

Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-)escalation

The case of Ahrar al-Sham in Syria

Karin Göldner-Ebenthal and Ahmed Elsayed

Case Study Report

Abstract

In the Syrian civil war, the Salafi jihadi armed group Ahrar al-Sham was one of the largest and most powerful non-state armed groups. This report outlines the development of Ahrar al-Sham and explores the conditions that led to its de-escalation and analyses as a second step the role and challenges of dialogue engagement. The report analyses three strategic shifts of de-escalation and the organisational, ideological and external factors that contributed to these shifts. The report then outlines the experiences of third-party dialogue efforts with Ahrar al-Sham, analysing the challenges of such endeavours for third parties but also for Ahrar al-Sham. As a borderline Salafi jihadi armed group that was not terror listed, the report offers valuable insights into the challenges of negotiations with more extreme Salafi jihadi armed groups. In the case of Ahrar al-Sham the main challenges resulted from the internal group dynamics and the rivalry with other insurgents on the Salafi jihadi spectrum.

About this report

This report was written in the context of the research project “Salafi-Jihadi Armed Groups – (De-)escalation Trajectories and Dialogue Options” conducted by the Berghof Foundation from November 2017 to August 2019. Case study research was carried out on Salafi-jihadi armed groups (SJAGs) in Mali, Somalia and Syria. A research report was published alongside the case study reports in August 2019.

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List of Abbreviations

FSA – Free Syrian Army

HNC – High Negotiation Committee

HTS - Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham

IHL – International Humanitarian Law

IS – Islamic State, sometimes called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh

NSAG – Non-state armed group

OCHA – UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

SMC – Supreme military command

SJAG – Salafi jihadi armed group

UN – United Nations

YPG – People’s Protection Unit

1. Introduction

In the Syrian civil war, the nationalist opposition forces became overshadowed by a melange of Salafi jihadi armed groups (SJAGs) as the uprising was pulled into a vortex of sectarianism and regional rivalry. Prominent among these groups were the so-called Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda's affiliate al-Nusra Front and the Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham. International efforts to support a political solution to the Syrian conflict started as early as 2012 but consistently failed to produce results. These efforts were hampered by many factors, such as zero-sum thinking, international and geopolitical interests and the high level of fragmentation of the opposition. Another factor was that not all conflict parties were included – or willing to engage – on a political level. IS and al-Nusra were not part of the political efforts and remained spoilers in the process. They were excluded from the mediation efforts due to their non-negotiable goals, radical stance, disrespect of basic human rights and horrendous behaviour – especially in the case of IS. It seems that negotiations with such hard-core Salafi jihadi armed groups are impossible.

Yet in other countries where military strategies have failed to end conflicts, groups that were in the past deemed too extreme to be negotiated with are now either in a pre-negotiation phase (e.g. Taliban in Afghanistan) or negotiations are no longer a complete taboo (e.g. al-Shabaab in Somalia; see Göldner-Ebenthal 2019). The question, then, is when and how do Salafi jihadi groups de-escalate? Under which circumstances do negotiations become possible? And what is the role of third-party dialogue efforts for de-escalating conflicts with Salafi jihadi armed groups? Recently, there seems to have been a nascent interest among UN, European Union and US policy-makers to explore the role of dialogue and negotiation in dealing with SJAGs, driven by examples where negotiations have been successful or are ongoing, as in Afghanistan. But there is still a severe lack of comprehensive and in-depth research to inform policy approaches and decision-making in this area, also with regard to how SJAGs differ from other NSAGs and how such assumed differences affect dialogue efforts.

This case study on Ahrar al-Sham is part of a research project that helps to fill this gap by advancing knowledge on the factors contributing to conflict (de-)escalation by Salafi jihadi armed groups and on the specific (actual or potential) role of third-party engagement through dialogue and negotiation. Ahrar al-Sham is an interesting case, as it occupied the political-ideological middle ground in the spectrum of Syrian non-state armed actors. It shared many of the ideological features of Salafi jihadi actors, but in organisation and behavioural aspects it was closer to more 'classical' NSAGs focused on regime change. Albeit starting out closely aligned with IS and al-Nusra, it developed through the course of the conflict to become what was at one point termed a 'moderate extremist group'. Additionally, it was one of the strongest military actors in Syria, such that the international community has an interest in engaging it in political processes. Its situation on the borderline of Salafi jihadi armed groups makes it an interesting case that offers insights into Salafi jihadi armed groups' de-escalation and the challenges such actors – as well as third parties – face when trying to engage in dialogue.

After a short introduction to the context and key players, this case study therefore focuses first on Ahrar al-Sham's pathways of de-escalation. Identifying three strategic behavioural shifts, we analyse the factors that contributed to this development. Secondly, experience with third-party engagement is outlined, with a focus on past attempts at dialogue engagement and the challenges encountered. The study also explores a range of future scenarios.

The case study is based on 20 semi-structured interviews, including one with a high-level member and one with a former high-level member of Ahrar al-Sham and several with political analysts (3), international diplomats (4), Syrian humanitarian actors (2), international humanitarian and peacebuilding NGOs, including a humanitarian negotiation expert (8), and fellow researchers (2). The interviews were conducted in person in Istanbul, Gaziantep, New York and Geneva, or by phone, between July and November 2018. Besides the empirical data, an extensive literature search was conducted. The bulk of the academic literature on Ahrar al-Sham is still emerging; the main literature drawn on for the study includes a diverse set of Arabic and English primary and secondary sources such as reports, press releases, official statements, personal testimonies, studies and news coverage of Ahrar al-Sham. The project was supported by a dedicated advisory board and the study was reviewed before publishing.

2. Conflict setting and key players

In 2011, latent public discontent in Syria sparked massive demonstrations inspired by the Arab Spring. The conflict arose out of grievances relating to an authoritarian state which relied on direct loyalty to the Assad family and the Ba'ath Party, with a strong clientelist system creating unequal opportunities for economic development (Balanche 2018, 8). Although Syria is a secular state, the Alawites, a small religious offshoot of Shia Islam, were over-represented in power positions in the government and security forces. The majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, and resistance to the regime had traditionally been strongest among their conservative rural communities, which were also affected by a strong urban-rural development divide.¹ The Ba'ath Party, as 'leader of the state and society' (Belhadj 2012), claimed a monopoly on politics, while the repression of civil society (beyond religious and charity work) reinforced the Syrians' demands for free expression and dialogue. In the general momentum of the Arab Spring of 2011, the Syrian uprising was a call for more freedom and democratic rights. The government's violent crackdown on the protesters started a spiral of violence that turned into full-scale civil war.

In what the International Crisis Group (2012) called Syria's "mutating" conflict, the sectarian prejudices and spiralling levels of violence drove the dynamic of polarisation. The uprising's original slogan 'One, one, one, the Syrian people are one' was eventually superseded by 'We want to speak frankly, we do not want to see Alawites', 'al-Assad or we burn the country' (Hokayem 2016) and 'Christians to Beirut; Alawites to the coffin' (Satik 2013, 110).

The (armed) opposition grew out of small local militias and remained fragmented. By 2014, the Carter Center (2014) had documented more than 5,546 armed opposition groups and military councils, which eventually consolidated into larger umbrella organisations. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was one such umbrella organisation, largely considered secular or moderately religious and centred around early defectors from the Syrian armed forces. The Supreme Military Command (SMC) was established to serve as a platform to fund and coordinate the opposition forces. Operating from Turkish exile, it was supported by foreign governments as a means of bolstering a unified opposition leadership. The SMC never managed to move beyond being an arms distributor as the opposition was too diverse to unify under one leadership. The SMC – not its successor organisations – could credibly claim to represent the full opposition spectrum. The lack of

¹ A first Islamist rebellion in Hama was brutally repressed by Hafez al-Assad in 1982; see (Lia 2016).

legitimate representatives remained a constant issue for the political opposition.² Instead of unifying, the opposition was caught in a constant dynamic of mergers, splits and alliances.

The conflict “metastasised” with the early successes of the opposition, opening up more conflict lines beyond the revolutionary one: armed groups began to fight each other over the space wrested from state control. Eventually, Turkey considered the Kurdish forces as a threat not to be tolerated, while the radical Islamists were perceived as a threat to international stability. IS was attracting a high level of international attention and was drawing in large numbers of foreign fighters. The Islamic State’s march to power pitted the opposition forces against each other, forcing them to invest fighters and resources on that second front line. This gave credence to Assad’s claim that radical terrorists were driving the revolution, enforcing his self-presentation as guarantor of stability in the region and rendering him less replaceable in the eyes of the international community. Western states perceived the radical Islamists and especially IS as a threat. Turkey, on the other hand, viewed the Kurdish YPG’s expansion with concern. The conflict thus internationalised far beyond the previous level of international support for the revolutionary forces (which came mainly from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the US) and the regime (mainly Iran, Russia and Hezbollah) (ICG 2013; Lund 2018). An international coalition against terrorism was set up to fight IS in Iraq and Syria. Turkey intervened in northern Syria. The last turning point in the conflict was Russia’s decision to intervene on the side of the Syrian regime. With significant resources from Russia, Assad was able to achieve a strategic victory, reclaiming most of the Syrian territory and re-establishing himself as the primary force in Syria.

There is no agreed-upon figure for the number of casualties or displaced persons during the war, but they range from 350,000 to upwards of 500,000 deaths and more than 6.2 million Syrians displaced within Syria and up to 7 million refugees outside of Syria (Lund 2018). The social, economic and political issues that led to the conflict in 2011 have remained unchanged as the political efforts to find a way out of the conflict and address some of the grievances have been unsuccessful. Various international efforts to limit the violence or start a political process have failed.

3. The Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham

This section first outlines Ahrar al-Sham’s development, providing background on its ideological, organisational and behavioural dimensions before assessing it in accordance with various NSAG typologies. This section will set the stage for the analysis of strategic shifts of behavioural de-escalation in the next section in order to determine how Ahrar al-Sham’s features fit with the expectations of Salafi jihadi armed groups.

3.1 Ahrar al-Sham’s ideology

Ahrar al-Sham was founded by Islamic orthodox figures subscribing to the Salafi form of Sunni Islam in 2011. Some of the founding and leading figures, such as Hassan Abboud and Abdel Nasser al-Yaseen, had been imprisoned in Sednaya Prison before they were released in spring 2011.³ Their experience there shaped the ideology and goals of Ahrar al-Sham. Mohannad al-Masry, the second leader of the movement, spoke about

² See Carnegie Middle East Center (2013) and Lund (2014a).

