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SYRIAN CONFLICT

The Spaniard in the top ranks of one of Syria’s main rebel groups

Madrid-born Labib Al Nahhas is playing a key role in building diplomatic links with the West

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A rebel fighter from Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib last April.
REUTERS

It has to be said that Labib Al Nahhas doesn't fit the stereotypical image of an Islamic fundamentalist.

The head of foreign relations for armed Syrian opposition group Ahrar al-Sham, Al Nahhas dresses in western clothes, sports a neatly trimmed beard, and perhaps most surprising, speaks perfect Spanish with a slight Argentinean accent that he inherited from his grandmother.

In recent months he has been constantly on the move throughout the Middle East and Europe, meeting diplomats, think-tanks, and other representatives of the Syrian opposition with the hope of creating alliances to topple the regime of [Bashar al-Assad](#).

Born in Madrid to Syrian and Spanish parents in 1974, Al Nahhas spent his childhood between the Spanish capital and the Syrian city of Homs

The group, among the most powerful in Syria, has toned down its rhetoric over the last year, looking for support from Brussels and Washington and trying to keep off their terrorist organization lists.

Born in Madrid to Syrian and Spanish parents in 1974, Al Nahhas spent his childhood between the Spanish capital and the Syrian city of Homs, according to official documents seen by EL PAÍS. It was there that his father's mother, who was born in Argentina, taught him and his brother Spanish.

"They were a conservative family, perhaps close to the Muslim Brotherhood," says a close friend of the family. "But they were never active politically."

The Spanish branch, on his mother's side, were apparently fervent Catholics.

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Due to his age and family circumstances, Al Nahhas had no contact with the generation of Syrian Islamists who fled their homeland in 1982 after the regime of Hafez al-Assad slaughtered around 20,000 alleged members of the Muslim

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Brotherhood and their families in the city of Hama.

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Some of the survivors ended up in Spain, where a few joined the ranks of Al Qaeda.

In contrast, Al Nahhas led a quiet life, studying telecommunications at the University of Birmingham and then working in London, New York, California and France, setting up a number of companies in the process.

“He was a normal person. Agreeable, friendly, he was always pleasant to be around and was generally liked and respected,” says an old acquaintance.

In 2010 he decided to return to Syria, despite his opposition to the Assad regime, which he accuses of “systematically humiliating the population,” and “converting the country into the regime’s private property.”

In this respect, his story is similar to that of other Islamists who have returned to Syria to fight, says Syrian-Spanish political analyst Gabriel Garroum-Pla.

“Agreeable, friendly, he was always pleasant to be around and was generally liked and respected”

“These are people who have seen the world, have studied, and have a certain standard of living, but who perhaps feel they have not found themselves yet. Rather than an identity crisis, it’s simply that they have not found their own identity yet. And then suddenly, they experience a moment of catharsis,” he says.

Al Nahhas says his conversion to political Islam began in 2011, a year after he returned to Syria, when the first protests against the Assad regime erupted.

“We were on our way to Friday prayers before joining a protest march. We all prayed in the belief that this was the last day of our lives because when we came outside, the police were waiting with tear gas and machine guns. They let us stage our

protest for 10 minutes and then they opened fire,” says Al Nahhas during an interview in Istanbul.

“When each demonstration becomes a matter of life or death, you cling to whatever keeps you going and makes it worthwhile dying, and in our case that was our faith and the idea of freedom and dignity,” he explains.

Religion was a bond from the first beginnings of the protests, says Garroum-Pla. “In dictatorships like this there are no other ways to articulate discontent.”

“When each demonstration becomes a matter of life or death, you cling to whatever keeps you going and makes it worthwhile dying”

Following one of these protests in June 2011, Labib and his brother Kinan were arrested and tortured by Syrian security forces. When they were finally released, they decided that the only way to bring about change was through armed struggle.

“They gave us no option. It was the only thing we could do, given the international community’s passivity. When the regime began to arrest women, to come into our homes, to torture people to death, to attack mosques, that was the red line,” says Al Nahhas.

Along with two others, Al Nahhas and his brother founded the Al Ansar Brigade, which was largely made up of university graduates and members of the middle classes. The following year, by now espousing radical Islam, it fought the Assad regime’s forces in Homs.

There’s no doubt that radical Islam has played a role in turning the conflict into a sectarian war, but Al Nahhas blames the Syrian government, saying it brought in Shiite militias from Iran and Lebanon, as well as using its Alawite supporters to raid Sunni neighborhoods in Homs, where he says they “burned children alive and raped women in front of their families.”

The battalion the Al Nahhas brothers joined eventually became part of a bigger group called Liwa al-Haqq.

Over the last three years he has created a network of diplomatic contacts in the Middle East, Europe and the US

Labib soon emerged as one of its leaders, and Liwa al-Haqq then joined Ahrar al-Sham.

Sources on the ground say Nahhas’ rapid rise was a result of his role in funneling money given by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey from 2012 onward. Others say that it was his personal skills, particularly his use of management techniques for problem solving and improving outcomes that he learned when running his own businesses.

Over the last three years he has created a network of diplomatic contacts with countries in the Middle East, Europe and the United States, while at the same time his group has coordinated the war effort between groups as disparate as Al Qaeda affiliate Al Nusra and the moderates of the Free Syrian Army.

One of Al Nahhas’ biggest diplomatic tests so far has been leading the negotiations to lift the sieges on Madaya, Zabadani, Fua and Kefray with Iranian forces.

“His capacity to understand both the Syrian and Western way of thinking shows a level of political ability normally absent among Syria’s revolutionary armed groups,” says Charles Lister, an expert on radical Islam who knows Al Nahhas personally.

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