

Report

Syrian Revolution's Path after Attacks on Ahrar al-Sham

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Abstract

The 9 September 2014 attacks on the Ahrar al-Sham Brigade leaders have left more questions than answers for both internal and external observers. This report offers some background information on what has been labelled a “moderate Islamic movement”, outlines what little has been confirmed about the attack at the time of publication and analyses the most likely culprits and what each stands to gain, and ends with a discussion on the movement’s future as well as the wider implications for its umbrella group, the Islamic Front, and other “moderate Islamist movements” fighting in Syria.

Background

At least two dozen Ahrar al-Sham Brigade (Ahrar) leaders were killed 9 September 2014, in an attack that has left military and civil society opposition groups to Bashar Assad reeling. There are many questions: what kind of improvised explosive device was it? Who could have managed to infiltrate this secret meeting in a remote area where a stranger would certainly be noticed, a rural area of Idlib called Ram Hamdan? How was the device planted so close to the underground bunker where the commanders were meeting? When was this operation planned? Why were these commanders and this brigade targeted in particular? While these are all valid questions, the key question that must be answered is far simpler and will offer far more information to those wondering about the future of the Syrian revolution in general and what has been described as the “moderate Islamist movement” in specific: Who was behind these attacks?

There are many speculations about who could have infiltrated this key opposition brigade and planted an explosive device which is said to have led to the choking deaths of its commanders.(1) While it is impossible to make any sweeping conclusions, particularly in the absence of concrete evidence and thorough investigations, common sense dictates that there are two main suspects: the Assad regime and the Islamic State, both of whom the Brigade openly fights. However, given recent tension between Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions and other, more conservative groups such as the Nusra Front, also known as Jabhat an-Nusra (JaN), or the group calling itself the Islamic State (IS), the suspect list could be longer and far more convoluted – in fact, analysts would be doing themselves a disservice should they ignore the less obvious culprits. This report offers some background information on the movement, outlines the confirmed details of the attack at the time of publication, analyses most likely culprits and what each stands to gain, and ends with a discussion on the implications of this attack for Ahrar al-Sham and other moderate Islamist movements in Syria.

What is the Ahrar ash-Sham movement?

Harakit Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya is one of the key brigades fighting the Assad regime and its name is translated as “Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant” (or Syria). It is considered a “moderate” Islamist movement for its tolerance and willingness to cooperate with other groups on the battlefield, and falls under the umbrella of the Islamic Front, a merger of seven rebel groups that united in November 2013 to fight together against the Assad regime’s army. While the fighters consider themselves Islamists (the name is clear in terms of religious affiliation), they cooperate with secular brigades and are allied with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), often coordinating operations against the regime’s army. On its website, Ahrar al-Sham defines itself in the following manner:

“The Islamic Movement of Free Men of the Levant is an Islamist, reformist, innovative and comprehensive movement. It is integrated with the Islamic Front and is a comprehensive and Islamic military, political and social formation. It aims to completely overthrow the Assad regime in Syria and build an Islamic state whose only sovereign, reference, ruler, direction, and individual, societal and nationwide unifier is Allah Almighty’s Sharia (law)”. (2)

Hassan Abboud, whose nickname was Abu Abdullah al-Hamwee, was the group’s military leader, as well as the Islamic Front’s political leader before the 9 September 2014 attack that killed him and at least two dozen others. Abboud was formerly an English teacher who was imprisoned by the Assad regime, as were many others in the movement. (3)

According to some estimates, the entire Islamic Front comprises about fifty thousand soldiers,(4) with about ten to twenty thousand fighters under the banner of Ahrar al-Sham.(5)

The Brigade is seen as a “moderate” Islamist group for more than its tolerance and willingness to cooperate. On more than one occasion, Abboud has denounced the Islamic State, including in a BBC interview with Paul Wood in June 2014, saying, “They are the bearded version of the ‘shabiha’ [feared pro-regime militiamen]. ISIS does not reflect Islam in any way. Islam is a religion of peace. It is not a religion of slaughter. ISIS represents the worst image ever of Islam”.(6) Later in the interview, he went on to point out that while he and his movement were limited to the Syrian struggle, this was not true of IS, which has broader goals in terms of conquest, geographic spread and power.(7)

Taiseer Alony, a journalist who has spent significant time covering the Syrian revolution’s military factions, says that the Ahrar’s ideology is unique among Salafi Jihadist groups – the movement preaches flexibility and is attune to the society in which they live. For example, he has witnessed the movement’s leadership, on more than one occasion, rescue foreign journalists being detained by the Islamic State.(8) Finally, the movement is generally not seen by the Syrian public as fame or power-hungry, and Syrian activists’ comments on social media often describe the movement as working quietly and in an organised manner (9) on the ground without the constant public preaching displayed by some other brigades fighting in Syria.

Attack details

As with any unexpected large-scale attack of this nature, rumours began to make the rounds on social media minutes after the news broke. Also, as has been the pattern with coverage of the Syrian revolution, news first emerged on social media, with mainstream media outlets taking their cue from these pages and Twitter accounts and subsequently posting more in-depth information. This case was no different.