³ Sednaya military prison near Damascus is notorious for the extensive use of torture by security forces and for being a breeding ground for extremism.

his prison experience: “We witnessed how [followers of] extremist ideology behave, and how [followers] of far-right ideology behave, and we have seen those who were in the middle. In fact, this helped us to form an ideology or a project that is moderate in the true sense.” (Al Jazeera 2016). Ahrar al-Sham did not claim allegiance to al-Qaeda and was nationalist rather than transnational or global in its outlook and aims.⁴ Over the course of 2013, Ahrar al-Sham demonstrated that it would cooperate with actors affiliated with AQ such as al-Nusra and IS and nurtured the notion that these were ‘brothers’ among its members.⁵ In fact, one analyst interviewed for this study pointed out that there was little distinction between the armed groups on the Islamist spectrum during the first two years “*united in the fight against a common enemy, they had nothing to disagree on*”; the boundaries between the groups were fluid (Interview, November 2018). Yet unlike IS and al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham was not listed as a terrorist organisation by the United States, the United Nations or the European Union even though Russia actively lobbied the UN Security Council to blacklist Ahrar al-Sham by citing its alleged links to terrorist organisations (Nichols 2016).

In 2012, under the umbrella of the Syrian Islamic Front alliance, Ahrar al-Sham’s stated aim was to establish a Syrian Islamic society that would adhere to Sharia law, expressly rejecting any political solution and any form of international intervention. Sharia would be the exclusive source of legislation as “Allah’s *Sharia* is complete and does not need [any other thing]” and ruling out that non-Muslims could be part of any future government (Al Jazeera Arabic 2013). It rejected Syrian opposition structures with less commitment to Islamist ideology which were being set up in Turkey, such as the Supreme Military Council, denying their claim to represent all of the Syrian opposition forces. For this, Ahrar al-Sham was later accused of being the first to split the opposition and betray the revolution (Interview with civil society actor, July 2018).

In November 2013, Ahrar al-Sham took the lead role in a new alliance, the Islamic Front. Its Charter confirmed the previous alliance’s aims but also expressed the group’s rejection of secularism, democracy and its parliaments, and the civil state (Islamic Front 2013, 6). This more expressively exclusionary framework is in line with an increased competition for resources and fighters among the rising number of armed groups in Syria. Many groups had begun to use Islamist ideas as reference, believing that this would increase the chances of obtaining external funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States (Interview with political analyst, August 2018). The Islamic Front Charter can be explained as an outbidding strategy, especially against the main challenge on the Islamist spectrum – IS. Yet the outrageous actions of IS in Iraq and Syria began to sow dissent among Salafi jihadis and Ahrar al-Sham’s religious leaders debated what was legitimate behaviour with IS (Ansar al-Sham 2014). In the end, IS hegemonic claims left little room for Ahrar al-Sham and in December 2013, IS killed one of its commanders who had gone to consult with IS over skirmishes between the groups (Al-Khatieb 2014). The murder proved to be the trigger for Ahrar al-Sham to turn against IS.

The winter of 2013/14 was described by Aron Lund as a “*soul-searching moment*” for Ahrar al-Sham: a process of disillusionment with the ideals of Salafi jihadi actors and its scene combined with the realities of the threat of a terror listing as the international focus changed from a regime change scenario to counter-terrorism. This change in trend became apparent on 17 May 2014, only half a year after the founding of the Islamic Front, when Ahrar al-Sham drafted and signed the Revolutionary Charter⁶ in a public bid to be perceived as a moderate actor. The Revolutionary Charter stated as its goal that ‘the Syrian people aspire to

⁴ In an interview, Hassan Abboud later explained that “*Ahrar al-Sham battalions remained independent even after the announcement of the Free [Syrian] Army. We were keen to be independent and to show that we are not al-Qaeda, we are not from the Muslim Brotherhood and not from Hizb ut-Tahrir.*” (Al Jazeera 2016).

⁵ See Al-Ghannami (2017) and 24CR (2017, 1).

⁶ Also called Charter of Honour.

build the state of justice, law and freedom' and guaranteed respect for human rights within the framework of the state of justice and law and freedoms, along with adherence to the Syrian social fabric in all its ethnic and sectarian diversity, leaving the system of government to be decided by the Syrian people (Abu Soliman 2014). The Revolutionary Charter welcomed dialogue and cooperation with regional and international actors. It also denounced extremism and the reliance on foreign fighters in the country. A key distinction from the Islamic Front's Charter is that '[t]he political goal of the Syrian armed revolution is removing the regime with its pillars and figures and bringing them to fair trial', abandoning the explicit aim of establishing an Islamic state (Abu Soliman 2014).⁷ In the following month, some of Ahrar al-Sham's first-tier leaders went as far as vehemently discrediting Salafi jihadism, its ideology and organisations.⁸

Yet not all leaders and members followed this turn in strategy, language and focus on finding allies. Internal debate about the strategy and identity of the group created an incoherence that would remain a prominent aspect of Ahrar al-Sham, lasting until the group split in early 2017. Many scholars and commentators viewed Ahrar al-Sham as a binary group composed of hardliners (often also referred to as extremists) and moderates (often also referred to as reformists or pragmatics).⁹ Other contested issues were, for example, Ahrar al-Sham's relationship towards its main sponsor Turkey, Turkey's intervention in north Syria against the Kurdish YPG, and the level and permissiveness of political engagement in a politics vs. militarists divide that cut across the moderate vs. hardliner division.

Still, broadly speaking, as one political analyst put it, "*Ahrar al-Sham was standing on one radical and one revolutionary leg and had to balance between them.*" (Interview with Aron Lund, November 2018). While one side was more involved on a (international) political level, the other side was pushing for unification with al-Nusra. The unification did not materialise as the differences in religious doctrine, which set the framework for any possible choice of strategy, kept the division between al-Nusra's international-jihadi hardliners and Ahrar al-Sham's nationalist-revolutionary wing too far apart (Interview with political analyst, November 2018). An example of the difficulties Ahrar al-Sham's middle position created were two articles written by a leading figure in Ahrar al-Sham and published in the Western media, which – like the Revolutionary Charter – were specifically aimed at an international audience. The articles presented Ahrar al-Sham as a moderate rebel force that disdained extremism and wanted to see IS defeated (Al-Nahhas 2015a; 2015b). They achieved

⁷ Ahrar al-Sham's position on democracy remained complex, at the beginning expressly rejecting the concept while its charter maintained the idea of using a voting system to elect political leaders "as long as it is regulated by sharia" and only candidates whose policies "are bound by sharia" are involved (Zelin & Lister 2013).

⁸ Hassan Abboud, leader of Ahrar al Sham in an interview with BBC (2014), published in 3 June 2014, denounced ISIS: "They are the bearded version of the 'shabiha' [the pro-regime thugs]. 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." Deputy Leader of Ahrar al-Sham, Abu Yazen al-Shami, posted on facebook on 3.September 2014: "Yes, I was a Salafi-Jihadist and I was jailed in the regime's prisons for that, and today I ask Allah for forgiveness and repent to him and apologize to our people".

Online at: <https://www.facebook.com/aboyazanshamy/posts/1465504023737191>.

⁹ For instance, Hashim al-Sheikh, a prominent figure in the 'extremist' bloc, may be the first leader of Ahrar al-Sham to publicly criticise al-Nusra for its ties to al-Qaeda, which, he claimed, were an excuse for the international community to regard the Syrian revolution as 'terrorism' (Al Jazeera Arabic 2015). Another example from the 'moderate' faction is Kenan al-Nahhas, a then-member of the Shura (consultative) Council, who strongly opposed to the February 2016 ceasefire, stating that 'the revolution has not achieved its ultimate aims; therefore the sword will not be sheathed' (Ansari 2016).

Ahrar's purpose internationally¹⁰ but the negative backlash created internally and within the Islamist scene was massive (Interview with former Ahrar al-Sham member, December 2018).

Only a split within Ahrar al-Sham in early 2017 would solve the internal tensions as the splinter group joined forces with al-Nusra. Ahrar al-Sham was freed of internal opposition, moved closer to the revolutionary forces supported by Turkey and adopted significant symbols like the revolutionary flag, albeit maintaining its central goal and deep-rooted Islamic conservatism.

3.2 Organisation and behaviour

Organisationally, Ahrar al-Sham displayed a less hierarchical decision-making structure, which allowed faster and smoother integration of other armed groups. Unlike in other more leader-centric structured groups, the Shura Council was the centre of power, the leader taking a more reconciliatory position towards the Shura members (Lund 2016) by whom he was elected annually. This allowed it to grow fast in numbers and geographical representation but incoherence was partly built into the structure (Drevon 2018). Ahrar al-Sham's military structure was decentralised, its ability to command and control its own forces comparatively weak. Comprised mainly of local militias, Ahrar al-Sham only had a small central force of more experienced fighters, which were free to move to different locations and to train the local fighters, strengthening the military capacities and capabilities on the front-line though their knowledge of strategies and weapons (Interview with Ahrar al-Sham member, August 2018). At its peak in 2015, Ahrar al-Sham claimed to have 40,000 fighters¹¹, making it one of the most powerful armed opposition groups.

A direct assessment of Ahrar al-Sham's behaviour is difficult. Due to the many NSAGs involved in the Syrian conflict, there is no comprehensive mapping of activities that can be ascribed reliably to individual groups, so it was not possible to make a behavioural assessment of its violent activities. What can be said, however, is that Ahrar al-Sham did not use terrorist strategies, such as targeting civilians or suicide attacks. Nevertheless, with its early targeting of military sites and seizing of their equipment, it quickly became one of the best-armed insurgent groups in the country. Besides military targets, government sites were the prime focus, along with strategic sites and rival insurgent groups.

Governance actor

In January 2013, Ahrar al-Sham established the Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham, reinventing itself as an all-encompassing entity – no longer only a military but also a social and political actor (24CR 2017). Its degree of formalisation increased as Ahrar al-Sham was successful in 'liberating' areas under regime control when they were faced with governance needs. In response to these needs, Ahrar al-Sham developed specialised departments such as the Sharia Office, Political Bureau, Technical Bureau and Internal Judiciary – a process of institutionalisation. The judiciary's task was to resolve internal issues between elements of Ahrar al-Sham and to investigate complaints filed by civilians against any member of the movement. This guaranteed a higher level of accountability and security for the local population, unlike the situation in IS or al-Nusra

¹⁰ In spring 2016, the UK, US and France blocked the Russian efforts to add Ahrar al-Sham to the UN terror list for Syria. For more on Ahrar al-Sham's political dialogue engagement, see Section 5.

