entity

developed the group's *esprit de corps*. After one year, growing administrative issues motivated Ahrar al-Sham's *majlis al-shūrā*'s decision to create additional institutional structures inspired by state entities. The collective leadership therefore ordered the creation of administrative, financial, military, development and political offices, each with their own internal regulations to manage the group, clarify existing problems and provide solutions.¹⁸ An external consultant was hired explicitly for that purpose.

Ahrar al-Sham's features encapsulate and refine two arguments often developed to explain the success of Syrian Islamist groups during the conflict. The first argument holds that Islamists were primarily bolstered by the liberation of prisoners that occurred throughout 2011, which would have been ordered by the regime to tarnish the reputation of the uprising. According to this view, the regime would have liberated Islamist prisoners to marginalise the non-violent component of the uprising and to equate the resistance to al-Qaida. Others add that the groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, were simply created by former prisoners when they returned to their localities.¹⁹ In reality, while Ahrar al-Sham managed to gather most newly liberated prisoners, the group's early developments and expansion actually preceded the liberation of Islamist prisoners that occurred from mid-2011 onwards. The liberated prisoners were joining a group to whom they had previously been connected – since they often stemmed from the same Islamist milieu – or simply the main Islamist early riser. Prison liberation reinforced existing dynamics; most of Ahrar al-Sham's early brigades were not formed by former prisoners.

The second argument contends that Syrian Islamist brigades succeeded with financial support provided by their supporters in Gulf countries – states as well as individuals.²⁰ Although many armed groups (including Ahrar al-Sham) did receive extensive support from Gulf countries from the early days of the conflict, this argument is incomplete. Foreign support that is not provided through a unified structure is likely to aggravate armed groups' internal divisions. A plurality of armed factions and sub-groups can contend over resources and try to secure their own direct external support. External sponsors can upset a group's internal balance of power and cause it to split.²¹ Only non-state armed groups that are more institutionalised around clearer organisational structures can exploit external funding without worsening internal rivalry. Moreover, foreign states and supporters are not necessarily

willing to support local armed groups that cannot form a real alternative to the regime. When thousands of groups compete for support, the most militarily and politically potent groups are the most attractive choices for foreign patrons. The success of Ahrar al-Sham in gathering external support can therefore be explained for two reasons. First, the large diversity of Ahrar al-Sham's supporting networks signified that, more so than the localised military units, the group was capable of brokering multiple ties to foreign supporters – from mainstream Salafis in Kuwait to independent preachers and jihadi sympathisers worldwide.²² Second, Ahrar al-Sham was the largest and most appealing Islamist group in northwest Syria. Prison liberation and foreign support therefore significantly sustained existing trends.

Becoming the Largest Insurgent Group through Factional Alliances

By 2012, the Syrian armed opposition had grown in size and sophistication. The opposition gradually seized large geographical areas located primarily in the country's periphery. The eastern part of the city of Aleppo, as well as the border control of Baab al-Hawa with Turkey, switched to the hands of the opposition in the summer of 2012, which contributed to the unification of northwest Syria. The regions of Ghuta in the suburbs of Damascus and eastern Syria were similarly lost by regime forces and transferred to armed opposition groups by mid-2013. The transformation of the conflict from low-scale guerrilla attacks against military checkpoints and infrastructures to the stabilisation of relatively wide front-lines transformed the Syrian opposition. The small and geographically localised armed groups realised that they had to coordinate their efforts to gather more extensive resources, develop a credible alternative political project that could sway the population and create local structures of governance while limiting inter-factional fighting.

As the main Islamist early riser, Ahrar al-Sham was favourably positioned to take the lead. The group's early agglomeration of an array of sub-groups around a culture of ideological and organisational consensus (*tawāfuqiyya*) facilitated its transformation into a mass movement alongside the liberation of large geographical areas. Early interactions between the groups' composing brigades shaped the foundations of Ahrar al-Sham's political project, reinforced internal solidarity and sustained the collaboration of many sub-groups

not merely confined to a single locality. Ahrar al-Sham transformed into a more institutionalised group, structured around shared decision-making processes that enabled its leaders to share internal resources and make strategic decisions more adequately than competing groups.

The diversity of Ahrar al-Sham's constituting networks helped the group to present political initiatives to unify the Syrian opposition. The integration of well-experienced leaders with extensive ties abroad hastened the group's learning processes. When other groups focused on their survival after the successive deaths or replacement of their leaders and prominent commanders, Ahrar al-Sham's early political officers in Turkey were opening channels of communication with an array of countries and non-state actors to articulate the group's positions regionally and internationally.²³ In contrast to networks of deserting officers or locals fighting to protect their communities, Ahrar al-Sham's brokerage with wide social networks was more conducive to the articulation of a clearer political approach to the conflict. Brokerage later included other factions with a more urban, middle-class outlook, such as Liwa al-Haq in Homs, which further bolstered Ahrar al-Sham's politicisation, since these factions would figure prominently in the group's political bureau.²⁴

