



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

THE SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY: THE TURKISH PROXY MILITIAS OF NORTHERN SYRIA

JULY 2022



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SYRIAN AND MILITIA GROUPS

FSA: Free Syrian Army
GRO: Guardians of Religion Organization
HTS: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
LCM: Liberation and Construction Movement
NFL: National Front for Liberation
NLF: National Liberation Front
SAA: Syrian Arab Army
SFL: Syrian Front for Liberation
SIG: Syrian Interim Government
SLF: Syrian Liberation Front
SNA: Syrian National Army
SOC: Syrian Opposition Coalition

TURKISH STRUCTURES

AKP: Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)
MHP: Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi)
MIT: Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilâtı)
ÖHD: Department of Special Warfare (Özel Harp Dairesi)
TAF: Turkish Armed Forces

DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES

AANES: Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
HDP: Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi)
NES: North and East Syria
PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)
PYD: Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)
SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces
YPG/YPJ: People's and Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel/Jin)

OTHERS

IDPs: Internally Displaced Persons

ISIS: Islamic State

RIC: Rojava Information Center

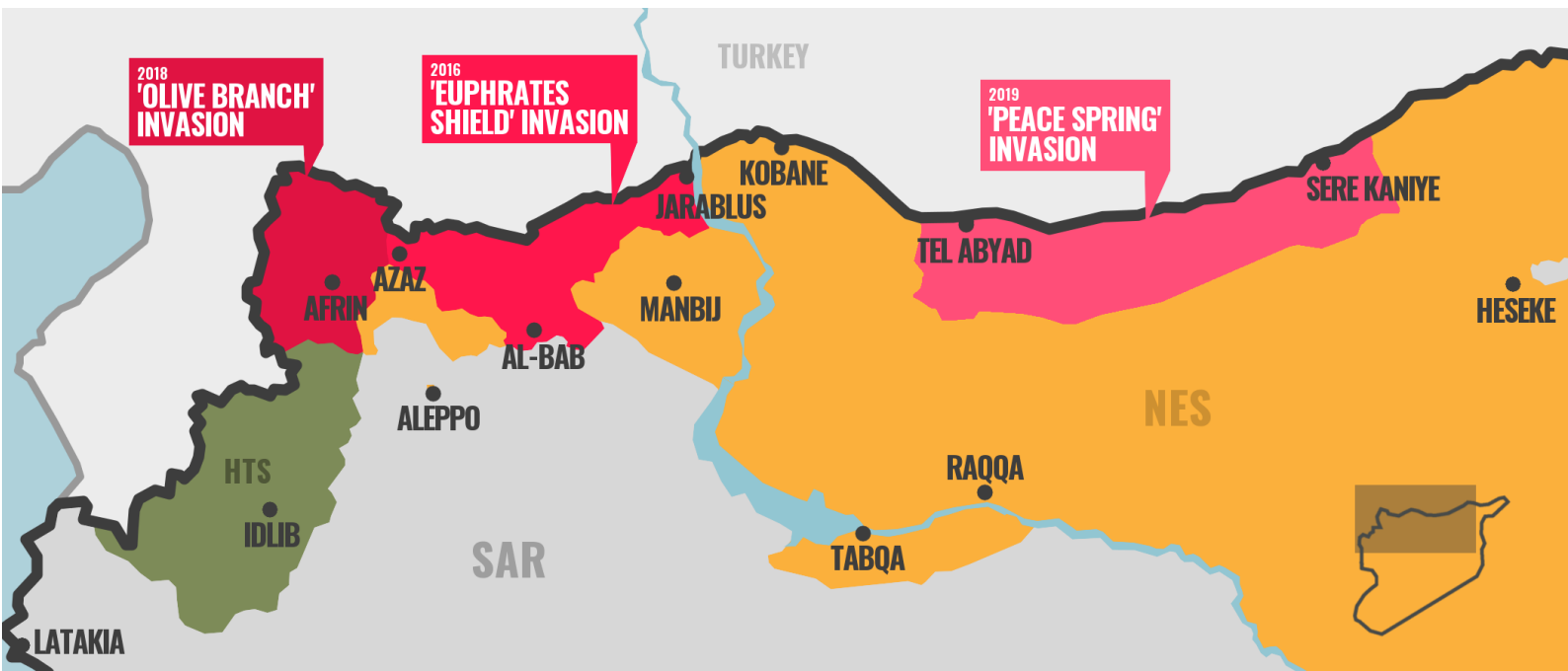
STJ: Syrians for Truth and Justice

US: United States of America

GENERAL MAPS

- Turkish occupied territories of Syria (page 4)
- Occupied Afrin (page 5)
- Occupied M4 Strip (page 6)

TURKISH OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF SYRIA



OCCUPIED AFRIN

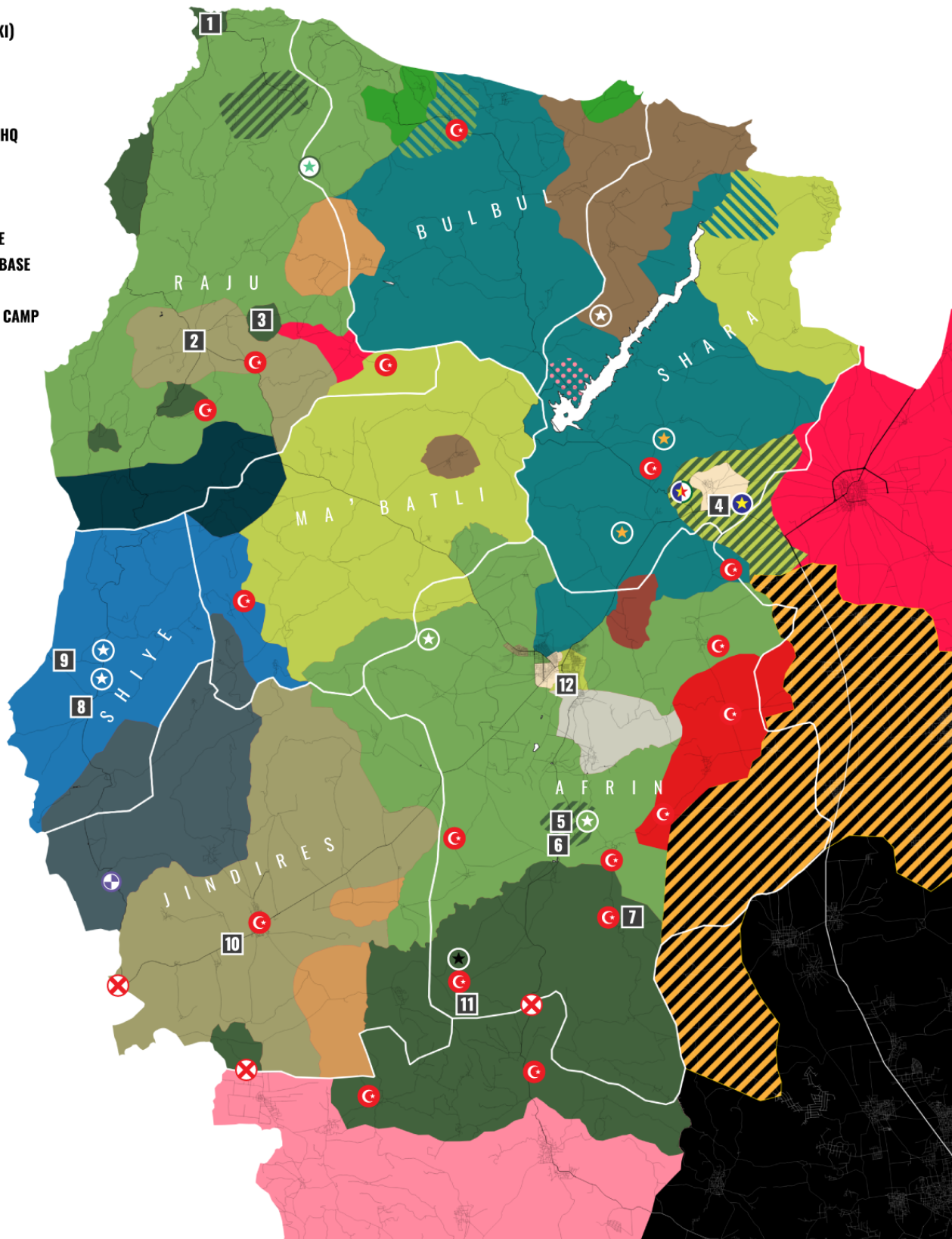
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION, JAYSH AL-NUKHBA, RAJUL AL-HARB
- AHRAR AL-SHAM
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- HAMZA DIVISION
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- JAYSH AL-ISLAM
- SULTAN MEHMED FATIH
- 13TH DIVISION
- SULEIMAN SHAH BRIGADE
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION
- SUQOUR AL-SHAM
- JAYSH AL-NUKHBA
- FAYLAQ AL-MAJD (ZINKI)
- TURKISH CONTROL

TURKMEN
FACTIONS

- MILITARY POLICE HQ
- SNA MILITARY POLICE HQ
- HAMZA BASE
- SULTAN MURAD BASE
- SULEIMAN SHAH BASE
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM BASE
- LIWA REJAL AL-HARB BASE
- JAYSH AL-NUKHBA HQ
- AL-WAQQAS TRAINING CAMP
- TURKISH BASE
- MILITARY CROSSING

- PRISON (MAYDAN IKBIS)
- MAHATTAH PRISON (RAJU)
- GORAN PRISON
- AHRAR AL SHAM PRISON (QATMAH)
- HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)
- HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)
- MIT PRISON (BARAD)
- SULEIMAN SHAH PRISON (SHIYE)
- QARMATLAQ HQ & PRISON
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA PRISON
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM PRISON (ISKAN)
- TURANDA PRISON (RUN BY MIT)

- SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES
- GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA
- TURKISH ARMY AND
TURKISH-BACKED GROUPS
- HTS - EXTREMIST GROUPS

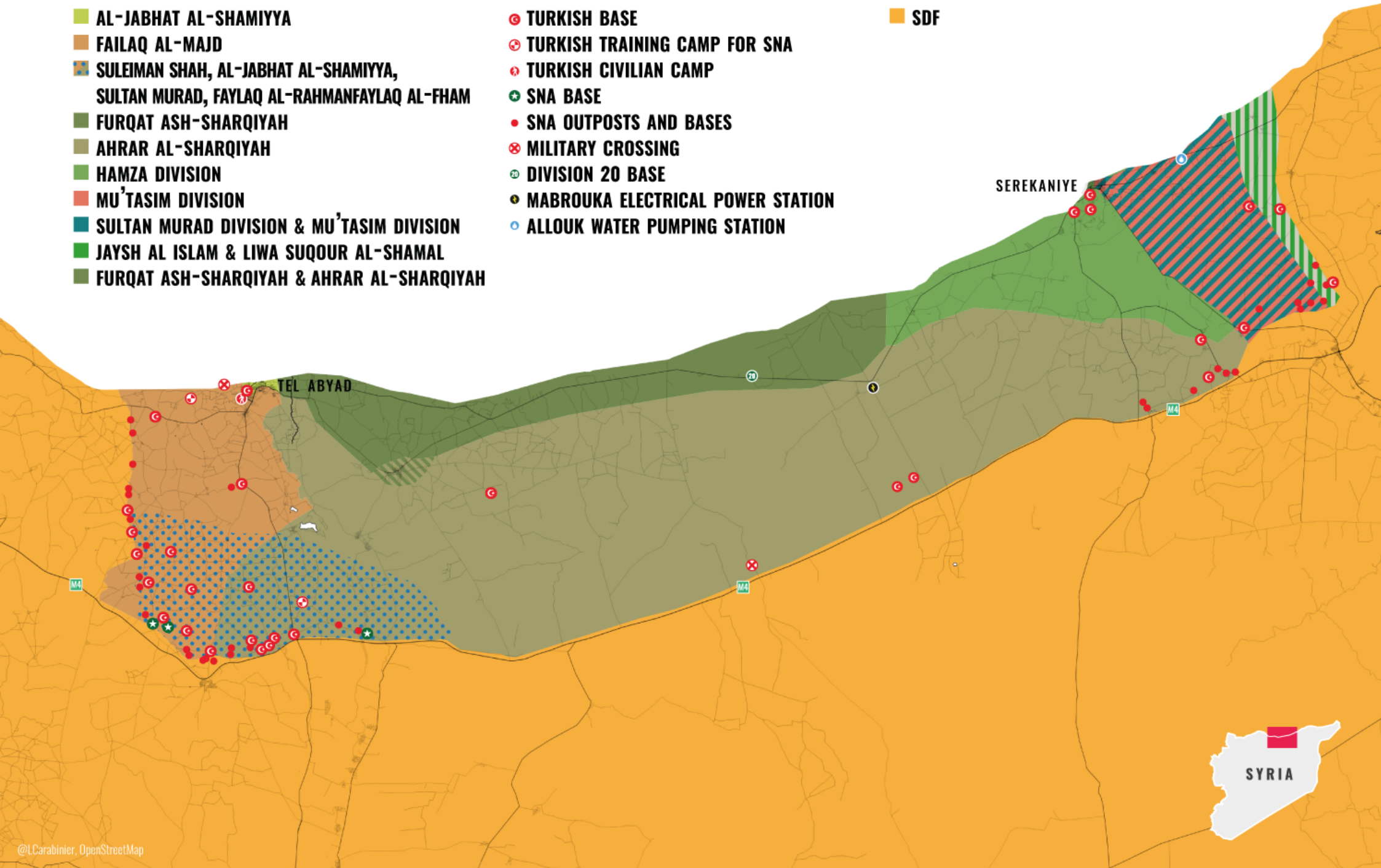


OCCUPIED M4 STRIP

- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- FAILAQ AL-MAJD
- SULEIMAN SHAH, AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA, SULTAN MURAD, FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN, FAYLAQ AL-FHAM
- FURQAT ASH-SHARQIYAH
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYAH
- HAMZA DIVISION
- MU'TASIM DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & MU'TASIM DIVISION
- JAYSH AL ISLAM & LIWA SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL
- FURQAT ASH-SHARQIYAH & AHRAR AL-SHARQIYAH

- TURKISH BASE
- TURKISH TRAINING CAMP FOR SNA
- TURKISH CIVILIAN CAMP
- SNA BASE
- SNA OUTPOSTS AND BASES
- MILITARY CROSSING
- DIVISION 20 BASE
- MABROUKA ELECTRICAL POWER STATION
- ALLOUK WATER PUMPING STATION

SDF



SYRIA

1. INTRODUCTION

More than eleven years after the civil uprising in the Syrian Arab Republic, almost a third of Syrian territory remains beyond the central government's control. Much of the northern and western border regions with Turkey are currently controlled by militias grouped under the Syrian National Army (SNA), as well as the organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Since their participation in the first Turkish military operation in 2016, the militias that once fought to liberate the country from its authoritarian government as part of the 'Syrian opposition' have today become little more than proxies at the service of the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The SNA was established in late 2017, composed mainly of Turkmen factions. It grew into a kaleidoscope of militias, including former Free Syrian Army (FSA) militias, armed groups from Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria, as well as some Sunni Muslim extremist groups. Turkey promoted the formation of a joint command center of these opposition militias, not only at a military level, but also in order to manage the newly-settled territories, in the aftermath of its successful first military intervention in Syria. Most of the current SNA's militias participated in the 2016, 2018, and 2019 Turkish military operations in Syria and continue to control different areas of the north and west of the country.

While Turkey claims it invaded sovereign Syrian territory in order to create a "security buffer" and a "humanitarian zone" for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from other parts of Syria as well as those residing in Turkish territory, the occupation has turned the three regions (Afrin, the "M4 Strip", and the so-called Euphrates Shield Area) into a patchwork of fiefdoms where human rights abuses are commonplace.

This report is an analysis of existing (in or before July 2022) open-source information about the current state of the SNA militias and other armed groups active in the Turkish-occupied territories of Syria. It furthermore attempts to expand the scope of Rojava Information Center's first 'State of the Occupation' report, by providing a more thorough look at the relationship between the SNA and its political counterpart, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), as well as the Turkish authorities. It concludes that both military and political Syrian 'oppositional' organs in occupied territories can be classified as little more than Turkish proxies. Moreover, this report seeks to underline the importance of the territories for Turkey's domestic politics – in particular that of

its current president. The report concludes that the SNA's future will almost entirely depend on Erdoğan's political future.

1.1 AUTHORS

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists, and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

1.2 METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The report is based on RIC's own OSINT research as well as data from the ground in Afrin, the 'M4 Strip' and the so-called Euphrates Shield Area, collected by RIC and our partners in local media and human rights organizations. The media and human rights documentation landscape in northern Syria is highly variable.

Part of the report is based on the work of organizations such as Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), the Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, Violation Documentation Center in Syria, and Hevdestî. The report also draws on third-party reports by the United Nations and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, as well as academic articles. On the other hand, much of the information on the SNA militias themselves can be found on the public profiles of these groups (Twitter, Telegram, YouTube, and their official websites), as well as on local information channels (particularly Telegram and Twitter), and local and regional media.

This report stems from the RIC's own need to understand who is committing the crimes it records in the northern Syrian territories of Afrin and the 'M4 Strip' and why. This report omits some historical background on the Syrian war and the opposition factions before 2016, which is essential to understanding the current situation, yet would go beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, due to the pace of events, this report remains but a snapshot of the constellation in northern Syria at the time of its publication. In this sense, the complex network of variables surrounding the SNA prevents the authors of this report from offering future projections.

Maps from Afrin and M4 Strip were created by cartographer and designer Eduardo Artica (@LCarabinier).

2. THE SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY

The Syrian National Army or SNA (Suriye Millî Ordusu, الجيش الوطني السوري), also known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), in its current form, was established in late 2017. Initially, the bulk of the group was composed mainly of Turkmen factions, such as Sultan Murad Division and Hamza Division, which had participated in Turkey's invasions in northern Syria. After the 2018 merger with the National Front for Liberation (NFL, or الجبهة الوطنية للتحرير), the SNA grew to include a kaleidoscope of militias, including former FSA- militias, armed groups from Deir-ez-Zor in eastern Syria, as well as some Sunni Muslim extremist groups. It now numbers up to 100,000 men.¹ Of the more than 30 major factions at the SNA's inception, 21 have at one point received CIA or Pentagon backing.² Yet many groups also harbor extremist sentiments, with even ISIS members now embedded with Turkish-controlled forces.

Most of the SNA's groups participated in the 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 Turkish military operations in Syria and continue to control different occupied territories. While the SNA proclaims to be the army of Syria's opposition, the coalition group is really under the thumb of the Turkish Army. Turkey pays the militia-men's salaries; Turkish hospitals care for their wounded; and Turkish forces and SADAT International Defence Consultancy, a private military contractor close to Erdoğan, trains them.³ In the past, Syrian militia-men have been hired as Turkish mercenaries in conflicts from Libya to Armenia.⁴ Around 17,000 SNA militia-men have gone to fight in Libya, while more than 2,500 were sent to aid Azerbaijan with its assault on Armenian Karabakh controlled territory in 2020.⁵

In the occupied territories of North and East Syria (NES), officially the SNA is still organized into legions, each with varying numbers of division; the divisions breaking into brigades. These groupings escape logic and only serve to give the SNA the appearance of a professional standing army. While it is true that legions occasionally cluster around certain geographical areas, these observations are broken by multiple exceptions; also legions are not organized by ethnicity, with Turkmen and Arab divisions strewn across all three. In the end, bloody infighting within the legions, divisions, and brigades has become commonplace. In mid-2021 a definitive reorganization of the militias began in different operations rooms, to try to balance the internal power struggles already existing and at the same time prepare for a possible new Turkish military operation scheduled for October – November 2021.

¹ rb.gy/zhbdkd (www.al-monitor.com)

² Ibid.

³ syriahr.com/en/188513/

⁴ tinyurl.com/k8b9p2sb (www.ohchr.org)

⁵ rb.gy/zdoc7w (https://ahvalnews.com)

Finally, the SNA presents itself as the regular army technically subordinate to the SIG. Based in the city of Azaz, it is made up of a typical council of ministers and is responsible for developing its own political and civil institutions in the territories it controls. Currently, the head of the SIG is Abdulrahman Mustafa.⁶ In turn, it is controlled by The National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces or the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), presided over by Salem al-Meslet. This is an umbrella group made up of different organizations opposed to Bashar al-Assad's rule, headquartered in Istanbul. The SOC was founded in 2012 based on international quotas and ideological currents, directly linked to funding and political dependence on these countries (mainly Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia). This is why until now the coalition served foreign agendas more than an independent Syrian approach, among internal division and dismissals.⁷ It is composed of twelve different components (the Turkmen Council, the Syrian Tribal Council, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Kurdish National Council or ENKS, and 'Military Representation' among others), organized by a General Assembly of 75 members who in turn make up the ten-member SIG, a supreme military council and a judicial body. Both the SIG and the SOC act as a Turkish-sponsored body which lobbies on behalf of the SNA in Geneva and other foreign capitals.⁸ (See graphic page 12)

Currently, the different militias that constitute the SNA are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense of the SIG, headed by Brigadier General Pilot Hassan Hamadeh, and the Chief of Staff of the SNA, Brigadier General Adnan al-Ahmed. Down the chain of command, the different groups act under a number of operations rooms, which are unified command centers for decision-making and dispute resolution. According to the RIC's research, as of June 2022, there are five operations rooms acting within the occupied territories: the NFL, the Azm Unified Command, the Third Legion, the Revolutionaries for Liberation, and the Liberation and Construction Movement.

However, in practice the subordination of the SNA to the SIG does not exist, since in reality it is Turkey that elects the senior positions and those responsible for the chain of command and draws the lines to follow in the organizational and military aspects.⁹ The SIG has benefited economically and diplomatically from this alliance with Turkey, since it decided to establish itself and become the institutional representative of the territories occupied by Turkey, once the Euphrates Shield operation ended in April of 2017. Later we will specify these connections.

⁶ rb.gy/0elmvc (en.etilaf.org)

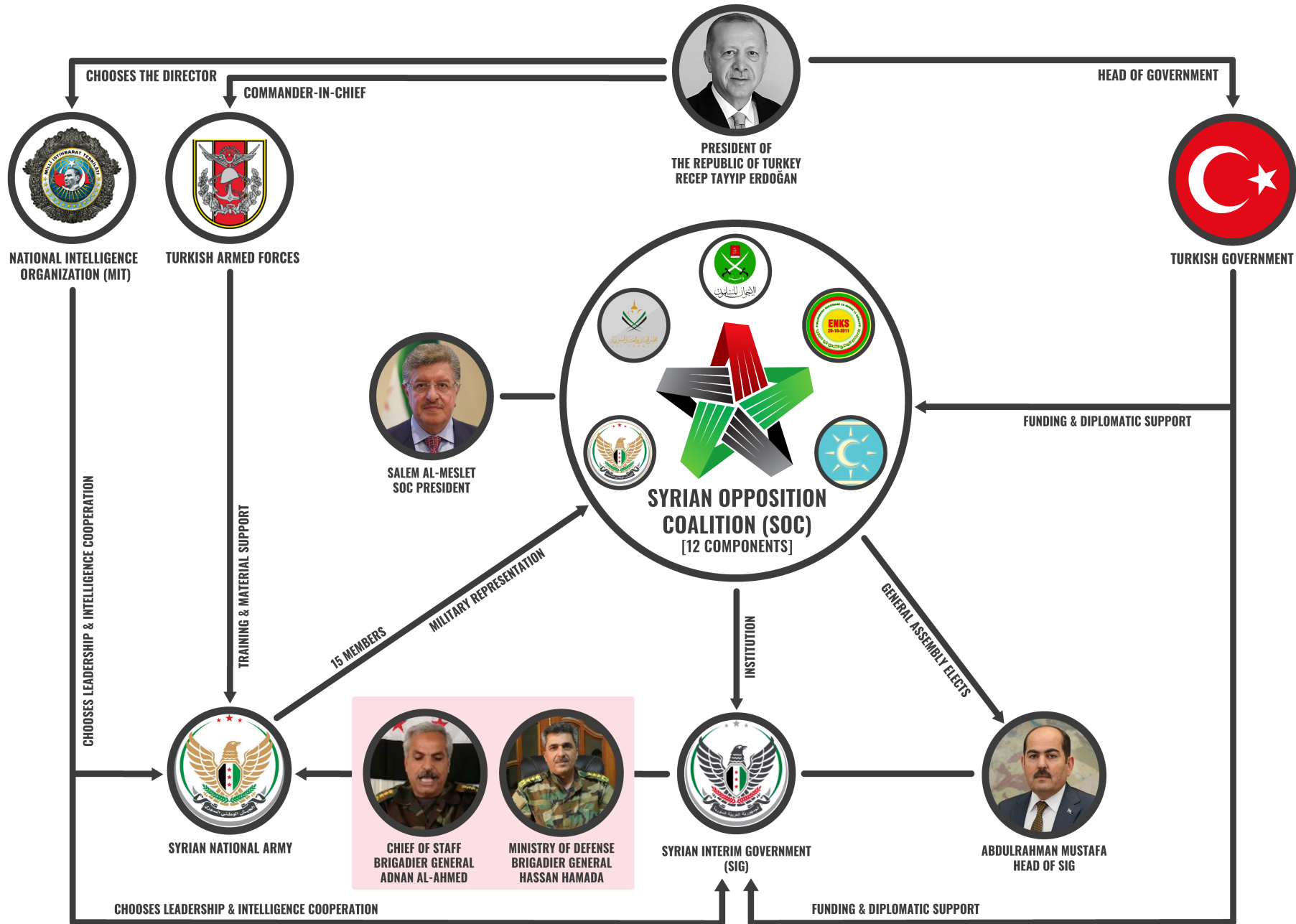
⁷ npasyria.com/en/75849/

⁸ syrianobserver.com/news/74941/opposition-new-structure-reflects-pure-turkey-aims-politicians.html

⁹ rb.gy/lfgghy (stj-sy.org)

TURKISH CONNECTIONS WITH SNA & SOC

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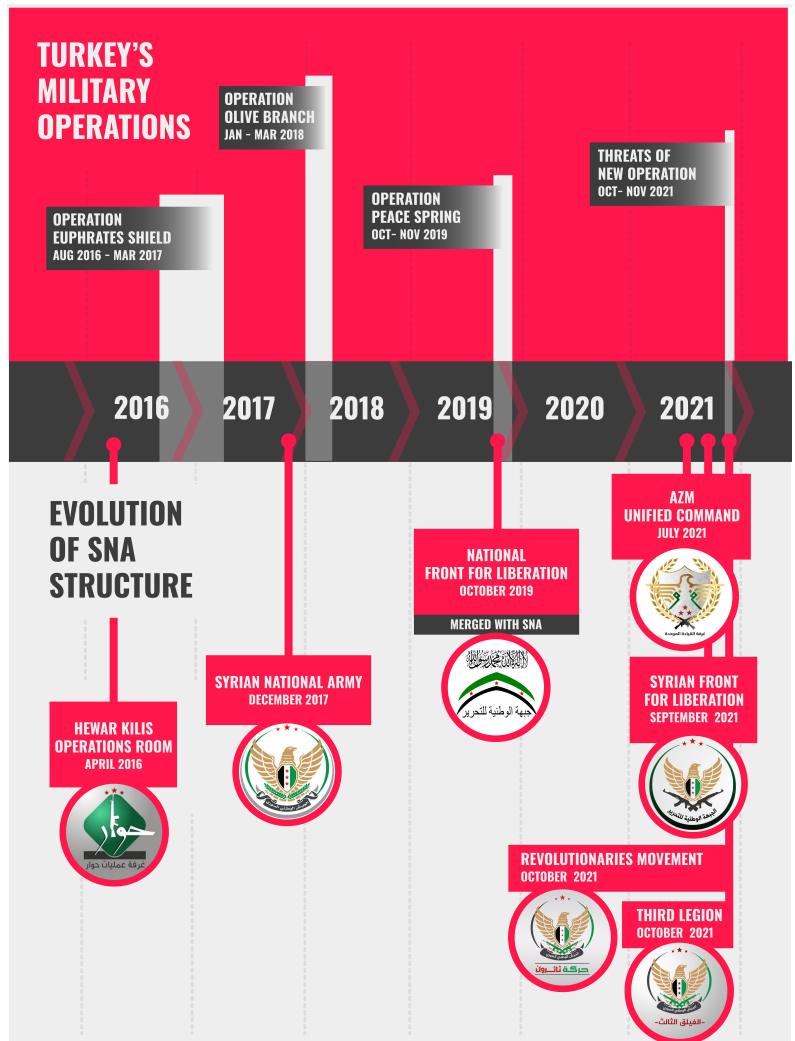


2.1 HISTORY OF THE SNA

An analysis of the SNA based on its official military organization around divisions, legions and brigades is no longer adequate as one seeks to understand the complexities of its inner workings since it does not reflect the actual chain of command one finds on the ground today. Rather than operating according to their designated legions within the SNA, the militias in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip' act in coordinated operations groups, created in accordance with their ideological affinity, location, and proximity to Turkey.