¹¹ Number stated by a former Ahrar al-Sham member during interview. Independent estimates range from (minimum) 10,000-20,000 fighters to up to 40,000 -70,000 fighters (Stanford Mapping and Hassan 2016; Steinberg 2016, 1.)

territory (Interview with Syrian humanitarian practitioner, August 2018). International funding and locally generated income enabled Ahrar al-Sham to build up significant civilian governance capacities and offer service provision to the local population as well as to meet its own infrastructure needs. Working with the local councils, its control was indirect and less interfering compared to al-Nusra's control¹² (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, August 2018). The indirect approach to assert influence was Ahrar al-Sham's strategy in all of the regions where it had a presence. One exception was Idlib, where it built up more elaborate civilian structures, including inter alia schools, a medical service for everyone, water pumping stations, electricity networks and bakeries. The civilian administration also included courts: there was one central courthouse with 11 sub-magistrates that operated locally and were staffed by local religious scholars. "*There was no rigid ideology that Ahrar al-Sham was trying to implement, more an effort to keep law and order rather than implement certain ideology. But nor was it a coherent and unified strategy. Still, it was quite effective and worked well.*" (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, August 2018). Overall, Ahrar al-Sham displayed significant governance capacities and ambitions.

The question of allies

Ahrar al-Sham did not employ terrorist strategies but profited from such activities when it combined forces with more radical Islamist actors such as al-Nusra or IS in coordinated attacks during the early years.¹³ Rebel infighting later became a constant, with smaller battles against al-Nusra, FSA and other groups fought over resources and strategic positions. Simultaneously, Ahrar al-Sham regularly coordinated military manoeuvres not only with brigades affiliated to the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council (SMC) but also with al-Nusra.

In summer 2014, Ahrar al-Sham was in negotiations with other Syrian opposition forces to create a broader alliance under joint leadership to unify the rebel mainstream forces and replace the collapsed institutions of the FSA. The Revolutionary Command Council¹⁴ was "one of the very few genuinely initially Syrian ideas which came from the Islamic Front and developed into a more popular front. It was a non-ideological project as people started to feel the damage of division of the opposition." (Interview with former Ahrar al-Sham member, December 2018). Ahrar al-Sham involvement in this effort stalled when almost all of its first- and second-tier leadership was killed by a bomb on 9 September 2014. Against expectations, Ahrar al-Sham displayed considerable institutional strength and a high level of formalisation: the second- and third-tier leaders took over control of a new Shura Council that elected a new Emir: Hashim al-Sheikh. The extensive

¹² The separation between the group and the local council, though, was not clear-cut, as Ahrar al-Sham tried to get local members named as part of the local councils, functioning as a legitimate voice in the council – which some councils accepted and others did not (Interview with political analyst, August 2018).

¹³ Still, the movement was accused by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) of committing human rights atrocities. 'You Can Still See Their Blood' report, HRW (2013) refers to unlawful executions, hostage taking and other violations in August 2013.

¹⁴ Watasimo Initiative, an initiative of Islamic preachers and activists in the Idlib region of northwest Syria that assembled Syrian rebel commanders to lobby for and plan for their idea to create a joint leadership called the Revolutionary Command Council. This was supposed to replace FSA. Ahrar al-Sham was involved in this but was struggling internally to make a decision when the 9 September bomb killed all leaders of Ahrar al-Sham, including two leaders that had been outspoken about their disenchantment with Salafi jihadism.¹⁴ The new leadership with al-Sheikh at the helm still became part of the Revolutionary Command Council when it was established on 27-29 November 2014. The socio-political structure was set up and it was planned to establish a central military force under the direct command of the RCC – an ambitious attempt as all other alliances, including the FSA and Islamic Front, had been functioning as an umbrella organisation where each group maintained the control of their fighters. This ambition in the end was not to be fulfilled.

leadership change was a significant moment for Ahrar al-Sham and the changes that had started under its charismatic first leader Hassan Abboud were not continued by al-Sheikh.

Under al-Sheikh, widely perceived as representing the conservative faction within Ahrar al-Sham¹⁵, there was a high level of coordination of Ahrar al-Sham's activities with the al-Nusra Front. The proximity peaked in March 2015 when both parties joined a military alliance, known as the Army of Conquest, with three smaller groups. The capacity for military action increased and significant successes were achieved on the battlefield: Ahrar al-Sham gained almost complete control of Idlib province and became a real threat to the regime's control over central and coastal Syria (Heller 2015).¹⁶ Based on – and in turn contributing to – the military victories was the success in attracting foreign funding from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey (Ignatius 2015) as well as attention from influential independent preachers and jihadi sympathisers worldwide (Drevon 2018).¹⁷ Independent income was generated when Ahrar al-Sham captured the Bab al-Hawa border crossing to Turkey from the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The bulk of all humanitarian aid for northern Syria passed through Bab al-Hawa and Ahrar al-Sham “reportedly siphoned off millions of dollars from commercial traffic and high-value goods like construction material” (Lund 2017b).

Towards de-escalation

Externally, Ahrar al-Sham was successful in ‘liberating’ Syria. Internally, incoherence remained a challenge. In September 2015, Russia increased its support for the Syrian regime and the dynamics of the conflict changed significantly in the latter's favour. Regime forces supported by Iranian and Russian allies and by Hezbollah first managed to stall the opposition forces and then put them on the defensive. The opposition's luck was finally turning when eastern Aleppo, a rebel stronghold, fell to the government in December 2016 after extensive fighting at great cost to Ahrar al-Sham. Under increasing pressure from the conflict dynamics, the internal divisions between the factions also came to a head. In autumn 2016, the faction around former leader al-Sheikh, which had been promoting an alliance with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra), created a sub-faction within Ahrar al-Sham. They split from Ahrar al-Sham to merge with Jabhat Fath al-Sham in January 2017, creating Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) under al-Sheikh's leadership. This fragmentation of Ahrar al-Sham in early 2017 ended the internal decision-making blockade but was costly in military capacities as fighters, as well as much of the military equipment and weaponry, were lost to HTS. The target of Ahrar al-Sham's violent activities accordingly shifted from the Syrian regime to HTS: up to 80% of all fighting in 2017 were targeting HTS (Heidar 2018).

Under the remaining more national-revolutionary leadership, Ahrar al-Sham steered towards a closer alignment with the revolutionary forces and its sponsor Turkey. Symbolising this trend, Ahrar al-Sham adopted the revolutionary flag on 22 June. HTS began to target Ahrar al-Sham, accusing it of betraying their shared goals. This peaked in a broad offensive against Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib in July 2017. After this “*mini civil war*” (Interview with Aron Lund, November 2018), Ahrar al-Sham was significantly weakened and dependent on its main sponsor Turkey. In this position, Ahrar al-Sham participated for the first time in direct political negotiations, joining the sixth round of talks in Astana in September 2017. Here, Turkey, Iran and

¹⁵ He appointed Abu Saleh al-Tahhan as the military commander and Abu Mohammed al-Sadiq as the Chief Shar'i (religious jurist) of the movement. Their strict militaristic and extremist views alarmed many in the movement. See Al-Ghannami (2017).

¹⁶ Even though Ahrar al-Sham was present in almost all of Syria with the exception of the IS-held territory and Kurdish-held territories, there were very few cities or villages where they were the only armed group.

¹⁷ Also Interview with Hassan Abboud, Al Jazeera, 8 June 2013.

Russia agreed on the details of the four de-escalation zones (Al Jazeera 2017; ICG 2018).¹⁸ Ahrar al-Sham had forces in three of the four zones: northern Hama, Eastern Ghouta and Idlib. In spring 2018, the regime forces moved to re-take Eastern Ghouta – under the label of fighting extremism, which was excluded from the de-escalation zone agreement.¹⁹

A succession of evacuation agreements, which allowed the fighters to withdraw to the remaining rebel stronghold in Idlib, marked the final loss of territorial control outside this last opposition stronghold. In August 2018, under threat from the advancing combined forces of the Syrian regime and its allies, Ahrar al-Sham joined forces with the remaining armed groups in Idlib – except HTS – to create the National Liberation Front. This front was the attempt to organise the defence of the opposition’s last remaining territories. The Sochi Agreement reached between Russia and Turkey on 16 September 2018 focused on the establishment of a de-militarised buffer zone along the border of Idlib’s de-escalation zone, which further reduced the military activities. The loss of territorial control and income had significantly weakened Ahrar al-Sham’s military and governance capabilities. In January 2019, under pressure from HTS, Ahrar al-Sham further dissolved its military structure (Heller 2019). Overall, Ahrar al-Sham has had quite a journey in its eight years of existence, rising to power and then losing it again in a complete cycle of organisational development.

3.3 Defining Ahrar al-Sham

What kind of non-state armed group is Ahrar al-Sham? Typologies can only ever be snapshot assessments and an assessment of Ahrar al-Sham in 2012 would have painted a different picture from today’s, which takes into account Ahrar’s more recent development. Nonetheless, it is interesting to consider what kind of NSAG Ahrar al-Sham is, especially as so many assumptions go along with the terminology of Salafi jihadi armed groups.

Typologies of SJAGs, for example, identify them by their “internationalist and anti-Western” features (Hegghammer 2014, 253) which many of the Salafi jihadis display. Ahrar al-Sham’s public discourse was critical of the West more often than not, even though it engaged Western actors in dialogue. For example, Abu Yazan al-Shami, Ahrar al-Sham’s deputy leader, concluded that IS is a model of what the Western intelligence agencies do ‘to make Jihadi experiments fail’ (MAS 2017). Hassan Abboud regarded the West as ‘hypocrites’ and their democracy as a weapon to get rid of anyone they did not like (ibid.). Still, Ahrar al-Sham repeatedly emphasised its state focus, even though some of its members had previous experience in transnational jihad.²⁰ The acceptance of the Weberian model of states as the foundation of a global political order sets Ahrar al-Sham at odds with Bellamy’s (2016) category of violent extremist groups and Maher’s (2016) violent rejectionists category, where groups perceive modern states as heretical and artificial units that usurp God’s sovereignty.

Typologies that differentiate according to the groups’ underlying rationales show that Ahrar al-Sham clearly falls within the state-oriented groups (Hegghammer 2014, 258) as it seeks to ‘change the social and

¹⁸ The four zones were first agreed on in the first Astana Talks in January 2017 with the US, Turkey, Russia and Iran as guarantors but the details were not set. The de-escalation zones included the areas of Northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Idlib Province and the south-west of Syria. The last was eventually negotiated outside of the Astana framework with Israel and Jordanian participation instead of Iran and Turkey (ICG 2018). See also Al Jazeera (2017).

¹⁹ Although the de-escalation zones were created with the purpose of reducing violence levels, the violence actually increased, according to Save the Children’s (2018) report.