Ahrar al-Sham expanded throughout insurgent-held areas through a strategy of cross-group alliances that reinforced its consensual decision-making at the leadership level. Ahrar al-Sham initiated major attempts to unite the armed opposition inside Syria. The group repeatedly attempted to include most Islamist-leaning brigades in larger fronts (*jabha*) that would pave the way for a meaningful organisational merger throughout Syria,²⁵ although many initiatives failed to achieve their objectives. The liberation of vast geographical areas, especially in northwest Syria, facilitated the process, but important obstacles remained. Ideological differences of views between various Islamist groups persisted. New opposition-held areas were not geographically contiguous, and their strategic significance was not understood similarly by the groups in control. For instance, while northwest Syria could be more easily stabilised through its connection to foreign countries, the periphery of Damascus in the Ghuta region was more threatening to Syria's capital. Other regions conversely remained under siege and could not easily coordinate with other provinces.

The transformation of Ahrar al-Sham into a large movement occurred

through three successive initiatives. The first initiative was the creation of the Jabha Thuwar Suriyya (Front of the Revolutionaries of Syria) with several smaller Islamist factions. The front failed to yield its objectives since contending groups did not endorse Ahrar al-Sham's lead and, more importantly, Ahrar al-Sham suffered from internal impediments. Ahrar al-Sham's leaders abroad tried to present an acceptable political programme that was not well understood by group members on the ground, who often had a different understanding of the conflict.²⁶ Although Ahrar al-Sham benefitted from the more refined political understanding of its leaders abroad, the latter recognised that they were developing a mainstream political programme too quickly, without clarifying and legitimising their rationales to the foot soldiers.

Then, Ahrar al-Sham created the Syrian Islamic Front in December 2012, with Al-Haqq Brigades in Homs, the Al-Fajr Islamic Movement in Aleppo, Ansar al-Sham in Latakia, Jaysh Al-Tawhid in Deir ez-Zor and the Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib Brigade in Damascus.²⁷ This front paved the way to these groups' subsequent unification – with the exception of al-Haqq Brigades – under the name 'Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham'. Ahrar al-Sham leaders recognised that many new sub-groups had a more Salafi-jihadi approach to Islam than themselves; yet, they acknowledged that in a competitive environment where Salafi-jihadi groups like Jabhat al-Nusra were expanding, it was necessary to co-opt and integrate smaller Salafi-jihadi brigades rather than abandon them to their contenders.²⁸ Integrating less experienced groups was an opportunity to challenge their approach to the conflict and integrate them into Ahrar al-Sham's mainstream.²⁹

Ahrar al-Sham's organisational expansion and associated transformation into a movement consolidated the group's outreach. All the new factions were successfully integrated into the group's consultative council, regardless of their size,³⁰ and endowed with responsibility for strategic decision-making, while their leaders were given specific missions and responsibilities in opposition-held areas. Externally, a charter expressing the group's political positions and its willingness to include new factions in the group was published.³¹ Some group leaders felt that the charter sent a signal of inclusiveness that contrasted with Salafi-jihadi groups. For example, Ahrar al-Sham describes its *manhaj* (method or approach to Islam) to be in the middle and moderate. Although Ahrar al-Sham subsequently clarified further its willingness to be

considered a main actor of the revolutionary process, the charter had already positioned the group in Syria's mainstream opposition.

The final major step occurred with the emergence of the Islamic Front in late 2013. Ahrar al-Sham's objectives were to unite the major Islamist groups throughout the country into an all-encompassing umbrella, before integrating them organisationally. The emergence of the Islamic Front occurred in parallel to growing tensions with Islamic State, a few months before Syria's mainstream opposition launched a war against Islamic State and expelled the group from many regions in northwest Syria. The creation of the IF eased the future integration of several groups into Ahrar al-Sham, including Liwa al-Haq and Suqur al-Sham,³² but did not achieve broader unity with a major actor such as Jaysh al-Islam for geographical, ideological and administrative reasons pertaining to each group's new responsibilities, power and share of resources in the new entity.³³ In addition, discussions with Jabhat al-Nusra did not lead to the group's inclusion in the Islamic Front, since its leaders believed that the Front was not a meaningful unification of the opposition.³⁴

By 2014, Ahrar al-Sham maintained a dual structure on the ground. The group's sub-brigades maintained their geographical location and local embeddedness, which positioned Ahrar al-Sham at the core of local Syrian communities. At a more hierarchical level, the group promoted these brigades' leaders into the group's overall leadership according to their strength or specific skills. Ahrar al-Sham did not sever its brigades' connection to their local leaders and local constituencies, which helped to sustain the group's popular grounding at the possible cost of organisational cohesion. In contrast to more Salafi-jihadi groups like Islamic State, where sub-groups were more easily recomposed and isolated from their commanders, Ahrar al-Sham did not impose tight control over its brigades and could not prevent them from leaving the group. This choice meant that Ahrar al-Sham's leadership had to be more responsive to the needs and expectations of its sub-units. Ahrar al-Sham could not impose top-down decisions without risking the departure of its sub-component for competing groups.