The existence of operations rooms is nothing more than the latest organizational restructuring of the militias opposed to the Assad government. Since Turkey's intervention in the Syrian Civil War began, these constellations have dramatically evolved and, with each change, Turkish control over the militias has become more effective. The Turkish government has provided its support and guidance to every one of the militia's efforts to unify. Conversely, during each one of the military operations conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) in Syrian territory, these groups have served as the first line of contact. There is a strong correlation between Turkish military operations in Syria and the evolution of these militias on an organizational level, which explains how so many groups which began as independent militias attempting to overthrow the Assad government have ended up aligning themselves with Turkish interests, and becoming proxy groups thereafter. (See graphic on the right)

TURKISH MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SYRIA AND THE SNA



As the Kurdish People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) rapidly advanced against the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015-2016 and threatened to connect the Kurdish-majority cantons of Afrin and Kobane, Turkey sought to prevent this from happening. In April 2016, Turkey announced the creation of the 'Hawar Kilis Operations Room', based in the Syrian border town of Hawar Kilis. This united more than 50 militias under a single command, supported by Turkey and the United States (US), in three military blocs: the Victory Bloc, the Sultan Murad Bloc, and the Levant Bloc. Many of these militias continue to be organized under the current SNA operation rooms. Four months later, on August 12th, the SDF fully captured Manbij from ISIS and announced a new offensive towards al-Bab. Less than two weeks later, on August 24th, Erdoğan announced the start of operation 'Euphrates Shield' (August 24th 2016 – March 29th 2017), stating: "At 4 a.m. our forces began an operation against the Daesh (ISIS) and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) terror groups that threaten our country in northern Syria".¹⁰

Following the success of the first major Turkish military operation in Syria, the Syrian opposition militias that were organized within the 'Hawar Kilis Operations Room' and in the FSA found themselves in control over a large territory bordering Turkey (including the cities of Jarablus, al-Bab, and Azaz). Turkey promoted the formation of a joint command center, not only at a military level, but also in order to manage the newly-settled territories. On October 24th 2017, the governor of Gaziantep, the governor of Kilis, the commander of the Turkish Special Forces, representatives of the Turkish intelligence service, members of the SIG, the deputy head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the leaders of militia groups active in the 'Euphrates Shield Area' convened at the headquarters of the Turkish Special Forces. At that meeting they decided upon progressively unifying and organizing the disparate Syrian groups into three legions that would later be called the 1st, 2nd and 3rd SNA Legions, namely: The National Army Corps, The Sultan Murad Corps and al-Jabha al-Shamiya Corps. The document was signed by representatives of al-Jabha al-Shamiya, the Hamzah Division, the Fastaqim Gathering, Jaysh al-Islam, Suqur al-Sham, Liwa Ansar al-Sunna, the First Division, Liwa al-Waqqas, Liwa al-Sunnah, al-Fateh, Ahrar al-Sham Movement, al-Muntasir Billah Brigade, al-Mu'tasim Brigade, Northern Division, First Brigade, Fourth Brigade, Jaysh al-Ahfad, Samarkand Brigade, al-Mustafa Regiment, The First Regiment, the Elite Division, Suqour al-Shamal, the Elite Army, the Sultan Murad Division, the SIG, the National Coalition, the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, The Northern Brigade, the General Staff, the 23rd Division, the Fifth Regiment, the Revolutionaries of

¹⁰ rb.gy/pgloaz (web.archive.org)

Jazira Brigade, the 9th Division, the Sultan Othman Brigade, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, and the First Commando Brigade.¹¹ With this integrated regular army structure, on December 30th 2017 in Azaz, the creation of the SNA became official.

A month after the foundation of the SNA, Turkey launched 'Operation Olive Branch' (January 20th – March 24th 2018), invading the Kurdish canton of Afrin in coordination with the SNA, and later ceding it to be occupied and controlled by them. The military operation against this olive-rich region of Syria included airstrikes on over 100 locations, as well as an invasion force of 6,400 Turkish troops and up to 25,000 Syrian militiamen, including former members of ISIS, al-Nusra Front and other Islamic fundamentalist groups.¹² ¹³ Turkey based its war of aggression on the fact that Afrin had been the base for 700 cross-border attacks, though upon closer inspection, the BBC found only 26 such instances in the previous year, and merely 15 launched from Afrin itself.¹⁴ Afrin had seen virtually no fighting since 2011. The canton's population - 92% Kurdish by some estimates - swelled to up to half a million during the early stages of the Syrian Civil War, as IDPs settled in the area. As a result of the 2018 invasion, however, between 250-300,000 people were forced to flee Afrin.

On October 4th 2019, when the last pockets of resistance in the Afrin region were dying down, the head of the SIG, Abdul Rahman Mustafa, announced the merger of the NFL into the SNA – a decision that surprised even the NFL's own ranks, who were not aware the merger would occur.¹⁵ At a press conference in Urfa (Turkey), the SNA leadership explained that the NFL (some 40 opposition groups operating in the regions of Latakia, Idlib and Hama), would be absorbed into the SNA as the 4th – 7th Legions, following a direct request by the Turkish government. Other NFL militias joined the first three le-



Occupation of Afrin city by SNA militiamen, March 18th 2018

¹¹ rb.gy/5slfaa (www.almodon.com)

¹² rb.gy/lzzwwr (www.independent.co.uk)

¹³ rb.gy/r9udfm (www.reuters.com)

¹⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43262839

¹⁵ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/332601

gions operating within the so-called Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield Areas.^{16 17}

Once again, the reorganization of the Syrian opposition militias present in the occupied territories immediately preceded a Turkish military operation. This accumulation of militia groups would be key in implementing the "corridor of peace" that Erdoğan presented in the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 24th. During his speech, he insisted on the creation of a safe zone 30 – 40km (18 – 24 miles) deep in order to resettle around 3 million Syrian refugees from Turkey. He warned that "If no solution is found in two weeks that opens the way for Turkey, we will implement our own operation plans."¹⁸ The plan to extend Turkey's southern border 20 miles into Syria, thus covering some Arab-majority towns and the entire Kurdish-majority areas of Syria, was called operation 'Peace Spring' and began on October 9th 2019, just as the Turkish president had publicly announced.

Turkey unilaterally began shelling the border cities of Tel Abyad (Gire Spî) and Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ayn) in the aftermath of an abrupt US troop pull-out. Within days, Turkish jets bombed these two cities as around 200,000 civilians fled from the advancing Turkish Army. Much as in Afrin, border insecurity was the *raison d'être* for the invasion, though only a single cross-border attack launched from Syria was recorded in 2019 (the suspect was arrested by security forces), while 30 attacks originating from Turkey were confirmed.¹⁹

The invasion ended on November 25th 2019 as a result of two bilateral agreements Turkey signed with the US and Russia, which fixed the limits of its zone of occupation. The 'Peace Spring' invasion led to the deaths of 679 civilians and wounded 3,392, according to the Violations Documentation Center.²⁰ As in Afrin, health facilities and personnel were targeted. 25 attacks on medical facilities were recorded, as well as the deliberate killing of five medical workers, and the injury of



Erdoğan at the UN General Assembly, September 24th 2019

¹⁶ syriahr.com/en/142663/

¹⁷ rb.gy/pn1tep (www.middleeasteye.net)

¹⁸ rb.gy/s5z1d9 (www.al-monitor.com)

¹⁹ anfenglishmobile.com/rojava-northern-syria/six-injured-as-rocked-fired-into-ceylanpinar-36438

²⁰ vdc-nsy.com/archives/43968

another eight. Four journalists were also killed – two alone when a Turkish airstrike targeted a civilian convoy entering the city. Turkish airstrikes led to the widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, including water pumping stations, dams, power stations, and oil fields in a strategy which the UN OCHR called “disturbing.”²¹

After the 'Peace Spring' invasion, the SNA militias divided up control of the invaded territories and resources in a complicated mosaic, introducing draconian rules and extracting wealth from territories under their control. Militarily, during 2020 and 2021, these militias have continued to gain influence following Turkey's orders to deploy in the recent wars in Libya and Karabakh. The use of Syrian mercenaries in conflicts was strongly condemned as a violation of international customary law on March 11th 2021, by the European Parliament.²²

On January 2nd 2020, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey approved a one-year mandate to deploy troops to Libya. This military intervention was preceded by sending mercenaries hired from within SNA militias in December 2019. A majority of these guns-for-hire allegedly belonged to the Mu'tasim Division, Sultan Murad Division, Hamza Division and Ahrar al-Sharqiya.²³ In August 2020, the number of Syrian recruits who arrived in Libya rose to nearly 17,300, including 350 minors. Meanwhile, the number of mercenaries killed in military operations rose to 481, including 34 minors.²⁴ For this reason, in July 2021, the US added Turkey to the list of countries implicated in the use of child soldiers. In the 2021 American Trafficking in Persons Report, the Turkish government is named as providing “operational, equipment, and financial support” to the Mu'tasim and Sultan Murad divisions.²⁵ ²⁶ As the war in Libya developed, in January 2020, the first Berlin conference concluded with the announcement of a permanent cease-fire, the formation of a new unity government, the formation of a military committee tasked with the unification of rival armed forces in the country, and a call for the withdrawal of foreign fighters from the country. In a May 2021 press conference, the Libyan Foreign Minister, Najla Mangoush, reminded his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, to comply with the UN resolutions and withdraw Turkish troops and mercenaries. Çavuşoğlu responded that the military forces were present under a training agreement reached with the previous government.²⁷ Until now, no progress has been achieved in efforts to merge rival Libyan institutions, form a national army, neutralize irregular Libyan militias, or draft a new

²¹ www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25129&LangID=E

²² www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0088_EN.html

²³ www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-send-syrian-rebel-fighters-fight-haftar-libya

²⁴ www.syriahr.com/en/178326/

²⁵ www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf

²⁶ rb.gy/aektcn (english.alarabiya.net)

²⁷ www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/3/libyas-top-diplomat-calls-on-turkey-to-withdraw-foreign-fighters

constitution and election laws. The presence of foreign fighters in the country has turned into a major obstacle for progress on all of these fronts.⁸ Yet Turkey instead extended the contracts of its foreign fighters by three to six months, and there appears to be no plan in place to remove the mercenaries already in Libya. Additionally, STJ documented the presence of numerous police and healthcare professionals trained and sent to work in Libya as nurses and police officers.²⁹



10th anniversary of the Syrian uprising celebration by Sultan Suleiman Shah Division in Tripoli, Libya, March 16th 2021

SNA militias were also used in a second international conflict: namely, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War (September 27th – November 10th).^{30 31} During Azerbaijan's invasion of the so-called Republic of Artsakh, under the control of Armenia, Turkey provided public and military support to Azerbaijan. Although the direct involvement of the Turkish army seems to have been restricted to aerial combat (eg. the flight of F-16 planes as well as Bayraktar TB2 drones operated by Turkish personnel), Syrian mercenaries from SNA-controlled territories were deployed on the ground.^{32 33} Weeks before the start of the war the Turkish military contractor SADAT, with the assistance of SNA commanders allegedly brought together militiamen from the Aylak al-Sham, Sultan Murad Brigade, Firkat Hamza, and Firkat Suleiman Shah groups in a meeting of recruits organized in Afrin. From here, with the help of Turkish

²⁹ stj-sy.org/en/libya-5000-syrian-mercenaries-continue-to-operate-in-tripoli/

³⁰ rb.gy/k2hrgc (www.washingtonpost.com)

³¹ rb.gy/gfs1wk (www.theguardian.com)

³² www.gazeta.ru/army/2021/09/15/13987826.shtml

³³ archive.vn/7V4MH#selection-463.308-463.502

transport companies, the new recruits were taken to the Turkish city of Gaziantep, 40km from the border with Syria. From Gaziantep they would later be transferred onto flights chartered to Azerbaijan by the same transport companies.³⁴ According to local sources, Muslim imams appointed by the Turkish occupation authorities encouraged people in occupied Afrin to “join the jihad and fight against infidels” in Azerbaijan.³⁵

By employing Syrians via private contractors, Turkey is able to absolve itself from legal repercussions, as Turkey's government can only legally deploy troops with parliamentary authorization – as was the case with the deployment of Syrian militias in Libya.³⁶ According to different sources, rebels were told they could earn 3,500 USD and 600 TL per month. Another group was given 1,000 USD and 1,000 TL each, while some others were given two payments of an estimated 5,000 TL. Nevertheless, all the fighters who returned to Syria confirmed that there were “unpaid sums of money” that were supposed to be given to them within the next few days. The payment far exceeds the salary that the different SNA militias pay their combatants, which ranges from 450-550 TL, or around 100 USD a month.³⁷ As the war drew to a close, with the signing of a declaration agreeing to a complete ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia on November 10th 2020, more than 2,580 Syrian fighters from different SNA militias had been involved in the Caucasian conflict; 541 of whom had been killed during the war.³⁸

Following the participation of SNA militiamen in Turkey's foreign military operations in 2020 and 2021, conditions in the occupied territories developed. The implementation of civil institutions under the umbrella of the SIG, the political counterpart of the SNA, based on the Turkification of the territories, has not prevented the power struggles between the militias from leading to infighting. As RIC's own 'State of the Occupation' reports documented³⁹ – in addition to other organizations that monitor the evolution of the conflicts in said territories such as STJ,⁴⁰ The Carter Center⁴¹ and Syrian Observatory for Human Rights⁴² – since the last Turkish military operation ended at the end of 2019, the situation in Afrin and the ‘M4 Strip’ has been marked by hundreds of cases of unlawful arrests/kidnapping, arrests involving extortion or torture, deaths, gender-based violence, and extortion/theft cases.

³⁴ www.kommersant.ru/doc/4537733

³⁵ rb.gy/3w9lqs (afrinpost.net)

³⁶ www.middleeasteye.net/news/azerbaijan-armenia-turkey-syrians-recruiting-guard-facilities

³⁷ rb.gy/3togbe (www.theguardian.com)

³⁸ www.syriahr.com/en/194516/

³⁹ rojavainformationcenter.com/category/report/

⁴⁰ stj-sy.org/en/thematic-reports/

⁴¹ www.cartercenter.org/news/publications/peace/conflict_reports.html

⁴² www.syriahr.com/en/233685/

These multiple rights violations have led to direct sanctions against leaders of SNA groups, and consequently, to a greater need to whitewash these crimes. For example, on October 12th 2019, three days after ‘Peace Spring’ started, the young Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf was ambushed by Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, a Turkish-backed armed Sunni brigade, and savagely executed (for more information read our report ‘Ahrar al-Sharqiya: War crimes with impunity’, published in October 2021). Even though the Turkish invasion was done with the green light of President Donald Trump, later in July 2021, the Biden Administration rolled out its first sanctions directed at Syria. They targeted

Ahrar al-Sharqiyah and its commander, Ahmed Ihsan Rayyad al-Hayes, better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Hatem Shaqra, who was present during Khalaf's murder, becoming the first Turkish-backed opposition group ever to be sanctioned. The SNA militia was also accused by the US Treasury Department of recruiting members of ISIS and killing multiple civilians in northeastern Syria.⁴³ To counter the growing reports of the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the SNA-controlled territories, Turkey expelled foreign journalists who report in a way that is contrary to their official line and makes access



Ahrar al-Sharqiya commander Abu Hatem receiving an award from the local Turkish-backed Civil Police forces in the Afrin town of Rajo, February 2019

difficult for the journalists' outlets in the future. At the same time, a propaganda campaign began in which certain journalists were exceptionally allowed to visit the occupied territories since 2016, especially Afrin. The articles that have later been published in the corresponding media have a common narrative,⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ that presents the invasion of Turkey as positive for the local population, and the groups of the SNA and the SIG as guarantors of security and stability in said territories. At the same time they completely avoid all the reports and testimonies of the crimes that have occurred since then.⁴⁶

⁴³ rb.gy/edugah (www.al-monitor.com)

⁴⁴ rb.gy/pjn926 (www.dailysabah.com)

⁴⁵ www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-Erdoğan-afrin.html

⁴⁶ npasyria.com/en/54685/

Seemingly as an attempt to counteract the worsening situation, the SNA went through a process of restructuring throughout the second half of 2021. On July 15th, al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the Sultan Murad Division merged to become the Azm Unified Command Room (غرفة القيادة الموحدة عزم), with Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the Hamza Division, the Malik Shah Division, Suqour al-Shamal, and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade quickly joining as well. Smaller militias joined Azm in mid-August. Initially it concentrated on joint security operations in the cities of Azaz and al-Bab.⁴⁷ On August 22nd however, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, the Hamza Division, and Suqour al-Shamal announced their departure from Azm, allegedly due to a leadership dispute. As a result, militiamen of al-Jabha al-Shamiya closed the roads to Afrin city and surrounded the Hamza Division headquarters on Rajo Road. A gun battle with heavy weapons followed in the streets of Afrin while, in a joint statement, the 20th Division, al-Mutasim Division, and Faylaq al-Rahman announced they would deploy their forces should a prolonged battle between Azm and the other factions break out.

Further attacks by al-Jabha al-Shamiya followed in September, when they took villages north of Maabatli from the Hamza Division, while threatening others held by the Suleiman Shah Brigade. A visit by Turkey's Defense Minister also failed to ease tensions. As a consequence the al-Mu'tasim Division and the 20th Division, in addition to the original three defectors from Azm, founded a rival merger on September 9th – the Syrian Front for Liberation (SFL, or الجبهة السورية للتحرير).⁴⁸ At the end of September, a former group within the Hamza Division, Special Forces Division, also joined the SFL.⁴⁹ Major fighting continued in Afrin, with as many infighting events as in the previous two months combined. At the end of the month the creation of the last operational group to date was announced, the Revolutionaries Movement (حركة ثائرون), which would operate as a sub-group of Azm. It was made up of the Sultan Murad Division, the Sham Legion, the North Sector, the Levant Revolutionaries and the Muntasir Billah Division, in addition to the First Division (the North Brigades, the 9th Division, and the 112th Brigade). Fahim Issa, commander of the Sultan Murad Division, was appointed to lead the group, and would also occupy the position of deputy commander of Azm.⁵⁰ Overall, the new formations have done little to unify or professionalize the SNA militias. On the contrary, the two new groupings seem to have been the cause for an increase in infighting between the occupation militias.

⁴⁷ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/504455

⁴⁸ rb.gy/lbuj3x (www.al-monitor.com)

⁴⁹ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/515983

⁵⁰ rb.gy/unhfwz (www.almodon.com)

Thus, the new SFL and Azm Unified Command Room, along with the National Liberation Front (NLF), have superseded the Turkish-imposed legions system, which never quite fit the internal power balance. Despite the fact that both operating groups have made statements describing the new structures as a fusion of the old militias, with a unified leadership, both the internal power-structures of the militias remain intact within the groups, with the heavyweights in each (al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the Hamza Division, respectively) effecting control. On October 18th, al-Jabha al-Shamiya further consolidated control over its bloc by re-launching the Third Legion as a subgroup within Azm. The Legion appeared in a new configuration, with al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Faylaq al-Majid, Liwa 51 and Liwa Salam, Sultan Malek Shah Brigades and Jaish al-Islam as members of the sub-group.⁵¹ This tendency to reconfigure groups under new identities risks concealing the crimes of individual militias behind a new, clean-cut facade, which seems to be the reason the Turkish government has for the moment acquiesced to the latter formations. Infighting broke out again in October, as the Turkish government's preparations for a new military invasion of NES later in the year took shape.

As fighting in the 2020 Karabakh war subsided, Turkey once again returned its attention to NES. Erdoğan's growing political and economic woes at home made it possible for him to launch another military adventure to distract the public and stoke nationalist sentiments. However, this time, he did not get the green light from Russia or the US. Erdoğan could hardly order a large-scale military operation and risk a major escalation without receiving permission from Russia to use Syrian airspace. Yet on September 29th 2021, a meeting between Erdoğan and Russian president Vladimir Putin Sochi (Russia) concluded with no joint public statement. Renewed Russian operations in Idlib days later seemed to indicate that Putin and Erdoğan had failed to resolve their differences.⁵² For his part, Biden, on 7th October, opined that the "situation in, and in relation to Syria, and in particular the actions by the government of Turkey to conduct a military offensive into northeast Syria, undermines the campaign to defeat the Islamic State. [...] For this reason, the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13894 of October 14th 2019, must continue in effect beyond October 14th 2021."⁵³ With these words, the US had renewed its military presence in Syria and its support for the SDF for another year. Faced with the double refusal of the great powers, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar a week later said: "Russia and the United States are also responsible for YPG/PKK attacks on Turkey. [...] Now that they have not kept their word, the

⁵¹ twitter.com/UniLeadership/status/1450114042287304707/photo/1

⁵² www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/Erdoğan-threatens-fresh-military-campaign-syria

⁵³ rb.gy/h1hsvx (www.aninews.in)

terrorists still have a presence there and have intensified attacks [on Turkey], what we need is to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps." Meanwhile, Erdoğan warned: "We have no patience left regarding some regions in Syria that have the potential to be used for attacks on our country. [...] We are determined to eliminate the threats originating from here either with forces active there or by our own means."⁵⁴ In addition, Erdoğan added: "The latest attack on our police and harassment that targets our soil are the final straw" – a similar type of accusation that had served as the justification for previous Turkish military invasions. Thus, on October 26th, the Turkish parliament passed a motion extending the government's authorization to conduct cross-border operations in northern Iraq and Syria for another two years, and Turkey deployed hundreds more troops in northern Syria overnight in preparation for a long-deferred offensive.⁵⁵

By the end of October, both the Turkish Army and the new SNA militia structure were prepared for an imminent operation in the territories of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) – most likely in one of three areas: that stretching from Sere Kaniye to Qamishlo, Tel Rifaat and its surroundings, or Kobane and Manbij. Yussuf Khaled Hammoud, the official spokesman for the SNA, declared on October 19th: "The opposition factions are fully prepared for any upcoming military action, and we have the capabilities to achieve a new victory, especially considering that this battle will take place with the participation of Turkish forces, as was the case with operations 'Euphrates Shield', 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring'. An operations room has



⁵⁴ rb.gy/l0wvtp (www.dailysabah.com)

⁵⁵ rb.gy/ie4mxy (www.bloomberg.com)

Turkish military vehicles enter Syria to take part in a joint patrol with Russian troops in the countryside of Derbassiye, inside AANES territory, July 14th 2021

been established for an organized military command in a bid to increase the ability to respond to any military development. Everyone knows that the SDF will not be able to confront our forces if Russia and the US abandon them." At the same time, he pointed out the terms under which an agreement with Russia would be negotiated: to "abandon parts of Idlib in return for being allowed to advance into areas controlled by the SDF."⁵⁶

As the weeks passed, however, war was not forthcoming. Mazlum Abdî, the SDF General Commander, said in an interview published on November 9th 2021: "Erdoğan has always sought the support of international actors before embarking on a military intervention here. He's made threats and continues to make threats. He insists he will intervene and will continue to insist. In doing so, he is looking to prepare the ground for an operation. However, the existing situation in northeastern Syria is different now. The balances have shifted. In past instances, there were no binding agreements between Turkey and the international powers. Neither prior to the attack on Sere Kaniye nor the attack against Afrin. But now there are two agreements in place: the agreement between Erdoğan and Putin that was signed in Sochi, and the agreement that was signed between the US and Turkey in Ankara. In my view, unless Turkey gets the approval of either Russia or the United States, Erdoğan cannot take such a step. And as far as I am aware there is no such approval".⁵⁷ So far the words of the SDF General Commander remain true, as there has been no new Turkish military invasion, nor have Russia and the US declared their approval of it.

