

BBC Panorama Team Embedded with Islamic State Partner Group

By [Fabrication in BBC Panorama 'Saving Syria's Children'](#)
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Scenes in the 2013 BBC Panorama special [Saving Syria's Children](#) reveal that the [award-winning](#) team of reporter [Ian Pannell](#) and cameraman [Darren Conway OBE](#) were embedded with jihadi group [Ahrar al-Sham](#) which, according to Human Rights Watch, had three weeks earlier worked alongside Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra as one of "the key fundraisers, organizers, planners, and executors" of an attack in which at least 190 civilians were killed. [1]

In its October 2013 report "[You Can Still See Their Blood](#)" – [Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside](#) Human Rights Watch identifies 190 civilian fatalities "including 57 women and at least 18 children and 14 elderly men" killed by opposition forces including Ahrar al-Sham on August 4, the first day of the [2013 Latakia Offensive](#). Over 200 civilian hostages were taken. [2]

Pannell and Conway began filming for Saving Syria's Children on 23 August 2013 [3]. The programme professed to show Syria's humanitarian crisis through the eyes of two British doctors, [Rola Hallam](#) and [Saleyha Ahsan](#).

On the morning of 26 August, in order "to see what medical care is available for children closer to where the fighting is", Hallam and Ahsan travel to a frontline clinic. Pannell states ([10:18](#)):

"Western journalists have been targeted in Syria, so I have to travel with my own security. The doctors are able to be more low key and take their own vehicles." [4]

A number of vehicles are shown setting off in convoy, including a white pickup truck with a distinctive ornament and the Ahrar al Sham [emblem](#) on its bonnet:



White pickup truck in convoy transporting BBC reporter Ian Pannell and cameraman Darren Conway on 26 August 2013 bears the former logo of Salafist militant group Ahrar al-Sham (Saving Syria's Children, BBC1, broadcast 30 September 2013)

Stanford University's Mapping Militants Project [states](#) that "Ahrar al-Sham worked with the Islamic State (IS) until January 2014". The partnership would seem to be amply borne out by the scenes of Pannell and Conway's entourage passing unmolested through an ISIS checkpoint at [11:00](#) in the programme. [5]



Ian Pannell and Darren Conway's convoy approaches an ISIS checkpoint in Saving Syria's Children



Armed ISIS checkpoint guard filmed from rear of white pickup truck, presumably by BBC cameraman Darren Conway, Monday 26 August 2013. Up until January 2014 an alliance existed between ISIS and Ahrar al-Sham, whose logo is visible on the pickup's bonnet.

As the convoy passes through the checkpoint Pannell narrates:

"This is an ISIS group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. This is a group that's affiliated with Al Qaeda."

Pannell's words belie the links between Al Qaeda and the very group within which he and his cameraman are embedded. [Wikipedia](#) notes:

[Ahrar al-Sham] aims to create an Islamic state under Sharia law, and in the past has cooperated with the al-Nusra Front, an affiliate of al-Qaeda.

[Stanford University](#) fleshes out the picture:

Ahrar al-Sham has been coordinating operations with its closest ally, former Al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Tahrir al-Sham), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra), since late 2012, and both groups are part of the Jaysh al-Fatah umbrella organization.

Stanford also records that one of Ahrar al-Sham's co-founders, Abu Khalid al-Suri, who was killed in 2014

acted as Al Qaeda's (AQ) representative in Syria and was charged with facilitating reconciliation among regional Islamist militants.

