



Al Qaeda Is Gaining Strength In Syria

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The struggle for Aleppo poses an awful threat for the United States. The ongoing battle for what was once Syria's second-largest city has united two of the most prominent opposition coalitions. Their goal is to defeat Bashar al-Assad's regime. But there's one more thing they have in common — neither has ever received significant help from Washington in their joint effort to break a nearly month-long siege of opposition-controlled areas of the city and conquer the rest of it.

The groups that have been trying to protect civilians in Aleppo from the siege tactics and indiscriminate attacks of the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies may succeed nonetheless. But Washington's inaction may inadvertently be paving the way for Syria's next Islamic State.

That's because al Qaeda has filled the breach left by the absence of the United States. Al Qaeda is resurgent globally, exploiting American blind spots, and building a popular local vanguard to oversee the transformation of local populations in countries where the state has collapsed. Syria is its current focus. The United States now has little choice but to reorient its strategy in Syria to focus on the threat posed by al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda's presence and influence in Syria was never confined to its formal affiliate, the Nusra Front. It dispatched numerous [senior leaders](#) and [strategists](#) to oversee the creation of a vanguard for al Qaeda within the Syrian revolutionary movement after the start of the civil war in 2011. These [operatives](#), which the U.S. government calls the "[Khorasan group](#)," not only advised the Nusra Front's top leadership, but also leaders of [other Syrian opposition groups](#). Al Qaeda's intent was to cultivate a series of rebel groups sympathetic to its aims while building a formal affiliate to normalize and diffuse its ideology. Al Qaeda probably also intended to establish a buffer against the possibility that an American intervention could destroy al Qaeda's entire network by eliminating one organization.

The Syrian war now involves U.S.-vetted and armed moderate groups, but also includes a significant component belonging to either Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the successor of the Nusra Front, or its close ally, Ahrar al-Sham. Both are now vital components of the largest opposition coalitions operating in Aleppo, [Jaysh al-Fatah](#), and [Fatah Halab](#).

Ahrar al-Sham epitomizes how al Qaeda is developing a network of sympathetic local revolutionary forces: The Syrian opposition group is a key node in the al Qaeda network that has nonetheless [achieved the image](#) of a "mainstream" Syrian opposition movement. It is the largest and most powerful recipient of al Qaeda's tutelage after Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

There is a common perception that Ahrar al-Sham never fully absorbed al Qaeda's ideology, despite al Qaeda's [intent](#) to use the group as part of its Syrian vanguard. Current U.S. policy [assumes](#) that Ahrar al-Sham [can be split](#) from al Qaeda and reconciled to a future Syrian state. Defenders of Ahrar al-Sham further argue that al Qaeda does not exert operational control over the organization and conclude that Ahrar al Sham can be dealt with [separately](#) from al Qaeda. This is little more than wishful thinking.

The most prominent [mentor](#) for Ahrar al-Sham's original leadership, Abu Khalid al-Suri, was a [veteran fighter](#) in Afghanistan who [worked closely](#) with al Qaeda. He was also a [student](#) of Salafi jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri, a leading al Qaeda ideologue who argued that in the near-term, al Qaeda should tolerate a range of actors within the Muslim community. Nor did al Qaeda's influence over Ahrar al-Sham end with his death in 2014: A Khorasan cell member named [Rifai Taha](#) subsequently took his place [as the liaison](#) between Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front.

Ahrar al-Sham's activity demonstrates that its strategy is joined at the hip with al Qaeda, and represents a local vanguard for the transnational jihadi group in Syria. Al Qaeda's signature is apparent in Ahrar al-Sham's campaign to [transform the religious identity of Syrians](#). The group [governs](#) through a series of sharia courts throughout the northern Idlib and Aleppo provinces, operating in parallel [to](#) the Nusra Front, which enforces [hard-line rulings](#) such as veil requirements for women and restricts freedom of the press.