This latest restructuring of the Syrian militias fell apart in a matter of weeks. At the beginning of November 2021, three of the five factions (Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, Suqur al-Shamal Brigade and 20th Division) that made up the newly created SFL left the operations room to rejoin Azm under the Revolutionaries Movement subgroup. Still, the SFL continued to stand firm due to the familial and regional relationship between al-Jabha al-Shamiya and al-Mu'tasim Division inside the city of Marea (between Azaz and al-Bab), while the security concerns relating to the alliance between the al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the Sultan Murad Division were the major reason al-Hamza Division was holding out.⁵⁸ Shortly after, in January 2022, tensions and internal clashes between al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the Sultan Shah Suleiman Division broke out, as well as popular protests in Jindires sub-district of Afrin, demanding that the leadership of Sultan Suleiman Shah – especially its commander, 'Abu

⁵⁶ rb.gy/u9qnaw (www.al-monitor.com)

⁵⁷ rb.gy/hxheqt (www.al-monitor.com)

⁵⁸ rb.gy/uordnq (www.al-monitor.com)

Amsha' – be held legally accountable for their participation in murders, rapes, torture, kidnappings and arms trafficking.⁵⁹ In addition, during the previous months, rumors began to grow surrounding negotiations between the Sultan Shah Suleiman Division and the SNA's main regional rival, HTS, the former al-Nusra Front in the Idlib region.⁶⁰ In mid-February 2022, after a two-month investigation by a special committee consisting of three members of the Islamic Council, the committee called for the removal of 'Abu Amsha' from the leadership of the division and not to be assigned to any other position in the future, "because of the allegations that have been proven against him and to avoid exposing the region to the possibilities of fighting, sedition and blood." The committee also decided to dismiss five of the division's leaders. Yet it appears that the committee did not have the final say. 'Abu Amsha' returned after a short break from the limelight on March 9th to attend a meeting with the President of the SIG and the military leaders of the SNA.⁶¹ Abu Amsha's immunity before any accountability results from his close relationship with the Turkish MIT, who went as far as threatening to cut off funding for the protesting al-Jabha al-Shamiya militia.⁶²

Tensions were finally resolved on January 23rd with the announcement of a new operational reorganization: the factions operating under the blocs of the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF, or جبهة تحرير سوريا) and the Revolutionaries Movement merged into Revolutionaries for Liberation (هيئة ثائرون للتحرير). The new structure is made up of the Sultan Murad Division, al-Hamza Division, al-Mu'tasim Division, Muntasir Billah Division, al-Sham Legion, Liwa 112, Sham Revolutionaries Brigade, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, the 9th Division, and the North Brigades. The key to this new structure is that representatives of all factions agree on the necessity of a bloc to confront the ambitions of the leaders of al-Jabha al-Shamiya, who control the Azm Unified Command Room, and aspire to strike the rest of the factions one by one in order to get rid of them or subjugate them. On the other hand, the admission of Sultan Suleiman Shah, one of the militias with the greatest military and material capacity, was conducted by taking advantage of the temporary weakness of the group as a consequence of the investigation to which its leadership was being subjected.^{63 64}

On February 15th 2022, four SNA militias (Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, the 20th Division and Suqur al-Sham - Northern Sector) announced their complete integration into a new military formation, the Liberation and Con-

⁵⁹ vdc-nsy.com/archives/52338

⁶⁰ rb.gy/atgm2l (www.alquds.co.uk)

⁶¹ vdc-nsy.com/archives/56732

⁶² rb.gy/khvgi2 (syriadirect.org)

⁶³ rb.gy/fve7vc (www.syria.tv)

⁶⁴ orient-news.net/ar/news_show/195177

tion Movement (LCM, or حركة التحرير والبناء). The commander of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Major Hussein Hamadi, was appointed as the leader of the new merger, and another commander of the same militia as his deputy. It is clear that this new power balance favors Ahrar al-Sharqiyah – one of the SNA's larger groups, with some 2,500 fighters, which was sanctioned by the Biden Administration in July 2021, who accused the group of serious human rights abuses against civilians.⁶⁵ One month later, two smaller factions operating in the 'M4 Strip', the "al-Ghab" and "Ahrar al-Qaqaa" brigades, also joined LCM. Despite the fact that currently there is no statement on LCM's part declaring their organization under Azm and members of LCM publically distanced themselves from Azm,⁶⁶ a number of reliable sources describe the LCM as an operations room subordinate to Azm.⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ Moreover, the Commander-in-Chief of LCM participated in Azm's last meeting, in May 2022.⁶⁹ Since its creation, LCM has continued to consolidate its position within the SNA. Of all groupings, LCM places the strongest emphasis on internal cohesion and homogenization in order to become a single military formation. It follows a clear political line centered on Islamism, fighting against the Assad government, as well as co-operation with the Turkish forces.⁷⁰

Meeting of the Azm, with the presence of LCM's leader (5th from left) and SIG Minister of Defense (9th from left), May 27th 2022



⁶⁵ rb.gy/37y0ik (www.al-monitor.com)

⁶⁶ rb.gy/3q71fr (www.mei.edu)

⁶⁷ rb.gy/qefbx2 (www.cartercenter.org)

⁶⁸ rb.gy/0avc7t (www.almodon.com)

⁶⁹ twitter.com/UniLeadership/status/1530146401635778562/photo/1

⁷⁰ twitter.com/Houssen_Hammadi/status/1493543333532155904/photo/1

Finally in mid-June, two alliances centered around Ahrar al-Sham and al-Jabha al-Shamiya clashed in the 'Euphrates Shield' and Afrin regions. It was the most serious infighting between SNA militias since autumn 2021. For two days, violent clashes between the two SNA militias erupted in the villages of Abla and Tal Battal, on the outskirts of al-Bab. The clashes came amid heightened tensions between the two militias after the 32nd Division - Eastern Sector defected from al-Jabha al-Shamiya in early April in order to rejoin Ahrar al-Sham, which they had left in 2017. Amid the fighting, Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector requested the support of HTS, which formed a united front against the Third Legion, especially against al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Jaysh al-Islam. HTS consequently sent large military convoys to Jindires sub-district. In doing so, the jihadist militia crossed through territories belonging to the Faylaq al-Sham militia, affiliated with the Revolutionaries for Liberation. The ensuing battles led to military casualties on both sides, as well as civilian deaths. The Third Legion and Ahrar al-Sham briefly detained each other's militiamen. On June 19th Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) forced all parties to negotiate a ceasefire agreement, whereby all militias would return to their pre-fighting positions, including the return of Ahrar al-Sham's headquarters, and the release of captives. HTS was forced to retreat from the areas under the control of SNA factions.⁷¹ This severe incident, so close to a possible Turkish invasion of NES, reaffirms the volatile nature of the SNA power constellation.

As of July 2022, the operational structure of the different SNA militias can be represented with the following organization chart. (See graphic page 28)



2.2 UPDATE ON SNA FACTIONS

RIC presented an initial summary of the major SNA militias in its first-ever 'State of the Occupation' report in July 2021. Since then, the descriptions have been updated with additional information, as well as with RIC's own research relating to each of the group's criminal statistics. What follows is an updated SNA factions encyclopedia. The militias are sorted alphabetically based on its most commonly used name in English language publications, and the descriptions summarize their history, involvement, and connection with the Turkish military operations; presence in northern Syria; as well as their current situation inside the SNA and their relations with other militias.

⁷¹ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/why-are-turkeys-allies-fighting-each-other-syria

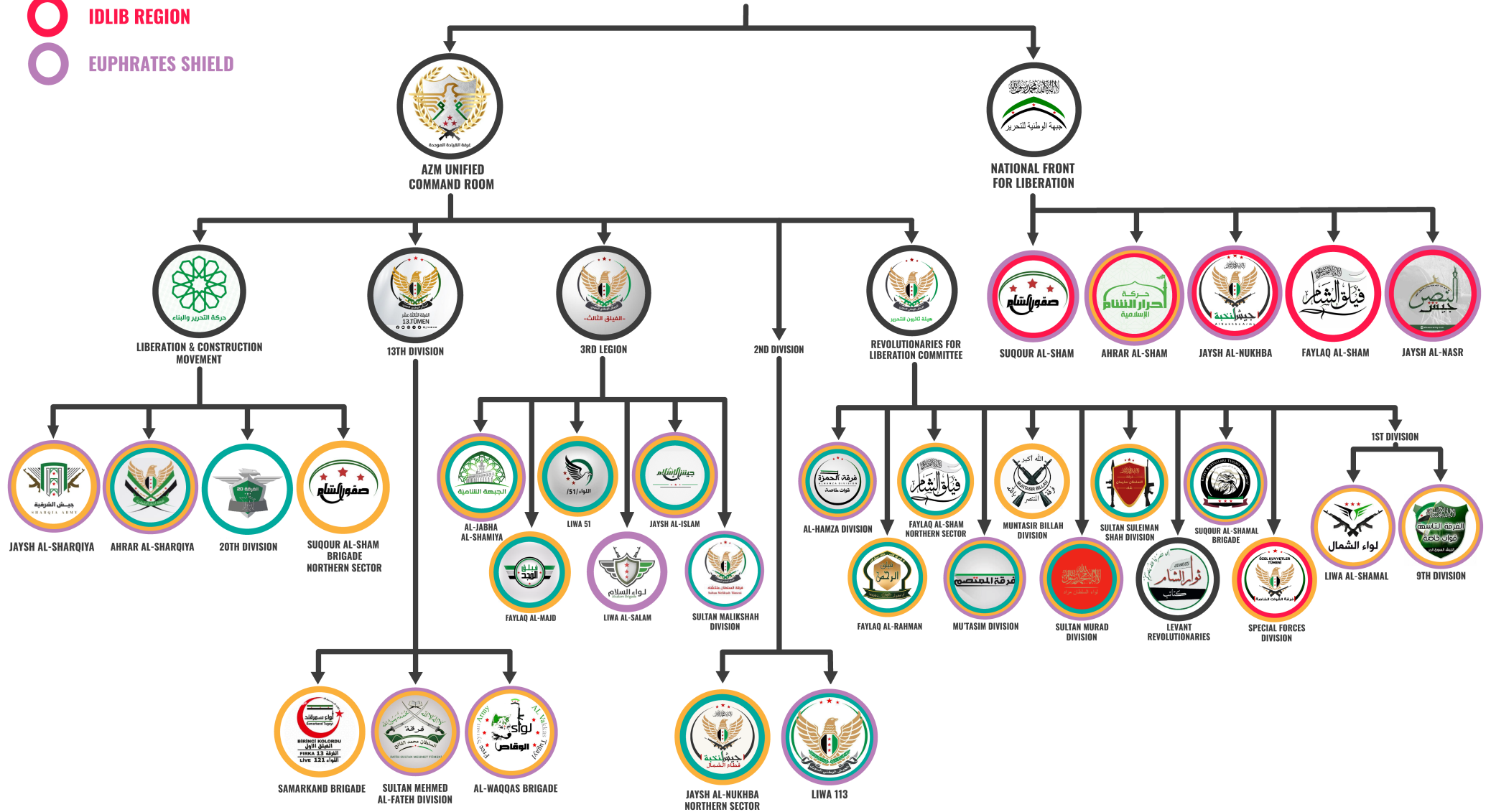
SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY (SNA)

JULY 2022

-  M4 STRIP
-  AFRIN
-  IDLIB REGION
-  EUPHRATES SHIELD



SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY





9TH DIVISION

Al-Furqah 9 – الفرقة التاسعة

Also known as 9th Division - Special Forces, the militia was founded in June 2013 as a ensemble of different brigades from Aleppo affiliated with the FSA⁷², and led by Murshid al-Khaled Aboul-Moutassem.⁷³ In January 2014 the 9th Division joined the Harakat Hazzm, an alliance of Syrian rebel groups affiliated with the FSA in northwestern Syria, and supplied with BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles by the US.⁷⁴ The group's fighters also received US military training in Qatar under the same program.⁷⁵ The militia existed from January 2014 until March 2015 when, after several months of intense attacks by the al-Nusra Front on Harakat Hazzm positions in Idlib and Aleppo, it decided to join al-Jabha al-Shamiya.

There was no more public information about the 9th Division until December 2016, almost two years after the defeat by al-Nusra Front, when news of the reappearance of Harakat Hazzm with a new leadership after meetings in Turkey arrived.⁷⁶ It's not clear how the 9th Division managed to recompose itself but, by the end of operation 'Euphrates Shield' in April 2017, it again appeared publicly, calling themselves 9th Division – Special Forces of the FSA, with Captain Abdel Nasser Galal as the new leader and congratulating the AK-Party of Erdoğan for winning the Turkish presidential referendum.⁷⁷ Later, the 9th Division stated its involvement in the Sultan Murad bloc of the Hawar Kis Operations Room, a military coalition promoted by Turkey for 'Euphrates Shield'.⁷⁸ Since then, the 9th Division started to announce the joining of leaders and fighters, and stabilized its presence in the eastern countryside of Aleppo as well as Jarablus. At the beginning of 2018, the militia joined operation 'Olive Branch' as part of the 5th Division of the FSA. From that point it was present in the front line of the eastern countryside of Idlib and Manbij. At the end of 2019, it also participated in the operation 'Peace Spring' as part of the First legion of the SNA. At the beginning of 2021, 9th Division was present in Idlib, the countryside of Aleppo, Manbij, and Jarablus.

⁷² pbs.twimg.com/media/Ctt0EIUW8AA9jNf.jpg:large

⁷³ carnegie-mec.org/diwan/53910?lang=en

⁷⁴ www.huffpost.com/entry/american-anti-tank-weapon_b_5119255

⁷⁵ rb.gy/bdmkpd (https://www.washingtonpost.com)

⁷⁶ twitter.com/Syria_Rebel_Obs/status/813135865090371590

⁷⁷ twitter.com/ninth_brigade/status/853690995917115393/photo/1

⁷⁸ twitter.com/ninth_brigade/status/903378504674357249/photo/1

Finally, in May 2021, the 9th Division announced its integration with the 112th Brigade and the Northern Brigade into the newly created First Division, within the First Corps of the SNA.⁷⁹ In October 2021, the First Division also merged with other SNA militias to create the Revolutionaries Movement, under the Azm Unified Command Room. Nowadays, it is part of the Revolutionaries for Liberation. According to RIC's own database, 9th Division remains active in the Afrin region, as well as in the so-called Euphrates Shield Area.

⁷⁹ twitter.com/st1division/status/1398976736973492233



20TH DIVISION

Al-Furqah 20 - الفرقة العشرون

The 20th Division is a militia formed in October of 2018 and is constituted as Brigade 114, Division 14, of the First Legion of the SNA. It is mostly made up of fighters from eastern Syria and the Homs region.⁸⁰ The 20th Division participated in the 'Peace Spring' invasion and currently controls the majority of the Turkish-Syrian border region between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, in the so-called 'M4 Strip'. In January 2020, Ahrar al-Sharqiya arrested 20th Division fighters accusing them of being behind a car bombing. Consequently, Ahrar al-Sharqiya took over a 20th Division base in Mabrouka. The 20th Division attempted to reopen its bases but Ahrar al-Sharqiya prevented them from doing so. Turkey pushed for negotiations between the two factions, and ordered both to release their detainees. Regarding Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Turkey also ordered them to withdraw from the base and return property they had confiscated. Three months later, Ahrar al-Sharqiya again clashed with 20th Division, this time using former ISIS fighters in their assault, according to a report by STJ.⁸¹ Again, Turkey intervened, but this time threatened to cut off the militias' salaries. In response, the commanders of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Jaysh a-Sharqiya and the 20th Division accepted holding a reconciliation (sulha) meeting in al-Bab under the auspices of Turkey.⁸²

In September 2021, the 20th Division joined the newly created SLF led by al-Mu'tasim Abbas. However, two months later, the militia defected along with three other groups.⁸³ Recently, in February 2022, the militia announced their integration into LCM, within the Azm Unified Command Room, led by their former rival Ahrar al-Sharqiya. Abdulaziz al-Sawadi, commonly known as 'Abu Barzan', head of the 20th Division and a former deputy commander of the Usud al-Sharqiya, is the current leader of the LCM's political bureau.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/division-20-interview

⁸¹ stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IS-Members-to-the-SNA-1.pdf

⁸² twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1217873718854275072

⁸³ rb.gy/xosgxr (<https://www.al-monitor.com>)

⁸⁴ rb.gy/3q71fr (<https://www.mei.edu>)



AHRAR AL-SHAM

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant

أحرار الشام

Ahrar al-Sham is a Salafist outfit formed in 2011 in Idlib, but later expanded its area of operation with the help of fighters and factions from the Aleppo and eastern Ghouta regions. This is a coalition of multiple Islamist and Salafist units who aim to create an Islamic state under Sharia law. They cooperated with ISIS until 2014, when a bloody feud with the terror group almost wiped out al-Sham. Before 2016, it cooperated with the al-Nusra Front, originally an affiliate of al-Qaeda, but from 2017 on, Ahrar al-Sham began feuding with HTS, the rebranded al-Nusra Front. From 2015 it received Saudi and Turkish funding and even attempted to negotiate with the Assad government. In January 2017, during the 'Euphrates Shield' invasion, the western Aleppo branch of al-Jabha al-Shamiya and several other former al-Jabha al-Shamiya groups, such as the Army of Mujahideen and the Fastaqim Union, abandoned the SNA and joined Ahrar al-Sham. The western Aleppo branch, now inside Ahrar al-Sham, would be involved in the attack against its former ally and SNA group, the Descendants of Saladin Brigade later that year, kidnapping its leader and handing him over to Turkish security forces. They also captured the group's positions and warehouses, after the Descendants of Saladin Brigade's declaration that it would not take part in a planned Turkish-led offensive against the Afrin Canton.⁸⁵ The relationship with al-Jabha al-Shamiya deteriorated when, in 2017, the eastern sector of the Ahrar al-Sham movement, operating in the cities of al-Bab and Jarablus, east of Aleppo, decided to fully merge with al-Jabha al-Shamiya.⁸⁶ Later, in early 2018, with the support of Turkey, Ahrar al-Sham merged into the newly-created SLF. That August, the SLF would join the Turkish-backed NFL, a bigger ensemble of militia operations in northwestern Syria that in October 2019 merged into the SNA.^{87 88}

Since then, the killing of Ahrar al-Sham's initial leadership has been the biggest challenge to the movement. HTS, the most influential power in Idlib, has been accused of supporting the dissolution of Ahrar al-Sham from the inside,⁸⁹ even though they joined forces in order to create a joint operations room between the NFL and HTS in the Idlib Governorate in October 2020 – the so-called 'Tripartite Military Committee', or 'Unified Military Council'. The leadership of Ahrar al-Sham, HTS and Sham Legion constituted this oper-

⁸⁵ www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-war-turkey-disbands-rebel-battalion-alliances-collapse

⁸⁶ rb.gy/ia7zmf (<https://www.syria.tv>)

⁸⁷ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/182297

⁸⁸ rb.gy/mqwkd (<https://www.cartercenter.org>)

⁸⁹ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/turkey-syria-russia-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-bombing.html

ations room.⁹⁰ In January 2021, Ahrar al-Sham appointed a new leader, Amer al-Sheikh (also known as Abu Ubaidah Daraa), with the approval of Turkey, who proved effective in countering HTS' attempts to influence al-Sham's internal dynamics. The replacement of the group's leadership almost split it in two (one trying to implement a stronger military council in northern Syria and the other operating in Afrin, seeking to strengthen its ties with Turkey).⁹¹ By April 2021 Amer al-Sheikh announced the formation of a new leadership body, in charge of military decision-making. Members of Ahrar al-Sham's shura council, a religio-political legislative body which still operates as the movement's political wing, criticized the formation of the new leadership council, accusing the new council of seeking to also control the political decision-making process by undermining the role of the Shura Council.⁹² It seems that the gradual shift of Ahrar al-Sham from a more general movement with a political agenda (to overthrow the Assad government to establish an Islamic state governed by Islamic law)⁹³ into a simple military faction could have been made in preparation for its future integration into HTS in Idlib, which has its own Shura Council and political project.

During the first half of 2021, due to these disputes around the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham, some military blocs from Idlib and Aleppo, representing a third of its striking force, split from the movement to join al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Since then, different infighting events have taken place between Ahrar al-Sham and al-Jabha al-Shamiya, while two opposing blocs have been consolidating in Aleppo province: the Third Legion, led by al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and the deepening alliance between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS. In April 2022, the Third Legion (al-Jabha al-Shamiya) and the 32nd Division (also known as Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector, as the group had split from Ahrar al-Sham in 2017 in order to integrate in al-Jabha al-Shamiya) fought each other in the city of al-Bab after the former had attempted to take control of the headquarters of the 32nd Division. Ahrar al-Sham - Main Sector intervened and, less than a week later, an official statement announced the reinstatement of Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector.⁹⁴ Less than a month later, two days of violent infighting erupted between Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector and al-Jabha al-Shamiya on the outskirts of al-Bab. Amid the fighting, the Eastern Sector requested HTS' support due to their united front against Third Legion – especially against al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Jaysh al-Islam. The clashes ceased when MIT forced all sides to return to their antebellum positions.⁹⁵ At the end of April, Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector announced its joining of the Revolutionary Liberation Movement, also part of Azm.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ rb.gy/0uudow (english.enabbaladi.net)

⁹¹ storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/d63d2259894f4575a37bc3e9b8d9720f

⁹² www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/political-military-wings-islamist-movement-clash-idlib

⁹³ ahraralsham.net/about-us/

⁹⁴ twitter.com/Ahrar_AlSham3/status/1531017155868778508/photo/1

⁹⁵ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/syrian-armed-groups-clash-outside-aleppo

⁹⁶ rb.gy/gtybr9 (www.syria.tv)

Ahrar al-Sham currently controls the town of Qatmah in Bulbul sub-district of Afrin, as well as some parts of west Afrin city, and has been active in Jindires sub-district. The militia also holds positions, as part of the NFL, in the north of al-Bab and in Jarablus city, in the 'Euphrates Shield Area', and in the south of Idlib region.⁹⁷ According to RIC's own database on rights violations in the occupied territories of Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', Ahrar al-Sham has been responsible for numerous cases of extortion against the local population, and has been involved in clashes with other SNA militias. Along with Faylaq al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham has consistently shown itself to be the most aggressive militia in its actions against Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions.



Meeting of Ahrar al-Sham leadership, June 24th 2022

⁹⁷ web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523



AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya,
Gathering of Free Men of the East
أحرار الشرقية

As their name denotes, Ahrar al-Sharqiya hails from eastern Syria. It established itself as an independent group in 2016, when it split from Ahrar al-Sham. The majority of Ahrar al-Sharqiya's militiamen are former members of al-Nusra Front including its leader. Additionally, RIC has identified at least two former ISIS fighters who are now part of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, including a commander.⁹⁸ Citizens in Afrin have spoken to reporters about al-Sharqiya's attempts to impose the veil and other Sharia law measures.⁹⁹ They have been accused by Amnesty International and others of participating in forced displacements and the seizure of property in Afrin, amounting to "serious human rights violations."¹⁰⁰ Most infamously, Ahrar al-Sharqiya attracted particular media attention following their execution of Hevrin Khalef, a prominent Kurdish politician, as well as her driver Ferhat Ramadan, near Tel Abyad in 2019. The head of Ahrar al-Sharqiya's branch in Jarabalus was also caught on video sexually abusing a 13- or 14-year-old girl.¹⁰¹ In July 2021, the US Treasury Department announced sanctions on entities affiliated with the Syrian intelligence and Turkish-backed armed opposition factions, including Ahrar al-Sharqiya and two of its leaders, Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes and Raed Jassim al-Hayes. The Treasury highlighted the fact that they were responsible for the assassination of Hevrin Khalaf and her driver.

Furthermore the Treasury noted that Ahrar al-Sharqiya controlled a large prison complex outside of Aleppo where hundreds have been executed since 2018. The group has also used this prison to operate an extensive kidnapping-for-ransom operation, targeting prominent business and opposition figures from the Syrian provinces of Idlib and Aleppo.¹⁰² In summer 2021, local sources reported that the Turkish army was deploying Jaysh al-Islam militia-men to replace fighters in some of Ahrar al-Sharqiya's positions. Despite this attempt at whitewashing SNA militias' crimes, weeks later photos of an official meeting showed the head of the Syrian Opposition Coalition embracing Ahrar al-Sharqiya's leader Hatim Abu Shaqra, who was personally involved in the murder of Hevrin Khalef.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ rb.gy/hcd3gl (rojavainformationcenter.com)

⁹⁹ rb.gy/1dj8lk (www.middleeasteye.net)

¹⁰⁰ rb.gy/yof9qw (www.amnesty.org)

¹⁰¹ rb.gy/mtxpku (http://www.francesoir.fr)

¹⁰² See our report: Ahrar al-Sharqiya: war crimes with impunity (October 2021)

¹⁰³ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/506235

Ahrar al-Sharqiya has taken part in all Turkish territorial invasions of Syria, as part of the FSA and later on the SNA. Moreover, in the fall of 2020, Turkey pushed for fighters from Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Sultan Murad to be sent to Artsakh (Karabakh) to fight alongside the Azerbaijani Army, with the help of private Turkish security companies. During 2020, Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia-men were also deployed to the war in Libya in order to participate in Turkish military operations.

Since February 2022, the militia has been part of the LCM, within Azm, with Ahrar al-Sharqiya's leader, Ahmad al-Hayis, commonly known as 'Abu Hatem', as the deputy leader. Today, the militia controls the city of Rajo and its surroundings, the old town of Afrin city, the majority of Jindires sub-district, and over 1,800km² of territory between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, including the Mabrouka power station. Ahrar al-Sharqiya's unrestrained actions



Ahrar al-Sharqiyah's leader (left) and Syrian National Coalition's president in a public meeting after US Treasury sanctions, August 2021

and attempts to marginalize other groups in a bid to monopolize political and military power, particularly in Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, are seen as a threat by other SNA groups.¹⁰⁴ In the so-called Euphrates Shield Area, Ahrar al-Sharqiya control a 23km long strip between al-Rai and Aulan.

Ahrar al-Sharqiya has clashed with Hamza Division in 2018; another such incident was reported in 2020, when Ahrar al-Sharqiya arrested 20th Division fighters and took over their opponent's militia base in Mabrouka, accusing them of being behind a car bombing. Ahrar al-Sharqiya strategically employed the military experience of its former ISIS fighters for various operations, most notably infighting between factions. According to an STJ report, Ahrar al-Sharqiya used former ISIS fighters within their ranks in another attack on the 20th Division in April 2020, in the city of al-Bab.¹⁰⁵ In August 2021, Ahrar al-Sharqiya violently clashed with the 9th Division in the center of Afrin city in the presence of civilians; a child was injured.¹⁰⁶ It maintains a good relationship with Jaysh al-Sharqiya, with whom it created the LCM in February 2022. At times, Jaysh al-Sharqiya has worked as a mediator for Ahrar al-Sharqiya in disputes with other factions.

¹⁰⁴ rb.gy/37y0ik (www.al-monitor.com)

¹⁰⁵ stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IS-Members-to-the-SNA-1.pdf

¹⁰⁶ www.syriahr.com/en/220557/

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is currently one of the most important SNA militias and very active in the occupied territories. According to the RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and 'M4 Strip', Ahrar al-Sharqiya is responsible for numerous arrests, extortion and violence against civilians, as well as participating in infighting with other SNA militias, especially before the creation of the LCM. The militia also runs two prisons: on the outskirts of Jindires and Rajo respectively (both capitals of the sub-districts under their control). Recently, on July 12th 2022, a US drone strike outside Jindires, south of Afrin region, targeted two senior ISIS officials who were under the protection of Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia.¹⁰⁷ One of the two men, Maher al-Aqal, was one of the top five ISIS leaders and the leader of ISIS in Syria, in charge of strengthening the organization's networks outside Syria and Iraq.

¹⁰⁷ npasyria.com/en/80326/



AL-HAMZA DIVISION

Furqat al-Hamzah - فرقة الحمزة

Better known as Hamza Division,¹⁰⁸ this former FSA outfit was formed in the countryside of Hasakah Governorate in 2013. It received weapons through the US 'Syrian Train and Equip Program'.¹⁰⁹ The division closely collaborated with Turkish forces during the 2016 invasion and occupation of the city of Jarablus. Now they control a 27-km strip from the Turkish border to the Herbel front, one of the most active frontlines with the Syrian government forces, as well as the strategic city of Kaljibrin and the western frontline with NES's Manbij region.