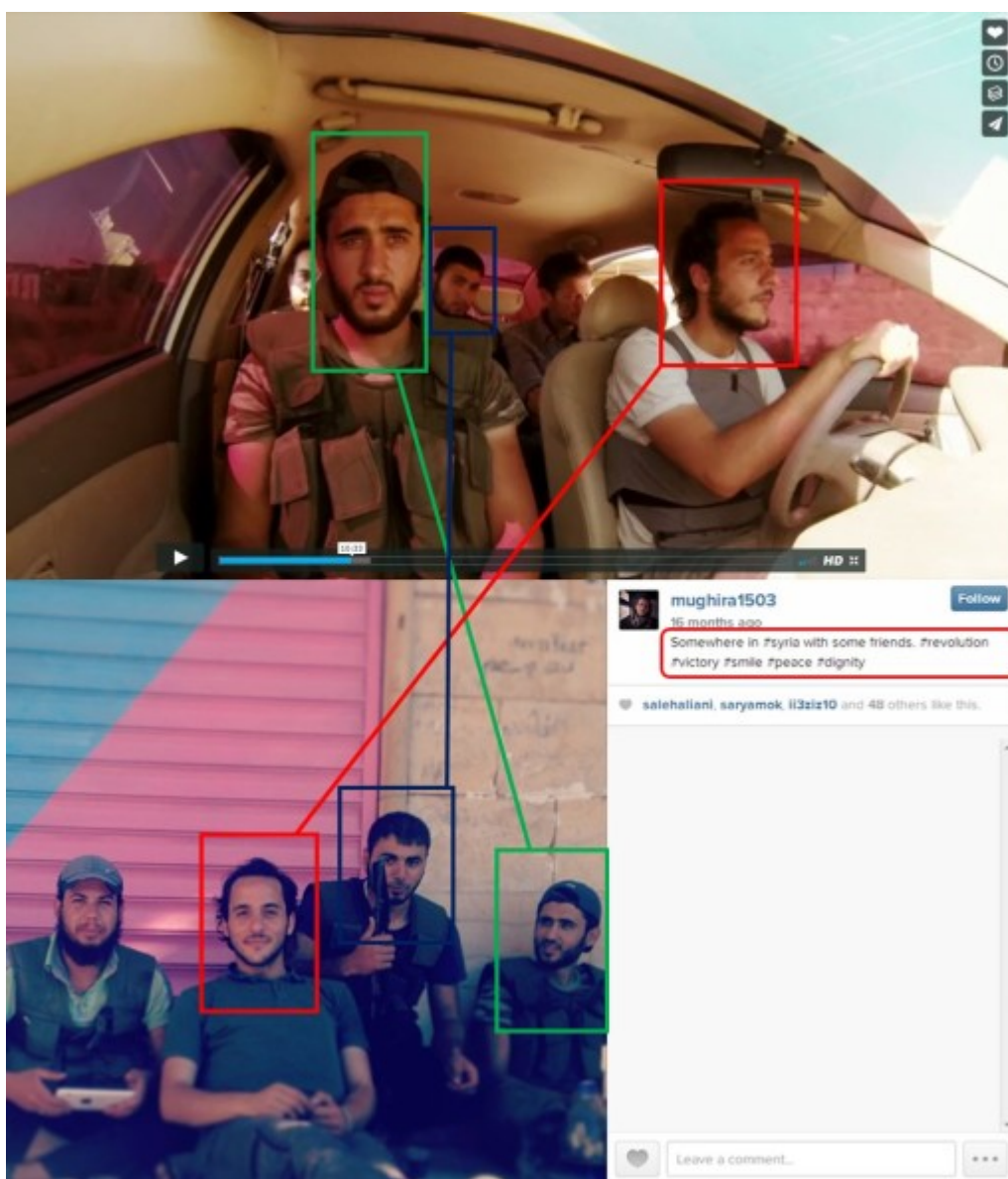
The FDD's Long War Journal website [reported](#) in 2013 that Spanish investigators had identified Al Suri - real name Mohamed Bahaiah - as "one of Osama bin Laden's most trusted couriers"

Bahaiah is a longtime al Qaeda operative who worked as a courier for the terror network. Spanish authorities think he may have delivered surveillance tapes of the World Trade

Center and other American landmarks to al Qaeda's senior leadership in Afghanistan in early 1998.

In addition to being a senior member of Ahrar al Sham, Bahaiah today serves as [current [al-Qaeda leader](#)] Ayman al Zawahiri's representative in the Levant.

At the wheel of Pannell's convoy car in Saving Syria's Children is the programme's [credited](#) Fixer/Translator [Mughira Al Sharif](#). On the same day Al Sharif posted an image to Instagram expressive of the camaraderie between the Panorama team and the Ahrar al-Sham "security" men who accompanied them. It is possible that these men were among those who had participated in the mass slaughter and kidnap of civilians in Latakia twenty-two days earlier. [6] [7]



(Above) Fixer/Translator Mughira Al-Sharif driving Ian Pannell's convoy saloon car in Saving Syria's Children. Pannell is second from right. (Below) Al Sharif poses with two of the Ahrar al-Sham men in an Instagram post of the [same day](#), describing them as "friends". The post was [subsequently deleted](#).

Later the same day Pannell and Conway travelled with Hallam, Ahsan and Al Sharif to Atareb Hospital, Aleppo where they were on hand to record [harrowing scenes](#) of the alleged victims of an alleged incendiary attack in footage which formed the dramatic climax of Saving

Syria's Children. (See links below for discussion of these sequences).

In May 2017 [it was announced](#) that Ian Pannell was leaving the BBC to join ABC News [\[8\]](#) as a senior foreign correspondent, stationed in London. In a [note](#) to staff ABC News President James Goldston paid this tribute:

He has an uncanny knack of being in the right place at the right time...

Notes

[1] The five groups which Human Rights Watch identifies as primarily responsible for the August 4 attack are:

- Ahrar al-Sham
- Islamic State of Iraq and Sham
- Jabhat al-Nusra
- Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar
- Suqur al-Izz

[2] The report [states](#):

Eight survivors and witnesses described how opposition forces executed residents and opened fire on civilians, sometimes killing or attempting to kill entire families who were either in their homes unarmed or fleeing from the attack, and at other times killing adult male family members, and holding the female relatives and children hostage.

[3] "Mr Pannell has confirmed that his *"journey"* began on 23 August 2103 [sic]. The visit to the frontline clinic occurred on the morning of 26 August", [BBC Editorial Complaints Unit Final Report](#), 19 May 2014 (p2 of [PDF download](#)). Full complaints correspondence with the BBC re: Saving Syria's Children is logged [here](#).

