

Ex-UK student clocks up air miles on mission to rebrand Syrian Islamists

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A Spanish citizen who studied in Birmingham and headed a tech company based in a London suburb is leading efforts to rebrand one of Syria's most prominent armed Islamist opposition groups.



Labib al-Nahhas is the “foreign affairs minister” for Ahrar al-Sham, a group that has fought in alliances with al-Qaida’s Syrian franchise, and aims to establish a Sunni theocracy in Syria. One of its original leaders also had personal connections with Osama bin Laden.

His role sends him around western capitals arguing that his group is an ultra-conservative but legitimate part of the opposition, using his own European roots to reach out to diplomats wary of the group’s history and beliefs.

“From the ideological point of view, I am an Islamist of course; if not I wouldn’t be in this movement. But the difference, what enables me to do my work better, is that I understand both worlds and not only from a theoretical point of view,” he said in an interview about his role in the group and its new positioning.

Nahhas was born in Madrid to a Syrian Muslim father and Spanish mother from a Catholic background and lived in the Spanish capital for the first years of his life, an investigation by this paper found. At four, his parents were killed in a car accident and he moved back to Syria to live with his extended family.

An Argentinian-Lebanese grandmother kept up his Spanish after the move, he says, although he is vague about where he spent some of his childhood. Wherever he was studying, he learned enough English to win a place at Birmingham University and graduated in 1999 with a degree in telecommunications engineering.

After graduating he spent time in France, the Netherlands and the US, as well as the UK, where official documents list him as director of a company based in a west London suburb. But in 2010 he moved back to Syria, finding a job in the telecoms industry.

“I had an immense affinity to Syria, and specifically to Homs. Homs, which is my father’s city and where I grew up, is like the ultimate place for me. I have lived in the best cities of the world, but I could never settle down,” he said. “I kept changing places because I never

found peace of mind away from Homs.”

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He had not been there long before the Arab spring swept through the region, and he joined local street protests that were the first stirrings of revolution. In 2011 he was detained by government security forces at a demonstration along with his brother, who now sits on the shura council of Ahrar al-Sham.

A western diplomat negotiated the men's freedom. They went on to move from peaceful protests to violent rebellion, as founding members of a rebel group that later merged with Ahrar al-Sham.

"The transformation was because they did not leave us any other option; it was in our own defence in the face of the passivity of the international community," Nahhas said. In 2014 he stepped down as director of the UK firm and increased his focus on the civil war.

"When every demonstration becomes a question of life or death, you hold on to what allows you to continue, what is worth dying for, and in our case it was faith, and the idea of freedom and dignity which united us."

His role emerged after an unclaimed attack that took out most of the top figures in September 2014, leaving the group to reorganise at a time when the opposition seemed to have Bashar al-Assad's forces on the back foot.

At the time many commentators expected the group to fade away. Instead Ahrar al-Sham's surviving leaders reorganised, held their position on the battlefield, strengthened ties with backers in Turkey and Qatar and recently launched an extraordinary drive for western recognition, in the face of efforts by Assad and Russia to label the group terrorists and bar them from the negotiating table.

Nahhas is at the heart of that, clocking up thousands of air miles persuading diplomats from the US and Europe that the group is an advocate of ultra-conservatism, not extremism, and a legitimate part of the rebel alliance, with strong popular support and no desire to export jihad beyond Syria to Europe or foment sectarianism at home.

Dressed in a fine leather fighter pilot's jacket, and sporting an impeccably groomed beard, Nahhas's charming, broad smile and warm manner is no doubt something he has deployed to great effect in his scores of diplomatic meetings.

“Over the the last year we had numerous meetings with western and regional diplomats,” he said. “Those meetings provided us with a direct channel to convey our views and the facts on the ground.”

Last summer he even published an opinion piece in British and American papers calling for engagement, an extremely unusual move for a Salafist group.

Analysts say they are still unsure whether Ahrar al-Sham has abandoned its most radical roots, or is simply running a pragmatic public relations campaign. Nahhas said the group’s members hold a broad spectrum of opinions.

Ali el-Yassir, an analyst following Ahrar-al-Sham closely, said: “Whether those recent moves are due to a change in strategy and tactics or constitute a real change within the group is yet to be seen. What is clear is that there is indeed an ongoing debate within Ahrar over its ideological character and the future of the organisation.”

Nahhas insiste the group’s views on democracy, women and minorities may be unpalatable to the west but are not so extreme that it should be ruled out as a partner.

They support a limited form of democracy, governed by sharia law, he says. “We don’t see any conflict with most mechanisms used in democracy in electing people’s representatives and leaders; it is a clear principle in Islam that the nation has the right to choose its leadership,” he said.



▲ An image grab from a propaganda video uploaded in 2013 by Ahrar al-Sham showing its members training at an undisclosed location in Syria. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Ahrar al-Sham have also committed to protecting minorities, Labib said. Some violations have been documented, including in a Human Rights Watch report, but he dismissed them as actions of rogue individuals, not official group doctrine. A recent BBC report said their fighters intervened to stop a religious massacre by Jabhat al-Nusra.

“We are a popular movement above all else, which represents the values and identity of the Sunni majority in Syria, but with an inclusive vision for the rest of the population,” Nahhas said, adding that the group are also too important for the west to ignore if its politicians are serious about supporting the opposition.

“Trying to label Ahrar al-Sham as a terrorist organisation will not change the fact that they are a resilient popular movement ... Going down the labelling game will be counter-productive for everyone.”

That view is echoed by the former US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, who last summer urged his government to “talk with Syria’s Ahrar al-Sham” in an article written with Yassir, calling them “probably the most important group fighting the Syrian regime”.

The group’s progress in winning some cautious endorsement for engagement from figures like Ford encapsulates the strategic dilemma the west faces as opposition to Assad fragments and radicalises. A group like Ahrar al-Sham would once have been anathema to Washington, with its commitment to “moderate” opposition groups.

But as Russia doubles down on its ally Assad, Washington is forced to choose between uneasy allies or no allies on many areas.

“Our refusal even to talk with groups like Ahrar further reduces the little influence Americans still have in Syria,” Ford and Yassir said. “The administration keeps trying to lead the opposition from behind, hoping for an opposition white knight to appear. Instead, because Islamist groups like Ahrar strongly influence decisions about the fate of Syria, Washington will be left behind.”

• *This article was corrected on 28 February 2016 to reflect the fact that Labib al-Nahhas’s brother sits on the shura council of Ahrar al-Sham and not the sharia council as earlier stated.*

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