It participated in the 2018 and 2019 Turkish invasions of Afrin and the 'M4 Strip'. Today, Hamza Division controls large swathes in the north-west countryside of Rajo sub-district and a majority of Afrin sub-district. In the 'M4 Strip', the militia controls Tel Halaf and the area south to the front line, the western half of Sere Kaniye, and the Sere Kaniye border crossing, where they act as Turkey's middleman. A large number of prisons recorded by the RIC are under the Division's control – two in the 'M4 Strip' and four in Afrin.

The number of militiamen under the command of Hamza Division is between 2,200 and 6,500 according to some sources, mostly Arabs, Syrian Turkmen and Kurds.^{110 111} Many of them have been sent as mercenaries to Libya and Armenia as well.¹¹² Hamza Division stands accused of torturing and raping women in their prisons and beating and humiliating captured Kurds,¹¹³ in addition to other violations such as looting, destroying public and private infrastructure, and arbitrary arrests. Among the Hamza Division militiamen are a number of known former members of ISIS: the commander Abu Rabea al-Ansari, who participated in a mass execution of Syrian Army fighters at the Tabqa Airbase; the commander Mounir Khalil, who took part in several massacres carried out by ISIS in Homs in 2015, including the al-A'miriya massacre, and the Palmyra massacre, which killed over 400 civilians; as well as several other IS members in security and administrative positions.

¹⁰⁸ Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib was a companion and commander under the Islamic prophet Muhammad. He was the first Muslim to lead an expedition to Mecca and fought in many battles, for which Muhammad gave him the posthumous title of Sayyid ush-Shuhda ("Chief of the Martyrs").

¹⁰⁹ dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/sna-structure-function-damascus

¹¹⁰ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

¹¹¹ www.trtworld.com/middle-east/syrian-opposition-forces-open-first-military-barracks-42056

¹¹² rb.gy/6gzpot (www.ohchr.org)

¹¹³ twitter.com/Mekut_Mallet/status/976147595679682571

The militia has clashed with many other SNA groups including Ahrar al-Sharqiyya and Ahrar al-Sham. However it harbors a special hostility against al-Jabha al-Shamiya, since both are internal heavyweight powers inside the SNA. Among the SNA militias, Hamza Division played a significant role in the creation of the main rival to the Azm Unified Command Room, the SFL, announced on September 9th 2021.

According to the RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', Hamza Division has been involved in numerous infighting events, especially with Ahrar al-Sharqiya, with whom they have fought over control of the 'M4 Strip'. The militia is also responsible for numerous cases of extortion and drug trafficking, since the militia controls the Tel Halaf crossing with Turkey, which is a popular smuggling and human trafficking route.

Base of Hamza Division in the city of Bazza, April 3rd 2021





AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA

Levant Front - الجبهة الشامية

Al-Jabha al-Shamiya was established in Aleppo in December 2014 as an Islamist militia opposed to President Bashar al-Assad's rule, and considered to be closer to the Muslim Brotherhood.¹¹⁴ Its ideology ranges from hard-line salafists to more moderate Islamists, though they received US military support including TOW missiles. In 2016, their fighting strength was estimated at 3,000 men. It is one of the most institutionalized militias within the SNA, since they have a stronger political organization and decision-making structure, unlike other militias which mostly operate as private armies, with a founding leader in control of military equipment, headquarters, and vehicles.¹¹⁵ Crucially, al-Jabha al-Shamiya's independent vision for a future Syria at times put them at odds with Turkey's Syria policy.

Al-Jabha al-Shamiya has been accused by Amnesty International of summary executions through its system of Sharia courts.¹¹⁶ In 2018, it was declared a "criminal organization of terrorist intent" and a "Salafist and jihadist" group that "strives for the setting up of the caliphate" by the Dutch government, its former backers.¹¹⁷ Some of their militiamen were recruited to fight in Libya.¹¹⁸ According to statistics collected by the RIC throughout 2021, al-Jabha al-Shamiya is one of the groups with the highest number of rights violations on record, especially with multiple cases of gender-based violence and unlawful arrests.¹¹⁹

Al-Jabha al-Shamiya took part in Turkish military operations in northern Syria in 2016, 2018, and 2019. It currently controls the city and the border crossing at Tel Abyad; has a presence on the frontline of Ayn Issa in the 'M4 Strip'; the east of Afrin city, where they control the strategic hospital where all injured SNA militiamen receive medical treatment; the majority of Maabatli sub-district, including its capital; and holds key territories in the 'Euphrates Shield Area', including the frontline at Tadif, the city of al-Bab, and the city of Azaz, as well as the important border crossing of Bab al-Salam. It plays a major role in Afrin and the 'Euphrates Shield Area', as it is one of the founders and key players inside Azm. In October 2021, al-Jabha al-Shamiya further consolidat-

¹¹⁴ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/will-hts-close-ranks-turkish-backed-factions-north-syria

¹¹⁵ rb.gy/qzjkr6 (www.almodon.com)

¹¹⁶ rb.gy/ev7snt (www.amnesty.org)

¹¹⁷ rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/03/TNA_report.pdf

¹¹⁸ rb.gy/svrgst (ahvalnews.com)

¹¹⁹ rojavainformationcenter.com/category/report/occupation-report/

ed its sphere of influence with the relaunching of the former ‘Third Legion’ as a subgroup of Azm. That same month, it was reported that “dozens of militants of al-Jabha al-Shamiya faction and other factions have recently arrived in HTS-held areas in Idlib” with the latter group’s approval,¹²⁰ among rumors of a possible merger between HTS and the SNA, though this never materialized.¹²¹ It is one of the militias most involved in infighting with other SNA militias and its leaders have been the target of bomb attacks.

The relationship between al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Ahrar al-Sham is especially fraught, since both are among the most powerful Islamist militias within the SNA, with territories bordering one another, and numerous cases of mutual defections. During the first half of 2021, due to disputes around the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham, some military blocs from Idlib and Aleppo, representing a third of its striking force, split from the movement to join al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Since then, different infighting events have taken place between Ahrar al-Sham and al-Jabha al-Shamiya, while two opposing blocs have been consolidating in Aleppo province: on the one hand, the Third Legion, led by al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and, on the other, the deepening alliance between Ahrar al-Sham and HTS.

In April 2022, a split from Ahrar al-Sham known as 32nd Division - Eastern Sector integrated into al-Jabha al-Shamiya in 2017, had been involved in clashes with al-Jabha al-Shamiya for the control of the 32nd Division headquarters in the city of al-Bab. Ahrar al-Sham - Main Sector intervened and an official statement announced the reinstatement of Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector.¹²² Less than a month later, two days of violent infighting erupted between Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector and al-Jabha al-Shamiya on the outskirts of al-Bab. Amid the fighting, Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector requested HTS’ support due to their united front against Third Legion – especially against al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Jaysh al-Islam. The clashes ceased when MIT forced all sides to return to their antebellum positions.¹²³

¹²⁰ rb.gy/bnhtat (syrianobserver.com)

¹²¹ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/will-hts-close-ranks-turkish-backed-factions-north-syria

¹²² twitter.com/Ahrar_AlSham3/status/1531017155868778508/photo/1

¹²³ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/syrian-armed-groups-clash-outside-aleppo



AL-WAQQAS BRIGADE

Al Vakkas Tugayi – Liwa al-Waqqas

لواء الوقاص

It still unclear whether its members participated in the Battle of Aleppo (2012-2016) and the ‘Euphrates Shield’ operation, yet the al-Waqqas Brigade¹²⁴ appeared publicly in early 2018 as part of the SNA First Legion during the operation ‘Olive Branch’. Since then, al-Waqqas Brigade has controlled some territory and has been active in Jindires and Shiye/Sheikh al-Hadid sub-districts. Like other Turkmen militias, between 2020 and 2021, it sent around 400 mercenaries to participate in Turkey's military operation in Libya.¹²⁵ In May 2021, together with other Turkmen militias, they announced their merger into the 13th Division. In August, the 13th Division joined the Azm Unified Command Room. Although the al-Waqqas Brigade counts among the smaller SNA militias, accusations of unlawful arrests, kidnapping, imposing ransoms, looting, and felling of olive trees against the group have been constant.

The militia also appears to be active and controls the town of Marea in the so-called Euphrates Shield Area – an important location since Tel Rifaat, the northern-most city in which the SAA is present, lies only 9km to the west. al-Waqqas’ leader, Abu Lazer, was arrested in Marea by the Mu'tasim Division militia on charges of dealing in narcotics when an illegal drug ring was uncovered.¹²⁶



Meeting of the 13th Division leadership with the SIG president Salem al-Meslet (center seat), December 5th 2021

¹²⁴ Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas was an Arab Muslim military general in the service of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Abi Waqqas played a leading role in the Muslim conquest of Persia against the Sassanid Empire in 636–642.

¹²⁵ rb.gy/iu5txg (akhbarlibya24.net)

¹²⁶ rb.gy/vitiem (www.syriahr.com)



FAYLAQ AL-MAJD
Glory Legion - فيلق المجد

Faylaq al-Majd was formed in 2017 by Yaman Talju and other defectors from Jaysh al-Islam with no more than 200 militiamen. Yaman Talju was a military commander of the Jaysh al-Islam - North Sector and represented it at the 2017 Astana talks organized by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. He was accused by local activists of misappropriating funds and weapons granted to Jaysh al-Islam – North Sector before his defection. Later, in 2018, Major Yasser Abdul Raheem defected from Faylaq al-Sham with a number of fighters and was tasked with leading Faylaq al-Majd. In early 2019, after the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement announced its dissolution, its fighters also joined Faylaq al-Majd, bringing the number of the latter’s fighters to 3,000.¹²⁷ Nowadays, the militia is part of the SNA, operating within the Azm Unified Command Room inside the Third Legion, led by al-Jabha al-Shamiya. In Afrin, Faylaq al-Majd controls two patches of territory in Jindires sub-district, where it established military bases, and another small area between Rajo and Bulbul sub-districts. The militia is also present on the eastern frontline of the ‘M4 Strip’, between Ayn Issa and the Turkish border.

Faylaq al-Majd participated for the first time in a Turkish military operation alongside SNA in 2018's operation 'Olive Branch', receiving full and direct support from Turkey. Later, the militia participated in the 'Peace Spring' invasion. In both cases, it was accused of committing widespread violations against the local population, among them seizing houses, robbing businesses, unlawfully arresting civilians, and mutilating the bodies of SDF fighters they had killed. Yasser Abdul Rahee committed flagrant violations against detainees during 'Peace Spring', as he took humiliating photos of an SDF female fighter.¹²⁸



Screenshot from a video of Faylaq al-Majd fighters showing that they have killed several SDF fighters, October 2019

¹²⁷ stj-sy.org/en/tell-abiad-civilian-shot-dead-by-members-of-glory-corp-in-the-national-army/

¹²⁸ Ibid.



FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
Al-Rahman Legion - فيلق الرحمن

Faylaq al-Rahman¹²⁹ is a moderate Islamist militia originally based in eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, and in the eastern Qalamoun Mountains. It was formerly funded by the Qatari government. The militia currently holds some minor territory around Qibare village, to the northeast of Afrin city, as well as south of Tel Abyad.

The militia was officially created in November 2013 and led by Abdul al-Nasr Shamir, a military captain who defected from the Syrian Army in early 2012. Faylaq al-Rahman does not seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state.¹³⁰ It maintained close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and received material support from Qatar. In previous years, when the Gulf Crisis (between Qatar and Saudi Arabia) was at its peak, Faylaq al-Rahman fought a bloody war against the Saudi-backed Jaysh al-Islam in Damascus.¹³¹ Between 2014 and 2016, Faylaq al-Rahman was part of the Unified Military Command of eastern Ghouta, established in 2014, along with Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. By February 2017, the head of the Rahman Legion's political council, Mutasim Shamir, attended peace talks in Geneva as a member of the Syrian opposition.¹³² After a large-scale Syrian government operation to recapture eastern Ghouta, in March 2018, Faylaq al-Rahman agreed to a surrender agreement with Russia and the Assad government and began to evacuate its fighters (~5000 men) and their families towards Turkish-controlled territory.¹³³

Faylaq al-Rahman then became Division 26 inside the SNA's Second Legion. The militia participated in the 'Peace Spring' invasion. In April 2020, Turkey suspended support for Faylaq al-Rahman, after the group disobeyed the SNA order to prepare lists of militants willing to go fight for the Government of National Accord in Libya.¹³⁴ Finally, in April 2022, Faylaq al-Rahman joined the Revolutionaries for Liberation, after close to four years without affiliation to any particular SNA power bloc.

¹²⁹ Rahman means 'merciful' in Arabic. Rahman is one of the names of God in Islam and ar-Rahman is the name of the 55th sura of the Quran. It describes the story of creation, as well as the joys of paradise.

¹³⁰ www.dw.com/en/which-rebel-groups-are-fighting-in-syrias-eastern-ghouta/a-42663501

¹³¹ rb.gy/vdfy4w (www.reuters.com)

¹³² rb.gy/z9uh6p (www.newindianexpress.com)

¹³³ rb.gy/jfn43a (www.thenationalnews.com)

¹³⁴ www.syriahr.com/en/161593/



FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
Sham Legion - فيلق الشام

Faylaq al-Sham was born out of a 2014 alliance between 19 Aleppo-based militias. Though the group had strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, it distanced itself in order to receive Saudi aid and US military backing, including the delivery of American TOW missiles.¹³⁵ It participated in the 2016 and 2018 Turkish military operations. During the war in Afrin, their commander was deemed a “key member” of the leadership of the campaign.¹³⁶ It has been accused by Amnesty International and others of participating in forced displacements and the seizure of property in Afrin, amounting to “serious human rights violations,” as well as the torture of detainees.¹³⁷ Later, Faylaq al-Sham also provided mercenaries for the Libyan and Karabakh conflicts in which Turkey was involved in 2020 and 2021.¹³⁸ Faylaq al-Sham is thought to be one of the groups closest to Turkey, while also maintaining close ties to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. It has had disputes with HTS in Idlib, for example over the control of gas stations. Yet, overall, the two groups tend to cooperate, for example in the Unified Military Council for the Idlib Governorate, together with Ahrar al-Sham.¹³⁹

Faylaq al-Sham comprised between 4-10,000 militiamen in 2018, mostly Arabs,¹⁴⁰ ¹⁴¹ and provided the SNA with its top commander, Fadlallah al-Haji. In Afrin region, it shares much of Hamza Division's territory, controlling the region's southern flank with the crossing between Afrin, Idlib and Turkey at Deir Balout; the Basouta village that is close to the mountainous area considered an Afrin Liberation Forces hotbed; and, in recent months, they have established a foothold in the north-west tip of Idlib region (including the border crossing of al-Ghazawiyah). It also holds territory in Afrin's sub-district of Raju. The group runs two prisons in the border town of Maidan Akbis and Goran village, both in Raju sub-district, under the supervision of MIT. Civilians detained at this site allege that they were tortured and that cruel treatment is commonplace there. Faylaq al-Sham runs another prison in the village of Iska, on Afrin's southern border with Idlib.¹⁴²

¹³⁵ dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/sna-structure-function-damascus

¹³⁶ www.naharnet.com/stories/en/241182

¹³⁷ rb.gy/yof9qw (www.amnesty.org)

¹³⁸ rb.gy/cb2w4r (english.alarabiya.net)

¹³⁹ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/syrian-jihadi-group-idlib-goes-after-gas-stations?amp

¹⁴⁰ www.dw.com/en/pro-turkey-rebels-start-pullout-from-syrias-idlib-under-deal/a-45693917

¹⁴¹ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

¹⁴² rb.gy/uqaa6n (afrinpost.net)

In January 2022, Faylaq al-Sham - North Sector was named as one of the members of the Revolutionaries for Liberation, under the Azm Unified Command Room. This group controls territories in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip' but its main sector is active in the Idlib region under the NFL. The North Sector's increasing power and territorial expansion is likely to contest Hamza Division's position as the hegemonic militia within the Revolutionaries for Liberation. Nowadays, according to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', the North Sector is one of the SNA militias that commits the most rights violations, including a high number of unlawful arrests, mass detentions, cases of extortion, and gender-based violence.



The headquarters of Faylaq al-Sham in the northern countryside of Aleppo, February 2022



JAYSH AL-ISLAM
Army of Islam - جيش الإسلام

Formerly known as Liwa al-Islam, this militia was established in the eastern Ghouta neighbourhood of Damascus in late 2011, and in 2013 merged with 50 other Salafist factions to form Jaysh al-Islam.¹⁴³ Partially funded by Saudi Arabia, it advocated for the “cleansing of the filth” of religious minorities, including Shi’a Muslims, in Syria.¹⁴⁴ With around 10-15,000 militiamen,¹⁴⁵ the Salafist group held east Ghouta under totalitarian rule for years, until it was forced out as the tide of war turned in Assad’s favor. Around 1,500 fighters and their families escaped to occupied territories.

Testimonies from its al-Tawba prison describe electrocution, beatings, and mass detention of minors.¹⁴⁶ The Idlib branch of Jaysh al-Islam was also among the forces found to have committed war crimes by the United Nations for participating in bombardment of a Kurdish neighbourhood in Aleppo, killing at least 83 civilians and 30 children.¹⁴⁷ It participated in the invasion of Afrin during ‘Olive Branch’ as well as the ‘Peace Spring’ operation. The militia has made public statements declaring Kurdish people to be their enemy.¹⁴⁸ According to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, its members have been extorting local farmers, forcing them to hand over produce for half of its value, and imprisoning those who refuse to obey; expropriating land from religious minorities; and raping women.¹⁴⁹ They have also sent mercenaries to Libya.¹⁵⁰

During the invasion of Afrin, Jaysh al-Islam was part of the Second Legion of the SNA. It feuded with al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Hamza Division in 2020, as well as with Faylaq al-Rahman in early 2022. But in mid-2021 the militia joined the Azm Unified Command Room, and in October it became a member of the Third Legion subgroup within Azm Unified Command, under the leadership of al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Together with the Suqor al-Shamal militia, Jaysh al-Islam currently controls the eastern frontline of the ‘M4 Strip’, near Tel Tamir,

¹⁴³ rb.gy/4ovovg (jisrtv.com)

¹⁴⁴ www.joshualandis.com/blog/zahran-alloush/

¹⁴⁵ rb.gy/here0f (medium.com)

¹⁴⁶ www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syria-torture-army-of-islam_us_56f54d0fe4b0143a9b47fc59

¹⁴⁷ rb.gy/7glcyw (www.amnesty.org.uk)

¹⁴⁸ SOHR, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=92283>

¹⁴⁹ SOHR, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=106133>

¹⁵⁰ rb.gy/svrgst (ahvalnews.com)

as well as territory to the south of Afrin city, including a recruitment camp in the village of Kerzayhel. In the 'Euphrates Shield Area', Jaysh al-Islam, together with Jaysh al-Nukhba, controls the city and countryside of Jarablus, including the border crossing with Turkey.

According to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', Jaysh al-Islam have mainly been involved in cases of infighting and extortion. The group is most well-known for its hostile relationship with HTS, which further deteriorated during the first half of 2022. HTS has launched a media campaign in order to harass Jaysh al-Islam. HTS appears to have similarly animus relationships with other militias of the Third Legion within the Azm Unified Command.¹⁵¹ The conflict between HTS and Jaysh al-Islam has existed since the two coexisted in the eastern Ghouta area of Damascus, where the conflict erupted in a bloody turf war lasting for years, until 2018, when Jaysh al-Islam and other opposition militias were expelled to northern Syria as part of an agreement with the Syrian central government.¹⁵²



March of Jaysh al-Islam fighters in Sere Kaniye's countryside, in the 'M4 Strip', March 21st 2021

¹⁵¹ rb.gy/fve7vc (www.syria.tv)

¹⁵² rb.gy/oynvmk (www.syria.tv)



JAYSH AL-NUKHBA Elite Army - جيش النخبة

The Islamist militia 'Liberation Army' (Jaysh al-Tahrir), was seemingly established in parallel to the Hawar Kilis Operations Room, and participated in the 'Euphrates Shield' invasion. Jaysh al-Nukhba was commanded by Muhammad Ahmedal-Sayed and initially composed of 3,000 militiamen (mostly Arabs) according to its own statements in early 2017. It established two main sectors: one operating in the Aleppo region from their headquarters in Jarablus, and another covering Idlib, Latakia and Hama.¹⁵³ In January 2017, the militia announced they would change their name to Jaysh al-Nukhba (Elite Army) and appointed Muhammad Ahmed al-Sayed as their new commander.

In early 2018, a subgroup called Northern Sector, commanded by Colonel Moataz Raslan and part of the 5th squadron of the newly created SNA, took part in the 'Olive Branch' operation. Since then Jaysh al-Nukhba - Northern Sector has been acting independently from the main group and holds two different territories in north Afrin, in the northern territories of Shera and Bulbul, and controls a number of villages in Shera and Maabatli sub-districts. The militia also participated in the 'Peace Spring' invasion – this time under the command of Brigade 145, Division 14 – and still maintains a presence on the Ain Issa front. By June 2021, Jaysh al-Nukhba - Northern Sector merged with Liwa 113 to form the Second Division within the SNA, and, two months later, the Second Division became part of the Azm Unified Command.

For its part, Jaysh al-Nukhba's main body joined the NFL in May 2018, which operated mainly in south of Afrin and Idlib against SAA-forces, and which would later be absorbed into the SNA. In fall of 2020, together with other Turkish-backed militias within the SNA, Jaysh al-Nukhba militiamen fought as mercenaries alongside the Azerbaijani army in the Karabakh war.¹⁵⁴ Between the end of 2021 and May 2022, the NFL-aligned Jaysh al-Nukhba lost its territories in the southern Afrin region to Faylaq al-Sham. This sits in line with the progressive consolidation of the Azm Unified Command Room in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip' (to which Jaysh al-Nukhba - Northern Sector belongs), and outside Idlib. Today, Jaysh al-Nukhba's main sector resides in Idlib and Jarablus.

¹⁵³ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

¹⁵⁴ rb.gy/vlfn4z (saradzhyan.wordpress.com)



JAYSH AL-SHARQIYAH Eastern Army – جيش الشرقية

Jaysh al-Sharqiyah first declared its existence in a September 2017 press release. It was led by Major Hussein Hamadi and appeared to be composed of Deiri factions operating northeast of Damascus, as well as members from Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, and Raqqqa governorates.¹⁵⁵ In early 2018, as part of FSA, the militia took part in the 'Olive Branch' invasion. Since then, it has remained active in the Jindires area and runs the al-Harith training camp in the southwest of Afrin city. Jaysh al-Sharqiyah also participated in the 'Peace Spring' invasion, this time under the control of Brigade 146, Division 14. Before they joined the newly-created Azm Unified Command Room in July of 2021, Jaysh al-Sharqiyah was involved in multiple battles in Hama and Idlib governorates against Syrian government forces. Finally, in February 2022, the militia announced their complete integration into LCM, within the Azm Unified Command Room, with Hussein Hamadi as its leader.¹⁵⁶ In the 'Euphrates Shield Area', Jaysh al-Sharqiyah controls the eastern part of the Tadif front, south of al-Bab.

Jaysh al-Sharqiya has quarreled with several SNA militias, including the Military Police and Jaysh al-Islam, which led Turkey to temporarily suspend its financial support for the group.¹⁵⁷ Also, it maintains a good relationship with Ahrar al-Sharqiya, occasionally mediating in disputes between the latter militia and other factions. STJ have accused Hussein Hamadi and other SNA faction commanders of aiding ISIS fighters fleeing the SDF advance on their areas and settling them and their families in areas under their control. STJ further identified a large number of ISIS members currently within the ranks of Jaysh al-Sharqiyah – both in military and administrative positions.¹⁵⁸



Jaysh al-Sharqiya checkpoint in Afrin city, November 2020

¹⁵⁵ rb.gy/14orrx (www.bellingcat.com)

¹⁵⁶ rb.gy/3q71fr (www.mei.edu)

¹⁵⁷ rb.gy/lfgghy (stj-sy.org)

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.



LEVANT REVOLUTIONARIES

Thuwar al-Sham - ثوار الشام

The Levant Revolutionaries was formed in April 2015 when several factions of the Army of Mujahideen, a Sunni Islamist rebel group regrouped in order to fight the Syrian government and ISIS. al-Nour Islamic Movement, the Amjad al-Islam Brigade, al-Huda Brigades Gathering, and several groups affiliated with the al-Ansar Brigade, left the group to join the Revolutionaries of the Levant Battalions, led by Captain Naji al-Mustafa, nicknamed 'Abu Hamza'.¹⁵⁹ That same month, the Levant Revolutionaries participated in the creation of Fatah Halab, or 'Aleppo Conquest', a joint operations room of Syrian rebel factions led by the commander of the Sham Legion, Major Yasser Abdul Rahim. The aim of the operations room was to organize opposition factions for an offensive against the Syrian government forces in Aleppo city. As part of Fatah Halab, the Levant Revolutionaries were part of the 'train-and-equip' TOW program run by the CIA.¹⁶⁰ At that time, Levant Revolutionaries and other rebel groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Sultan Murad Division, also attacked the YPG-held Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood of Aleppo, in October 2015.¹⁶¹ A United Nations report came to the conclusion that, during the siege of eastern Aleppo, Fatah Halab intentionally attacked civilian-inhabited neighborhoods of the Kurdish-majority enclave, killing and maiming dozens of civilians, and that these acts constitute war crimes.¹⁶² Following the conflicts within the Syrian opposition forces between 2016 and 2017, Fatah Halab dissolved as the militiamen within its ranks defected to other groups.

For its part, in January 2016, Levant Revolutionaries announced a full integration to al-Jabha al-Shamiya.¹⁶³ However, in July 2016, they reappeared on the Aleppo front under the direction of Fatah Halab, with a statement announcing their separation for breaching the terms of the integration agreement (though some Levant Revolutionaries battalions remained with Al-Jabha al-Shamiya).¹⁶⁴ In August 2016, Levant Revolutionaries announced their re-merger with Army of Mujahideen,¹⁶⁵ but in January 2017, after the al-Nusra Front attacked and captured the bases of the Army of Mujahideen, it an-

¹⁵⁹ http://www.syriainside.com/articles/100_

¹⁶⁰ rb.gy/wpbx9a (hasanmustafas.wordpress.com)

¹⁶¹ rb.gy/9b4zdn (www.dailysabah.com)

¹⁶² documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/026/63/pdf/G1702663.pdf?OpenElement

¹⁶³ twitter.com/k_th_alsham/status/692295127583309824

¹⁶⁴ twitter.com/k_th_alsham/status/748912191282278400

¹⁶⁵ twitter.com/mohamadsorreeh1/status/762289057133101056

nounced that it would join Ahrar al-Sham Movement, as one of many smaller groups which sought protection from the latter.¹⁶⁶ One year later, in January 2018, it announced the integration into the Nour al-Din al-Zinki Movement, a Sunni Islamist militia that at that time was violently clashing with HTS in northern Idlib and western Aleppo.¹⁶⁷ One month later, this movement joined the Turkish-backed SLF alongside Ahrar al-Sham, becoming the largest Sunni Islamist rebel groups in northwestern Syria to counterweight HTS.¹⁶⁸ In August 2018, in an effort to strengthen its position in Idlib against HTS, the SLF, along with six other groups in the area, created the NFL.¹⁶⁹

In January 2019, the Nour al-Din al-Zinki Movement came under heavy attack by HTS, which captured most of the towns held by the group in Idlib. Most of the members of Nour al-Din al-Zinki either joined different militias within the NLF or fled into the Turkish-held Afrin region. In November 2019, the Levant Revolutionaries were still active, announcing that a new batch of their fighters had graduated as part of the NFL.¹⁷⁰ By the end of 2020, the militia had established training camps and returned to the Aleppo frontline. In September 2020, as hundreds of Syrian SNA fighters were sent by Turkey to fight alongside the Azerbaijani army in Karabakh, a former fighter of Levant Revolutionaries, Muhammad Shaalan, was reportedly killed in Armenia.¹⁷¹ For over a year, nothing was known of the militia outside of Syria, until October 1st 2021, when the Azm Unified Command Room announced the formation of a new operations room under its command - the Revolutionaries Movement. The new formation was led by Sultan Murad commanders, alongside the Levant Revolutionaries, First Division, Muntasir Billah, and the Sham Legion - North Sector. In January 2022, the Revolutionaries Movement merged with the SLF to form the Revolutionaries for Liberation. Since then, there has not been any more public information about the Levant Revolutionaries.