²⁰ With the exception of some rare cases such as Mohamed al-Bahaiya (*better known as* Abu Khalid al-Suri *and* Abu Omayr al-Shami) and Hussein Feras (*aka* Abu Sareyah al-Shami), this experience was almost solely in Iraq to fight the US occupying forces. For instance, Hisham al-Sheikh worked as a coordinator to facilitate the entry of Syrian fighters into Iraqi territory, while Ali al-Omar and Hussein Abdel Salam [8:33] (*aka* Abu Hamza al Sharkeyah *or* Abu Hamza al-Raqqa) joined the resistance groups inside Iraq.

political organisation of the state' with a level of sectarian rationale. Piazza's (2009) typology also relies on goals. Highlighting the ideological and organisational differences among SJAGs, he distinguishes between strategic and abstract/universal groups. The former's mode of action resembles that of national liberation or regime-change organisations, while the latter are those associated with al-Qaeda's transnational network. In this typology, Ahrar al-Sham displays all the features of a strategic group. Unlike abstract groups, Ahrar al-Sham's goals are specific, its tactical objectives are military rather than communicative and the movement has a constituent population 'on whose behalf' it fights Assad (Piazza 2009, 65-66). Winning 'the hearts and minds' of popular constituencies, which Piazza listed as a distinctive feature of strategic groups (ibid.), was what Ahrar al-Sham's commanders referred to as the popular incubator that should be nurtured to win support (al-Sheikh, 2014).

Typologies that span the entire spectrum of NSAGs also focus on goals. Eran Zohar (2016) classified four groups according to their agenda: secessionist, social-revolutionary, sectarian-revolutionary and global-revolutionary. Zohar (2016, 7) considers that most global-revolutionary NSAGs are Salafi jihadist groups that have been influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood's intellectual Sayyid Qutb. Furthermore, for Zohar (2016, 20-1), such groups mix terrorism and conventional warfare, have "strong external orientation" and rely heavily on suicide bombing and martyrdom operations. It is undeniable that Qutb was and remains a revered intellectual among the Ahrar al-Sham's leaders²¹, but the behavioural characteristics and international focus are largely missing. In terms of its allocation to these various typologies, it becomes obvious that based on its behaviour and structures, Ahrar al-Sham fits best in categories of more 'classical', state-focused rebel organisations. Ideologically, however, its aims are close to those of the AQ-affiliated actors, including a sectarian exclusionary perspective, minus the international perspective. Indeed, during the research for this project, several interviewees rejected labelling Ahrar al-Sham as Salafi jihadi or grouping it with actors such as IS or al-Shabaab. However, two analysts pointed out that in their early years, the boundaries between Ahrar al-Sham, al-Nusra and the fledgling IS were fluid. Furthermore, Ahrar al-Sham displayed Manichean tendencies, a dualist perception of the world in terms of right vs. wrong or good vs. evil, a worldview that is common for Salafi jihadi groups which self-claim to be true believers.

Overall, Ahrar al-Sham is a borderline Salafi jihadi armed group in that some of its members would self-claim that term and others would reject it. Nonetheless or perhaps precisely because of this borderline position, Ahrar al-Sham holds interesting lessons for other groups more firmly in the Salafi jihadi category. Such groups tend to be listed as terror organisations. A terrorist designation not only impedes dialogue efforts; it also makes them difficult to research as any attempts to establish (the possibility for) dialogue are kept very quiet. Before presenting the findings on dialogue engagement with Ahrar al-Sham, the next section focuses on the conditions and factors that contributed to strategic shifts in Ahrar al-Sham's de-escalation trajectory.

4. Strategic shifts of de-escalation

In order to identify factors contributing to Ahrar al-Sham's de-escalation, this section focuses particularly on instances of behavioural change. These instances of behavioural change were termed 'strategic shifts' as they imply a strategic choice by the group's leadership for de-escalation. Behavioural de-escalation is understood

²¹ In an interview with Al Jazeera (2016), Abdel Nasser al-Yaseen stated that Sayyid Qutb's *Fe zelal al-Qur'an* (In the Shades of the Quran) and *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Milestones) 'have influenced us so much.'

here as either a reduction in the frequency of violent activities or the engagement in dialogue, such as ceasefire negotiations or peace talks in pursuit of a non-violent strategy.

Focusing on the factors and conditions contributing to these strategic shifts, we draw on Soifer’s (2012) understanding of critical junctures. Soifer defines critical junctures not by the significance of the outcome but by focusing on factors allowing and/or producing change: the loosening of structural constraints to allow agency (permissive condition), and contingency to shape divergence from the past (productive condition). Accordingly, for a critical juncture to occur, permissive and productive conditions, individually necessary but insufficient, must come together in a loosening of constraints and heightened agency. Distinguishing between conditions that drive change in a certain direction and those that are necessary to allow change to occur is an interesting approach. In order to distinguish between different types of permissive and productive conditions that might lead to strategic shifts towards de-escalation, the section will also make references to the specialised literature on the de-escalation of NSAGs. A 2015 study by Dudouet on armed groups’ transformation into non-violent social movements was particularly helpful in disentangling intra-group, societal, relational (inter-actor) and contextual factors of change (2015, see graph below). Permissive conditions relate mostly to external factors but can also be found within the group, for example a change in the leadership. Productive conditions, as they refer to the ideas and choices that drive decision-making, are internal factors.

Graph 1: Mechanisms of Change (Dudouet 2015, 9)

Levels of analysis	Mechanisms of change
Intra-group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Shifts in the identity, belief systems and strategic choices of the leadership ≡ Horizontal dynamics and power shifts ≡ Vertical dynamics across the hierarchy (top-down/bottom-up)
Group-society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Pressure from (existing) allies within a broader movement ≡ Coalition-building with other socio-political forces ≡ Mirroring a strategy that has been proved effective by other groups ≡ ‘Reversed outbidding’ to emphasise one’s distinction with competitors
Group-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Persistence or increase in power asymmetry in favour of the state ≡ Level and nature of state repression to dissent ≡ Selective state inducement and political opportunities
Group-international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Loss of foreign support and search for new allies ≡ Emulation of successful regional/international models ≡ Cross-border transmission of techniques and skills

In the original concept for the research project, the idea was to examine whether behavioural change is influenced and conditioned by ideological and organisational change – for example, whether SJAGs have to de-radicalise their worldview in order to moderate their behaviour. However, it proved extremely difficult to access reliable information on the internal group dynamics. Secondly, in the research, the relations with society, with the state and with international forces seemed to be the most relevant in influencing the strategic choices of the group. This section therefore moves away from the three internal dimensions to identify other drivers of change.

4.1 Strategic shift 1: Attending the Riyadh conference

Ahrar al-Sham's attendance at the Riyadh conference in December 2015 was a behavioural de-escalation and the first strategic shift presented here.

The purpose of the international conference was to create a body that could represent the fragmented opposition forces at the UN peace talks in Geneva. Ahrar al-Sham's attendance was a sign of its rapprochement with the wider Syrian opposition beyond the Islamist spectrum. Many factors contributed to this development and some of the dynamics started as early as 2013, two years before the Riyadh conference. As outlined before, during winter 2013/2014 Ahrar had a 'soul-searching moment' brought on by the conflict with IS and its hegemonic behaviour. The outbidding within the Salafi jihadi spectrum in 2013 turned, in response to the fighting with IS, to a strategy of reversed outbidding. IS's attack on Ahrar al-Sham made it necessary to adapt its ideology to have sufficient legitimacy to justify fighting its former 'brothers' in the eyes of its fighters, but also served as a visible severing of their connection.

The international focus also shifted dramatically from the regime change scenario to a counter-terrorism effort against IS – and any other Salafi jihadi armed group. In interviews, a high-level representative from Ahrar al-Sham's foreign relations bureau and a former member with close ties to the inner circle both highlighted the pressure that the international attention on terrorism put on Ahrar al-Sham not to be considered as 'terrorist' as well (Interviews in August 2018 and December 2018, respectively). Driven by outside supporters, mainly Turkey, Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic Front allies set out to draw the line between themselves and more extreme groups like IS. This resulted in the Revolutionary Charter, which included many buzzwords like respect for minority rights, a state of justice and law and freedoms, and denouncing extremist violence. Another buzzword was missing, however: the explicit aim of an Islamic state. The Revolutionary Charter's target audience was mainly the international sphere, the aim being to "*de-mystify the group and its vision*" (Interview with former Ahrar al-Sham member, December 2018) As the a member pointed out: "*The signing of the covenant of honour [Revolutionary Charter] occurred because of the international contexts. Western countries did not differentiate among the armed Islamist groups active in Syria. We were described as terrorist and this impacted our relations with other actors. We wanted a response to that*" (Interview, August 2018). The charter served to differentiate Ahrar al-Sham from IS and al-Nusra and was not listed as a terror organisation by the UN. Some of the core leaders, for example Hassan Abboud, underwent a process which a former member termed "disenchantment" with jihadist thinking and actors representing it. Thus, reversed outbidding was partly driven by pragmatic considerations but also by a level of change in the belief system of some of the leaders towards more inclusive thinking – a productive condition for the participation in the Riyadh conference one year later.

Additionally, the costs of a fragmented opposition had become apparent in rebel in-fighting along with a renewed regime offensive (Lund 2014). One of Ahrar al-Sham's key features, as Jerome Drevon (2018) highlighted, is its early and continuing effort to unite the opposition (preferably behind Ahrar al-Sham's ideas). Whereas in autumn 2013 the main unification focus had been on the increasing number of Islamic opposition groups, autumn 2014 saw a diversification of potential allies in accordance with a more pragmatic approach. Ahrar al-Sham opened towards considering a broader spectrum of socio-political forces. The foreign affairs representative Labib Nahhas, for example, sought more international attention in an effort to distinguish Ahrar al-Sham as a moderate rebel group rather than an extremist one, driven by the looming terror listing and pushed by international backers (Al-Nahhas 2015a, 2015b, Steinberg 2016)(Steinberg 2016)(Steinberg 2016)(Steinberg 2016). Ahrar al-Sham also began engaging more deeply in dialogue efforts among the opposition forces, backed by mediation organisations that had set out to support the peace process.

Not least, in September 2015, the annual leadership election replaced the more al-Nusra-leaning al-Sheikh with centrist Mohannad al-Masry.

Internal belief changes and a re-evaluation of the best strategy in favour of a broader opposition coalition were the productive conditions driving the change, which combined with the external permissive conditions in form of the terror threat and increased costs of continuing the military effort. The prospect to win the war by military means was decreasing in the face of the Russian intervention. The leadership change was the internal permissive condition. Under these circumstances, Ahrar al-Sham decided to send a representative to participate in the Riyadh conference.

Although the decision to participate in an international conference such as this was a strategic shift, the conference itself was a missed window of opportunity. Ahrar al-Sham in the end refused to sign the conference agreement that established the High Negotiation Committee to represent the opposition in peace talks. Ahrar al-Sham's political capacity and willingness to involve itself might have grown in 2015, but the internal strategic planning capacity remained blocked due to the division between the factions. In the end, the agency for change was not sufficient to complete the turn towards buy-in to a political option and a broad coalition (see more in Chapter 5).