Ahrar al-Sham's characteristics and choices explain why, by 2013–14, the group had become the most successful one in Syria. Its military strengths and broad alliance system with other groups surpassed its main competitor, Jabhat al-Nusra, which would be critically weakened at the beginning of

2013, due to its split from Islamic State. Whereas other groups were struggling to survive the disappearance of their leaders, Ahrar al-Sham managed to develop relatively advanced internal institutions within a short time-span. Although internal issues remained, the group was able to conduct internal reforms more so than the groups that were only unified by foreign support or a succession of military victories.

The Politicisation of an Insurrectionary Revolutionary Project

The politicisation of Ahrar al-Sham occurred gradually during the war. This process was sustained by pre-war factors as well as in-war dynamics, which urged Ahrar al-Sham to clarify its ideological positions and embrace the revolutionary agenda of the opposition. These factors gradually informed Ahrar al-Sham's dissociation from jihadi Salafism, although the next section reveals the existence of real institutional impediments.

The first notable factor underpinning Ahrar al-Sham's politicisation is the nature of its popular constituency (*hadina sha'biyya*). As noted above, Ahrar al-Sham emerged in northwest Syria from the bottom up, in contrast to many Salafi-jihadi groups spearheaded by foreign fighters or nationals coming home from lands of foreign jihad.³⁵ Ahrar al-Sham, meanwhile, has been manned primarily by local fighters originating from a mostly Sunni region, often connected to the families that militarily opposed the regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s.³⁶ In contrast to smaller groups mobilised around a shared foreign nationality – for instance, being Moroccan or Chechen³⁷ – Ahrar al-Sham has relied primarily on local rather than foreign manpower. Relying on the local support of the population rather than an external support network constrains insurgent actions and can, for instance, restrict their use of violence.³⁸

At the same time, some of the group's members had been socialised into the Salafi-jihadi trend before 2011. According to several interviews, they stem from a plural array of backgrounds and various levels of religiosity, but eventually embraced the Salafi-jihadi approach to Islam in response to the changing regional and international environment.³⁹ The US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as in other countries in the region,⁴⁰ boosted the sympathy for this approach to Islam, in response to the external threats to the Muslim world. This is particularly true for the younger generations, who often mobilised in support of the Iraqi resistance to the American occupation

of the country. The youths became Salafi-jihadi when this ideological trend was perceived as the only credible alternative in the region.

Many future Ahrar al-Sham leaders had already started a process of revising Salafi-jihadi ideas in prison prior to 2011. According to prison leaders connected to Ahrar al-Sham, thousands of individuals were arrested in the mid-2000s and imprisoned in Saydnayya.⁴¹ Some of them had been or tried to go to Iraq in support of the anti-American armed resistance, provided logistical support to the insurgents, or simply sympathised with them. Prison regrouped different generations of Islamists, from the first generation of the late 1970s to young al-Qaida supporters. The prisoners had to organise themselves and make decisions as a group. Notable discussions concerned jihad and its practicalities in Syria. Against the backdrop of al-Qaida's spiral of violence in Iraq, prisoners reflected on their objectives in Syria and the complementarity of political and military means to achieve them. They notably contested al-Qaida's main military focus and the contradictions between Salafi-jihadi ideas and their real-life implementations. A prison uprising in 2008 made some prisoners move in favour of a military solution, but the majority asked for negotiations and formed the core group of former prisoners that joined Ahrar al-Sham in 2011 and 2012.⁴² As a result, Ahrar al-Sham members who were close to the group's first leader, Hassan Aboud, confirm that he insisted they would never join al-Qaida when they left prison. While some Ahrar al-Sham supporters were Salafi-jihadis relatively sympathetic to the group, the early leaders had an antagonistic stance towards al-Qaida early on.

Ahrar al-Sham's multi-level networking structure reinforced this dynamic at the beginning of the conflict. The joining of Syrians fighters who participated in foreign jihad while opposing al-Qaida's agenda further distanced Ahrar al-Sham from jihadi Salafism. Prominent individuals such as Iyyad al-Sha'ar and, later, Abul-Abbas al-Shami warned the group against al-Qaida's influence. Al-Sha'ar notably argues that he wrote the group's initial political programme, although it was not initially embraced by other leaders.⁴³ These Syrians were well connected abroad and, in Istanbul, liaised with many Islamist groups dwelling in Turkey, from Hamas to the Egyptian Islamic Group (*al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*), to learn from their experience, to develop Ahrar al-Sham in Syria and to achieve the right balance between political and military means and objectives.⁴⁴

The first few years of the conflict further bolstered the politicisation of Ahrar al-Sham. The main factor was the de-centralised structure of the opposition, especially in Syria's northwest, where Ahrar al-Sham was particularly powerful. Geographical, sociological and ideological divisions impacted the militarisation of the conflict and prevented the emergence of a unified front, despite Ahrar al-Sham's attempts to unite the opposition. Ahrar al-Sham leaders recognised that, among the opposition, they still needed to coordinate military battles, share spoils of wars and recognise each other's legitimacy. Only Islamic State refused to do so, declaring that, as a state, it could not accept the prerogatives of independent courts of justice manned by independent or factional preachers. A related element was practical. Once the armed opposition became the *de facto* ruler of extensive geographical areas, how to govern the population? None of the armed group had the experience to set up local structures of governance. They had to collaborate with other groups in Islamic committees and courts designed to support the population and stabilise security, which sometimes competed with civil-society-led initiatives.⁴⁵ External assistance provided by foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also became a new reality that groups like Ahrar al-Sham had to acknowledge.