¹⁶⁶ www.syriahr.com/en/59855/

¹⁶⁷ twitter.com/Ahmad_Hamaher/status/953950882789543936

¹⁶⁸ www.brecorder.com/news/399757/

¹⁶⁹ rb.gy/a5wwtf (www.clingendael.org)

¹⁷⁰ twitter.com/Amjadal2slam/status/1198330601230786565

¹⁷¹ orient-news.net/ar/news_show/184718



LIWA 51
Brigade 51 - اللواء 51

The militia first appeared in September 2016, as part of the ‘Euphrates Shield’ invasion in northern Aleppo. Brigade 51, composed by Arab fighters and led by Colonel Haitham Afissi, mainly took part in the war against ISIS as part of the FSA.¹⁷² Since then, it has been operating around the village of Susyan, north of the city of al-Bab. In 2018, the militia participated in the invasion of Afrin, maintaining a presence since then, though it does not control any territory. Similarly, it participated in the operation ‘Peace Spring’.

Brigade 51 maintains a neutral position within the internal power struggles of the SNA, generally aligning itself with Turkey's strategic outlook in the region. At its inception, the militia was part of the FSA, and later became part of the Third Legion of the SNA. In October 2021, when the organizational regrouping of operations rooms within the SNA took place, Liwa 51 joined the Third Legion subgroup, led by al-Jabha al-Shamiya, within the Azm Unified Command.



Fighters training in an Azm camp, November 2021

¹⁷² setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/10/A54En.pdf

LIWA 113

Brigade 113 - اللواء 113

Brigade 113 takes its name from its initial position within the SNA, when a militia named Jaysh al-Ahfad composed of Brigades 112 and 113 of Division 11 was formed within the First Legion.¹⁷³ The origin of Jaysh al-Ahfad is unclear, but it seems the militia appeared in early 2017 from remnants of the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades after the 'Euphrates Shield' invasion. Formed in mid-2012, it was an ensemble of different Sunni Islamist and Salafist factions spread across Idlib, northern Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor. Jaysh al-Ahfad participated in the 'Euphrates Shield' invasion, especially around the city of al-Bab. Later they again took part in the 'Olive Branch' invasion, this time as Brigade 113 of the First Legion, and led by a so-called 'Abu Suleiman'. Since then, the militia has remained active around Bulbul sub-district, where it is reported that the militia impose extremist teachings of Islam on the remaining original Kurdish residents, does not allow residents to hold social events, and forces them to labour for the militia.¹⁷⁴

Brigade 113 continued to be active around Afrin and the 'Euphrates Shield Area' until June 2021, when together with Jaysh al-Nukhbah - Northern Sector (Brigade 145) merged to form the Second Division, which operates within the ranks of the First Corps of the SNA.¹⁷⁵ Since then, the militia has been active on the frontline south of al-Bab. Recently, two Brigade 113 fighters were arrested as they attempted to infiltrate the SDF-affiliated al-Bab Military Council.¹⁷⁶ Brigade 113 has also extended its presence to the Ayn Issa frontline of the 'M4 Strip', where it is deployed under the Second Division operations room.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-structure-of-the-syrian-national-army

¹⁷⁴ afrinpost.net/ar/archives/9323

¹⁷⁵ twitter.com/First1Legion/status/1408485611292577792/photo/1

¹⁷⁶ sdf-press.com/?p=37148

¹⁷⁷ twitter.com/wexP257t8yGMwRf/status/1532069009369075713



LIWA AL-SALAM
Peace Brigade - لواء السلام

Liwa al-Salam began to be active under the Fastaqim Kama Umirt Union, created by a merger of several smaller Aleppo-based factions in December 2012. By 2013 Mustafa Berro became the leader of the Union.¹⁷⁸ The militia remained focused on the battle for Aleppo, until the Fastaqim Union began to collapse due to infighting with other militias. The remnant group joined the 'Olive Branch' operation.¹⁷⁹ By December 2018, Liwa al-Salam presented itself as the Fourth Division of the Third Corps of the Syrian National Army, being active in the 'Euphrates Shield Area' and the Manbij frontline. Later, at the end of 2019, it also participated in the 'Peace Spring' invasion, achieving greater notoriety within the SNA. In August 2021, Liwa al-Salam joined Azm Unified Command, and in October, became a member of the Third Legion operations room, led by al-Jabha al-Shamiya, within Azm Unified Command.



Fighter with the patches of the flags of the Syrian Opposition (left above), ISIS (left below), Turkey (right above) and Liwa al-Salam (right below), November 2019

¹⁷⁸ carnegie-mec.org/diwan/57605?lang=en

¹⁷⁹ www.radioalkul.com/p164543/



MU'TASIM DIVISION

Furqat al-Mu'tasim - فرقة المُعتصم

This militia was formed in August 2015 through a merger of a number of militias active in Marea, north of Aleppo, into what was then known as the Mu'tasim Brigade.¹⁸⁰ The militia has a minor footprint within the occupied territories, though it claimed to employ 1,000 fighters in 2017.¹⁸¹ It has participated in all Turkish invasions of Syria, having been accused of abusing, beating and trampling captured YPG soldiers in Afrin.¹⁸² It reportedly sent a high number of mercenaries to Libya and recruited militiamen from other factions for Turkey.¹⁸³ Further, in May 2021 Mu'tasim Division was appointed by the United Nations Security Council report concerning the use of children in armed conflict for recruiting and deploying young Syrian boys as mercenaries in Libya.¹⁸⁴ With a high level of organization and discipline it is active in the region of Afrin and in Afrin city, the frontline of Tel Tamir, and maintains a base southeast of Sere Kaniye. In Marea, it shares control over the city together with the al-Waqqas Brigade. In all these areas, the Mu'tasim Division is recorded as having committed crimes against the civilian population, such as arbitrary arrests, the seizure of private property, and looting.

In September 2021 the Mu'tasim Division was one of the five SNA militias who announced their merger into the newly-formed SFL; its leader Mutasim al-Abbas was appointed as SFL commander. The factions constituting the SFL unified in response to attacks by factions affiliated with the Azm Unified Command Room, which was established in July 2021.¹⁸⁵ Two months later, the SFL began to crumble as three factions withdrew and only the Mu'tasim Division and Hamza Division remained. Yet, in January 2022, SFL finally merged with the Revolutionaries Movement to form the Revolutionaries for Liberation.

¹⁸⁰ Al-Mu'tasim Billah was the eighth Abbasid caliph, ruling from 833-842. His reign was marked by continual warfare. He rose to power on the backs of a private army composed predominantly of Turkish soldiers.

¹⁸¹ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/04/free-syrian-army-training-camps-turkey-islamic-state.html

¹⁸² <http://www.rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?pageid=242071>

¹⁸³ rb.gy/6gzpot (www.ohchr.org)

¹⁸⁴ rb.gy/fkbph9 (www.securitycouncilreport.org)

¹⁸⁵ rb.gy/lbuj3x (www.al-monitor.com)



MUNTASIR BILLAH DIVISION

Furqat al-Muntasir Billah - God's Victory Division

فيلق الرحمن

The militia is one of the oldest and most important Turkmen militias among the SNA. The Muntasir Billah Brigade subscribed to Turkish nationalist and pan-Turkic ideologies, such as Neo-Ottomanism, and received support from the Turkish Red Crescent and Turkish ultra-nationalist groups, such as the Grey Wolves or Turkmen Der.^{186 187} The group was seemingly formed in Raqqa, and took up arms against the Syrian government alongside the FSA, playing a major role in the Battle of Raqqa (March 2013). It later on joined the al-Nusra Front, and, in December 2013, ISIS.¹⁸⁸ The current Brigade is composed of Turkmen and Arab militiamen who were engaged in the Battle for Aleppo since January 2014. It was involved in the clashes against the YPG-held Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood of Aleppo in October 2015.¹⁸⁹ In February 2016, the Battle of Aleppo was the major frontline for Muntasir Billah Division, which at that time was composed of about 350 fighters (170 of them ethnic Turkmen) according to the head of the militia, Firas Pasa.¹⁹⁰

When Turkey announced its 'Euphrates Shield' operation, the Muntasir Billah Brigade also joined as part of the FSA, leaving the Aleppo front by the end of that year. After receiving military training from Turkey,¹⁹¹ the Brigade also participated in the 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring' invasions.

While the militia was initially integrated into the First Legion of the SNA in 2019, following the creation of the Azm Unified Command Room in mid-2021, the Muntasir Billah Brigade moved closer to the Turkmen-led Sultan Murad Division bloc, joining the Revolutionaries Movement, a new constellation within Azm, in October of the same year. Today, the Muntasir Billah Brigade is still integrated within Azm as part of the Revolutionaries for Liberation.

According to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', the Muntasir Billah Brigade keeps a low profile, punctured only by their involvement in clashes with Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the most prominent militia of the rival LCM within Azm.

¹⁸⁶ warontherocks.com/2016/01/a-cause-for-all-turks-turkey-and-syrias-turkmen-rebels/

¹⁸⁷ rb.gy/5tmgggy (web.archive.org)

¹⁸⁸ www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/4_battalions_from_qa.php

¹⁸⁹ rb.gy/9b4zdn (www.dailysabah.com)

¹⁹⁰ www.middleeasteye.net/news/turks-head-syria-defend-turkmen-brothers

¹⁹¹ www.cnturk.com/turkiye/turkmen-komandolar-afrinde



NORTHERN BRIGADE

Liwa al-Shamal - لواء الشمال

Known as the 'Northern Brigade', the militia was formed in January 2016 as part of Faylaq al-Sham in north Aleppo Governorate. The group participated in the 'Euphrates Shield' invasion, for which it received Turkish support, as well as TOW anti-tank missiles via the US MOM operations room. Since then, it has remained in the Jarablus area, near the Turkish border.¹⁹² However, on May 30th 2017, Faylaq al-Sham expelled the Northern Brigade from its ranks and dismissed its commander, Captain Mustafa Rami al-Kuja,¹⁹³ after Ahrar al-Sharqiya and the Northern Brigade of Faylaq al-Sham were involved in infighting in Jarablus in mid-May, and Turkish soldiers were forced to intervene to contain the clashes.¹⁹⁴

During the second half of 2017, as it sought to establish itself as an independent militia, the Northern Brigade filled its ranks with members of smaller brigades from the region, which strengthened its presence in Jarablus, and expanded its presence to the city of al-Bab as well. The militia even mended its ties with Faylaq al-Sham. Much like it, the Northern Brigade has shown total adherence to Turkey's strategic line in Syria. The group participated in the 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring' invasions as part of the First Legion of SNA. By September 2020, the Northern Brigade had a presence in all regions under Turkish control (Jarabulus, al-Bab, Azaz, Afrin, and the western Aleppo countryside).

In May 2021, the Northern Brigade announced its complete integration with the 112th Brigade and the 9th Division into the newly-created First Division, within the First Corps of the SNA.¹⁹⁵ In October 2021, the First Division merged with other SNA militias to create the Revolutionaries Movement, under the Azm Unified Command Room. Today, the First Division is part of the Revolutionaries for Liberation. According to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', the Northern Brigade have a base in the city of Afrin and have been active in the north of Afrin region, linked to cases of unlawful arrests and robbery, especially of agricultural machinery and olive trees. The Northern Brigade is also active in the 'Euphrates Shield Area', in Jarablus and Aleppo countryside front lines.

¹⁹² setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/10/A54En.pdf

¹⁹³ twitter.com/TerrorMonitorAR/status/869997289665843200

¹⁹⁴ www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/catismayi-turk-ordusu-son-anda-engelledi-327115.html

¹⁹⁵ twitter.com/st1division/status/1398976736973492233



SAMARKAND BRIGADE

Liwa Samarqand – Semerkant Tugayi

لواء سمرقند

Also known as 'Faylaq Samarqand',¹⁹⁶ this Syrian Turkmen militia is one of those most heavily backed by Turkey. It first appeared in 2016 during the 'Euphrates Shield' operation alongside other FSA-groups. It again participated in the operation 'Olive Branch'. This time, however, it operated under the command of the First Legion of the newly-created SNA. In May 2021, the Samarkand Brigade announced its merger with Sultan Mehmed Faith Division and Liwa Waqqas, two other Turkmen militias, into the 13th Division, with Dogan Suleiman as its commander. Later, in August, the 13th Division joined the Azm Unified Command Room. Since 'Olive Branch', the Samarkand Brigade has controlled some territory, as part of 13th Division, in Jindires sub-district. According to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', the Samarkand Brigade has been mainly involved in cases of extortion of the local population, since the militia controls important areas of agricultural production in Afrin.

The Samarkand Brigade also followed Turkey's call for SNA militias to fight its wars in Libya and Karabakh as mercenaries.¹⁹⁷ Reportedly, in November 2020, the Samarkand Brigade graduated about 50 militiamen from military training in the village of Kafar Safra, in Jindires sub-district. The new recruits were set to be sent to Azerbaijan.¹⁹⁸ Samarkand Brigade's alignment with Turkey's geopolitical aspirations were also laid bare in the participation of the new military group al-Quwat al-Radifa (Auxiliary Forces) in Idlib. Created in April 2020, the Auxiliary Forces are one of the Turkish government's efforts to boost its military presence in the province controlled by HTS. Its purpose is the protection of, and surveillance from, Turkish military posts and deployments.¹⁹⁹



جانب من الفعالية الثورية بمناسبة الذكرى العاشرة للثورة السورية التي أقيمت

Celebration in the Samarkand Brigade camp of Manzikert, March 2021

¹⁹⁶ Samarkand is the second largest city in Uzbekistan and among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in Central Asia. It is one of the most prestigious centers of Central Asian Turkic identity, and formerly an important place for Islamic scholarly study.

¹⁹⁷ www.syriahr.com/en/153473/

¹⁹⁸ rb.gy/ypftvb (afrinpost.net)

¹⁹⁹ stj-sy.org/en/the-auxiliary-forces-formed-to-boost-turkeys-presence-in-idlib/



SPECIAL FORCES DIVISION

Özel Kuvvetler Tümeni - فرقة القوات الخاصة

This militia was established around February 2020 by Abdullah Halawa, the general military commander of the al-Hamza Division, from which he broke away and formed the Special Forces Division. Halawa, who hails from Khan Sheikhoun, south of Idlib, collaborated with HTS in order to get permission for his and other SNA groups to enter Idlib and strengthen its frontlines following Russia's and the Syrian government's advance on Idlib. Halawa, who was expelled from his city by al-Nusra Front in 2015, became the first fighter officially authorized by HTS to return to the region. With the protection of HTS, his influence increased in Idlib.²⁰⁰ Halawa's close relationship with Turkey, and especially the MIT, were crucial in consolidating the Special Forces Division's position.

By September 2021, according to the commander of the militia, the Special Forces Division had 1,550 fighters distributed across SNA-controlled territories. It was present in Sere Kaniye, Tel Abyad, the countryside of Aleppo, and especially in Idlib, where it concentrated the majority of its force (around 800 fighters) and participated in battles against the Syrian government.²⁰¹ Halawa's position was once again key to the militia's next step. After reports of meetings between the Azm Unified Command Room and HTS, the recently-formed SFL sought to strengthen relations with HTS. Halawa's role was crucial in the Special Forces Division's ascension to the SLF at the end of that month.²⁰² According to an official statement by the SLF, the Special Forces Division has completely integrated into the SLF, and the militia will cease to identify itself under its former name, banners, and flags.²⁰³

However, in October 2021, Halawa's fortunes changed. The Military Police launched a security campaign against drug dealers in the Afrin region, and raided a drug factory in the town of Basouta. During the investigation, the suspicion grew that it was owned by Halawa himself. A few weeks later, two SLF militias fought each other in Afrin. Alaa Junaid, a commander in the Hamza Division and Halawa's partner in control of the Basouta area was arrested in the aftermath of the fighting. Halawa consequently fled to Turkey and an officer was temporarily appointed to the Special Forces Division.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ rb.gy/0ocvlz (www.syria.tv)

²⁰¹ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/515983

²⁰² rb.gy/0ocvlz (www.syria.tv)

²⁰³ twitter.com/OGNArabic/status/1442860214529654786

²⁰⁴ rb.gy/0ocvlz (www.syria.tv)

Though in the aforementioned statement the Special Forces Division announced its full integration into the SFL (which subsequently merged into the Revolutionaries for Liberation), it appears that the militia is still active in the south of Afrin and Idlib regions, as well as in the territories controlled by the Hamza Division.



فيلق الشام - فرقة القوات الخاصة

جانب من الحملة الأمنية التي استهدفت المفسدين والفارين من وجه

Part of the Special Forces Division security campaign in Afrin region, August 2021



SULTAN MALIKSHAH DIVISION

Sultan Melikşah Tümeni – Furqat al-Sultan Malik Shah

فرقة السلطان ملكشاه

The Malikshah Division was created in August 2020 by the Commander-in-Chief of the Second Legion, Mahmoud al-Baz.²⁰⁵ He formed it out of a number of brigades which were previously affiliated with the Sultan Murad Division in the Third Legion. Its fighting force is estimated at about 2,500. It played a major role in all three military operations launched by Turkey in Syria.²⁰⁶ STJ alleges that the Turkish government agreed to make the division independent from the Sultan Murad Division in exchange for it sending its fighters as mercenaries to Libya and Azerbaijan, as well as recruiting civilians, especially from Homs, for the same purpose.²⁰⁷ In August of 2021, it announced that it had joined the Azm Unified Command; and, in October, that it joined the Third Legion as a subgroup within Azm Unified Command, under the leadership of al-Jabha al-Shamiya.



Meeting in the Sultan Malikshah Division headquarters of the 'M4 Strip', July 2022

Sultan Malikshah Division is active in the territories of the 'M4 Strip', where it holds some territory near the town of Tel Halaf. Along 2021, the militia clashed with the Sultan Murad Division, in Shara sub-district of Afrin region and near Sere Kaniye, which resulted in casualties on both sides. Members of the Division also committed widespread violations against civilians, the most prominent of which included the seizure of private property and the looting of homes and shops.²⁰⁸ Sultan

Malikshah Division is also present in al-Bab countryside frontlines, in the 'Euphrates Shield' area.

²⁰⁵ Malik-Shah I (1055-1092), was a Seljuk sultan from 1073-1092, under whom the Seljuk empire reached its maximum extent and power. He was furthermore a symbol of his time: he himself was of Turkish descent, believing in a religion of Arab origin, and running a Persian administration.

²⁰⁶ rb.gy/lya89m (www.syria.tv)

²⁰⁷ rb.gy/taudzq (stj-sy.org)

²⁰⁸ Ibid.



SULTAN MUHAMMAD AL-FATEH DIVISION Fatih Sultan Mehmet Tümeni

فرقة السلطان محمد الفاتح

The Turkmen militia first appeared in early 2018 as the 'Third Squadron' inside the First Legion of the newly-created SNA during the 'Olive Branch' operation. Since then, it held territories in the Rajo and Maabatli sub-districts, in western Afrin. Later, the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Division²⁰⁹ also participated in the 'Peace Spring' invasion, this time as the 13th Division inside SNA First Corps. It has also been active in the 'Euphrates Shield Area', where it controlled the city of Ihaimlat, north of Marea. The militiamen also participated in the Turkish military operation in Libya which began in 2020, alongside other SNA mercenaries.²¹⁰ In May 2021, it announced a merger with the Samarkand Brigade and Liwa Waqqas – two other Turkmen militias operating in western Afrin – in order to form the 13th Division, with Dogan Suleiman as its commander. In August, it joined the Azm Unified Command Room.

The Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Division did not stand out quantitatively, according to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip'. Yet when the militia does commit crimes, they do so brutally, for example through mass arrests, infighting with other SNA militias, and the planting of IEDs against rival factions.

Military show of Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Division, December 2018



²⁰⁹ Mehmed II, also known as al-Fatih ("the conqueror"), was an Ottoman sultan. In 1453, he took Constantinople, causing the final fall of the Eastern Roman Empire. In the following years, he campaigned in the Balkans, gaining major military successes.

²¹⁰ stj-sy.org/en/syrian-mercenaries-in-libya-commanders-and-recruits-involved-in-serious-violations/



SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

Furqat al-Sultan Murad – فرقة السلطان مراد

Sultan Murad Division²¹¹ is the largest Turkmen militia operating in the occupied territories. Information about the size is not publicly available, though it is often cited as one of the largest along with Hamza Division with 1,300-6,500 men, mostly Syrian Turkmen and Arabs.^{212 213} The formation of the militia was announced in mid-2012 and it has been active around the Aleppo area, under the leadership of Youssef al-Saleh, but now operates exclusively in Turkish-controlled territory as one of Turkey's closest proxies, led by Fahim Issa. The Sultan Murad Division was at the helm of all Turkish military operations and currently controls large swaths in north and east Afrin region, and the north flank of the city of Afrin. It shares control of Sere Kaniye city with Hamza Division, and holds the territory from the east of the city to the front of Tel Tamir, including the important water-pumping station at Alouk. In the 'Euphrates Shield' area, the Division holds territory on the border with Turkey, which includes the strategic city of al-Rai and its border crossing.

Sultan Murad Division was found to have committed war crimes by the UN for participating in the bombardment of a Kurdish neighborhood in Aleppo.²¹⁴ Amnesty International has also documented cases of illegal detention and torture of POWs and media activists, and "beating men for fun".²¹⁵ In Bulbul sub-district, 600 families of Sultan Murad Division's fighters were brought in to settle formerly-Kurdish towns. They are integral to Turkey's demographic project of establishing a 'Turkmen belt'. The militia was in charge of recruitment and supplied most of Turkey's mercenaries for the wars in Libya and Armenia, including the majority of around 180 minors who were sent to the two theaters from Syria.²¹⁶ Sultan Murad Division has been behind numerous cases of looting public and private property in the areas it controls, considered war crimes according to the Statute of the International Criminal Court (the Rome Statute of 1988) and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. It is also known to employ former ISIS members among its ranks, like Muhammad al-Rasho. He is the commander of a militia group in Tel Abyad, who served in al-Nusra Front

²¹¹ The name of the militia most likely derives from Murad IV, sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1623-1640, known both for restoring state authority and for the brutality of his methods. The reign of Murad IV is notable for the war he waged against Persia, in which Ottoman forces conquered Azerbaijan, as well as the capture of the city of Baghdad in 1638.

²¹² www.trtworld.com/middle-east/syrian-opposition-forces-open-first-military-barracks-42056

²¹³ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

²¹⁴ rb.gy/7glcyw (www.amnesty.org.uk)

²¹⁵ rb.gy/cwfiqs (www.amnesty.org)

²¹⁶ rb.gy/6gzpot (www.ohchr.org)

and ISIS before joining Sultan Murad Division or Abu Saraqa, who while in ISIS allegedly executed two civilians, arrested dozens more on charges of violating Islamic norms and tortured others based on their 'disbelief'.^{217 218}

According to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', Sultan Murad Division is known to aggressively lash out against other SNA factions, often resulting in several civilian and military casualties during cases of infighting. They are also responsible for a high number of extortion cases, since they control a large part of Bulbul sub-district, the olive-growing region of Afrin.

Sultan Murad Division has been a mainstay of the SNA since its inception, but has similarly also been perennially involved in clashes with rival SNA factions. By the time of its foundation in December 2017, the SNA was led by the militia known as 'The Sultan Murad Corps', later to be renamed the 'Second Legion'. Only five months earlier, heavy fighting had broken out between the Sultan Murad Division and Ahrar al-Sham and its allies in and around al-Bab, resulting in the deaths of 33 people and injuring 55 others.²¹⁹ Sultan Murad Division continued to be involved in infighting in the following years. In January 2021, a base belonging to 'Abu Yazan', one of the group's leaders, was raided by the Turkish army, allegedly due to a smuggling operation which he had conducted. 'Abu Yazan' escaped, though some militiamen were arrested.²²⁰ Sultan Murad Division also previously feuded with al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Nevertheless, the SNA went through a process of restructuring throughout the third quarter of 2021, in which al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Sultan Murad Division merged to create the Azm Unified Command Room, later joined by several other militias. With rival SNA militias also regrouping, tensions would rise again by the end of the year, when a top Sultan Murad leader was mysteriously assassinated.²²¹ Nowadays, Sultan Murad is part of the Revolutionaries for Liberation. Its previous militia grouping, the Revolutionaries Movement, failed to resolve its internal tensions.

²¹⁷ rb.gy/hcd3gl (rojavainformationcenter.com)

²¹⁸ rb.gy/lfgghy (stj-sy.org)

²¹⁹ www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-confirms-internal-fight-in-free-syrian-army--114338

²²⁰ rb.gy/ug6pl9 (<http://afrinpost.net>)

²²¹ rb.gy/lqelxp (www.difesaesicurezza.com)



SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH DIVISION

Furqat al-Sultan Suleiman Shah

فرقة السلطان سليمان شاه

The militia was established in late 2011 under the name Liwa Khatt al-Nar (The Fireline Brigade) in Hama province. It was and is led by Muhammad al-Jassem, nicknamed 'Abu Amsha', that's why it is sometimes also called the 'Amshat' militia. The faction took part in several battles against the Syrian government. When founded, the faction consisted mainly of recruits hailing from the tribe of Muhammad al-Jasim Bani Jamil, and it served under the flag of the FSA. Later, al-Nusra Front persecuted Abu Amsha and his fighters, forcing them to flee to the northern countryside of Aleppo.

Abu Amsha escaped in coordination with Turkey, abandoning Aleppo and the Syrian opposition factions, according to former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. In early 2016, the faction rebranded itself as the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division in order to underline its supposed Turkic origin.²²² As the group underwent a turkification process, a rapprochement with Turkish authorities was also underway. Though the group supposedly harbors a large percentage of the faction's fighters that are ethnic Turkmen from Hama province, a recent STJ publication suggests that Turkmen fighters are only a small fraction of the militia's recruits, and that



'Abu Amsha' (left) with the Syrian National Coalition president, August 2021

the Turkmen origins are projected onto the faction for promotional purposes in order to gain the support of nationalist Turkish parties.²²³ In the same year, the militia participated in the operation 'Euphrates Shield', which led to Turkey's occupation of the areas of Azaz, al-Bab, and Jarabulus, among others, and made its first public appearance at the tail end of that invasion in Ghandoura village, west of Jarabulus.