4.2 Strategic shift 2: Breaking point

The winter of 2016/2017 was a decisive change for Ahrar al-Sham. The behavioural de-escalation during that time has two aspects: from fighting to negotiations and withdrawal, then the agreement for a national ceasefire and the potential for political negotiations. Ahrar al-Sham faced several similar withdrawal situations during the civil war. The instance stands out for its magnitude and the symbolism of Aleppo's re-taking by the regime and the effects on Ahrar al-Sham's internal dynamics. The events of Aleppo reinforced the existing default lines around the question of the right strategy and opened a window of opportunity for a second de-escalation in the form of direct engagement in political negotiations.

Aleppo ceasefire negotiations

In December 2016, Aleppo – a symbolic and materially important city for the revolutionary forces in Syria – fell under heavy fire from the Syrian regime and its allies. The opposition in the besieged part of the city crumbled for several external reasons that functioned as permissive conditions. One of them was the unequal international support: “They were facing down a regime whose allies, Russia and Iran, were willing to do whatever it took to ensure its victory.[The] Rebels’ backers were never ready to match that commitment” (Heller 2017). As the combined forces of the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran focused on Aleppo, the irresolvable asymmetry of force in the Syrian conflict reached a new height.

Inside the rebel-held areas, a second central factor was the factionalism and in-fighting between opposition groups, which had a negative effect on fighters' morale. The third contributing external factor was the panic and suffering of civilians, which added significantly to the pressure on Ahrar al-Sham. As Heller (Heller 2017) quotes: “‘The main obstacle in our way was the presence of civilians,’ said negotiator and Ahrar al-Sham commander al-Farouq Abu Bakr. ‘Until the last moment, we were calling for the exit of these civilians, without

us leaving, but the Russian side stubbornly insisted that everyone had to leave or they would keep bombing.’” The regime refused to allow civilians to leave or humanitarian assistance to get into Aleppo.²²

Ahrar al-Sham’s relationship with the local population, its unwillingness to go to extreme lengths in accepting suffering (contrasting with IS’s position during a similar siege in Raqqa) and its own survival were a forceful productive condition. Under such heavy pressure, Ahrar al-Sham for the first time opened up discussion channels with Russia directly (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, August 2018). Ahrar al-Sham took on a central role and negotiated the evacuation of civilians and fighters on 13 December 2016 under a limited ceasefire agreement (Shaheen 2016).

National ceasefire and momentum for political negotiations

The events in Aleppo, which the Western and global media covered intensively, also served to re-ignite diplomatic efforts – a new option for Ahrar al-Sham to engage in dialogue. Qatar ceased its funding post-Aleppo and Ahrar al-Sham was left ever more reliant on its remaining sponsor Turkey.²³ Turkey’s foreign policy, though, had shifted towards stronger cooperation with Russia: post-Aleppo, they worked together for a nationwide ceasefire to be followed by a political process in Astana, Kazakhstan, in January 2017.

Similar to the nationwide ceasefire in 2016²⁴, Ahrar al-Sham did not participate in the negotiations on the ceasefire but, under strong Turkish and international pressure, it agreed to it nonetheless (Interview INGO representative, October 2018). Russia abruptly changed its view of Ahrar al-Sham, now regarding it as part of the “moderate opposition”, having condemned its members as “inveterate jihadi extremists” and demanded its terror listing at the United Nations less than two months earlier (Lund 2017). The external factors of international pressure and the forceful display of power asymmetry set the stage for Ahrar al-Sham to participate in the Astana talks in early 2017.

Internally, though, the productive conditions for participation were missing as the leadership remained too divided: while the situation in Aleppo was deteriorating, Ahrar al-Sham had been electing a new leader, pitting the opposing factions and their proposed leaders – Hashem al-Sheikh for the more jihadi-leaning faction and Kinan Nahhas for the more revolutionary-nationalist wing – against each other. As neither side could muster up enough support for their candidate, a compromise candidate was elected, Ali al-Omar. An internal power shift in either direction at the horizontal leadership level was avoided. As a reaction, eight members of the Shura Council suspended their membership at the end of November (Lister 2016), and by 10 December 2016 – three days before the Aleppo withdrawal agreement – they announced the formation of a new faction within Ahrar al-Sham under al-Sheikh (Lund 2016).

The ceasefire started on 30 December 2016 but was only partially effective, remained fragile and excluded IS and Jabhat Fath al-Sham (former al-Nusra) from the deal. The al-Sheikh faction of Ahrar al-Sham

²²Joint Statements by the UK, US, Canada, Germany, Italy and France calling on Russia and Iran to urge President Bashar al-Assad to consider a ceasefire in Aleppo in order to stem the city’s “humanitarian disaster” (McKernan 2016).

²³ Qatar had been one of Ahrar al-Sham’s biggest financial supporter (if not the biggest) between 2012 and 2016. According to an expert interview this was partly due to changed Qatari interests and partly because of differences with Turkey, Ahrar al-Sham’s other financier (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, August 2018).

²⁴ The Geneva peace talks were re-started in early 2016 and gained some traction when the US and Russia brokered a truce on 22 February 2016, to cease hostilities between Assad’s forces and rebel groups with the exclusion of ISIS and al-Nusra. While Ahrar al-Sham had not participated in the negotiations, it quietly signalled its commitment to abide by the truce (Reda 2016), even though various members publicly voiced their opposition to that deal (Lund 2016; Steinberg 2016, 7). From 26 February 2016 until the ceasefire broke down a few weeks later, the military activity “significantly dropped” and the situation in 2016 remained “characterised by apolitical and military stalemate and de facto partition” (Lucas et al. 2016, 22).

had long been lobbying internally for a union with Jabhat Fath al-Sham, and their exclusion from the ceasefire and from political dialogue further impacted Ahrar al-Sham's internal leadership divide.²⁵ Furthermore, the Russian effort for a political solution was generally viewed with scepticism due to an awareness of the implications of Russia driving the process – as a conflict participant on the regime side.

In the end, Ahrar al-Sham rejected the chance to participate in the Astana talks, naming the failed implementation of the ceasefire as the reason (The New Arab 2017). Still, it supported groups that did send representatives and – remarkably – announced that if the results of the political negotiations were in the wider Syrian interest, Ahrar al-Sham would support them (Akoum 2017). As on previous occasions, Ahrar al-Sham was walking a thin line, hedging its bets and trying to appease its main international sponsor and its internal opposition, which were locked in a power struggle. Four days after the first Astana talks on 23 and 24 January 2017, the faction under al-Sheikh split from Ahrar al-Sham to join forces with Jabhat Fath al-Sham and others, forming HTS. The horizontal power struggle within the Ahrar al-Sham leadership was over but the opportunity to participate in the Astana talks had passed.

4.3 Strategic Shift 3: Astana talks

Whereas in January 2017 Ahrar al-Sham had refused to participate in the Astana talks, nine months later things looked very different. In September 2017, Ahrar al-Sham participated for the first time in political negotiations at the international level. The sixth round of Astana talks finalised the demarcation of the previously announced de-escalation zones to increase stability in Syria and reduce violence (with the exception of fighting terrorism).²⁶ Both internal and external factors contributed to Ahrar al-Sham's decision to participate.

Externally, Ahrar al-Sham had lost power, reducing its military strength in relation to other rebel groups and the Syrian regime and increasing its dependence on international support. Skirmishes and violent clashes between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS erupted in late January 2017 and in July 2017, an all-out and decisive battle between the two factions occurred.²⁷ The mini civil war lasted from 18 to 21 July 2017 and reduced Ahrar al-Sham from the most important armed opposition force in northern Syria to a faction that was, in effect, not much more than a proxy of Turkey. Before the battle, Ahrar al-Sham's manpower was estimated to be between 18,000 and 20,000 fighters compared to HTS's 12,000 to 14,000 (Lister 2017). Yet Ahrar al-Sham lost most of its strongholds and vital positions in western Aleppo and Idlib, including the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey – an indispensable financial and strategic asset for the movement.

Factors contributing to Ahrar al-Sham's unexpected collapse on the battlefield included: al-Omar's comparatively weak leadership, the salience of territorial and tribal loyalties, an organisational structure based on local militias without a strong central force, and corresponding low levels of discipline and loyalty among the local factions (Abazeid 2018). In this situation of widening power asymmetry, Ahrar al-Sham's dependence on Turkey increased. However, Turkey had grown disillusioned with Ahrar al-Sham, declining to come to its rescue, and actively turned to other Islamist and nationalist proxies in northern Syria such as

²⁵ For example, the more religious hardliners believed that Aleppo could have been held with a religiously purer, more unified force that was less dependent on foreign patrons. See, for example, the commander of Ahrar al-Sham in Aleppo expressing this opinion in OGN TV (2017).

²⁶ The agreement on the de-escalation zones was concluded in the fourth round held on 4 May 2017.

²⁷ In 2017, the primary target for Ahrar al-Sham shifted from the regime to HTS. Up to 80% of all of Ahrar al-Sham's fighting in 2017 targeted HTS (Heidar 2018).

Faylaq al-Sham. Therefore, the decision to join Astana's sixth round was partly intended to present Ahrar al-Sham as a reliable follower of Turkey in order to sustain international support.

A third factor is based on the relationship between Ahrar al-Sham and the local community in Idlib. Public opinion is primarily an external factor, but in cases like Ahrar al-Sham, where no clear constituency can be defined (unlike in ethnic or secessionist conflicts), the internal-external distinction is blurred. Idlib had been a target of intensive air strikes by Russia and Assad's forces since the rebels took control of the region, causing high civilian casualties and humanitarian suffering. Then the al-Qaeda-linked HTS took control of most of the region, having beaten Ahrar al-Sham, sparking locals' fears that the province would be attacked by Russia under the pretext of fighting terrorism. The realistic threat raised bottom-up pressure on Ahrar al-Sham. It responded by seeking to address the security needs and supporting the Astana talks' de-escalation zones to alleviate the local population's suffering and reduce the mood of panic – and by presenting itself as a better alternative to HTS in a reversed outbidding effort.

