

Why the Obama Administration Is Favoring al-Qaeda's Main Syrian Ally

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In yet another a dangerous US political-diplomatic move in Syria, the Obama administration is going out of its way to protect the interests of al-Qaeda's closest and most powerful ally in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham.

The administration's decision to shield the Islamist organization from the consequences of collaborating closely with al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, Nusra Front, in threatening what had been a promising "cessation of hostilities," goes much further than the US failure to pressure other armed opposition groups to separate themselves from Nusra Front, as US [Secretary of State John Kerry had promised](#) in negotiations with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov.

Ahrar al-Sham is believed to be the largest military force seeking to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, with at least 15,000 troops. It is not considered by analysts who have followed its evolution to be a "jihadist" organization like Nusra Front, because it has shown no interest in terrorism against Western countries. However, some of its senior leaders have had ties with jihadists, including Osama bin Laden, in the past, and it has worked closely with al-Nusra Front since both organizations entered the Syrian conflict in 2011.

Ahrar not only helped Nusra Front gain control of all of Idlib Province last year, but also joined with Nusra Front in an offensive south of the city of Aleppo in early April that was an open breach of the "cessation of hostilities" brokered by the United States and Russia. And in another development that should have alarmed Washington, Ahrar used shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles to bring down Syrian regime planes in March and April. Those two firings of so-called man-portable air defense systems (Manpads), which the Obama administration has tried to keep out of the Syrian war, raise the specter that Ahrar's al-Qaeda allies could possibly acquire dangerous weapons such as these.

But instead of treating Ahrar as it has treated Nusra Front in the context of the partial cease-fire that went into effect on February 27, the Obama administration is treating it with the kind of kid gloves normally reserved for clients in the Syrian opposition.

Last December, the Obama administration gave the director of foreign affairs for Ahrar, Labib al Nahhas, a visa to visit the United States for a few days on what was clearly a mission to build political support in Washington for its future role in Syria. Nahhas' visit to Washington was a closely guarded secret at the time and was only revealed in a [story by McClatchy News Service](#) on May 21.

Given the United States' highly restrictive travel policy, which routinely denies visas to

anyone imagined to have connections with Islamic extremists, granting a high official of Ahrar al-Sham a visa for such a visit to Washington had obvious political significance.

In fact, Nahhas had [already met with US special envoy for Syria](#) Michael Ratney in Istanbul in early December. And the US State Department had already made the decision to include Ahrar among the opposition groups to be invited to participate in a conference of Syrian opposition groups in Riyadh that same month.

The Riyadh conference, which the United States organized along with its regional allies, was aimed at reaching agreement on the representation of opposition groups at political talks to be held with the Assad regime. At the Riyadh conference on December 9 and 10, however, the Ahrar al-Sham representative walked out of the conference after complaining that the results did not sufficiently reflect Ahrar's insistence that the opposition should have a "Muslim" identity — meaning that Islamist groups should be dominant in the composition of the negotiating team.

Ahrar's participation in the Nusra Front-led offensive that began April 3 is a far more reliable indicator of its political-military intentions than showing up at the Riyadh conference. In a video lecture on May 29, Ahrar's deputy leader, Ali al-Omar, [explained its participation in the political talks](#) as part of a strategy to "divide or neutralize our enemies." The offensive on three fronts in northern Syria has touched off further rounds of fighting that threaten to render the partial cease-fire meaningless.

The Russian response to Ahrar's disruptive behavior was to [propose in late April](#) that Ahrar be blacklisted and put outside the cease-fire framework. That would have meant that the United States would not insist that Russia and the Syrian regime avoid targeting Ahrar in airstrikes.

But the Obama administration rejected that Russian proposal, and in the process it revealed the new status that Ahrar now has in US policy. On May 24, when US State Department spokesman Mark Toner was asked why Ahrar should be given any protection under the "cessation of hostilities" agreement despite its violation of the cease-fire, Toner replied that Ahrar "is part of this vetted group of opposition forces that are part of the HNC, High Negotiating Council." (The actual name of the body is the High Negotiations Committee.) He also said the State Department believed that agreeing with the Russian request "would have a damaging effect on the cessation of hostilities."

Toner characterized the HNC as having multilateral status, reflecting the involvement of US regional allies as well as Russia and other world powers. His response indicated that the Obama administration has decided to give Ahrar special status as part of the "legitimate" opposition.

The real turning point in the administration's attitude toward Ahrar al-Sham, however, came in early 2015 when Turkey, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, supported the establishment of an "operations room" for the planning of a major offensive by the "Army of Conquest" (Jaish al-Fatah), the joint command led by Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham for the operation to take control of all of Idlib Province from Syrian government troops in March and April 2015.

That operation marked the beginning of a much closer relationship between Turkey and Ahrar al-Sham. Since then, Ahrar al-Sham has been "a Turkish project in Syria," Faysal Itani,

resident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, told Truthout in an interview. This, according to Itani, was the reason behind the Obama administration's refusal to reject Ahrar despite its open flouting of the cease-fire.

"I know for a fact," Itani said, "that the US calculated that we need the Turks, who already have a lot against us." That consideration alone, he says, accounts for the accommodation with a group it had previously spurned as too extremist.

Over the past year some in Washington, including former US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, have suggested that, despite its hard-line Islamist posture, Ahrar is too important to exclude from a political process aimed at a settlement. Others have suggested that Ahrar could play the role of limiting Nusra Front power. A leading specialist on the jihadists in Syria, Charles Lister, now at the Middle East Institute, has written that his Syrian Islamist contacts believed Ahrar's close relationship with Nusra Front is the "only viable method" of controlling the al-Qaeda branch's behavior.

That's not the same as a readiness to break with Nusra Front, much less confront it, however. Ahrar has opposed some of the harshest implementations of Sharia law that Nusra has imposed in areas the anti-Assad coalition has conquered in Idlib. But it has far more in common with Nusra Front than in conflict with it. Like Nusra Front, Ahrar's demand for a post-Assad political system calls for "an Islamic State under Sharia law," and Ahrar fully shares Nusra's visceral hatred of the Alawite minority, to which both organizations refer by the derogatory terms "Nusaryri" and "Rafidah."

Ahrar al-Sham's military cooperation with Nusra Front has been so complete, in fact, that Nusra has come to regard it as a source of weapons, [according to a former Nusra fighter](#) who has left Syria. He was referring to weapons supplied by external parties, especially Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, to Ahrar.

Perhaps the most crucial factor binding Ahrar al-Sham to Nusra Front, however, is that it is afraid to provoke a confrontation with Nusra Front over the latter's policies. As Aron Lund, a leading specialist on the war in Syria and a nonresident associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [has observed](#), Ahrar "probably feels too weak and internally divided to stand up to its jihadi ally." Any confrontation with Nusra, therefore, would likely split Ahrar in two and weaken it drastically overnight.

There is virtually no chance that Ahrar would act to block Nusra Front's path to power. The Obama administration's coddling of Nusra's main ally is far more about the politics of its relations with regional allies — and especially with Turkey — than about its professed concern about bringing the Syria conflict to an end.

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