Furthermore, the armed opposition, and Ahrar al-Sham in particular, faced the rise of Islamic State. Despite Ahrar al-Sham's antagonistic position on al-Qaida, Islamic State could initially prosper and mobilise in opposition-held areas after the split from Jabhat al-Nusra. But, less than a year later, Islamic State imposed its hegemonic control over the eastern province of Raqqa, which had initially been liberated from the regime by Ahrar al-Sham and other groups. In addition to Islamic State's military danger, the regional and international threat posed by the group forced Ahrar al-Sham to further clarify its positions. Inside Syria, Ahrar al-Sham members were often reluctant to fight fellow Muslims.⁴⁶ Outside Syria, Islamic State's behaviour started to draw international attention to the Syrian Islamist armed groups opposed to the regime. Ahrar al-Sham leaders did not want to be assimilated into the group in people's minds and, therefore, had to demonstrate that they were fully part of Syria's mainstream opposition and embraced its revolutionary objectives.⁴⁷ They presented the revolutionary covenant of honour of the fighting brigades (*Mithaq sharaf thawri li al-kataib al-muqātila*) for

that purpose and to oppose the dichotomy between Syrian Islamists and the Free Syrian Army.⁴⁸ The group confirmed its willingness to collaborate with foreign countries for the sake of the revolution, and this process was accompanied by growing international public relations efforts.

Ahrar al-Sham then tried to weaken Islamic State by providing direct assistance to Jabhat al-Nusra to help it survive the split between the latter two groups. Not helping Jabhat al-Nusra to survive would have benefitted Islamic State, which would have eventually gathered all of the former's resources and soldiers.⁴⁹ Although Ahrar al-Sham initially wanted to use Jabhat al-Nusra as a counterweight to Islamic State and encouraged it to join the Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra subsequently became a threat in its own right. Jabhat al-Nusra tried to set up its own governing structures and successively dismantled several opposition groups.⁵⁰ But Jabhat al-Nusra's threat to Ahrar al-Sham was also ideological. When Jabhat al-Nusra started to become a larger group, its ideological proximity to Ahrar al-Sham threatened the latter's internal cohesion. Ahrar al-Sham leaders recognised that, after socialising young fighters around ideological concepts stemming from a shared approach to Islam, it became easy for Jabhat al-Nusra to recruit them. Ahrar al-Sham therefore had to develop a new distinctive identity around a flag, musical chants (*nashīd*) and shared history to protect the group's internal cohesion. Despite military collaboration with Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham refused to unite with the group as long as Jabhat al-Nusra's ties to al-Qaida remained. Jabhat al-Nusra's affiliation to al-Qaida indeed warranted increased military strikes from foreign countries, such as the United States, and justified the narrative articulated by the regime.

Ahrar al-Sham additionally refined its religious approach by re-emphasising internally the importance of the Islamic schools of jurisprudence (*madhhab*), arguing that the Salafi reticence to recognise their role has severed the ties between Muslims and their scholars. Ahrar al-Sham's scholars published an array of publications justifying its political pragmatism considering the group's weakness and for the interest (*maṣlahah*) of the community, by aligning its position with *siyāsah al-sharī'ah* (*sharī'ah* politics), which is partially associated with the tradition of Ibn Taymīyyah, a mainstream Salafi reference.⁵¹ But Jabhat al-Nusra's embeddedness in the Syrian opposition meant that these efforts were not sufficient to contain the group. In contrast with

Islamic State's expulsion from opposition-held areas, Jabhat al-Nusra continued to expand alongside the other armed opposition.

Institutional Constraints and Power Politics

Ahrar al-Sham expressed the desire to unite all the armed opposition by summer 2014, in collaboration with the main armed groups present throughout Syria. The initiative sought to create the council of the leadership of the revolution (*Majlis Qiyādat al-Thawra*), which would comprehensively unite the opposition's political and military structures and present a common front to the regime. The initiative nonetheless stumbled when other groups presented a competitive similar initiative; more importantly, cross-factional negotiations collapsed when most of Ahrar al-Sham's leaders were killed in an explosion in September 2014. The date marked the beginning of Ahrar al-Sham's institutional decay, which inhibited the group's decision-making process at the leadership level.

