

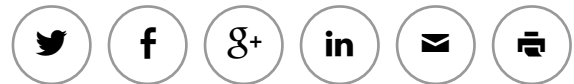


Fighters from Ahrar Al Sham march in the eastern Damascus suburb of Ghouta. Ahrar Al Sham Twitter page via AP Photo

Ahrar Al Sham's leader clarifies its role in Syria

Hassan Hassan

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Over the past five years in Syria, Ahrar Al Sham has emerged as an important political and religious experiment. The group, one of the most powerful rebel forces, has struggled to reconcile the legacy of many of its founders as jihadi veterans with the need for an acceptable political discourse in the war-ravaged country.

The ideology of the group is further muddled by the fact that it works closely with [Al Qaeda](#)-affiliated Jabhat Al Nusra while it participates in political conferences and pacts that appear to deviate from the canons of jihadist organisations.

After the death of its leaders in an explosion at a high-level meeting in September 2014, it has also sought to present itself to the outside world as a moderate group and an indispensable fighting force on the ground.

Countries involved in the conflict in Syria are split about the organisation. Some, including Russia, are pushing for its designation as a terrorist organisation. As the group engages cautiously in the political process for a transition, it is also important to understand whether it has really broken away from Salafi-jihadism, the movement to which its top echelon once subscribed.

Is Ahrar Al Sham merely a conservative Syrian faction immersed in an

armed struggle against the regime of Bashar Al Assad?

Ali Al Omar, the group's deputy leader, answered some of these questions during an hour-long talk he gave on Friday, titled "The Place of Ahrar Al Sham among Islamist Currents". Three points stand out.

First, Mr Al Omar begins the insightful talk by laying out main Islamist movements that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He says all the four movements differ in their approach but agree on the objective, which is the restoration of the Islamic caliphate.

Two of these movements, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Tablighi Jamaat, seek to establish the caliphate without stating that as their goal, through political participation and proselytisation respectively. The failure of those movements, he says, led to the rise of a third one: jihadism.

Ahrar Al Sham belongs to a new movement that sees merits in each of the movements he mentioned. The group combines, rather than departs from, the approaches of all of its predecessors. Significantly, he points out that the difference between Ahrar Al Sham and jihadists is that the group does more than just jihad. The difference between the two is not that jihad is a temporary tactic for them, he says. That is a key clarification because some observers think that Ahrar Al Sham's engagement in armed struggle is dictated by the reality in Syria, as the war against the regime rages.

The group's position on jihad is heavily shaped by Salafi-jihadism, which views jihad as a goal in and of itself. According to a recent 78-page study by Ahmad Abazeid, one of the group's closest observers, the group "adopts the writings of Salafi-jihadism in its training camps and discourse".

A second point that stands out from Mr Al Omar's lecture is his group's real stance on political participation. He explains that Ahrar Al Sham's participation in political talks, conferences or pacts is designed as a form of "takhtheel" – disruption or subversion.

This is a telling statement, considering that it is such "flexibility" that led many to rethink the group's ideology and to conclude that it broke away from Salafi-jihadism – the "crucible from which it emerged", in the words of one of its media activists.

Third, Mr Al Omar singles out the Taliban as a model worth following. This is the second time the group has officially praised the Taliban in this way. Last August, Ahrar Al Sham paid a tribute to the Taliban's dead leader Mullah Omar, describing him as "the happy emir" and his group as "the blessed movement".

Throughout his talk, Mr Al Omar emphasises that his group's objectives are part of a broader global Islamist project, and echoes common beliefs among Salafi-jihadists that Syrian society's Islam has been distorted by decades of a Baathist education system. In his view, Syrian society is not Muslim enough. He also clarifies that political engagement and flexibility are a ploy, as part of the Ahrar Al Sham's strategy of combining the approaches followed by the three movements he cited as influencers of his group.

If the remarks made by Mr Al Omar are supposed to represent a shift from jihadism, the apple did not fall far from the tree.

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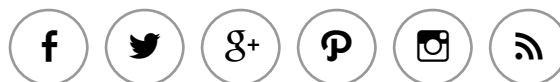
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