However, more than twenty-four hours after the attack, there has yet to be a concrete cause or culprit. What has become clear is that the cause of death, according to several sources, including a doctor with the movement, was choking.(10) The movement has appointed new leadership but not yet announced their suspicions about the culprits, only confirming the cause of death and releasing photos of the dead.

The choking could have been caused by one of three things, according to news reports. Initial reports indicated a suicide bomber infiltrated the meeting place or a car bomb

exploded nearby; however, the injuries of the dead are not consistent with this theory.(11) A government airstrike was another possibility, with some speculating that a strike on a nearby ammunition warehouse sparked a fire and subsequently filled the underground bunker with smoke.(12) However, the damage caused seems to be inconsistent with such an airstrike. Finally, some speculated that it was a chemical gas attack on these leaders, particularly because some witnesses are said to have seen the men choking and others crawling in an attempt to escape. The last scenario would certainly be in line with the Assad regime's previous attacks on civilians; however, without further sophisticated testing of the area, it is impossible to confirm this theory as well.

At the time of publication, only one thing is clear about the attack and cause of death, found in the Ahrar al-Sham doctor's report which states:

"Upon examination of the bodies, it is clear the cause of death was suffocation by some type of poisonous gas, given the blueness in their faces and the obvious attempts to remove their clothing, with scratches on the body consistent with this. There is no evidence of death by explosion...I do not see injuries consistent with an explosion nor do I see any shrapnel in the bodies. Even though some say they heard an explosion in the area, this could be a distraction used by the perpetrators to mislead the witnesses".(13)

Most likely culprit

Scouring IS members' tweets celebrating the attack, it is clear there is enmity between Baghdadi's men and the Islamic Front, Ahrar ash-Sham included. This enmity is no secret, particularly with Ahrar's Abboud publicly denouncing the group on more than one occasion. However, IS has not claimed responsibility for the attack – in fact, many of its defenders and sympathisers are accusing vague members of the international community of perpetrating the attack to stop all Jihadi movements in Syria. One such example is Dr. Eyad al-Qunaibi, who posted the following Twitter message after the attack:

"Martyrdom_Of_The_Islamic_Movement_of_Free_Men_of_Syria's_Leaders (14) indicates the international community's upcoming campaign is not to wipe out just the Islamic State but rather Jihad in Syria, and this is the first step. May God have revenge on them".(15)

This tweet is important on several levels, first because it attempts to equate the Islamic State with other, more moderate movements, something Abboud and Ahrar al-Sham

have repeatedly denounced. Second, the tweet connotes that the revolution in Syria is centred solely on Jihadi goals in line with the IS' goal, which discounts the reality that the attack was on what was considered a "moderate" rebel faction. Finally, and most importantly, it reduces the "choice" in Syria to two alternatives: the Assad regime or IS, and the international community has made it clear the Islamic State is its priority in Iraq and in Syria if given a choice – strikes on IS in Iraq became a reality faster than any empty threats Barack Obama publicly made against the Assad regime.

The obvious suspects, then, include the Assad regime, which has a stake in taking out any moderate factions which would interrupt its "fighting terrorism" narrative, and IS, which actively fights moderate factions in Deir ez-Zor and ar-Raqqah because they interrupt its "Islamic State" narrative. However, they are not the only groups which would stand to benefit from an attack on what has been labelled as a moderate rebel faction as well as be in a position to carry out such an unexpected attack. Hamzeh Moustafa, a research assistant at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, says that while at this point there is really no way to pinpoint a culprit, he believes that there is some evidence to support very real ideological divisions within Ahrar al-Sham.(16) These divisions had materialised in two separate camps – that more in line with Abboud's moderate stance and another camp closer to more Jihadi-centred movements.(17) Such a division could have prompted a betrayal by those who felt the Ahrar movement was moving away from their goal to "raise the flag of Islam".

Thus far, the discussion has been about internal actors with an interest in breaking apart the movement or at least weakening it. However, the reality is that there are also likely culprits from the outside, the most obvious of which is Iran, an emerging contender which continues to provide the Assad regime with material support and has an interest in continuing to use him as their man in Syria. It would not be surprising at all to discover that Iran or another member of the international community was able to somehow infiltrate the group and carry out an attack of this nature. Iran has capitalised on the "fighting terrorism" narrative used by both Assad and leaders of the western world (including the US) in order to defend its actions in both Syria and Iraq, and an attack of this scale on what many consider to be a "moderate" Islamist group fighting the Assad regime would augment and strengthen their argument that it's either Assad or the "terrorists" (e.g., the Islamic State).

At this time, the reality is that much of this speculation; however, it is important for analysts to consider all scenarios as they try to understand what happened 9 September 2014, even considering that the attack may have been a complete accident. Furthermore, until the cause of death is entirely clear, it will be difficult to determine the

culprit, because knowing how the Ahrar leaders were killed is instrumental in determining who killed them.