[4] Pannell's narration in the sequence from [10:28 to 11:40](#) is as follows:

Western journalists have been targeted in Syria, so I have to travel with my own security. The doctors are able to be more low key and take their own vehicles.

The war in Syria is now in its third year. Sectarian differences and extremism have taken hold on both sides and the conflict threatens the stability of the region.

Travelling around Syria has never really been more dangerous, both foreign journalists and foreign aid workers have been targeted, some have been killed. We're just going through a checkpoint now, put the camera down a bit.

Rival rebel factions now fight each other as well as the government. Lawlessness prevails and areas that were once safe can become dangerous almost overnight.

This is an ISIS group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. This is a group that's affiliated with Al Qaeda. Increasing numbers of Jihadis have come into Syria, they're setting up checkpoints so it means that any foreigners in particular travelling around the country, run the gauntlet of these checkpoints

every few miles or so.

And the worst thing about driving around is that you're never sure what lies behind the next corner.

[5] Despite Pannell's assessment ([10:47](#)) that "travelling around Syria has never really been more dangerous" it would appear that Conway is able to hop between vehicles with impunity in the immediate vicinity of an ISIS checkpoint. At [10:55](#), seated in the rear of his saloon car, Pannell states "we're just going through a checkpoint now" and instructs the cameraman – presumably Conway – to "put the camera down a bit". Seconds later, in footage presumably also shot by Conway but filmed from the rear of another vehicle (the white pickup truck), we see an ISIS guard inspecting vehicles at a checkpoint.



Ian Pannell presumably instructing his colleague, cameraman Darren Conway, to "put the camera down a bit" on the approach to an ISIS checkpoint.



Scenes filmed from a different vehicle, ostensibly moments later, as the convoy passes through the ISIS checkpoint. The footage is presumably also shot by Saving Syria's Children's [sole credited cameraman](#) Darren Conway, seemingly indicating that he has moved freely between vehicles in an ISIS held area.

[6] In 2012 Al Sharif was [photographed](#) bearing the standard of the now defunct Idlib Martyrs Brigade:



Instagram, 13 August 2012 (subsequently deleted)

Another of Al Sharif's [Instagram](#) photos is jarring when one considers that it was uploaded on 27 August 2013, the day after he had driven Pannell's car through the ISIS checkpoint and, later, supposedly witnessed appalling carnage as dozens of child victims of an incendiary attack were rushed into Atareb Hospital:



Mughira Al Sharif uploaded this jocular image celebrating “the formation of the special battalions” one day after he had been present at Atareb Hospital, Aleppo, supposedly witnessing the aftermath of an incendiary attack on a nearby school playground in which scores of children had been killed or horrifically burned. <https://www.instagram.com/p/dhg4o4GV5a/>

These images and other material were submitted in a 2014 [appeal](#) to the BBC Trust which argued that Al Sharif's involvement in Saving Syria's Children breached [BBC Editorial Guidelines](#). In [rejecting](#) the appeal the Trust's Editorial Standards committee did not deign

to address the point.

Some of Al Sharif's more recent Instagram images demonstrate the prestigious connections he currently enjoys:



<https://www.instagram.com/p/BP9-EEZA241/>



<https://www.instagram.com/p/BOfg2JHAYPH/>

[7] The identity and/or role of other uniformed and/or armed or professionally equipped individuals filmed by Darren Conway and others at Atareb Hospital on 26 August 2013 remains unclear:



Militarily attired male with microphone headset
(See <https://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com/#european>)



Two militants who transported a female alleged incendiary attack victim to Atareb Hospital.
(See <https://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com/#black-dress>)



Yusuf Zou'a, formerly a commander of the Ansar Brigade and military commander of Jabhat al-Nusra ally Jaysh al-Mujahideen (Army of Mujahideen). Zou'a was killed circa August 2016. In this scene Zou'a refers to "seven martyrs and about 50 wounded from the religious college for women and girls", in stark contrast to the scenes recorded by Darren Conway and screened in Saving Syria's Children, in which the overwhelming majority of alleged victims are adolescent males.

(See: <https://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com/#Halab>https://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com/#_ftn21<http://en.mehrnews.com/news/118834/Syrian-army-establishes-control-number-of-positions-in-Aleppo> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1siwEfWixw&feature=youtu.be>)



Male of European appearance carrying a camera. In other scenes (e.g. top right in montage immediately below) he can be seen using a walky-talky. Saving Syria's Children editor Tom Giles has stated that he has "no idea" who this man is.

(See: <https://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com/western-male-filmed-at-atareb-hospital/>)



At least seven individuals can be seen using walkie-talkies in scenes filmed at Atareb Hospital or at Urm al-Kubra, the location of the alleged incendiary attack.

(See: <https://bbcpanoramasavingsyriaschildren.wordpress.com/2017/04/03/who-are-these-men/>)



Individual bearing emblem of the Free Aleppo Governorate Council at [35:06](#) in Saving Syria's Children. According to a 2014 MENASource [blog post](#) "The Council formed in March 2013 to provide services and administrative assistance for civilians living in free areas of Aleppo Province".

[8] "ABC News is the news division of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), owned by the Disney Media Networks division of The Walt Disney Company" – [Wikipedia](#)

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