Internally, a leadership change within Ahrar al-Sham was a major permissive condition that facilitated the behavioural de-escalation as the movement abandoned its long-held rejection of negotiating peace with the Assad regime. Leader al-Omar resigned and Hassan Soufan was appointed in his stead in August 2017 to unite and revive the group. Crucial for this permissive condition to unfold was the split of the Jabhat Fath al-Sham-leaning hardliners in January 2017. The departure of Sheikh and other hardliners (e.g. al-Tahan and al-Sadek) left Ahrar al-Sham's leadership with a more consistent and reconciled identity and vision. This horizontal power shift at the leadership level cannot be overestimated and enabled Soufan's ideology to function as a productive condition: Hassan Soufan had been a prisoner in Sednaya prison alongside Ahrar's founding members. Soufan was presented by Ahrar al-Sham (2017) to its audience as a leader who 'played a positive role in reforming jihadi ideology and combating *ghulu* (religious exaggeration) and extremism using the jihadis' understanding and language and style'. A former secular Sednaya prisoner described Soufan as "a humanitarian who represents moderate Islam despite being a Salafist. [H]e belongs to the revolution and upholds the ideology of his movement's early leaders who were killed in 2014" (Al-Omar 2017). In his first public address, Soufan considered the founders' revisions to be 'historical' and called on Ahrar al-Sham's soldiers to pursue "moderate jihad and guided politics and centrist thought" (Baladi-News 2017). Soufan's vision was thus in line with Hassan Abboud's late ideological shift²⁸ towards pursuing political means along with fighting. In an implicit reference to the participation in the Astana talks, he asserted that 'we will fight at the negotiating table to restore rights and avoid evils' (Soufan 2017). Soufan's convictions drove the decision to attend the Astana talks.

As a result of the Astana talks the de-escalation zones were established, but the overall development of the Syrian conflict and Ahrar al-Sham's continuing decline in power meant that it would remain a one-time event. By 2018, the regime had taken by force three of the four supposedly de-escalated zones one after the other. The advance on Idlib, the last remaining 'de-escalation zone', was only stopped in late summer 2018 by an agreement between Iran, Russia and Turkey, with no place for local forces at the table.

What contributed to Ahrar al-Sham's de-escalation?

²⁸ Alerted by the sharp decline in international support for the Syrian revolutionary cause after the emergence of IS and by the continued suffering of Syrians, Hassan Abboud's last message to the people was that Ahrar al-Sham will participate in any *Hilf al-Fudul* (virtuous alliance) and accept any plan that 'alleviates the ordeal of the nation' (Aldorar 2014). *Hilf al-Fudul* is a pre-Islamic pact and alliance by some Meccans who came together to pledge support for oppressed and defenceless individuals no matter what tribe or place they belonged to.

To summarise, Ahrar al-Sham has undergone an almost complete cycle of escalation and de-escalation. Overall, it was the external factors that most strongly affected the group. Driven by the fast-paced conflict, Ahrar al-Sham was often forced into a reactionary mode rather than being an active shaper of the conflict – amplified by its blocked decision-making. The overall factors that contributed to de-escalation, then, were the diversification and competition of the rebel spectrum (group-society level), which drove developments in the leadership’s strategic choice of a reversed outbidding strategy, pushed on by the threatened loss of international support. The impact of the threat of a terror listing is notable. Furthermore, the rise of a more ideological, radical and hegemonic rival in the form of IS forced Ahrar al-Sham to revise some of its ideological arguments, which in turn made behavioural changes possible. The result was the budding effort of coalition-building beyond Ahrar al-Sham’s previous spectrum of allies from the Salafi jihadi scene, which was cut short by a horizontal power shift.

The factors driving the 2017 breaking point in Ahrar al-Sham’s development are found to a large extent outside of the group’s control. The increasing power asymmetry, loss of foreign support and the pressure arising out of its ties to the local population fused into a considerable productive condition. Horizontal power dynamics and combined pressure from allies in the broader movement (Jabhat Fath al-Sham), on the one hand, and political opportunities, on the other, pulled the organisation towards fragmentation. Ahrar al-Sham never de-legitimised the use of violence but a loss of power and influence contributed to major de-escalation in the end. Arguments for the need to find a political solution came with the incapacitation. The next chapter will outline Ahrar al-Sham’s dialogue experiences and the challenges of dialogue with Salafi jihadi armed groups.

5. Dialogue engagement

This section will focus on experience with third-party engagement with Ahrar al-Sham and the challenges encountered. Ahrar al-Sham is not a rejectionist actor as it does not perceive the US (or the West in general) as an enemy, as most internationalist Salafi jihadi groups in the tradition of AQ and IS do. Since the early days of the conflict, the group has been participating in dialogue engagement for multiple purposes. This section first focuses on the different kinds of dialogue experiences and then attempts to answer the question which role dialogue has played in Ahrar al-Sham’s development.

5.1 Humanitarian dialogue

To preserve their need for neutrality, humanitarian negotiations should not be misused as entry points for political dialogue. Nevertheless, a group’s interactions with humanitarian actors give indicators as to their experience, accessibility and capacity to engage in other kinds of dialogue – which is why it is included in this research.

UN Resolution 2165, first adopted in 2014 and renewed annually since then, empowered the UN to deliver humanitarian aid across Syria’s border without permission from the Syrian regime, which routinely blocked deliveries to civilians in areas outside its control. The negotiations with NSAGs holding territory outside of regime control were therefore essential. As Ahrar al-Sham controlled Bab al-Hawa – one of the main

border crossings between Syria and Turkey – between December 2013 and July 2017, most of the international aid for northern Syria passed through its control.

Among the international and local humanitarian actors spoken to for this study, the impression of Ahrar al-Sham was quite favorable. One OCHA representative, for example, considered it to be *“very practical, proactive in solving problems and no feeling that they were hiding anything from us. They also shared information openly, were speaking English and the communication was easy. I felt they understood OCHA's mandate and weren't political (during the humanitarian negotiations) but cared only about the humanitarian situation”* (Interview with INGO representative, August 2018). Ahrar al-Sham was considered reliable and committed once an agreement was made. There are many examples of **humanitarian agreements** with Ahrar al-Sham. Karakus and Svensson have listed, for example, the agreements with Hezbollah in the areas of Zabadani, Madaya, Beqin, Sarghaya and in Dimashq and Idlib provinces, whose purpose was to facilitate the evacuation of civilians, particularly women, children and seniors suffering under siege conditions (Karakus & Svensson 2017). In the interviews with humanitarian actors, all interviewees agreed that Ahrar al-Sham had not tried to interfere with their work and that it had posed no unusual challenges. The dialogue on humanitarian aid with Ahrar al-Sham was comparatively easy, which most respondents put down to its internal coordination and structure, but also its accessibility: the local offices in the towns it controlled, a relief office at the border crossing that could be contacted when necessary and the political bureau in Istanbul were all easy **entry points**. A humanitarian INGO representative stated their overall impression that *“where Ahrar al-Sham is present it is good for our local partners, especially in comparison to HTS”* (Interview, August 2018). In a similar vein, several interviewees highlighted the comparison between Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra/HTS.

Comparing Ahrar al-Sham's relationship with the local population, one of the Syrian humanitarian actors highlighted that *“the difference between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham lies in how much they come from the local population. For if they are closer to the people, the threat of stopping humanitarian action is more powerful”*. This appearance as a reliable actor was further supported by the fact that Ahrar al-Sham itself **acted as a mediator or facilitator for humanitarian actors** in relation to other military actors. All interviewees knew of instances where Ahrar al-Sham had been called on or had offered support for logistical problems or safety and security issues, such as road blocks. Another example of Ahrar al-Sham's mediator role came from a humanitarian negotiator: *“al-Nusra would try to overpower local councils or try to pressure local NGOs on where to deliver goods or make them register with al-Nusra to bind them into their network of service delivery. OCHA [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] intervened to try to support the local NGOs' neutrality and distance. To achieve this, OCHA used the established relationships with Ahrar al-Sham, which was able to curb the bullishness of al-Nusra as they had more power and leverage on the ground. Similarly, they could be contacted to intervene in cases of stolen aid goods or when staff were kidnapped”* (Interview, November 2018). Ahrar al-Sham also nurtured this impression and profited from it when the US and UK became more restrictive in allowing/funding NGOs operating in HTS-controlled areas. *“Ahrar al-Sham benefited from appearing as the “good” choice in comparison to HTS and attracted more funding for the people under their control.”* (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, November 2018).

Ahrar al-Sham has been involved in several **evacuation negotiations**, including Zabadani, Madaya, Homs, Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta. During the fall of Aleppo, Ahrar al-Sham for the first time directly negotiated with Russia; at the same time, it was involved in communication with de Mistura's team and with OCHA, to the point where *“it got confusing for them because there were too many actors”* (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, August 2018).

Ahrar al-Sham also participated in **training on international humanitarian law** (IHL). A Syrian organisation conducted IHL training for opposition fighters and Ahrar al-Sham sent members to participate, although none were from the leadership level. An interviewee from that organisation spoke about their approach in discussing IHL with Ahrar al-Sham, comparing IHL to the Islamic teachings and the normative congruence. Some difficulties were apparent in the discussion of details:

“Example: all groups in Syria agree that freedom is a right for all people irrespective of religion, but when it comes down to the right of apostates and how they should be treated, Islamists responded that they would kill apostates, as is legitimised in the Islamic writing. The discrepancies between the general freedom guaranteed for all in the Qur’an and not allowing that right for apostates as written in the Hadith made the discussion difficult. This problem was specific to Islamist groups. There was a lack of intellectual depth and they would accept only what is written, which is difficult if the writing is inconsistent or contradictory.” (Interview with Syrian civil society representative, August 2018).

Additionally, the UN had continuous **technical dialogue engagement** with Ahrar al-Sham for the purposes of information gathering. As a representative from the Office of the UN Special Envoy outlined, this was done by military advisers, who engaged military counterparts on the NSAG side to gather data on attacks, convoys, etc. for a comprehensive conflict assessment (Interview with international diplomat, November 2018). Ahrar al-Sham provided detailed information on breaches of ceasefires, for example. Among the mostly dysfunctional small NSAGs belonging to the Syrian opposition, Ahrar al-Sham’s institutionalisation, large regional presence and capable representatives made it easier to deal with for international actors.

Overall then, Ahrar al-Sham’s involvement in humanitarian efforts and negotiations not only increased its accessibility but also schooled it for other kinds of negotiation and raised awareness of international actors’ diverse needs. It also shows that Ahrar al-Sham was responsive to the local community’s needs and generally respectful of humanitarian actors’ rules and regulations, both of which are positive indicators for other kinds of dialogue.

5.2 Political dialogue with Ahrar al-Sham in the wider negotiation setting

In the broader picture of mostly UN-led political negotiation efforts in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham did not play a major role. Nevertheless, its case illustrates the difficulties of engaging a Salafi jihadi armed group in dialogue although – or because of – its position in the opposition spectrum was between the revolutionary and the more hardline transnational jihadi forces.