²²² Sultan Suleiman Shah was the grandfather of Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Empire. The tomb of Suleiman Shas had three locations since his death in 1236, all in present-day Syria. In early 2015, during the Syrian Civil War, Turkey unilaterally moved the tomb again to a new site in Syria, since under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) the tomb site remains the property of Turkey.

²²³ stj-sy.org/en/how-is-abu-amsha-making-millions-of-dollars-every-year/

Sultan Suleiman Shah Division is now one of the most powerful SNA militias and one which enjoys arguably the closest ties to Turkey. It has also repeatedly been accused of grave human rights violations. At the beginning of 2018, as part of the Fifth Division of the FSA, the militia joined the 'Olive Branch' invasion. Since then, it has controlled almost all of the Shiye/Sheikh al-Hadid sub-district in west Afrin. In 2019, it took part in the operation 'Peace Spring'.

The position of the Division within the SNA has always been problematic and marked by a constant search for the most beneficial (even unsavory) alliances. In April 2021, the militia left the First Legion for the Second, and began calling itself a brigade rather than a division. Later that year, it joined the newly Unified Azm Command Room created in mid-July. Yet, in September, it withdrew from Azm to create the SFL alongside four other SNA militias, thereby creating a military counterweight to the Azm. Yet, only two months later, the militia withdrew from the Front to rejoin the Azm Unified Command Room. Paradoxically, in the same month, the commander of the Amshat militia claimed that he was willing to reach an understanding with HTS, regarding the fight against the Syrian government. 'Abu Amsha' proclaimed that his division was ready to fight alongside the jihadist group, though under the banner and command of the SNA. Consequently, al-Mu'tasim Billah Battalion, which up until that point acted under the command of the Suleiman Shah Division, issued a statement confirming its split from the former militia. The statement further accused Suleiman Shah Division's leadership of turning a blind eye to HTS, which has been designated as a terrorist organization by the US, Canada, and Turkey, and ignoring crimes committed against al-Mu'tasim Division in Hama region.²²⁴

In late 2021 and early 2022, tensions and infighting emerged between al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Sultan Shah Suleiman Division. Concurrently, popular protests in Jindires sub-district demanded the trial and expulsion of Sultan Suleiman Shah Division members, and, in particular, of its commander, 'Abu Amsha', after several accusations of theft, land seizures, corruption, as well as several cases of assassinations, rape, torture, kidnapping and arms trade.²²⁵ ²²⁶ The Azm Unified Command Room intervened and formed a "committee acceptable to all to investigate this special case," supervised by the leader of the Revolutionaries Movement. It also formed a new ensemble, called the Revolutionaries for Liberation to counterbalance the weight of al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Sultan Suleiman Shah Division was absorbed into the Revolutionaries for Liberation, taking advantage of its diminished prominence following the accusations. Finally, in mid-February 2022, the Commission of Inquiry resolved to dismiss 'Abu Amsha' and several leaders of the Division and rec-

²²⁴ www.syriahr.com/en/222403/

²²⁵ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/538597

²²⁶ vdc-nsy.com/archives/52338

ommended that he not be given any other positions within the 'opposition' movement. The tripartite investigation committee placed the responsibility for effecting justice and compensating the affected parties on decision-makers on the ground. The response of the militia's lawyer to the verdict was that it held "no legal, lawful, or customary importance."²²⁷ 'Abu Amsha' remained away from the limelight only briefly. On March 8th, he appeared at a meeting with SIG-President Abdul Rahman Mustafa and other leaders of the SNA.²²⁸



Meeting of the Revolutionaries for Liberation, with the presence of 'Abu Amsha' (2nd from left), SIG Minister of Defense (3rd from right in the front) and SIG President (4th from right in the front), March 8th 2022

The Sultan Suleiman Shah Division's singular profile among SNA militias is also a result of its close relation with Turkish intelligence and their strict adherence to the Turkish agenda.²²⁹ The militia was responsible for recruiting a large number of mercenaries for the 2020 attack on Karabakh, as well as providing the necessary manpower for Turkey's involvement in Libya, where militiamen are currently still deployed.²³⁰ The flipside of the group's unconditional support for Turkish policy has been highlighted repeatedly in a lack of accountability for human rights abuses in the territories under its control, even relative to other SNA militias, due to the absence of a legal arbitration body and the dependence of the Minister of Defense of the SIG on Turkey, which intercedes in the internal disputes of the SNA when necessary. The MIT asked the leaders of the Azm Unified Command Room to cancel the recent decision to isolate 'Abu Amsha' and other members in the leadership of Sul-

²²⁷ rb.gy/ufsdzv (www.rozana.fm)

²²⁸ twitter.com/Tha_Eroon/status/1501276420265459716

²²⁹ rb.gy/ozlr9e (www.al-monitor.com)

²³⁰ rb.gy/veopuy (verify-sy.com)

tan Suleiman Shah Division, as well as to release the brother of 'Abu Amsha', who was previously arrested for violations and crimes committed in the Shih/Sheikh al-Hadid sub-district of Afrin.²³¹

For all these reasons, it is not surprising that over the years the 'Amshat' militia has managed to turn the Sheikh al-Hadid frontier sub-district into their private fiefdom. A recent STJ investigation revealed that 'Abu Amsha's' wealth, and that of his faction, comes mainly from the pockets of civilians, with annual revenues that exceed 30,000,000 USD. Locals are subjected to a systemic pattern of extortion. They are arbitrarily arrested or abducted and then asked to pay ransoms in exchange for their release. They are also robbed of their properties, residential or commercial, which are seized under the pretext of the owners' affiliation with the AANES that remained in control of the area until March 2018, as well as large-scale crop confiscations or taxes on the local population. 'Abu Amsha' seized almost all the olive yield and other crops cultivated by Kurdish farmers before the Turkish invasion, while he continued to impose taxes and royalties on farmers over the following harvest seasons, which amounted to 25% of the harvest value. Suleiman Shah Division established control and monopoly over the springs in Shaykh al-Hadid sub-district and coerced Kurdish farmers to pay extra sums of money in return for irrigation water. Concurrently, 'Abu Amsha's' economic infrastructure was reinforced with the opening of a mall, a coffee shop, a hospital, and other businesses with Turkish approval and in the presence of the Turkish governor of the sub-district, the president of the opposition Syrian Coalition, and the Minister of Defense of the Interim Government.²³² He owns several restaurants and car dealerships in Turkey.²³³ In view of all this, one can conclude that the sole reason for Sultan Suleiman Shah Division's continued existence, despite all the crimes and rights violations, is its Turkish connection.

²³¹ rb.gy/67oivo (afrinpost.net)

²³² www.syriahr.com/en/206384/

²³³ rb.gy/ozlr9e (www.al-monitor.com)



SUQOUR AL-SHAM

Eagles of the Levant – لواء صقور الشام

The militia was formed by Ahmed Abu Issa at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in the Jabal al-Zawiya region of the Idlib Governorate. It was a member of the Islamic Front and the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, two Islamist opposition coalitions. Yet there is a lack of homogeneous political outlook within the brigades relating to the emergence of ISIS and al-Nusra Front, splitting the militia between different factions. Some members joined other opposition militias, such as Ahrar al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Fatah. A smaller group, known as Suqour al-Sham - Northern Sector, joined al-Jabha al-Shamiya in November 2017, becoming Division 32 within the Third Legion of the SNA, and cutting all organizational ties with Suqour al-Sham in Idlib.²³⁴ Various sources point out that Suqour al-Sham participated in the 'Olive Branch' operation. Since then, they have controlled a small patch of territory in the town of Sa'ra, in Bulbul sub-district, as well as the village of Burj Abd Allah in Afrin sub-district. But it is with its incorporation into the NFL in August 2018 that Suqour al-Sham reached its current form, with the militia's commander Ahmad Sarhan, also called Abu Satif. Later, after NFL joined the SNA, in fall of 2019, Suqour al-Sham also took part in the 'Peace Spring' invasion. As with other Turkish-backed militias, in 2020, it sent mercenaries to Libya.²³⁵ Recently, in February 2022, Suqour al-Sham - Northern Sector joined in the creation of LCM, within Azm,²³⁶ with Raed Arab, the leader of Suqur al-Sham, as the LCM military commander.²³⁷

Suqour al-Sham Brigade have had a strained relationship with HTS and other factions under the NFL operating in the Idlib region. The militia clashed with HTS on different occasions between 2017 and 2020, since the former is one of the oldest and most powerful factions, until they were finally forced to retreat to NFL-controlled areas in the 'Euphrates Shield' area. Nonetheless, Suqour al-Sham continues to control Jebel al-Zawiyah, a small area in southern Idlib region.²³⁸

²³⁴ www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-structure-of-the-syrian-national-army

²³⁵ www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-send-syrian-rebel-fighters-fight-haftar-libya

²³⁶ rb.gy/o7oab3 (ninarpress.net)

²³⁷ rb.gy/3q71fr (www.mei.edu)

²³⁸ en.suriyegundemi.com/between-rock-and-a-hard-place-the-armed-syrian-opposition-in-idlib



SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL

Kuzey Kartalları Tugayı - Northern Eagles Brigade

لواء صقور الشمال

The militia was initially established in September 2012 in Idlib by Ahmed Haj Ali. Between 2012 and 2016 it was found on the Aleppo frontline, as well as in Hama. It was organized under a myriad of Syrian opposition military formations, such as the Revolutionaries Front, the Marea Operations Room and Hawar Kilis Operations Room.²³⁹ Between 2016 and 2017, the Suqour al-Shamal Brigade participated in the 'Euphrates Shield' invasion, fighting against ISIS alongside other FSA-groups. The militia again participated in the 'Olive Branch' invasion, as part of the First Legion of the SNA. It participated within the Second Legion of the SNA in the 'Peace Spring' invasion and holds a small pocket of territory in the north of Bulbul sub-district. It controls the eastern frontline of the 'M4 Strip'. According to RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', most of its recorded crimes are cases of robbery, extortion and property destruction.

By mid-2020, Suqur al-Shamal Brigade had a presence in Afrin, Sere Kaniye and the Ghandoura area. In October 2020, the Brigade published a statement affirming that it was ready to answer any call made by the 'Turkish leadership' at any time,²⁴⁰ while announcing it would open "base number 9" in the countryside of Idlib. In April 2020, mercenaries flew to Libya alongside other SNA militia fighters under Turkish command.²⁴¹ As early as 2021, the Brigade joined Azm, but would leave alongside three more militias a month later, reportedly because the operations room lacked an internal mechanism that would achieve equitable representation for its member militias.²⁴² In September 2021, a new SNA operations room (SLF) was formed, increasing the struggle between power blocs within the SNA. Almost immediately, this led to infighting between rival militias, for example on 22nd and 23rd September, when clashes broke out between the Elite Army of Azm and Suqour al-Shamal of the SLF, allegedly over civilian property seizures in Sheikh Rose and Abudan, in the occupied Afrin region.²⁴³ Yet again, a month later, as preparations for a new Turkish invasion of Syria mounted, Suqour al-Shamal left the SLF to rejoin Azm, under the Revolutionaries Movement operations room, accept-

²³⁹ skoor144.site123.me/

²⁴⁰ twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/1316657541036871683

²⁴¹ www.syriahr.com/en/159958/

²⁴² www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507722

²⁴³ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/514974

ing the condition placed on the militia to settle all security issues related to the faction's members, specifically the case of the torture of young Ali Sultan al-Faraj in a Suqur al-Shamal prison, and to hand over the militiamen involved to the judiciary.²⁴⁴ Today, the Suqour al-Shamal Brigade remains active as part of the Revolutionaries for Liberation.



Military show of Suqour al-Shamal, December 2018

²⁴⁴ rb.gy/6ahx83 (www.almodon.com)

2.3 THE SNA IN JULY 2022

The SNA, as of July 2022, has undergone significant internal organizational changes, mainly linked to the rise of new military formations based on operations rooms that better represent the power relationship between SNA militias.

There has been a progressive assimilation and expulsion of the NFL in the 'M4 Strip' and especially Afrin (although it maintains positions in the 'Euphrates Shield' area and Idlib region), and the consolidation of the Azm Unified Command Room as the highest military authority among the Turkish-backed militias. Furthermore, the leadership of Azm has become the sole authority to control security in the occupied territories, since the disputes and armed clashes are unfolding amid an inability by the judiciary and official institutions to intervene, only being resolved with the mediation of the Azm leadership, together with tribal sheikhs.

Three large power blocs have consolidated their positions within the SNA: the Third Legion, led by al-Jabha al-Shamiya, which holds most of the leadership positions within Azm, but simultaneously finds itself under constant attack by other factions; the Revolutionaries for Liberation, made up mainly of Turkmen militias as the largest operations room and fully adheres to Turkey's strategy and agenda, with Failaq al-Sham, Hamza Division and Sultan Suleiman Shah Division as the most important members; and the Liberation and Construction Movement, led by Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, which has consolidated its position as a third power bloc, especially in the 'M4 Strip'.

A variety of reasons and incidents have increased the gap and driven competition between these blocs. An example was the case of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, led by Muhammad al-Jassem ('Abu Amsha'), whom the Third Legion sought to hold accountable for crimes committed by him. The Suleiman Shah Division became a member of the Revolutionary Liberation Front after this bloc exploited the incident in order to gain 'Abu Amsha's' favor and strengthen the formation, thus increasing rivalry with the Third Legion. On the other hand, the organizations that in principle should unite and strengthen the relationship between the SNA blocs, such as the National Coalition and the SIG, have also played a role in consolidating these differences, since they have shown clear favor towards the Revolutionary Liberation Front. The Prime Minister of the SIG frequently meets with the leaders of the Revolutionaries for Liberation, unlike the other two blocs. Moreover, competition between the Third Legion and the LCM appears to be growing as well. Each of these parties seeks to have the greatest weight in the

SNA. To this end, they attempt to build better relationships with local institutions, such as clans, police stations, local councils, universities, and others.²⁴⁵

The situation is complicated by the increasingly-active role played by HTS, which favors the other blocs over the Third Legion. Before the formation of Third Legion, HTS seemed open to military, security, and economic cooperation with the SNA. Throughout 2021, the relationship between SNA and HTS quickly matured. In August, the leader of HTS, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, expressed his willingness to merge with the SNA and form a unified administration for the two areas of control. Since then, HTS has grown in influence in Afrin, and there have been reports of meetings with SNA militias that would also be favorable to a merger agreement, as pointed out by the leader of the Suleiman Shah militia.²⁴⁶ However, in October 2021, the formation of the Third Legion was of serious concern to HTS. The al-Qaeda offshoot worried about a greater cohesion among SNA factions and, in particular, the influence of its former adversary Jaysh al-Islam. HTS concerns include the fact that the latter group could block its penetration into SNA-held territory.²⁴⁷

The infighting that occurred as a result of the departure of the 32nd Division from al-Jabha al-Shamiya and its reincorporation into Ahrar al-Sham in May 2022 served HTS with an opportunity to resume hostilities. HTS exploited these events, through its alliance with Ahrar al-Sham (of the NFL) and expanded into the northern countryside of Aleppo Governorate under the pretext of protecting the members of Ahrar al-Sham from the retaliation by the Third Legion. At the same time, in its media publications, HTS strengthened the rift between the factions of the SNA by supporting the Revolutionaries for Liberation and criticizing the Third Legion. It furthermore warned against the Corp's expansionist and exclusionary projects at the expense of other SNA militias. Additionally, it singled out the Jaysh al-Islam militia for criticism, exploiting its bad press among former residents of eastern Ghouta.²⁴⁸

Less than a month later, the conflict within the Third Legion, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham (of the NFL) was rekindled. For two days, Ahrar al-Sham and al-Jabha al-Shamiya fought deadly clashes on the outskirts of the city of al-Bab. Amid the fighting, HTS sent large convoys to areas in the town of Jindires, close to the city of Afrin, at the request of Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector, crossing through territories of the Faylaq al-Sham militia, affiliated with the Revolutionaries for Liberation Committee. The clashes ceased when MIT forced all sides to return to their ante-bellum positions, including the withdrawal of HTS from all the villages.²⁴⁹ HTS withdrew days after the decision was handed down. Through this episode,

²⁴⁵ rb.gy/fve7vc (www.syria.tv)

²⁴⁶ rb.gy/atgm2l (www.alquds.co.uk)

²⁴⁷ rb.gy/oyvmk (www.syria.tv)

²⁴⁸ rb.gy/fve7vc (www.syria.tv)

²⁴⁹ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/why-are-turkeys-allies-fighting-each-other-syria

HTS demonstrated its willingness to expand beyond Idlib and break with the established status quo in SNA-controlled territories.

To facilitate understanding of the current organizational framework of the SNA militias, on the next page is a graph of the distribution of SNA militias based on operations room, religiosity and affinity with Turkey. Charted by their religiosity and affinity towards the Turkish political projects, patterns within the SNA factions and blocs become apparent. The three larger blocs within the SNA, in addition to the NFL, can be defined as follows:

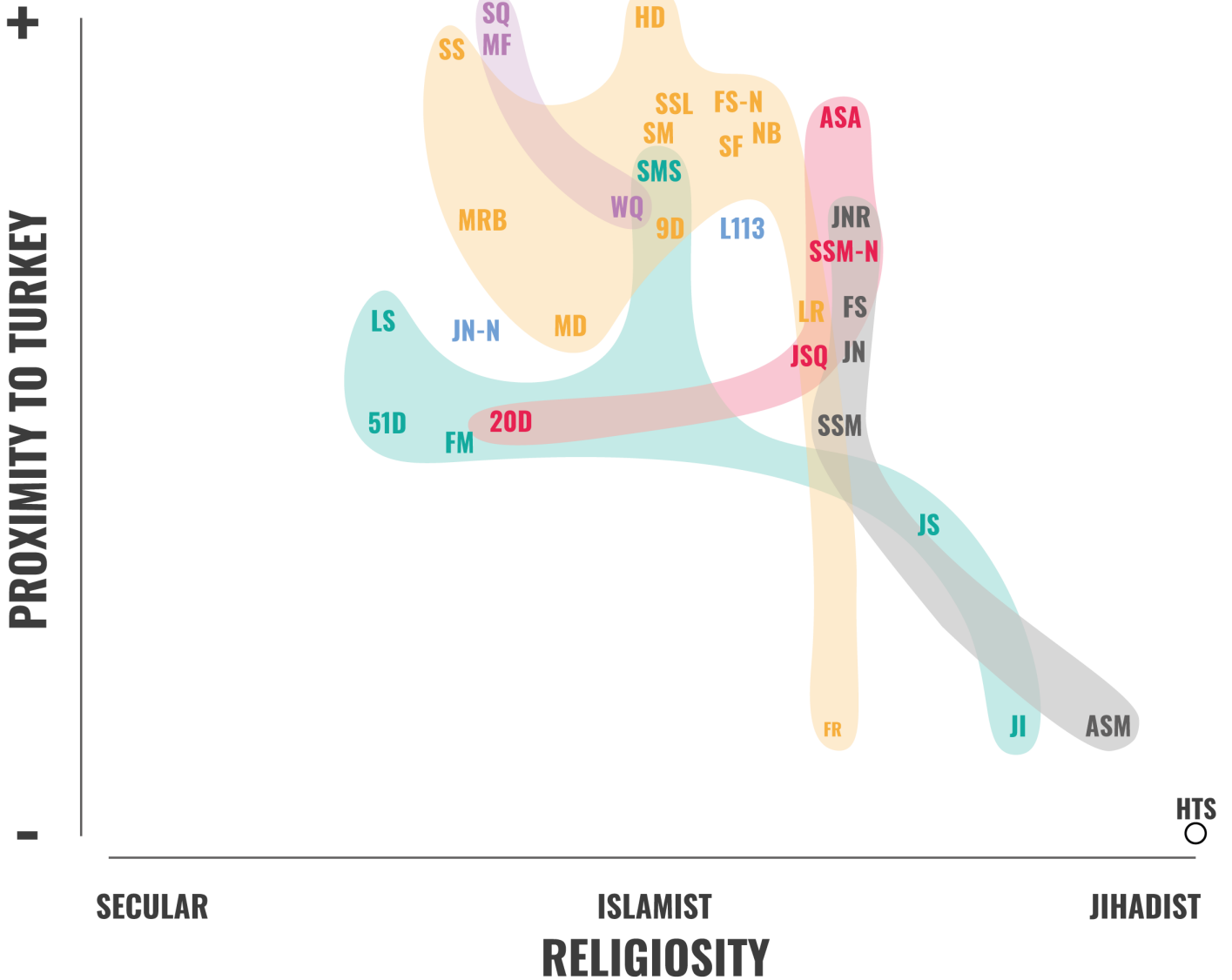
- **Third Legion:** This operations room was formed to consolidate the power and leadership of al-Jabha al-Shamiya within Azm. Although it includes non-Islamist militias with closer ties to Turkey, the weight of Jaysh al-Islam and especially al-Jabha al-Shamiya make the Third Legion a jihadist group that religiously and politically distances itself from Turkey and attempts to rival HTS. It remains one of the most powerful military and economic actors in the SNA-controlled territories.
- **Revolutionaries for Liberation:** led by the Sultan Murad Division, it is undoubtedly the bloc most in tune with Turkey's agenda, whether in Syria or in other countries with Turkish military operations. It groups together the Islamist militias with the most favorable position regarding the Turkification of the occupied territories, as well as a future merger of the SNA with HTS.
- **Liberation and Construction Movement:** as the newest operations room within the SNA, LCM is presented as a third option to the two previous blocks. Under the leadership of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, it brings together a variety of militias under a common political umbrella that is markedly Islamist and at the same time loyal to Turkey, with possible political aspirations.²⁵⁰
- **National Front for Liberation:** when the NFL became part of the SNA, the bloc had served as a buffer between the SNA-controlled territories and HTS. It was formed as an ideological and military project, with major support from Turkey, capable of bringing together the Islamist and jihadist militias of the Idlib region and containing HTS. Due to the fierce expansionism of the HTS, however, and the rivalries with al-Jabha al-Shamiya, the Front lost power in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip'. Nevertheless, the NFL continues to operate in the so-called Euphrates Shield Area and Idlib region.

²⁵⁰ rb.gy/3q71fr (www.mei.edu)

SNA IDEOLOGY & GROUPING

JULY 2022

- 3RD LEGION
- REVOLUTIONARIES FOR LIBERATION
- LIBERATION AND CONSTRUCTION MOVEMENT
- 13TH DIVISION
- NATIONAL FRONT FOR LIBERATION
- 2ND DIVISION



MF Mehmet al-Fateh
 SQ Samarqand Brigade
 WQ al-Waqqas Brigade
 20D 20th Division
 ASA Ahrar al-Sharqiya
 JSQ Jaysh al-Sharqiya
 SSM-N Suqour al-Sham (N)
 ASM Ahar al-Sham
 FS Faylaq al-Sham
 JN Jaysh al-Nukhba
 JNR Jaysh al-Nasr
 SSM Suqour al-Sham

9D 9th Division
 FR Faylaq al-Rahman
 FS-N Faylaq al-Sham (N)
 HD Hamza Division
 LR Levant Revolutionaries
 MD Mu'tasim Division
 MRB Muntasir Billah
 NB Northern Brigade
 SF Special Forces
 SM Sultan Murad
 SS Suleiman Shah
 SSL Suqour al-Shamal

JN-N Jaysh al-Nukhba (N)
 L113 Liwa 113
 51D 51st Division
 FM Faylaq al-Majd
 JI Jaysh al-Islam
 JS al-Jabha al-Shamiya
 LS Liwa al-Salam
 SMS Sultan Malik Shah
 HTS Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

The graph also lays bare that the militias with the greatest presence of Turkmen fighters tend to have a more favorable view of Turkey, especially the 13th Division. Surely, there are cultural elements that explain this affinity. Regarding the political-religious distance that exists within some blocs, it could be due to the fact that the internal reorganization of the SNA into operations rooms, which has been underway since summer of 2021, makes it very difficult for smaller militias to remain unaligned and thus they merge with some of the existing blocs; this could be the case for Faylaq al-Rahman, the 20th Division, the Sultan Malikshah Division and Suqour al-Sham - Northern Sector.

Most of the SNA militias present do not profess religious extremism, although it is also true that the groups that lead the current power blocs in the SNA do support an Islamist or directly jihadist agenda. There also seems to be some correlation between the proximity to Turkey and the religiosity of each militia. This could have several reasons: at the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, many of the Sunni pro-democracy militias saw the pseudo-democratic Islamism of its neighbor to the north as an alternative to the Assad government, and thus eagerly accepted Turkey's leadership. Other SNA militias were created expressly for, and continue to act as support for, Turkish military operations, which sets them firmly within Turkey's sphere. There is even the case of militias (the Levant Revolutionaries, the 9th Division) that emerged at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War against the forces of Assad's government, but for various reasons disappeared, only to then resurface in order to take part in the Turkish military operations in northern Syria. It stands to reason that Turkey blew life back into these latter groups in order to exploit their legacy and add further legitimacy to the Turkish invasions. Lastly, the manifestly Islamist, jihadist or Salafist militias show a greater reluctance towards the Turkish political project because they seek to impose their own vision of a post-war Syria. In many cases, this requires the creation of an Islamic Syrian state under Islamic Sharia law, and not the administrative annexation that Turkey promotes.

In summary, as of mid-2022, one can conclude that the design of the SNA as a conventional army made up of legions, divisions, and brigades, under a single command, has fundamentally failed. Instead, it has been replaced by a number of coordinated operations rooms, created in accordance with the militias' ideology, location, and affinity towards Turkey. According to data available to the RIC, the power bloc struggle between the SNA militias in the 'M4 Strip', Afrin and 'Euphrates Shield' area over the control of checkpoints, smuggling routes, stolen goods, and levies, is the main driver behind the

numerous infighting events. Yet re-organization of the SNA into operations rooms has been shown to be ineffective at ending internal fractioning and violence. Lastly, the creation of the SNA has not strengthened the so-called Syrian opposition. On the contrary, the dependence of the differing SNA militias (and the SIG) on Turkey continues to deepen over time, as is further outlined below.

Even more important is that, despite everything, these new SNA formations have not put a dent in the number of human rights violations against the population of the occupied territories, nor have they reduced infighting between the militias which, according to RIC research, continues unabated.

The numerous ties between ISIS and the SNA militias is equally worrying. Aside from having former ISIS members among the ranks of the SNA, the ISIS leadership continues to operate from Turkish-occupied territory, as periodic Global Coalition raids and drone strikes in the area can attest. On June 16th 2022, troops of the Coalition captured a senior ISIS leader, Hani Ahmed al-Kurdi, who was an experienced bomb maker and operational facilitator of ISIS' Syria branch. He was arrested only 4 km from the Turkish border, west of SNA-controlled Jarablus, in the 'Euphrates Shield' area. Another ISIS leader, Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, the right-hand man of Abu Bakr Baghdadi and an ISIS spokesman, was targeted around Jarablus in October 2019. On July 12th 2022, a US drone strike outside Jindires, south of the SNA-controlled Afrin region, targeted Maher al-Aqal, who was the leader of ISIS in Syria and within the group's top five, as well as another senior ISIS commander. Although the SNA and SIG publicly condemn ISIS, continued collusion with ISIS is tolerated by the SNA leadership, and ultimately by Turkey. It is hard to believe that ISIS' presence in the region has gone completely

unnoticed by Turkish intelligence. Such negligence should be of particular concern to other NATO partners and the international community.