What this means for the future of “moderate Islamist movements”

While the brigade is well-respected and is a key member of the Islamic Front, it is not without weaknesses and divisions. The attack is indeed a hard blow to the group’s dynamic, particularly at the present time (17), a time that many consider to be a critical time for the opposition fighting Bashar Assad’s regime. Ahrar al-Sham has boasted a number of accomplishments since the formation of the Islamic Front, including hitting regime strongholds, earning itself a place among the most well-armed rebel groups, leading key battles in ar-Raqqah, attacking regime websites and developing extensive food, water and fuel networks for civilian populations.(18) The group has even opened several schools in Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, focusing on the importance of educating children.(19) The future scenarios for the group also carry a larger implication of translating into a ripple effect on the idea of a “moderate Islamist” movement fighting the Assad regime in Syria.

Ahrar al-Sham was already dealing with several challenges, including weaknesses in its ideological message, IS’ entrance into the fray and declining financial support from backers – this indicates the brigade’s unity was already at stake.(20) Even if the attack does not break apart Ahrar al-Sham, it could weaken it both on the battlefield and in the eyes of “competitors” in the short-term.

The brigade’s next phase will be perilous – they will need to ensure that their new leaders are well-accepted by former allies of the now-deceased leaders, and they will also need to ensure that they clarify their goals and determine exactly what path they plan to follow not only in the short but also in the long-term. Most importantly, identifying threats and protecting their leadership must be a priority should they hope to survive. Ahrar’s quick appointment of Hashim al-Sheikh, also known as Abu Jaber, as leader, and Abu Saleh Tahan as his deputy is somewhat reassuring and points to the fact the group is well-prepared in terms of leadership as well as in terms of continuing to fight towards their stated goal of destroying the regime.

Should they not survive the next few months, this will also be a blow to the Islamic Front and all that it has managed to achieve in comparison to IS’ barbaric portrayal of Islam. For the Assad regime, for Iran, and for the international community, it is more convenient to clear the battleground of all “moderate” Islamist or non-Islamist factions, because that is a continuing excuse to maintain a stalemate in the Syrian struggle for independence and refrain from supporting the rebels. Creating the illusion that only IS

and Assad can rule Syria, the international community is sure to choose Assad, ensuring that any last bit of moderate resistance to the regime is destroyed.

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Endnotes

1. Author phone interview with journalist Taiseer Alony, Doha, 10 September 2014.
2. From the Ahrar al-Sham official webpage: http://ahraralsham.net/?page_id=4195 , translated from the original Arabic, which read:
حركة أحرار الشام الإسلامية حركة إصلاحية تجديدية شاملة، أحد الفصائل المنضوية والمندمجة ضمن الجبهة الإسلامية وهي تكوين عسكري، سياسي، اجتماعي، إسلامي شامل، يهدف إلى إسقاط النظام الأسدي في سورية إسقاطاً كاملاً، وبناء دولة إسلامية، تكون السيادة فيها لشرع الله -عز وجل- وحده مرجعاً وحاكماً وموجهاً وناظماً لتصرفات الفرد والمجتمع والدولة
3. AlJazeera and Agencies, "Syria Rebel Group Names New Leader", AlJazeera, 9 September 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/syria-rebel-leader-killed-suicide-blast-201499181811320610.html> , accessed 10 September 2014.
4. Charles Lister, "Syria's Evolving Salafists Suffer a Crippling Blow", The Huffington Post, 10 September 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-lister/syrias-evolving-salafists_b_5795682.html , accessed 10 September 2014.
5. The Economist, "Competition Among Islamists", The Economist, 20 July 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21582037-one-islamist-rebel-group-seems-have-overtaken-all-others-competition-among> , accessed 11 September 2014.
6. Paul Wood for BBC, "Defiant Syrian Rebels Offer Stark Choice", BBC News, 3 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27687018>, accessed 10 September 2014.
7. Ibid.
8. Taiseer Alony interview, 10 September 2014.
9. Aron Lund, "Syria's Ahrar al-Sham Leadership Wiped Out in Bombing", Syria in Crisis by Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 9 September 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56581&reloadFlag=1> , accessed 10 September 2014.
10. Step Agency News, "In Statement to Step Agency, Ahrar Movement Doctor Ayman Discusses Examination of Martyrs' Bodies", Step Agency News, 10 September 2014, <http://stepagency-sy.net/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%A3%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D8%B7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1/> , accessed 10 September 2014.
11. Author phone interview with research assistant Hamzeh Moustafa, Doha, 10 September 2014.
12. Ibid.
13. Step Agency News, 10 September 2014.
14. This the hashtag which began trending after the attack, translated from Arabic, which was #استشهاد_قادة_أحرار_الشام
15. Translation from the original Arabic, which read: #استشهاد_قادة_أحرار_الشام
يدل على أن الحملة الدولية القادمة ليست لاستئصال جماعة الدولة، بل لاستئصال جهاد الشام، وهذه أولى خطواتها رب رد كيدهم
16. Hamzeh Moustafa interview, 10 September 2014.
17. Hamzeh Moustafa interview, 10 September 2014.
18. Aaron Zelin and Charles Lister, "The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front", Foreign Policy, 24 June 2013, http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/06/24/the_crowning_of_the_syrian_islamic_front , accessed 11 September 2014.
19. Ibid.
20. Author phone interview with Mohammad Aburumman, Doha, 10 September 2014.