Ahrar al-Sham's goal is to replace the Assad regime with a theocracy. This vision is a fundamental change from the initial demands of the Syrian opposition in 2011 for a democratic and pluralistic system. Syrian opposition groups nonetheless view Ahrar al-Sham as a "mainstream" actor, because of its major contributions to the war against the Assad regime. It serves as the mortar that binds opposition groups together in northern Syria and is well-positioned to merge these forces with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and solidify sharia-based governance - all without the world realizing that the result would be a major win for al Qaeda's aims in Syria.

Ahrar al-Sham intentionally serves as the Syrian connective tissue for the global Salafi jihadi movement. It is networked into the global Salafi jihadi movement and sees itself as such - [outwardly identifying](#) with major ideologues in the global Salafi jihadi movement and [explaining](#) its jihad as a continuation of the jihad begun by Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar. This mirrors the narrative of al Qaeda affiliates. Ahrar al Sham also accepts foreign fighters into its ranks and is [featured prominently](#) in Nusra Front-linked propaganda calling for Muslims to immigrate to Syria to wage jihad.

Ahrar al-Sham has also supported al Qaeda's operations to attack the West from Syria. In November 2014, U.S. airstrikes [targeted](#) an al Qaeda cell that then-Attorney General Eric Holder said has entered the "[execution phase](#)" of an attack; the strikes [hit](#) the Nusra Front and [Ahrar al-Sham bases](#) in Idlib province.

The strikes were a deliberate targeting operation, which means that before striking, the United States carefully developed intelligence tying Ahrar al-Sham to the al Qaeda attack node planning an imminent attack on the American homeland or Europe. The physical presence of Khorasan operatives or infrastructure at an Ahrar al-Sham base suggests that, while some of its members may not support external attacks, al Qaeda is confident enough in the loyalty of the group's leadership to entrust it with some of al Qaeda's most valuable assets.

The battle for Aleppo stands to solidify Ahrar al-Sham's influence over the local population in Syria. The group's leading role in breaking the regime's siege of [over 250,000 civilians](#) in the eastern districts of Aleppo has secured its place in the hearts and minds of Syrian people. Ahrar al-Sham will continue to deepen its military partnerships with the opposition in Aleppo while developing local support by providing aid and other services to those remaining in the city. It will be in a strong position to increase its governing role inside the city alongside Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which is reaping similar rewards for its role in breaking the siege.

Meanwhile, Turkey is [using its intervention](#) in northern Syria against the Islamic State and the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces to position itself as a power broker and is empowering its [strongest opposition ally](#), Ahrar al-Sham, to play a key role. Ahrar al-Sham [participated](#) in the Turkey-backed offensive near the Euphrates but did not publicize its role, as American air support for the initial operation incentivized Turkey to emphasize the role of Free Syrian Army-affiliated groups. Ahrar al-Sham has long called for Turkey's direct involvement in the Syrian Civil War, including [publicly advocating](#) for a Turkey-implemented safe zone in northern Aleppo in August 2015.

The United States risks losing the war against extremism in Syria if it continues to allow Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to be seen by the Syrian people as the victors in Aleppo. Ahrar al-Sham is as much a part of al Qaeda's long game in Syria as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. It shares the same goal to shape Syria's population in a way that facilitates global jihad, and its pragmatic approach advances al Qaeda's aim to build a durable safe haven in the Levant.

Ahrar al-Sham's window to disavow al Qaeda and work against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham should be closing rapidly. The United States must take action to provide Syrian civilians and opposition groups with an acceptable alternative to the al Qaeda network. Washington must also focus on preventing the further development of sharia-based governance structures in opposition-held areas in order to combat al Qaeda's subversive strategy. If Ahrar al-Sham does not act decisively to counteract al Qaeda in Syria, it must be treated as, and targeted as, an equal threat.

For the time being, U.S. policymakers must resist the temptation to drift into an alliance with Russia and Assad to accomplish this goal. Any such partnership would ensure remaining "mainstream" opposition groups will turn away from the United States and toward hard-line elements of the Syrian opposition, effectively removing any potential Sunni partners against the Islamic State and al Qaeda from the battlefield. An alliance with Russia or Assad would only accelerate al Qaeda's victory.

Read this online at [Foreign Policy](#).

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