SNA fighter during training, June 2022

3. POLICE FORCES IN THE TURKISH OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Two police forces are also active in the occupied territories of Afrin and the 'M4 Strip' (as well as in the 'Euphrates Shield' area). Both were created, trained, and are controlled by Turkey. Although the Military Police is part of the SNA – through the Military Police Department's affiliation with the Ministry of Defense and the Chief of Staff of the SIG – the Civil Police operates under the Ministry of the Interior of the SIG. Both the Civil Police and especially the Military Police have been accused of committing human rights violations against the local population. An analysis of both police forces is necessary in order to gain a complete picture of Turkish-backed forces operating on the ground in the occupied territories.

3.1 THE MILITARY POLICE

On February 20th 2018, the Ministry of Defense of the SIG announced the formation of the Military Police in the 'Euphrates Shield' area with the aim of putting an end to the violations committed by the SNA. Later the Military Police would expand to the 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring' areas with their own Military Police branches. These branches are linked to each other within a central administration named the 'Military Police Department', which has direct connections to the Turkish General Security Directorate and Turkish Intelligence in Ankara. Nowadays, it is estimated that 10,000 military police officers are operating in these three areas, many appointed directly by the MIT.²⁵¹

A report by the European University Institute on the Turkish invasion further explains how the Military Police is constituted:

Ankara has attempted to structure the military police, first in the northern Aleppo countryside and later in Afrin, with the aim of reining in the factions, curtailing acts of looting and ending human rights violations. Meanwhile, in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, the Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defense formed a military court and military police force in November 2019. Ankara selects the commanders of these police forces, while the Syrian factions choose the more junior officers and members, each faction providing a number of its fighters without them having received any specialized training. These fighters continue to answer first and foremost to their factions, prioritizing their interests at the expense of the public interest, which is why the military police remain weak and incapable of curtailing violations.²⁵²

²⁵¹ rb.gy/lfghyy (stj-sy.org)

²⁵² rb.gy/dugbs3 (op.europa.eu)

Similar to militias of the SNA, whose members make up the Military Police, former ISIS fighters are present among first- and second-level officers of the force. For example, the current Commander of the Military Police, Colonel Muhammad al-Daher, was appointed under the direct orders of Turkey’s government. Before his appointment, he was the Head of the Directorate of Security of A’zaz, until July 18th 2020. Al-Daher joined al-Nusra Front, which was then affiliated with al-Qaeda and later, in 2013, he joined ISIS. He trained the group’s fighters in Shamarikh, in northern Aleppo Governorate, until he finally fled ISIS and joined the SNA in 2017. A further example is Military Police chief Captain Mahmoud al-Saleh, who currently heads the Military Police in Sere Kaniye. In 2012, he joined the al-Nusra Front and one year later changed allegiance to the newly-established ISIS group. al-Saleh served as head of ISIS’ al-Ababil Brigade. In June 2021, he was suspended from his work by several judges in the Justice Directorate of Sere Kaniye in protest over what they called “grave legal transgressions.”²⁵³

According to RIC’s quarterly State of the Occupation reports,²⁵⁴ the Military Police ranks highest in documented cases of unlawful arrests – be it for political reasons, as a consequence of road checkpoints, or during raids. Furthermore, cases of arrest by the Military Police increase quarter-on-quarter, suggesting that the SIG and the MIT, which has ultimate control over this force, prefer to rely on the Military Police to conduct arrests, at the expense of SNA militias. In Afrin, the Political Security Agency, affiliated with MIT and the Military Police, is still active and continues to persecute the indigenous population which previously worked with the AANES. Far from ceasing to occur, which is not supported by RIC’s own statistics, crimes against the local population in the occupied territories appear to increasingly be channeled through the Military Police, a military force with a more polished look compared to other militias.



Visit of the SIG Defense Minister (frontrow, 3rd from left) to the Military Police Office of 'Euphrates Shield' area , September 24th 2019

²⁵³ rb.gy/lfgghy (stj-sy.org)

²⁵⁴ rojavainformationcenter.com/category/report/occupation-report/

3.2 THE CIVIL POLICE

Formerly called the 'Free Police', the Civil Police has been supported by Turkey since the latter took control of the so-called Euphrates Shield Area. Syrian volunteers have been trained in new camps established in Turkish territory or police academy training centers in the Turkish cities of Adana and Mersin. Turkey has also trained Syrian officers in the towns of Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, as well as providing the police force with weapons, vehicles and more. Turkey also founded a Syrian 'commando' division, subordinate to the Turkish General Security Directorate, which carried out its first mission in Afrin after the 2018 invasion. This commando division protects the convoys of SOC-members and SIG-ministers, and joins Turkish forces in protecting and securing the visits of Turkish officials to the areas of Afrin, Tel Abyad, Sere Kaniye, and the 'Euphrates Shield' area.²⁵⁵ Other duties of the Civil Police include guarding the SIG's public institutions such as healthcare facilities, schools and justice buildings.

Although the Civil Police has a lesser role within the occupied territories, according to RIC's own research, as well as other monitoring reports, it has also been responsible for various rights violations since its inception. Infighting between the Civil Police and the local militias is common, as each militia sees their controlled areas as private fiefdoms and rejects outside authorities. The Military and Civil Police have also clashed on different occasions, which has required Turkey to directly intervene in order to stop and resolve the conflicts.^{256 257}

In short, the Military Police, with its proven link to MIT, is the armed force through which Turkey's agenda for the occupied territories is increasingly implemented (including high-profile arrests, and internal control over the SNA militias), while the Civil Police is an organization linked to the SIG, and tasked with policing public institutions and other civil entities.



Visit of the SIG President (7th from left) to the Civil Police Office in Sere Kaniye, July 21st 2020

²⁵³ rb.gy/lfgghy (stj-sy.org)

²⁵⁴ rojavainformationcenter.com/category/report/occupation-report/

4. SNA AND HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM IN IDLIB REGION

Idlib region is the opposition-controlled-territory that has been the most independent from Turkish control since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. There are three main groupings of armed factions present in Idlib, namely: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and associates, most notably the Turkestan Islamic Party, professedly independent though still understood to maintain ties with al-Qaeda; Hurras ad-Din or Guardians of Religion Organization (GRO) and associates, al-Qaeda's direct proxy in Syria which itself works in coordination with HTS; and factions grouped under the NFL, long under heavy Turkish influence and incorporated into the SNA. In a dossier published in March 2020 we documented the evolving relationship between Turkey and al-Qaeda offshoots and proxies in Idlib, in particular HTS.²⁵⁸

4.1 HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM

The real dominant faction in Idlib is HTS, a Sunni Islamist group which is dominated by the former al-Nusra Front and hardline elements from Ahrar-al-Sham. Led by Abu Mohammad Al-Joulani, HTS has 15-30,000 fighters, a majority of whom are former al-Nusra fighters. It itself operated as the official Syrian branch of al-Qaeda from the outset and committed acts of torture, child abduction, and summary execution – including stoning to death women accused of committing adultery – as part of a strict interpretation of Sharia law, imposing punishments amounting to torture.²⁵⁹

HTS describes itself as a military force, but also a Salafist-jihadist project, that retains tight control on civil society through its 'Salvation Government' and system of Sharia courts, often staffed by individuals with no formal legal training or even training in Sharia law. Much like ISIS, HTS conducts morality patrols, arresting young women for failing to follow religious dress codes; young men for shaving or listening to music; and



Abu Mohammad Al-Joulani, January 2019

²⁵⁸ rb.gy/4fzfua (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

²⁵⁹ rb.gy/myikux (www.longwarjournal.org)

civilian activists for any activity in opposition to HTS' de facto control of Idlib. HTS's religious police, known as 'Sawid Al Khayr', enforce dress codes and the segregation of males and females on buses and in the streets. HTS conduct public executions for witchcraft and heresy – as well as of ISIS members. Human Rights Watch has documented consistent arbitrary detention and torture of civil society activists who sought to document HTS abuses or protest their rule, as well as assassinations and the restriction of humanitarian aid to civilians living under its rule.²⁶⁰ The establishment of HTS was widely seen as a rebranding exercise, with the US Embassy issuing a statement to the effect that "the United States is not fooled by this al-Qaeda affiliate's attempt to rebrand itself".²⁶¹ Prominent al-Qaeda-linked individuals and designated terrorists joined the group following its formation. Finally in 2018 the US and Turkey designated the group as a foreign terrorist organization affiliated with al-Qaeda, at which time it was also sanctioned by the UN.²⁶² More broadly, despite paying lip-service to reform and moderation in recent months, HTS continues to violently crush dissent and apply a strict interpretation of Sharia law in the area under its jurisdiction.²⁶³

4.2 THE TURKISH TURN TOWARDS HTS

Turkey's relationship with jihadist groups in Idlib ranges from direct support, arming, funding and issuing commands through a deliberately opaque relationship with HTS to a relatively distant engagement with Hurras-ad-Din. Simplest to define is the relationship between Turkey and those factions directly under its control – that is, the NFL in Idlib, now incorporated into the SNA command structure, and the SNA in occupied territories to the north. A cursory investigation of the command and control structure of jihadist factions in the SNA, such as Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, Jaysh-al-Islam and Sultan Murad, shows that responsibility flows directly up to the TAF – and by extension their commander-in-chief, Erdoğan. These factions are technically subordinate to the SIG, but the real power is retained by Turkey, through direct control of local political bodies, top-down exploitation of economic resources, and governance through proxies dependent on Turkey's political, economic, and military backing for their survival.

²⁶⁰ [hrw.org/news/2019/01/28/syria-arrests-torture-armed-group](https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/28/syria-arrests-torture-armed-group)

²⁶¹ [sy.usembassy.gov/amendments-to-the-terrorist-designations-of-al-Nusra-front/](https://www.usembassy.gov/amendments-to-the-terrorist-designations-of-al-Nusra-front/)

²⁶² [rb.gy/21nr5p](https://www.rb.gy/21nr5p) (www.csis.org)

²⁶³ [rb.gy/0mynwq](https://www.rb.gy/0mynwq) (english.enabbaladi.net)

While Turkey’s control of the Idlib-based NFL is less complete than its control of the other SNA militias, it has nonetheless been able to establish an “influential client-proxy relationship with the NFL by offering its groups a rear base, having them participate in Turkish operations in Afrin and in the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor, and providing them with equipment, training and salaries.”²⁶⁴ The October 2019 merger constituted a further solidification of Turkish control over the NFL, illustrated by the participation of NFL elements – most notably Faylaq-al-Sham and Jaysh-al-Ahrar – in the execution of Turkish policy objectives against the SDF. But Turkey’s relationship with HTS, then, is a more complex question. As noted above, Turkey initially listed HTS as a terror group, but over the years their relationship has evolved into one of mutual co-dependency, with Turkey of course retaining technical and military superiority but at the same time recognizing HTS’ territorial dominance in Idlib. HTS is too powerful, in other words, to merely be considered as a Turkish proxy: it has other sponsors and backers, and the jihadi organization is able to exert a certain influence on Turkish policy in Idlib, rather than merely following Turkish orders as in the case of the SNA. As such, Turkey’s increasing trust in and cooperation with the Salafist-jihadist organization has alarmed observers who fear Turkey is handing power, influence – and lethal weaponry – to an organization it cannot expect to control.

HTS fighters and supporters in Idlib city, September 2018



The gradual extension of Turkey’s military operation in Idlib began with occasional minor clashes with HTS, but as Turkey became entrenched in observation posts they began a tacit relationship with the dominant grouping in Idlib. HTS guarded Turkish convoys as they entered Idlib and permitted Turkey to operate within its zone of control. By May 2019, HTS and the NLF were coordinating their attacks and the use of heavy weaponry, including anti-armor missiles, from a joint operation room. HTS’ total control of Idlib means that Turkey’s extensive operations in the region cannot take place without HTS’ express knowledge, approval and coordination.

A Chatham House research paper summarizes this evolution well:

“Hostility between HTS and Turkey has turned into a form of peer-to-peer coordination. This was clear when HTS allowed Turkish patrols to enter territories under its control and protected Turkish observation points in northern Syria, despite previously expressing disapproval at their presence.

This nascent coordination turned into wide-ranging cooperation, with HTS exclusively facilitating Turkish logistics and military operations in the north. The group prevented any other armed group being involved except with itself as an intermediary. Even Faylaq al-Sham, which had been very close to Turkey, cannot liaise with the Turks without the approval or agreement of HTS.”²⁶⁵

4.3 AN UNIFIED TURKISH-BACKED ARMY IN NORTH WEST SYRIA

Since the spring of 2019, the NLF and HTS have been operating together via an operations room known as al-Fatih al-Mubeen (Great Conquest Operations Room), comprising HTS, the NLF and Jaysh al-Izza, thus uniting the Turkish-controlled and al-Qaeda-linked forces in a single fighting coalition.²⁶⁶ On HTS’s behalf, meanwhile, the new operations room serves as a figleaf to cover Turkish supply of armaments to the al-Qaeda-linked group – presumably at Turkish request. That is, HTS still refer to their own units as the ‘Mujahidin of [Hayat] Tahrir al-Sham’ in videos without any Turkish armor or weapons pictured, but when Turkish armor is included in the shot they refer to the new operations room instead. Hurras-ad-Din and other smaller, hard-line Salafist groups in Idlib have their own operations room, ‘Incite the Believers’. As outlined above, this separate operations room operates in coordination with the dominant faction HTS,²⁶⁷ who in turn are in coordination with Turkey.

²⁶⁴ rb.gy/wfq1y4 (www.clingendael.org)

²⁶⁵ syria.chathamhouse.org/research/reviewing-the-turkey-hts-relationship

²⁶⁶ rb.gy/fjl93x (www.cartercenter.org)

²⁶⁷ rb.gy/nic4va (www.longwarjournal.org)

Following the Turkish efforts for a progressive convergence between HTS and NFL-SNA in Idlib region, in October 2020 the Tripartite Military Committee or Unified Military Council, a reconstruction of the former Great Conquest Operations Room, was created with representatives from Ahrar al-Sham, HTS, and Sham Legion.²⁶⁸ A further step came in April 2021 when, following a year of preparations, Turkey reportedly formed the 'al-Quwat al-Radifa' (Auxiliary Forces) in Idlib, which will be in charge of protection and surveillance of Turkish military posts and deployments. The Auxiliary Forces are made up of recruits from several local militias active across Idlib, and trained and connected to command-level officials in the Turkish army. Turkey also provides full financial support for the Auxiliary Forces, including weapons, outfits, food supplies, and monthly salaries.²⁶⁹

In October 2021 the expectations of a final merger appeared again, when the developments showed high-level coordination between the two sides in all military and security fields:²⁷⁰ Militias of the SNA sent groups into HTS areas in the southern countryside of Idlib and the western countryside of Aleppo. The entry of those groups took place in coordination with HTS, which, in turn, sent groups affiliated with it to the SNA-controlled territories in northern Aleppo.²⁷¹ Also, in an unprecedented move by any SNA militia commander, 'Abu Amsha' of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division publicly supported a merger with HTS in a statement, saying "We support the unification of the opposition politically and militarily, and we can go to fight if the regime attacks Idlib areas, alongside Tahrir al-Sham, but within the leadership and umbrella of the National Army."²⁷² Additionally, the rest of HTS' rival jihadist militias in Idlib have been targeted in different ways: since June 2020, six jihadist commanders from the GRO, the second biggest militia in Idlib, were killed by US-led International Coalition airstrikes, but there have been no similar attacks against HTS targets. This is why their opponents accuse HTS of being behind these airstrikes and of providing intelligence to the International Coalition in order to get rid of the GRO elements.²⁷³ For its part, HTS has expelled militias and foreign fighters opposed to it from their homes in Idlib - most notably in February 2022, when it issued a general warning to several foreign fighters to vacate their houses in Idlib.²⁷⁴

²⁶⁸ rb.gy/0uudow (english.enabbaladi.net)

²⁶⁹ stj-sy.org/en/the-auxiliary-forces-formed-to-boost-turkeys-presence-in-idlib/

²⁷⁰ rb.gy/54hfsc (www.al-monitor.com)

²⁷¹ rb.gy/bnhtat (syrianobserver.com)

²⁷² rb.gy/atgm2l (www.alquds.co.uk)

²⁷³ rb.gy/0mynwq (english.enabbaladi.net)

²⁷⁴ rb.gy/w5ramf (www.al-monitor.com)

Among many SNA militias, in particular within the Azm Unified Command Room, discomfort over the rapprochement with HTS is widespread. The creation of Azm in July 2021 consolidated the existence of two large blocks which are gaining a foothold in northwestern Syria: based in the Idlib region, under control of the HTS and the NLF, and the Azm Unified Command Room (with al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the Hamza Division at its head) in the northern countryside of Aleppo. Previously, HTS controlled most of Idlib after several bloody battles with Ahrar al-Sham, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, and Suqour al-Sham in 2017 and 2018. These tensions continue today.

Despite the success of Azm in gathering the majority of SNA militias under its umbrella, the ever-present factional rivalry, infighting and near-constant rights abuses without accountability contrast with HTS' ability to gradually bring the military, religious and political spheres in Idlib region under its control. In recent months, the HTS' media office re-published a speech of HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani from August 2021 in which he says: "We extended our hands to the people in the two areas [Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch]. I have met a large number of faction leaders and dignitaries in the two regions. If there is a will to integrate and unite, then the matter can be achieved. With chaos and non-existent security in it, we used to tell them that we could not enter without the consent of the people there, or at least in coordination and with the consent of the factions".²⁷⁵ Since May 2022, HTS has exploited these rivalries within the SNA in order to extend its influence northwards, into the Afrin region. To this end, HTS has used its alliance with Ahrar al-Sham (of the NFL) in order to try to curtail the influence of al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Jaysh al-Islam, both of the Third Legion operations room, while HTS media has provided support for the Revolutionaries for Liberation.

HTS further enshrined its influence in the region through the establishment of the SSG and the forced exit of the SIG from regions under its control. HTS furthermore repeatedly accused other factions of having ties with Western governments and of subordinating themselves to NATO interests (through NATO member Turkey). Whether HTS will be able or wants to form a union with the SNA in the future is unclear.

²⁷⁵ rb.gy/fve7vc (www.syria.tv)

Another clear example of HTS' influence and use of military force against the SNA militias was laid bare during the last major infighting that occurred in mid-June 2022. For two days, violent clashes between the two SNA militias erupted in the villages of Abla and Tal Battal, on the outskirts of al-Bab. Amid the fighting, Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector requested the support of HTS, which forms a united front against the Third Legion, especially against al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Jaysh al-Islam. HTS consequently sent large military convoys to Jindires sub-district of Afrin. In doing so, the jihadist militia crossed through territories belonging to the Faylaq al-Sham militia, affiliated with the Revolutionaries for Liberation Committee. The ensuing battles led to military casualties on both sides, as well as civilian deaths. On June 19th, MIT forced all parties to negotiate a ceasefire agreement, whereby all militias would return to their pre-fighting positions, including the return of Ahrar al-Sham's headquarters, and the release of captives.²⁷⁶ That same day, the Turkish-backed SNA-linked Syrian Islamic Council issued a statement, calling for confronting HTS: "The HTS' military movement toward the areas of the Syrian National Army in the liberated north of Syria is tantamount to a rebellion, and this is absolutely forbidden under Sharia."²⁷⁷ HTS took several days to withdraw all its forces from southern Afrin, showing that its intervention, apart from responding to the alliance with Ahrar al-Sham, also corresponds to its aspirations to show itself as a responsible and strong authority, even in the SNA-controlled territories. "As a result, the rebellious youth plunged into an absurd internal confrontation that led to harming peace and security in the liberated areas. [...] the residents of the faction-controlled areas suffer from the spread of corruption in society such as drugs, theft and violations of all kinds within service institutions," responded HTS in their official statement.²⁷⁸



Protest against HTS presence in Afrin city, June 21th 2022

²⁷⁶ rb.gy/o8hpoc (www.al-monitor.com)

²⁷⁷ rb.gy/jrapwh (www.al-monitor.com)

²⁷⁸ rb.gy/r1mpex (www.syria.tv)

An eventual HTS-SNA merger would change the current balance of power. Clashes between Russia and the Russian-backed SAA and HTS are a near daily occurrence in Idlib. However, if HTS were weakened politically and militarily, this would leave an opening in northwestern Syria to be exploited by Turkey. Yet, while both Turkey and Russia/the SAA stand to gain influence from a possible weakening of HTS, they risk losing more should the other side gain a foothold in Idlib. Paradoxically, it is thus to the benefit of both sides to maintain HTS' presence in the region. According to one analysis, "If Russia targets HTS leaders, Turkey will invest more in Idlib's security scene, preventing Russia from carrying out a military attack on the region in the future. Thus, the presence of HTS is currently serving Russia, as long as HTS continues its harmless policy towards Russia."²⁷⁹ Therefore, whether HTS merges with the SNA in the near future will depend largely on Turkey's calculations for its future in Syria.

²⁷⁹ rb.gy/0mynwq (english.enabbaladi.net)

5. THE SNA AND SIG AS TURKISH PROXIES

Turkish influence is omnipresent within the SNA and the controlled territories. From successive Turkish military operations in Syria to today's political control, SNA militias have consistently followed Turkey's Syria policy. It is therefore accurate to describe both the SNA and the SIG as Turkish proxies.

5.1 TURKISH POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL

In SNA-controlled territories, the institutional and political spheres belong to the Syrian Interim Government. During the early years of the Syrian Civil War, the SIG focused on local government in opposition-held parts of northern Aleppo and northwestern Idlib, thereby receiving financial aid from the United States.²⁸⁰ Once the Euphrates Shield operation ended in April 2017, the SIG moved to the new territories occupied by Turkey to play the role of institutional authority, taking economic and political advantage of its alliance with Turkey ever since. The militias are granted limited autonomy to plunder and extort money from the local population, while carrying out Turkish military and security objectives. Ultimately, real power is retained by Turkey, through direct control of local political bodies, top-down exploitation of economic resources, and governance through proxies "dependent on Turkey's political, economic and military backing for their survival."²⁸¹ Turkey's Hatay provincial administration governs Afrin, the Urfa administration runs the 'M4 strip' between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, while the so-called Euphrates Shield Area, which Turkey seized in 2017, is split between Kilis and Gaziantep.²⁸² (See graphic page 91)

"Following the Olive Branch operation in 2018, governing bodies known as local councils emerged throughout Afrin, supported by Turkish authorities, to fill a critical need for social and governmental organisation. The elected local councils in these areas officially follow the Syrian Interim Government and are connected to the Aleppo provincial council, with direct administrative, logistical, and financial support from Turkish authorities – mainly the governors of Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay in southern Turkey.

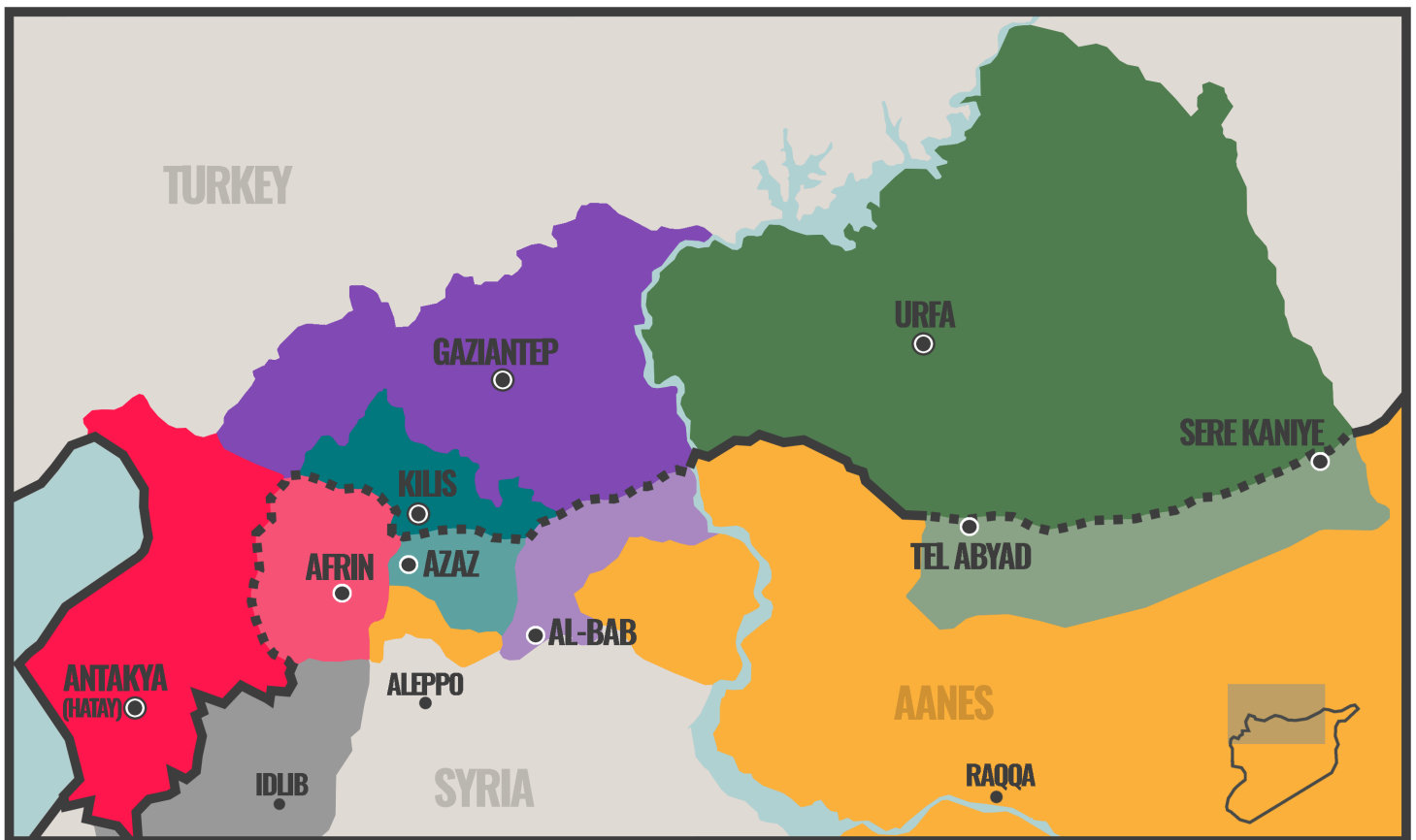
²⁸⁰ hurriyetdailynews.com/us-gives-6-million-to-syria-opposition-government--77284

²⁸¹ cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/63745/MED_2019_10.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

²⁸² rb.gy/c6himz (cadmus.eui.eu)

Overall, the provision of basic services at all levels, including education, health, telecommunications, electricity, and water, falls under Turkey. For example, the Hatay health directorate and health office in the local council oversee medical and health services. Humanitarian assistance in Afrin is also coordinated through the Turkish government, in coordination with the local councils. The presence of humanitarian responders is limited and most NGOs operate remotely, primarily from Turkey, and must collaborate very closely with AFAD for full unhindered access to Afrin."²⁸³

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL OF TURKISH-OCCUPIED REGIONS



The four administrations of the Turkish provinces bordering northern Syria (Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep and Urfa) are directly responsible for the administrative, logistical, and financial support to the various occupied territories. The provincial governors are under the direction of the Minister of the Interior, currently Süleyman Soylu, although they are appointed by the president of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but those responsible for supervising the local councils in Syria are the deputy Governors. Currently, the governor of Hatay

²⁸³ rb.gy/ma9zqn (www.acaps.org)

Province is Rahmi Dogan, with Orhan Aktürk as Deputy Governor for the Afrin region; Recep Soytürk is the Governor of Kilis Province, with Ömer Yılmaz and Fehmi Sinan Niyazi as Deputy Governors for the Azaz region; in Gaziantep Province Davut Gül is the governor, and Deputy governor Şenol Esmer is in charge of al-Bab; Finally, the governor of the province of Şanlıurfa is Abdullah Erin, with Oghuzan Erde Ataka as Deputy Governor in charge of Tel Abyad and the Ceylanpinar sub-district Governor Cüneyt Caner in charge of Sere Kaniye. Below we reproduce the organization chart and map with the information.