The killing of the group's leaders in September 2014 was a major institutional setback. The first and second leadership tiers of Ahrar al-Sham were decimated during a group meeting. Most *shūrā* members were killed, and the remaining leaders had to name the new leadership in a hurry to form a new *majlis al-shūrā*. While Ahrar al-Sham's relatively advanced institutions eased its survival in comparison to the groups that disappeared after the killing of one or two figureheads, the killing delayed its politicisation for the next two years.⁵²

The core issue pertained to the newly named leadership. The new leaders were not all part of Ahrar al-Sham's early core membership. The three main figures were Hashim al-Shaykh (general leader), Abu Muhammad al-Sadiq (religious authority) and Abu Saleh al-Tahhan (military commander). Al-Shaykh had only joined the group in a latter phase and, along with al-Tahhan, froze group membership before the killing of Ahrar al-Sham leaders. Al-Sadiq was a newcomer to the group. These individuals were lesser known internally and did not enjoy the same level of sympathy as the former leadership. Moreover, although not affiliated with al-Qaida, their ideological positions were not necessarily aligned with the revisionist positions gradually endorsed by the assassinated leadership. They initially tried to impose their authority by isolating many Ahrar al-Sham founders and dictating their views. Internally

contested decisions marginalised early Ahrar al-Sham leaders, some of whom split to form a new group, Jaysh al-Sham (Army of the Levant), which fully embraced the Syrian revolutionary agenda.⁵³

For the next two years, two revisionist and obstructing factions contended to sway the group in their direction.⁵⁴ The revisionist faction included most of Ahrar al-Sham's early members who remained in the group and increasingly embraced the Syrian revolutionary agenda. They wanted to forge closer ties to foreign countries, especially Turkey, and other armed opposition groups. The obstructionists opposed this choice and prioritised a military strategy that was suspicious of the revisionists' political agenda. The obstructionists managed to control the group for the next six months while the revisionists vied to internally strengthen their position to isolate the new leadership. The revisionists notably exploited the integration of new factions as well as internal bureaucratic quarrels to reposition themselves step by step. They gradually seized the initiative through the group's political bureau and their majority in the group's *majlis al-shūrā*, which led to the election of a figure situated between the two sides the following year – Muhannad al-Masri. The new leader used his administrative authority to further marginalise the obstructing faction and gradually demote them of their prerogatives.⁵⁵ The head of Jaysh al-Sham lamented that the group had become clogged by lobby politics (*lūbbyāt*) since the September 2014 death of its top leadership. The existence of bureaucratic feuds instead of large-scale splits or a violent internal purge nonetheless substantiates that both sides accepted the group's key institutional features.⁵⁶

The group's religious voice was a notable object of administrative dispute. A single controversial religious cleric, al-Sadiq, was designated after 2014 and subsequently attempted to obtain a veto over the group's strategy. While Ahrar al-Sham's key religious figures before September 2014 broadly endorsed the same revisionist views, religious divergences between the revisionist faction and al-Sadiq imposed an internal reconfiguration when the former reasserted themselves. They notably decided that having a single religious authority antagonistic to Ahrar al-Sham's unfolding political agenda was an impediment to the group's development.⁵⁷ They created instead an office composed of several figures who would make decisions based on the opinion of the majority. The designation of several individuals diluted the role played

by a single cleric and was more amenable to the group's pragmatism.⁵⁸ Some of Ahrar al-Sham's religious figures, especially three Egyptians,⁵⁹ nonetheless continued to oppose the group's rapprochement with foreign countries, in particular Turkey. Moreover, they strongly condemned the efforts of the head of Ahrar al-Sham's international relations to reach out to Western countries from summer 2015 onwards.⁶⁰ When Ahrar al-Sham published a *fatwa* legitimising collaboration with Turkey in the north of the country,⁶¹ these clerics were removed from their positions for opposing the group's political choices and ultimately presented their resignation.⁶²

Bureaucratic quarrels delayed Ahrar al-Sham's full embrace of Syria's mainstream revolutionary path despite real steps forwards. Ahrar al-Sham remained plagued by internal divisions until the end of 2016. The group's consensual decision-making process at the *majlis al-shūrā* prevented the group from articulating clear positions on an array of issues, including the conference of Riyadh organised in December 2015. Paradoxically, the consensual and inclusive features that sustained Ahrar al-Sham's appeal during the first three years of the conflict burdened the group in the following two years. As a result, although Ahrar al-Sham became closer to Turkey henceforth, the group was an ally burdened by serious internal concerns. An armed opposition group that cannot take a clear stance on decisive strategic developments does not make a potent alternative.

Ultimately, the loss of Aleppo by the Syrian opposition at the end of 2016 helped to settle Ahrar al-Sham's internal conflicts. In September 2016, Ahrar al-Sham revisionists elected a new leader associated with their faction, Ali al-Omar. The obstructing faction disputed the outcome of the elections since they believed that they were now entitled to the leadership. They temporarily froze their membership in the *majlis al-shūrā*⁶³ and intensified internal pressure with an unauthorised decision to create a new military sub-group, Jaysh al-Ahrar (Army of the Free), to demonstrate their internal strength and change the outcome of internal elections.⁶⁴ It is notable that they did not resign immediately, but still sought to control the group. But they ultimately failed to impose their views and used the opportunity presented by Jabhat al-Nusra's new iteration, Jabha Fath al-Sham (Front of the Liberation of the Levant), to attempt to unite the opposition by leaving Ahrar al-Sham and joining a new group, Ha'ya Tahrir al-Sham (The Committed for the

Liberation of the Levant). They departed with less than a thousand soldiers but extensive military supplies.⁶⁵ Most of Ahrar al-Sham's cadres remained in the movement.