First attempts at high-level negotiations (Geneva I) failed. In an effort to generate some positive momentum, Lakhdar Brahimi, second UN Special Envoy to Syria, invested greater efforts in bottom-up consultations to create a more inclusive peace process. In 2014, the second negotiation attempt (Geneva II) quickly stalled and conflict parties remained mired in zero-sum thinking (Lundgren 2016). In the UN Security Council, where Syria was repeatedly on the table, decisions were blocked due to disagreements between the five permanent members. The Syrian conflict blatantly revealed the UN’s dysfunctions and obstructed the potential for exerting leverage on the Syrian conflict actors.²⁹

²⁹ Efforts by the US, UK and France were repeatedly blocked by Russia and China or Russia alone. See the Security Council website - Veto List, Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN, <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>.

During these first years, when the main focus was on the stalled high-level negotiations (Track I), Ahrar al-Sham was engaged in **early consultation dialogues** to create more inclusivity in support of Track I: early consultation meetings were started by the Brookings Institute and then the effort was taken over by the Salman Shaikh Group in 2013. Staffan de Mistura followed Lakhdar Brahimi as UN Special Representative and the focus on bottom-up consultation increased when he proposed a strategy of indirect thematic discussions on the main points of the Geneva communiqué³⁰ in spring 2015. Several non-state organisations³¹ supported this strategy with dialogue efforts to gather a broad spectrum of influential Syrian actors and organisations for a national-level political process. Working groups were set to garner informal (Track II level) support for the formal Track I negotiations in Geneva. The **Track II** efforts were intended to contribute by **developing ideas and promoting consensus on political outcomes**. It assembled an almost representative spectrum of Syrian actors, including the various opposition forces, independents and loyalists (actors supporting and loyal to the Syrian regime but not representing it or speaking on its behalf). One sub-working group was established specifically with armed opposition actors in mind, with Ahrar al-Sham participating from the start in 2015. In the NSAG sub-group, Ahrar al-Sham was open to developing the process and working on conflictual issues in relation to an aspired future post-Assad state (Interview with representative of Salman Shaikh Group, October 2018).

The wider bottom-up approach was supported by international actors who were calling for the inclusion of Ahrar al-Sham as one of the main forces on the ground. They included Robert S. Ford, the United States ambassador to Syria at the time. Advising against material support, he advocated for talks, stating that “[Ahrar al-Sham] are in a grey zone, but in a civil war if you are not willing to talk to factions in the grey zone, you’ll have precious few people to talk to.” (Hubbard 2015). The US decided in 2015 to pursue direct dialogue with Ahrar al-Sham, against internal scepticism in the US about talking to a group that was so close to al-Nusra (Interview with international diplomat, December 2018). International observers attended the NSAG sub-group meetings conducted in Turkey, Qatar, Jordan and Europe to listen to the groups’ aims, gain insights into their thinking and obtain information on the situation on the ground. Ahrar al-Sham, as one of the largest and militarily most powerful groups that had communication channels to the more hard-to-reach Islamist groups, was also used as a conduit to the other NSAGs: *“it was because of their identity as a radical group that they could convince other groups without appearing as selling out the Islamist cause.”* (Interview with international diplomat, December 2018).

To engage effectively in the political sphere, Ahrar al-Sham had to develop its capacities. According to a former member of Ahrar al-Sham, Turkey had some effect in that direction in 2014 with regard to the Revolutionary Charter: *“Turkey recommended this [the Revolutionary Charter] because it understood the international discussion better. You don’t see yourself as outsiders might see you. They [Ahrar al-Sham’s leadership] didn’t realise that after all their losses and sacrifice they might be perceived as terrorists. They also had no capacity for diplomacy or to understand the international dynamic. Turkey provided that and pushed them on it.”* Later Ahrar al-Sham was also engaged in efforts by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, which was engaging a group of armed opposition actors in Syria **to increase their political participation**. According to the same source, this direct engagement support – which focused on *“politically maturing the group”* during 2015 and 2016 – was *“meaningful and had some results. (...) [It] was more effective because*

³⁰ The Geneva communiqué is a 6-point peace plan from 2012 drafted by the ‘contact group’ of states with interest in Syria, calling for a transitional governance body made up of regime and opposition forces. For a good summary of the first five years of mediation efforts, see Lundgren (2016).

³¹ Besides the Brookings Institute and Salman Shaikh Group also the Carter Center, for example.

they would provide training and meetings that helped shape the opinion of the group. They [the HD Centre] were enhancing the capabilities of the actors to properly understand the political realities and to get them the tools to help them engage properly, to help to eventually get to a solution.” This dialogue engagement thus provided much-needed information and capacity building for Ahrar al-Sham to advance its internal debate on strategy and options for further political engagement.

By autumn 2015, the Track II process had led to a position paper by the armed opposition sub-group, which an Ahrar al-Sham representative had been involved in developing. It outlined the ideas and conditions for a transition process: first, a negotiated agreement between the belligerent parties, followed by a transition period with a national dialogue process. The preconditions posed by the armed opposition groups for the negotiations were high. They included the call for strong UN support for a ceasefire to stop the loss of life, agreement by the regime to transfer all its powers to a technical interim body, transitional justice provisions, withdrawal of all foreign fighters and forces from Syria, a country-wide no-fly zone and safe zones in north and south Syria (Position Paper op. cit.). The demands voiced by the opposition indicate that they were, at that time, confident in their prospects of winning the war or at least being able to determine the outcome. The discussions leading up to the position paper centred on the character of the state. *“Ahrar al-Sham objected to language of democracy so the debate was on how to describe the character of the state, which language to use. So in the paper now you can see that it doesn't mention democracy but contains many of the ideas associated with it, like a state based on citizenship, rule of law, representation etc.”* (Interview with representative of Salman Shaikh Group, October 2018). Other debates centred on issues of combating or countering violent extremism, where the focus was on rehabilitation and reintegration rather than exclusion and on women's participation.

One of the most significant moments for the development of the role of the opposition forces came with the Riyadh conference in December 2015. It was the attempt to create a new format for political representation of the opposition with a broader, more representative and legitimate actor: the High Negotiation Committee (HNC). Ahrar al-Sham sent a representative to attend the conference. But the indecisiveness of the group's leadership on strategy impeded the next step: opposed to claims that Ahrar al-Sham had signed the conference agreement, the leadership in Syria made clear that they had not signed. The movement issued an official statement to justify this withdrawal, claiming among other things that the statements and demands put forward by the Islamist factions had been ignored. An insider from the Salman Shaikh Group interpreted the situation as follows: *“Ahrar al-Sham didn't feel they were sufficiently well-represented and too many of the included groups were close to the FSA, which Ahrar al-Sham did not accept as representing the opposition.”* (Interview with representative of Salman Shaikh Group, October 2018). Ahrar al-Sham has still not acknowledged the HNC as a legitimate representative.

Early in 2016, the Geneva process seemed to be gaining traction but in the end remained stalled yet again. However, with support from the US and Russia, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2268 calling for a first nationwide ceasefire, which was subsequently agreed by more than 40 rebel groups and the Syrian regime. Ahrar al-Sham had not been involved directly in these negotiations but adhered to the ceasefire nonetheless until it slowly unravelled two months later.

A new Track II effort was launched in summer 2016. Turning to discussing the design of a peace process rather than the content, a set of proposals was developed: a Draft Framework Paper which was continuously updated and consulted on. Ahrar al-Sham has been indirectly consulted in the process through the NSAG sub-group. The Draft calls for a process with a more gradual timeframe; the original suggestion was around six months for a transition period and change of power to a transition body. The timeframe was then extended to

include a period of negotiations of a year or more, during which there was no expectation of any power transitions. This was a concession by the opposition to the regime. The time was to be used for some of the confidence-building measures and for pre-negotiations. The negotiations were not to be bilateral between the HNC and the regime but were to involve a broadened “Syrian-Syrian dialogue”, a much more inclusive process. The process would have a clear endpoint and would result in a constitutional body and transfer of power to a transitional body (Draft Framework Paper, op. cit.). According to a Salman Shaikh Group representative, Ahrar al-Sham was not strongly opposed to the ideas and some of the more pragmatic thinking came from the armed groups rather than the political opposition. The armed groups better understood the trade-off and were willing to agree to a gradual but real process that had genuine international backing – unlike the stalled Geneva process. As Russia had the power to pressure the Syrian regime into more substantial negotiations and commitments, for the armed groups “agreeing to an alternative process that would bring more international - and especially Russian - support was worth agreeing to a slower process. [It was] a good trade-off.” (Interview with representative of Salman Shaikh Group, October 2018). Although this Framework has changed little since autumn 2016, the situation in Syria did: in winter 2016, the outgoing Obama Administration in the US had little to pit against a concerted Russian-Turkish effort to set the frame for a new peace format, pushing an alternative to the Geneva peace talks in form of the Astana talks in January 2017. Ahrar al-Sham refused to participate in these Track I talks, which a negotiation interlocutor assessed to be “its second big mistake” after leaving the Riyadh conference.

Since then, the Track I talks have increasingly come to be determined by Russia, Iran and Turkey. The UN Geneva efforts were stepped up alongside the Astana talks and both negotiation efforts were to support each other³² in setting up the de-escalation zones and beginning a process of constitutional reform. This has been dragging on for the last 1.5 years with little success. Ahrar al-Sham’s attendance at the sixth Astana talks in September 2017 remained a one-time event in a highly pressurised situation. Since then, Ahrar al-Sham has had little impact or role in the negotiations due to its decreasing influence and power, on the one hand, and the internationalisation of the negotiations, on the other hand.

5.3 Challenges for dialogue

First, the general context and overall development of the negotiation efforts in Syria posed a challenge. For the first four years, until 2015, the willingness of actors on both sides to consider seriously a negotiated solution was weak, favouring a military solution. When in 2015 the actors started to feel some war fatigue, the negotiation efforts were increased but remained unfruitful as the **zero-sum thinking** continued and the **mistrust on all sides** remained high: the opposition doubting the regime’s willingness to see power-sharing through, the regime doubting the opposition to be coherent enough to be able to implement any future agreement. On top of the Syrian difficulties were the strained US-Russian relations and other regional relationships that deterred successful mediation support (rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey-Kurdish conflict, etc.). Furthermore, **trust in the political process** was limited to begin with but reduced when the negotiations consistently failed to produce outcomes, achieving only one-sided cementation of power (e.g. de-escalation zones agreement), or were out of Syrian hands entirely (e.g. Sochi Agreement).

³² The UN peace talks IV to VIII in Geneva were convened from 23 February to 3 March 2017, from 23 to 31 March 2017, from 15 to 19 May 2017, from 10 to 14 July 2017 and on 28 November 2017.