Retrospectively, the timing of the obstructionist faction's departure from the group can be explained by three main reasons. First, the last internal elections demonstrated that they did not enjoy the support of the majority of the *majlis al-shūrā* and that it would be difficult to ever control the group again. Second, Jabha Fath al-Sham's overture meant that they would not lose everything. Staying inside Ahrar al-Sham was previously rationalised by the understanding that the incumbent would keep control over the group's resources and supporting networks. It was better to remain in Ahrar al-Sham and try to change the balance of power from inside. But Jabha Fath al-Sham was a potent alternative in early 2017. Finally, the battle of Aleppo was a strategic turning point that imposed a political and military choice – between a decisive rapprochement and collaboration with Turkey on the political front versus an emphasis on the military dimension of the revolution, which required unity with Jabha Fath al-Sham.

The departure of Jaysh al-Ahrar reinforced Ahrar al-Sham's politicisation, but an intra-factional conflict with Haya Tahrir al-Sham then fractured northwest Syria. At the beginning of 2017, Ahrar al-Sham embraced the Syrian opposition's flag and the Arab penal code that was to be implemented in the areas controlled by the Syrian opposition.⁶⁶ Shortly thereafter, a factional confrontation with Haya Tahrir al-Sham throughout opposition-held areas in northwest Syria turned in favour of the latter, which significantly weakened Ahrar al-Sham. Although Ahrar al-Sham was initially reinforced by the joining of smaller armed opposition groups that sought protection,⁶⁷ it was not sufficient to maintain control over several strategic areas including the lucrative border with Turkey in Baab al-Hawa. The groups that joined Ahrar al-Sham were not fully integrated in the *majlis al-shūrā*,⁶⁸ and the localised structure of Ahrar al-Sham was exploited by Haya Tahrir al-Sham; the latter systematically isolated Ahrar al-Sham's geographical strongholds by creating sub-groups and relying on local agreements to isolate these areas from the larger confrontation.⁶⁹ Ahrar al-Sham's central military force was weakened by the internal split and mostly unable to mobilise against its contender. While Ahrar al-Sham's local embeddedness was a strength when

facing an external enemy, the conflict with Haya Tahrir al-Sham demonstrated that it could backfire when an opponent had geographically movable military forces more efficient than Ahrar al-Sham's. The conflict resumed one year later, in spring of 2017. Ahrar al-Sham's new alliance with another local group, the Nour al-Din Zinki Movement, the formation of the Syrian Liberation Front and the naming of a new leader changed the outcome of the final confrontation and re-equilibrated the balance of power with Haya Tahrir al-Sham.

Meanwhile, the Syrian conflict became increasingly dominated by big power dynamics. From the beginning of the Russian-led Astana process, Turkey and Russia asserted their dominance over the political process and designated several de-escalation zones throughout Syria. These zones were gradually re-occupied by the regime through military pressure, internal divisions and the limited reintegration of former fighters under the so-called 'reconciliation' processes. The opposition stronghold of Ghuta in the suburbs of Damascus was reconquered by regime forces in April 2018, while the south of Syria followed suit by the end of July. Turkey simultaneously encouraged the formation of a united opposition front, the National Front for Liberation, which could pave the way to the development of a national army in the north of the country as well as in the province of Idlib. But a new round of conflicts ultimately gave the upper hand to Haya Tahrir al-Sham, which imposed its administrative control over all of northwest Syria and substantially weakened all remaining opposition groups, including Ahrar al-Sham.

Conclusion

Ahrar al-Sham is a singular case of a Salafi group that politicised during a civil war by articulating increasingly realistic political objectives, engaging with foreign states and non-Islamist groups and adopting a moderate position vis-à-vis the population. This development is rooted in the group's embeddedness within the Syrian Islamic social movement before 2011, which extensively debated al-Qaida's negative legacy on the jihadi movement and looked for an alternative Islamist project that would be different from the Muslim Brotherhood as well as al-Qaida. This process was subsequently bolstered by in-war factors, especially the unprecedented diversity of the armed opposition and the negative consequences of al-Qaida and Islamic State's behaviour both

inside and outside Syria. The peculiarities of the Syrian conflict forced Ahrar al-Sham to confirm and cultivate its politicisation in response.

This case-study further suggests that Salafi armed groups can transform during a civil war, but that successful transformation is contingent on their institutionalisation. Existing research excessively focuses on Salafi armed groups' ideologies or individual leaders, without exploring more thoroughly the institutional factors faced by these groups. Analysing the consolidation of Salafi armed groups' organisational structures and ideational norms is critical to contextualising internal debates, decision-making processes and armed groups' internal cohesion beyond the study of their theological commitments only.

Notes

1. This chapter was presented at several conferences and workshops. I would like to thank Souhail Belhadj, Véronique Dudouet, Abdulla Erfan, Karin Goldner-Ebenthal, Tore Hamming, Sam Heller, Fouad Ilias, Aron Lund, Mona Sheikh, Nagwan Soliman and Isak Svensson for commenting on previous versions of this chapter. I also received financial support from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS).
2. Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: the Expansion of al-Qaeda and its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jérôme Drevon, 'The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11 (2017), 55–62; Hassan Hassan, 'Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism', *CTC Sentinel* (2018).
3. Ahmed S. Hashim, *The Caliphate at War: The Ideological, Organisational and Military Innovations of Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
4. As emphasised by two common definitions: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politicize> and www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/politicize.
5. Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 147–90.
6. During field research, armed groups repeatedly emphasised their engagement with political matters over time, in contrast to pure military objectives. They often associated it with pragmatism more than moderation or de-radicalisation, terms they do not use.

7. Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
8. Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2009).
9. Interviews with a large range of Syrian Islamists and insurgents. See also Arnaud Lenfant, 'L'évolution du salafisme en Syrie au XXe siècle', in *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme*, ed. B. Rougier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 161–78; Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Muhammad Mustafa, *Jabhat al-Nusra li-ahl al-sham: Min al-ta'sif ila al-inqisam*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (2012); Abd al-Rahman Al-Haj, *Al-Salafiyya wal-salafiyyun fi suriya: Min al-islam ila al-jihad*, Al-Jazeera Center for Studies (2013); Teije H. Donker, 'Islamic Social Movements and the Syrian Authoritarian Regime: Shifting Patterns of Control and Accommodation', in *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, ed. S. Heydemann and Raymond Leenders (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013), 107–24; Raymond A. Hinnebusch, 'State and Islamism in Syria', in *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Routledge, 2018), 199–214; Dara Conduit, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Abd al-Rahman Al-Haj, *Thawahir al-islam al-siyasi wa tayarato fi suriya isti'ada khiyar al-dimuqrati* (n. d.).
10. Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, vol. 41 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
11. Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, 'The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37 (2014), 979.
12. Raphael Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: Hurst, 2013).
13. Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
14. Hinnebusch, 'State and Islamism in Syria'. See also note 9.
15. Adam Bacsko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 103–17.
16. Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author; Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Suri, interview with the author; member of Ahrar al-Sham political bureau, interview with the author. Ahrar al-Sham's leader cannot take strategic decisions without a

majority in the *shura* council and cannot name new *shura* members without the council's approval.

17. Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Suri, interview with the author.
18. Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author.
19. Ahmad Abazeid and Thomas Pierret, 'Les rebelles syriens d'Ahrar al-Sham: Ressorts contextuels et organisationnels d'une déradicalisation en temps de guerre civile', *Critique Internationale* 1 (2018), 63–84.
20. On the limits of foreign influence, see also Thomas Pierret, 'States Sponsors and the Syrian Insurgency: The Limits of Foreign Influence', in *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, ed. Luigi Narbone, Agnes Favier and Virginie Collombier (Florence: European University Institute, 2016), 22–28.
21. Henning Tamm, 'Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion', *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (2016), 599–610.
22. Thomas Pierret, 'Les Salafismes dans l'insurrection syrienne: Des réseaux transnationaux à l'épreuve des réalités locales', *Outre-Terre* 3 (2015), 196–215.
23. Husam Tarsha, interview with the author.
24. Labib and Kenan al-Nahas from Liwa al-Haq joined Ahrar al-Sham's *majlis al-shūrā* when their group joined Ahrar al-Sham. They later became Ahrar al-Sham's heads of international relations and of the political bureau, respectively.
25. Munir al-Sayyal, interview with the author; Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author.
26. Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author; Husam Tarsha, interview with the author.
27. On the Islamic Front, see Aron Lund, 'Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front', *UI Occasional Papers* 17 (2013).
28. Husam Tarsha, interview with the author.
29. The leader of al-Fajr Islamic Movement, Abu Yazan al-Shami, famously apologised in September 2014 for his affiliation with jihadi Salafism. See <https://justpaste.it/gybk>. See also Sam Heller, 'Ahrar al-Sham's Revisionist Jihadism', *War on the Rocks* 30 (2015).
30. The situation changed for the factions that joined Ahrar al-Sham subsequently, according to Khaled Abu Anas.
31. Ahrar al-Sham, *Mithaq harakat ahrar al-sham al-islamiyya* (2012).
32. Suqur al-Sham left subsequently.