Ahrar al-Sham's internal dynamics posed a more direct challenge for sustained dialogue engagement. An international diplomat's assessment of Ahrar al-Sham was that it was a "*complicated actor as it was very large but very diverse. Some elements were indistinguishable from IS-style radicals and others were relatively moderate nationalists. The spectrum it encompassed was big and it was an effort to keep it together. The group was under stress to balance its diverse wings.*" (Interview with international diplomat, December 2018). There was a disconnect between the political bureau that Ahrar al-Sham had set up in Istanbul and the leadership inside Syria: the political scene and the Syrian actors involved in it were viewed with scepticism and were derisively called "the 5-star hotel crowd" (Interview with international diplomat, December 2018). As an international NGO expert with experience in negotiation support explained, **decision-making was a major challenge:** "*The main challenge was in getting their leadership to agree to things their political people agreed to, so the political people would agree to something but would need the leaders to agree as well. There was a disconnect between the political representatives and the leaders. The political representatives were more like ambassadors rather than part of the decision-making. The decision-making processes took a long time. The political bureau was more constructive, the leadership less understanding of the international political circumstances.*" (Interview with INGO representative, August 2018). Although all experts and dialogue insiders attested that Ahrar al-Sham had comparatively well-qualified representatives, it thus remained a slow process of "*one step forward, two steps back*" (Interview with INGO representative, August 2018).

Another central challenge for Ahrar al-Sham, but also for international actors, was its **relationships to the terror-listed al-Nusra Front**. Indeed, it is impossible to explain Ahrar al-Sham's development without referencing al-Nusra, as Ahrar al-Sham's main distinguishing feature was its ideological location between the more extreme transnational Salafi jihadi armed groups and the more mainstream rebel actors. In this regard, the **Salafi jihadi ideology** had a negative impact on Ahrar al-Sham's ability to make strategic choices due to inherent restraints on the acceptability of particular choices – such as significant political engagement. This was reflected in the challenge to maintain its broad support base: with more Islamist-leaning supporters, the association with politics could tarnish Ahrar al-Sham, as it is perceived as a slippery slope towards selling out the ideals. In 2016, Ahrar al-Sham released a video of one-hour length that is set to "defend Ahrar's membership against Salafi jihadist critiques of Ahrar's departures from militant orthodoxy, including its international diplomatic outreach to regional states and the West" (Heller 2016). A former member of Ahrar al-Sham explained "*Al Nusra was accusing Ahrar al-Sham of being soft and weak and deviating from the right path. This affected Ahrar al-Sham very much because they were entirely new to the territory [of political engagement] and it played into the hands of the internal opposition but also on the doubts the leaders themselves had entering this new territory. Al-Nusra was smart about it, their ideologues and sheikhs would reach out and accuse them [the Ahrar al-Sham leaders] of treason and entering the slippery slope leading off the right path.*" For Ahrar al-Sham and other Islamist actors, "*There are no successful movements to look at for the success of the political level, there are no success stories, no states [that resulted out of Islamist revolutions]*" (Interview with former Ahrar al-Sham member, December 2018). As the overall development of negotiations in Syria is not a success story, engaging in the political process posed **high reputational risks with little chances of impact**.

The **pressure on Ahrar al-Sham to distance itself from the more hardline jihadist actors** thus posed a challenge for the organisation's ability to coherently engage at the political level. In an effort to minimise these effects, Ahrar al-Sham in meetings would demand space to involve al-Nusra, to draw them in and isolate their more AQ-linked factions, arguing that a moderation process needed space and offers of re-integration for fighters, rather than being targeted by US airstrikes (Interview with representative of Salman Shaikh

Group, October 2018). This point is also reflected in one of the articles published in 2015 in the Western media when Labib Nahhas argues that: “*The Islamic State’s extremist ideology can be defeated only through a homegrown Sunni alternative – with the term “moderate” defined not by CIA handlers but by Syrians themselves.*” (Al-Nahhas 2015a).

With ties and communication channels toward the (international) political sphere as well as the Salafi jihadi scene and especially al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham had potential to function as a bridge-builder. It enabled a flow of information and could have served as an entry point for engaging in dialogue with al-Nusra – but this potential remained limited as al-Nusra’s designation as a terrorist organisation clearly defined the **limits of what was legally possible** for third parties.

In interviews with international actors as well as in one of the interviews with a former Ahrar al-Sham member, another challenge mentioned was the “*new fashion in diplomacy*”: talking to NSAGs (Interview with international diplomat, November 2018). Starting in 2015, many international actors were accepting that NSAGs were the force on the ground and needed to be included in the process, creating a flurry of activity. Ahrar al-Sham had to manage the international sphere and the **multitude of actors** with varying mandates and goals that were engaged in the Syrian conflict. In the tense situation in the Aleppo evacuation negotiations, according to a humanitarian negotiator involved, the many international actors thus became confusing for Ahrar al-Sham (Interview, November 2018).

With regard to Ahrar al-Sham’s increasing incoherence and the difficulties in maintaining a middle position between the nationalist and internationalist jihadi groups, the dialogue engagement with international actors might have had a reinforcing effect. By changing the perception of some actors within Ahrar al-Sham towards the potential and perceived necessity of political participation, the existing fault lines within the organisation between pragmatists and ideological hardliners became more pronounced. Supporting strategic debate in favour of non-violent options per se is undeniably a worthy effort. In the case of Ahrar al-Sham – and potentially for other Salafi jihadi actors – **dialogue engagement could increase incoherence** as the (international) Salafi jihadi scene is brimming with mistrust towards the (international) political actors and threatening to discredit the SJAG’s (religious) legitimacy – as al-Nusra did with Ahrar al-Sham.

6. Conclusion

This case study set out to answer questions around Ahrar al-Sham’s de-escalation trajectory and experience with third-party engagement. After a short introduction to the context, Ahrar al-Sham was presented and the question considered as to how well it fits within the known typologies of NSAGs and those of Salafi jihadi actors in particular. Ahrar al-Sham never had transnational aims, as most typologies of Salafi jihadi actors require, but it still displayed other traits, such as Manichean and anti-democratic tendencies and large religious-ideological overlap. Over time, Ahrar al-Sham developed its features, most importantly in response to outside factors. Assessing the organisation from today’s perspective, it also fits well within the typologies of NSAGs that disregard religious or ideological specificities. It shares a lot of the features with other, non-Salafi jihadi armed actors, such as Hamas, rather than the other more ‘typical’ SJAG such as al-Nusra or al-Shabaab. The category of Salafi jihadi must therefore be understood as more complex and heterogeneous than most of the typologies for this group allow – as it is too simple to just exclude Ahrar al-

Sham from the spectrum of SJAGs by disregarding the ideological similarities between Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra, for example.

Ahrar al-Sham's trajectory shows considerable de-escalation through de-capacitation and a turn towards political settlement. In the original research concept, the intention was to outline potential future scenarios based on the research findings. With Ahrar al-Sham's dissolving its (military) structures, the future has meanwhile been decided. During the period of field research (August to December 2018), possible future scenarios for Ahrar al-Sham were considered to fall in the category of "proxy", "party" or to cease existing. Interviewees have named the first or last option to be most likely. Much of the outcome depended on the political negotiations and the final settlement with regard to Idlib, as this is Ahrar al-Sham's remaining centre of power. Ahrar al-Sham was already in the situation of being a "proxy", as it depended heavily on Turkey as sponsor. Under the right circumstances, Ahrar al-Sham could have maintained this position indefinitely. It is likely that the extensive network Ahrar al-Sham has built up during the civil war is something that will not disappear. As one analyst remarked, "*They might have to disband to ditch the baggage of the name, but the network will continue existing*" (Interview with INGO representative, August 2018).

The factors for Ahrar al-Sham's de-escalatory development were found mostly outside of the group in the fast-paced context of the civil war. Rebel competition, continuous fragmentation of the opposition and the power asymmetry forced the group to react. Rebel competition, especially from other Salafi jihadi actors, forced Ahrar al-Sham into an internal debate on the role of ideology and strategy, to maintain its identity and *raison d'être*. The setting might be particular to the Syrian conflict, but it highlights that Salafi jihadi armed groups can change their ideology to self-sustain and can create the legitimacy for a new strategy and behaviour. A driving factor seems to have been the threat of the terror listing. Interestingly, the threat might affect the cost-benefit calculations to a greater extent than the designation itself – as the threat of exclusion leaves space for change, whereas once an actor is listed as a terror organisation, the exclusion is real and hard to get out of (see, for example, al-Nusra's efforts to this effect). Ahrar al-Sham's close ties to local society, especially in north-west Syria, made it more receptive to the needs of the population and added bottom-up pressure towards de-escalation, as its international ties to sponsors, especially Turkey, added pressure from outside. These external factors were partly limited by the need to maintain coherence between the factions, which negatively affected the decision-making ability – a common trade-off for NSAGs.

This finding was echoed in the mapping of third-party dialogue experiences with Ahrar al-Sham and posed a significant challenge for engagement. However, the first point to note is that dialogue engagement happened, consistently and systematically. Most likely, this is the case as Ahrar al-Sham did manage to avoid the terror listing that would have made outreach and engagement much more difficult. This way, the group was able to present itself and its goals to a wider spectrum of politically influential actors but was also involved in debates around the realities, possibilities and necessary compromises that a path towards peace would require. Thus, one of the direct impacts of dialogue engagement was to carry the wider debate into the group, stirring the internal debate by opening more strategic options and possible allies. It also promoted debate by thinking of what was to come beyond the war and how to translate gains sustainably. These debates had a strong impact on the structurally weak leadership structures with comparatively flat hierarchies and restricted command and control over its decentralised and localised sub-factions. The dialogue engagement thus exacerbated the existing internal dynamics by adding additional options. In the ever-changing conflict dynamic, Ahrar al-Sham was pressed for strategic decision-making in a context where its basic participation in dialogues – and not only the context discussed there – was already conflictual even if it was not involved in any high-level negotiations until very late. Its position between the more hard-line Salafi jihadi rejectionists

and the more nationalist-revolutionary forces did not simplify that process, as its engagement discredited it not only in the eyes of the militarists inside and outside of its organisation, a common trade-off for NSAGs when entering dialogue, but also put it in a difficult position with regard to the Salafi jihadi peer spectrum and supporters. In this regard, the Salafi jihadi ideology had a negative impact on its ability to make strategic choices due to inherent restraints on the acceptability of particular choices – such as significant political engagement. In the end, this opened Ahrar al-Sham up to be out-flanked by HTS, which in turn reinforces the process of reversed outbidding. The development of Ahrar al-Sham demonstrates the difficulties of transition processes under fragmented leadership and the challenge of including and guiding the fighters through such processes, especially in a context of (ideological) competition. That dialogue engagement under such circumstances is a difficult endeavour is well-established for NSAGs. Efforts to engage Salafi jihadi armed groups and their need to ideologically legitimise their strategy might be more prone to leadership coherence difficulties, as the case of Ahrar al-Sham suggests.

7. References

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