33. Munir al-Sayyal, interview with the author; Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author; Abu al-‘Abbas al-Shami, interview with the author. Islam Alloush, interview with the author.
34. Abu Abdullah al-Shami, interview with the author.
35. Most Islamist insurgencies where Salafi-jihadi groups have been active were partially launched by nationals who had been in Afghanistan in the late 1980s (as in Algeria in the 1990s), or by international fighters (as in Iraq in the 2000s).
36. According to many testimonies, including that of Rami Dalati, interview with the author. See also ‘Film ahrar al-sham’, *al-Jazeera Arabic*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lydv7dr6qE.
37. For instance, Junud al-Sham (Soldiers of the Levant), primarily manned by Chechens, or Harakat Sham al-Islam (Islamic Movement of the Levant) recruiting Moroccan fighters.
38. Monica D. Toft and Yuri M. Zhukov, ‘Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia’s North Caucasus’, *American Political Science Review* 109 (2015), 222–38.
39. Munir al-Sayyal, interview with the author. See also ‘Film ahrar al-sham’.
40. Drevon, ‘The Jihadi Social Movement’.
41. Abul-‘Abbas al-Shami, interview with the author; Rami Dalati, interview with the author. See also Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism*.
42. Rami Dalati, interview with the author.
43. Ayyad al-Sha‘ar, interview with the author.
44. Ibid.
45. On insurgent courts, see also Baczkó, Dorronsoro and Quesnay, *Civil War in Syria*; Regine Schwab, ‘Insurgent Courts in Civil Wars: The Three Pathways of (Trans)Formation in Today’s Syria (2012–2017)’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29 (2018), 801–26. On the local council, see Akram Kachee, ‘Les conseils locaux syriens face à la militarisation du conflit’, *Confluences Méditerranée* 4 (2016), 31–45.
46. For example, see the communiqué by Ahrar al-Sham on the exclusion of two sub-groups for refusing to fight Islamist Social Movement in Ahmad Abazeid, *Ahrar al-sham ba’d ‘am tauwil: Markaz ‘umran lil dirasat al-istratijiyya* (2015), 50.
47. Husam Tarsha, interview with the author; Munir al-Sayyal, interview with the author.
48. Ahrar al-Sham, *Mithaq sharaf thawri li al-kata’ib al-muqatila* (17 March 2014).
49. Husam Tarsha, interview with the author; Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author.

50. Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 223–25; Charles R. Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 16–18.
51. Ahrar al-Sham, *Al-uṣūl al-shar li-l'amal al-islāmī al-mu'asir* (n. d.); Ahrar al-Sham, *Al-istid'af wal-tamkin bayna mu'tayat al-waqi'a wa ahkam al-dīn* (n. d.); Ahrar al-Sham, *Al-qawl al-mubin fi tartib maqāsīd al-sharī'ah wa maṣlahah al-nafs wa al-dīn* (n. d.); Ahrar al-Sham, *masā'il fi al-siyāsah al-sharī'ah* (n. d.).
52. For a study of the group in the year following the killing, see Abazeid, *Ahrar al-sham ba'd 'am tawil: Markaz 'umran lil dirāsah al-istratijiyah* (2015).
53. Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Suri, interview with the author. On this group, see also Ahmad Abazeid, *Jaysh al-Sham: Harakiyya al-shimal al-suriyya al-mustadama: Markaz 'umran lil dirasah al-istratijiyah* (2015).
54. Revisionists referred to the concept of *murāja'āt* (revisions), emphasised by Ahrar al-Sham's leaders.
55. See the details in Abazeid and Pierret, 'Les rebelles syriens d'Ahrar al-Sham', 72–73. See also Ahrar al-Sham, *qarar idari 84/a* (7 May 2016); Ahrar al-Sham, *qarar idari 86/a* (2 June 2016); Ahrar al-Sham, *qarar idari 89/a* (18 June 2016).
56. There have been limited internal altercations, including kidnappings, but the scale has remained very limited compared to other cases of internal factional purges.
57. Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author.
58. The institutionalisation of a religious clergy in opposition to the influence of a single religious authority has an interesting comparable precedent in Saudi Arabia with the creation of the Council of Senior Scholars in 1972: Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
59. Abu al-'Abd Ashida, Abu Fath al-Farghali and Abu Yaqthan al-Masri.
60. See, for instance, an op-ed published in the US by Labib al-Nahhas, 'The Deadly Consequences of Mislabeled Syria's Revolutionaries', *Washington Post* (10 July 2015).
61. Ahrar al-Sham, *Fatawā bikhusus qitāl da'ish bi al-tanfiq ma' al-jaysh al-turki* (20 September 2016).
62. Ahrar al-Sham, *Mujahidu ashida* (20 September 2016); Aranews, 'Inshiqaq fi ahrar al-sham ba'd fatwā jawaz al-tansiq ma' al-atrak did da'ish' [Splits in Ahrar al-Sham after the *Fatwa* allowing coordination with the Turks against ISIS] (22 September 2016).

63. Ahrar al-Sham, 'Freezing Membership' (2016).
64. Ahrar al-Sham, 'Creation of Jaysh al-Ahrar' (12 December 2016); Ahrar al-Sham, 'Joining Jaysh al-Ahrar' (12 December 2016). See also Haid Haid, 'Why Ahrar al-Sham is Fighting Itself – And How This Impacts the Battle for Syria', *Middle East Eye* (2016).
65. Husam Tarsha, interview with the author.
66. Ahrar al-Sham, *Hukm raf' alam al-thawrah al-suriyya, ha'ya al-da'wha wa al-rishad* (2017).
67. Ahrar al-Sham, *Bayan mushtarak min kubra al-fasa'il al-thawriyya fi al-shimal* (26 January 2017); Ahrar al-Sham, 'Joining of New Factions' (26 January 2017).
68. Khaled Abu Anas, interview with the author.
69. Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Suri, interview with the author; Ahmad Abazeid, *Kayf anharat harakat ahrar al-sham? Markaz 'umran lil dirasat al-istratijiyya* (2017).