The presence of Turkish administrators in the occupied areas is one more step in implementing their agenda, presiding over the opening of public centers and municipal institutions, as well as periodic meetings with local councils, and military and police forces. At the ceremony of opening a new branch of the PTT, the national post and telegraph/telephone directorate of Turkey, the governor of the Turkish province of Şanlıurfa Abdullah Erin said that after more than a year of 'Peace Spring', public institution projects continue to be carried out in Tel Abyad sub-district with the support of Turkey without slowing down. He added, "Tel Abyad sub-district is the safest and most secure city in Syria, thanks to the heroism of the TAF under the leadership of the President (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), with the cooperation of the Syrian National Army, and the public institutions and organizations that have made an effort to serve here."²⁸⁴ The efforts of the Turkish authorities and their backed SIG and SNA have, however, proven ineffective at, after the military operations, rebuilding a proper public service infrastructure and providing security for the local people, who now face economic difficulties, continuous insecurity, and Human Rights violations. Turkey's direct intervention in various civil spheres such as education, health, telecommunications, electricity, and water²⁸⁵, in addition to the military and political, show that it is not a question of simple humanitarian support, but of determined steps towards a complete integration and assimilation of the occupied territories for their future annexation to the Republic of Turkey.

Additionally, Turkification policies are applied to both the economy and education, as well as to humanitarian aid and access to housing. Turkish authorities control the establishment, governance, and access to IDP camps, and have furthermore monopolized the press' and NGO's access to the occupied territories, especially humanitarian aid access. Increasingly, humanitarian aid is being used in order to settle SNA militias' fighters and their families. Since the invasion, Turkey has promoted the construction of numerous set-

²⁸⁴ aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/baris-pinari-harekati-bolgesinde-ptt-subesi-acildi/2115731

²⁸⁵ rb.gy/jesqkz (english.enabbaladi.net)

²⁸⁶ nrls.net/en/settlers-and-settlements-in-afrin/

tlement projects to house Arabs and Turkmen in coordination with NGOs from Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar and Palestine.²⁸⁶ These settlements are being approved by Turkish officials, funded by international NGOs, and are being populated mainly by Arab fighters with Turkish-backed SNA groups. Each SNA group is responsible for raising funds in order to pay for construction material, and the financing for the projects comes from NGOs, particularly from the Gulf-region. In an extensive report STJ stresses that the settlements are not leading to homes occupied by SNA militiamen being handed back to their original owners. STJ concludes that these settlements are "part of [the] systematic process of altering the demographic composition of Afrin."²⁸⁷

In early May 2022, Erdoğan announced preparations for re-settling roughly one million Syrian refugees in 13 Syrian areas (such as Afrin, Azaz, Jarablus, al-Bab and Tel Abyad). In most cases, these areas do not correspond to those the refugees fled from.²⁸⁸ Erdoğan's resettlement plan also ignores the fact that the proportion of Syrian refugees in Turkey who say they do not plan on returning increased to 77% in 2020 from 17% in 2017, according to a survey sponsored by the UN refugee agency.²⁸⁹ A further invasion, thus, would only accomplish a further wave of displacement of the indigenous Kurdish populations of some of these territories.

Moreover, educational curriculums have been introduced throughout all occupied territories which force all students to learn in Arabic and Turkish, despite the fact that almost all indigenous Afrinis speak Kurdish as their mother- or sole tongue. Turkish universities have opened branches in Afrin and elsewhere, while the Turkish postal service operates there, and is the sole provider of salaries for Turkish-employed citizens in these territories. In June 2020, the local authorities in northwestern Syria – the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and the SIG – formally approved the Turkish lira for circulation in their areas amid rapid devaluation of the Syrian pound. The continuous depreciation of Turkey's currency (from June 2020 to May 2022 the Turkish lira has



Opening of a primary school in near Tel Abyad city, July 2021

²⁸⁶ nrls.net/en/settlers-and-settlements-in-afrin/

²⁸⁷ stj-sy.org/en/housing-settlements-in-afrin-demographic-engineering-or-idp-housing-projects/

²⁸⁸ rb.gy/3ylbyx (www.al-monitor.com)

²⁸⁹ unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/03/SB-2020-Ingilizce-son.pdf

lost more than 60% of its value) and skyrocketing inflation (the effects of inflation within Turkey have also been imported²⁹⁰) have adversely affected the economy and living standards of northwestern Syria.²⁹¹

The economic situation of SNA-controlled territories is such that the militias are almost entirely dependent on Turkish aid, whether through the supply of raw materials or basic services (electricity, water, telecommunications, or the monetary system). With the exception of Afrin, most occupied territories changed hands between warring Syrian militias twice or more before Turkey invaded them. Adding to the scarcity of basic goods, the local civilian population, indigenous and newly-settled alike, is also tormented by economical crimes, such as theft, extortion, and expropriation at the hands of SNA militias. In the 'M4 Strip', industrial zones have been looted and public properties pillaged, and their contents sold to local Syrian or Turkish merchants.²⁹² More than 315,200 trees have been cut down in Afrin by the Turkish army and Turkish-backed factions since 2018; Afrin's olives have been exported by Turkish companies.²⁹³

As highlighted by STJ,²⁹⁴ many of these cases are violations of international customary law, as cases of destruction and seizure of civilian property are considered war crimes according to Article 8 (2) (b) (13) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court (the Rome Statute of 1988). Regarding the property rights of displaced persons, Article 46 of the Hague Regulations states that "private property [...] must be respected. Private property cannot be confiscated." Notably the lootings, the destruction of property and other abuses against civilians directly contributes to the continued displacement of Syrian civilians, especially in occupied territories, and in-and-of itself constitutes a violation of international humanitarian law under article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. In addition, these cases deny several terms of the "historic agreement" between the US and Turkey which led to a ceasefire and put an end to the Turkish offensive into northeastern Syria. The looting outlined in multiple reports by human rights associations are at odds with the agreement's fourth term, in which "the two countries reiterate their pledge to uphold human life, human rights, and the protection of religious and ethnic communities." The operations also breach the seventh term, in which "The Turkish side expressed its commitment to ensure the safety and well-being of residents of all population centers in the safe zone controlled by the Turkish Forces [...] and reiterated that maximum care will be exercised in order not to cause harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure."²⁹⁵

²⁹⁰ english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/02/is-it-possible-to-turn-idlib-into-cashless-society-poll/

²⁹¹ rb.gy/3m3ayt (english.enabbaladi.net)

²⁹² hevdesti.org/en/industrial-zone-english/

²⁹³ mesopotamia.coop/olives-of-afrin-exported-to-other-countries-by-turkey/

²⁹⁴ hevdesti.org/en/industrial-zone-english/

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

The broader, Turkish-backed SOC council linked to the SIG and the SNA has only ever held one general assembly within Syria, and prefers to conduct its affairs from Turkey.²⁹⁶ The same council recently came under heavy local criticism for openly meeting with the SNA commander who oversaw the brutal beating and execution of Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalef.²⁹⁷ Similarly, some local council members in the Turkish zone of occupation live in Turkey and cross into Syria only during office hours, in large part due to the daily infighting between the Turkish-backed militias who exercise day-to-day control in these cities.

The councils established by Turkey are thus little more than a fig-leaf for the occupation. They are “directly supervise[d]” by the Turkish Ministry of the Interior, with the ‘Interim Government’ playing “no real role” in the administration of councils where “absolute loyalty to Turkey is mandatory.”²⁹⁸ Turkish coordinators are present at multiple levels throughout these councils, while Turkey’s own ministries also maintain operatives in all the zones of Turkish



Celebration of the 4th anniversary of the opening of the Al-Rai crossing building, the Chamber of Commerce and the Local Council, in the presence of the SIG President, the Governor of the Turkish city of Kilis, heads of local councils, and leaders of the SNA and Turkish Army, August 24th 2020

²⁹⁶ twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1326484903236603905

²⁹⁷ rb.gy/a4cjvb (www.syriahr.com)

²⁹⁸ cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/69657

occupation. Superficial ‘elections’ can only take place with Turkish supervision and approval, while salaries and budgets are directly provided by the neighboring Turkish provinces, with appointment on the basis of cronyism and loyalty to Turkey rather than merit. These councils tend to under-represent the Kurdish population and are mostly made up of individuals with political ties to Turkey, or economic interests in the ongoing plunder of Afrin’s natural resources. For all this, the SIG should also be accountable for the violations of the population’s rights in SNA controlled areas, since the SIG members are economically and politically profiting from their role in the alliance with Turkey.

5.2 THE SNA MILITIAS AS TURKISH PROXIES

A cursory investigation of the command and control structure of factions in the SNA shows that the chain of command flows directly up to the TAF and by extension their commander-in-chief (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan). These factions are technically subordinate to the SIG, a Turkish-sponsored body that lobbies on behalf of the SNA in Geneva and other foreign capitals. In practice they are trained, armed, funded, and commanded by the Turkish government.²⁹⁹

The SNA number “at least 35,000 full-time fighters, all under the near-total control of Turkey’s Ministry of Defense and National Intelligence Organization.”³⁰⁰ In areas under nominal SNA control they are granted limited autonomy to plunder and extort money from the local population, but the real power is retained by Turkey, exercised through direct control of local political bodies, top-down exploitation of economic resources, and governance through proxies “dependent on Turkey’s political, economic and military backing for their survival.”

Likewise, on the battlefield, the SNA take their commands directly from Turkey. A piece of in-depth research by Elizabeth Tsurkov, speaking to multiple sources within the ranks of the SNA, confirms: “All decisions, big and small, in the ‘National Army’ are made by the operations room run by Turkish intelligence.”³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ See our report *Ahrar al-Sharqiya: war crimes with impunity* (October 2021)

³⁰⁰ mei.edu/blog/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-opposition-groups-unite-under-one-banner

³⁰¹ nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/

In addition, STJ has quoted a high-ranking officer in the SNA as saying that the Turkish security services are responsible for appointing the SNA's commanders and determining their assignments: "The Turkish intelligence service directly studies the files of officers who are nominated to assume leadership positions in the region, and appoints the leaders directly. All current commanders in the SNA and its affiliated agencies, including civil police, military police and others, have been approved by the same service."³⁰²

In the organization chart (page 98) we represent the current organizational structure of the different SNA militias, following the analysis made in previous pages.

The SNA has failed as a conventional standing army. Though it has continued to use formal military nomenclature since its inception in December 2017, the militias which make up the SNA never gave up their names, traditional leadership, or subordination to local Shura councils. Even when it comes to receiving salaries, they are handed over to the faction leaders without passing through the Ministry of Defense. Overall, SNA factions fall into two general molds:³⁰³

- Factions built around a founding leader, or even a personality cult, where the militia acts as the commander's private property, as well as its military equipment, headquarters and vehicles. Such commanders are loath to give up their positions, especially to Ministry of Defense appointees. Examples of such groups include: the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Special Forces Division, and Jaysh al-Sharqiya.
- Islamic factions, which - including their commanders-in-chief - are subordinate to Shura councils, religio-political legislative bodies. Examples include: Ahrar al-Sham or al-Jabha al-Shamiya.

In general, those militias which were built around a single leader tend to be more directly under Turkish control through the Ministry of Defense, while also fully identifying as divisions and legions of the SNA. On the other hand, Islamic factions, having a certain political project of their own which focuses on establishing an Islamic government throughout Syria rather than the annexation and assimilation of territories along the Turkish border, tend to act more independently and prefer to retain an independent identity - at least to the outside. Nevertheless, one cannot speak of any militia belonging to the SNA as acting independently of Turkey's interests and orders.

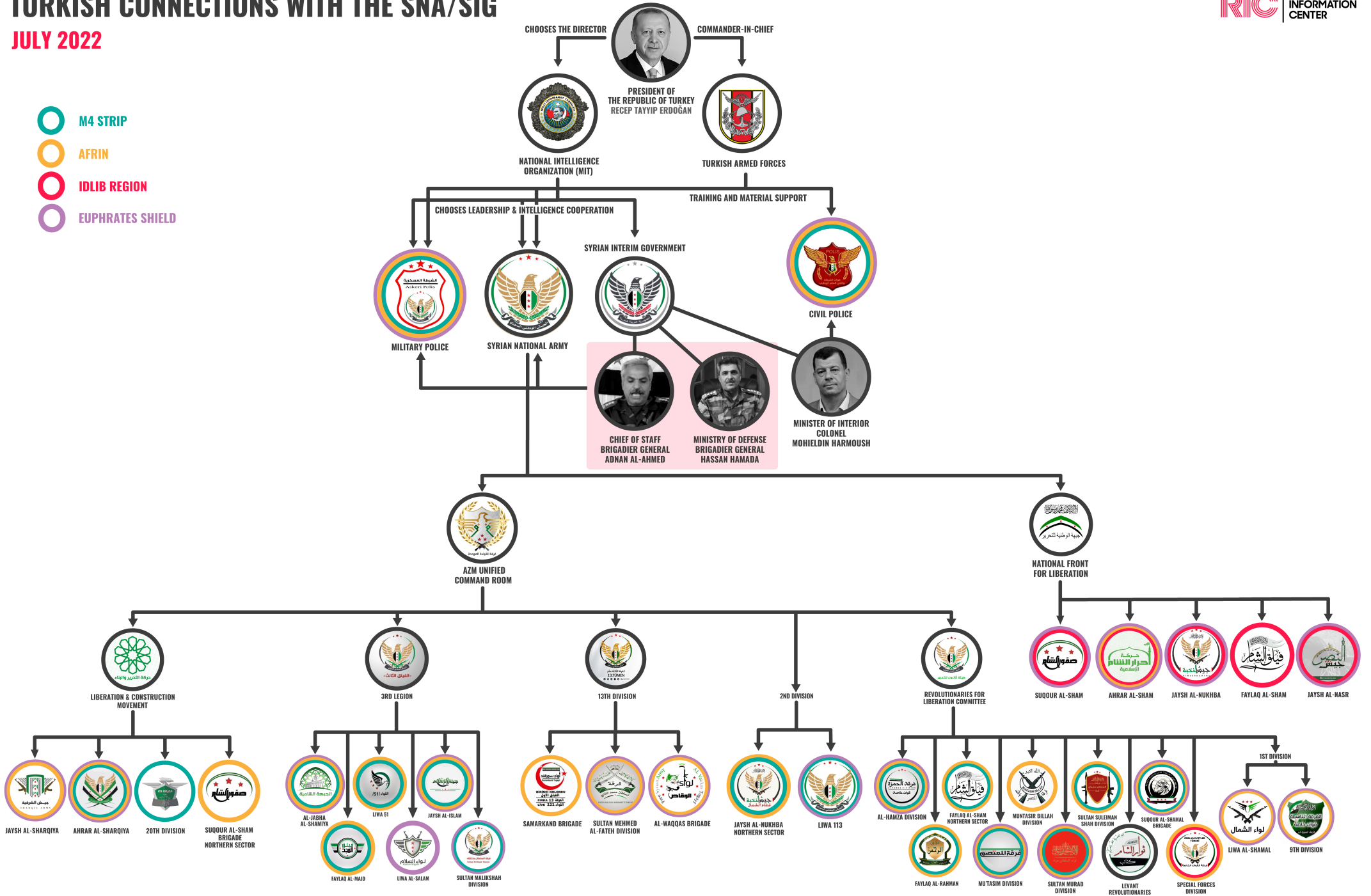
³⁰² rb.gy/lfgghy (stj-sy.org)

³⁰³ rb.gy/qzjkr6 (www.almodon.com)

TURKISH CONNECTIONS WITH THE SNA/SIG

JULY 2022

-  M4 STRIP
-  AFRIN
-  IDLIB REGION
-  EUPHRATES SHIELD



The way in which Turkey has made such a disparate kaleidoscope of armed groups fall in line with its interests is complex and multi-pronged. For example, Turkey allows its militias to abuse and rob local populations - particularly in Kurdish-majority areas - in order to keep faction leaders funded. It also allows militias to engage in turf wars, even playing them off against one another, so as to prevent any one faction from growing too powerful. At times, Turkey will even intervene in such squabbles and present itself as a peacemaker and responsible state actor. Yet the insecurity which so often plagues the occupied territories is a conscious policy, not a loss of control. Turkey can delineate each militia's area of operation with an iron fist if it so chooses. For example, in the summer of 2021, the Turkish army deployed Jaysh al-Islam militiamen to replace fighters in some of Ahrar al-Sharqiya's positions.³⁰⁴

Turkey's role as the ultimate authority in these areas has made accountability for crimes committed near-to impossible. The establishment of a unified internal code of conduct for the SNA militias in 2019 has proven ineffective in applying "discipline and compliance with the principles of military professionalism, and respecting the hierarchy in addition to complete representation of the values of the Syrian revolution, which arose against the regime of oppression, corruption, and sectarianism."³⁰⁵ On the other hand, although there are currently a large number and multiplicity of judicial committees there is an absence of a central reference body and the existence of a state of judicial chaos. SNA militias have repeatedly tried to influence, coerce, and infiltrate this judiciary branch so as to not be held accountable. Most of these judicial committees are supported by or affiliated with one or more factions. For example, despite the presence of the 'Committee to Respond to Grievances and Rights' in the case of violations committed by 'Abu Amsha' and his Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, the committee did not investigate the case due to an agreement made within the Azm Unified Command Room (of which Suleiman Shah Division is a member) to create a separate, tripartite accountability committee. Such acts, however, muddy the waters in relation to the basis of jurisprudence, law, and supreme judicial authority in occupied territories.³⁰⁶

In early 2021, an unofficial border crossing began operating in an area called Tufaha (Arabic for apple),³⁰⁷ which lies between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, connecting Turkish-backed, opposition-controlled areas and AANES-administered territories in northern Raqqa governorate. According to local sources, Tufaha facilitates a booming illegal business run by Abu Hatem Shaqra, Ahrar al-Sharqiya's leader. Control of Tufaha is shared with two other factions, Jaysh

³⁰⁴ twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1426406613460692994

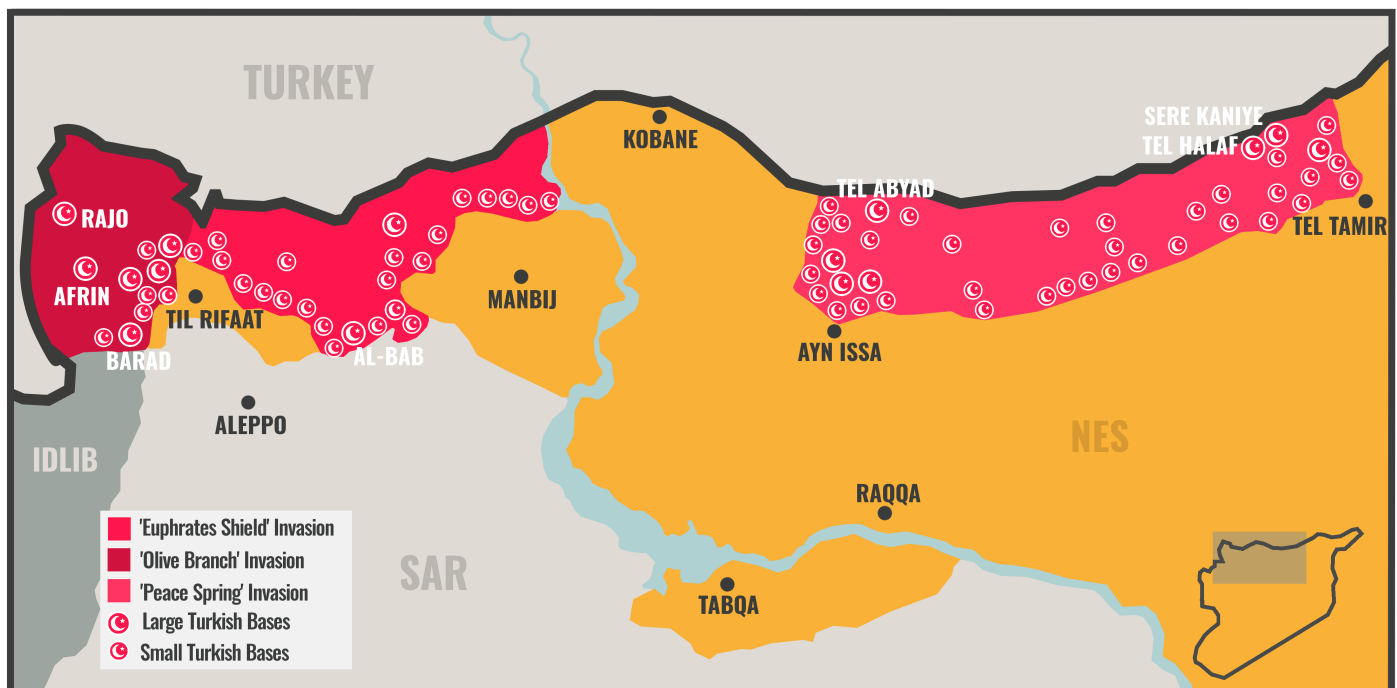
³⁰⁵ aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-syrian-national-army-code-of-conduct

³⁰⁶ enabbaladi.net/archives/538597#ixzz7LFQfehee

³⁰⁷ rb.gy/mpfirv (www.al-monitor.com)

al-Sharqiya and the 20th Division.³⁰⁸ Turkey has also deployed its military directly on the ground, building a large number of bases and guard posts that continued operating after the three military operations on Syrian soil. The aforementioned European University Institute publication described Turkish deployment in Syria in January of 2021 in detail.³⁰⁹ In addition, RIC has been able to determine the location of dozens of bases across the occupied territories. According to RIC’s own count, Turkey maintains at least 118 bases, outposts, and watch towers in the region (see map below).

TURKISH MILITARY BASES IN NORTHERN SYRIA



The SNA has made several statements underlining their strategic commitment to Turkey. According to the SNA itself, the two contact points between it and Turkey are, firstly, that “The battle against terrorism requires a long-term strategic alliance” - that is to say, the SNA’s attacks against the US-backed SDF that operate in NES and any future Turkish invasion of the region is and will be conducted jointly; and secondly that “The parameters of Turkish foreign policy go beyond the terrorism portfolio” - that is to say, that Turkey supposedly supports the opposition’s plans for Syria as part of its own geostrategic policy.³¹⁰ Turkey’s military presence in the region – established through a multitude of Turkish outposts across the contact line – acts as assurance for both. Through their strategic positioning, Turkey continues to be able to attack SDF-held areas, while also being able to pressure the Assad government.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ rb.gy/dugbs3 (op.europa.eu)

³¹⁰ www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-syrian-national-army-perspective-on

In summary, although a few groups do not fully meet the profile, the militias constituting the SNA in the occupied territories in Afrin, the 'Euphrates Shield' area, and the 'M4 Strip' should be described as Turkish proxies in the current Syrian Civil War. The weakness of the SIG to create a political and civil body to fulfill the necessities of the local population, and the lack of military means and training of the SNA are crucial reasons for their alliance with Turkey. For years, Turkey has allowed them to profit economically from the occupation in exchange for molding the structure of the SIG and SNA always in its favor, having reserved the ultimate right of decision in military and political affairs. In this sense also, in view of the assimilation processes that have been launched since the Turkish military operations 'Euphrates Shield', 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring' between the years 2016-2019, the annexation process is underway.



Celebration of the 11th anniversary of the Syrian revolution, with the presence of SOC President (left), the SIG President (center), the SIG Minister of Defense (right) and the SNA leaders (background), March 17th 2022

6. THE OCCUPATION AS A PART OF TURKISH INTERNAL POLICY

The fact that the militias of the SNA specifically, but also the SIG – both at one time pillars of anti-government opposition in Syria – have become Turkish proxies suggest that, rather than independent actors within the Syrian conflict, these groups are simply products of Erdoğan's ruling strategy within Turkey. Thus, these Turkish-backed proxies have to be evaluated as an extension of internal Turkish politics.

6.1 ERDOĞAN'S (PARA-)MILITARY COMPLEX

The SNA militias and the Turkish government have formed close links. Since he became president of Turkey in 2014, Erdoğan has created a private military and paramilitary system, deployed without official oversight for domestic and foreign operations, in what some observers have titled his 'neo-Ottoman' ambitions. The SNA, as will be outlined below, is to be understood as a useful foreign addition to Erdoğan's growing military and paramilitary complex.³¹¹ In order to understand the roots of these forces, it is necessary to examine the role of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) throughout the history of the Republic of Turkey.

Given their role in the foundation of the modern Turkish nation-state, the TAF have always regarded themselves as the true guardians of the Republic. Driven by the imperative of loyalty to the state's interests, as defined by the "deep state",³¹² the TAF engaged in military coups to redress policies that were perceived by them to threaten the state. Across decades, the lack of law enforcement and punishment encouraged deep state elements to continue their activities. Such behavior legitimized covert operations for "the sake of the state" and deeply affected Turkey's political culture. The Islamist AKP, a former adversary of the deep state, took control of the Turkish state structure in the 21st century and inherited the modus operandi of the deep state in dealing with its own adversaries.

The AKP was created in 2001 by Erdoğan, who had been mayor of Istanbul between 1994 and 1998, before being briefly imprisoned.³¹³ The party first

³¹¹ jiss.org.il/en/yanarocak-spyer-turkish-militias-and-proxies/

³¹² The concept of "Deep state" refers to a form of clandestine government of a State, operated through networks of covert power groups, in pursuit of their own agenda and goals, independently and in parallel to the legitimate and/or democratically elected government.

³¹³ In 1998 Erdoğan was sentenced to ten months in prison for having publicly recited a poem by the national poet Ziya Gökalp ("Mosques are our barracks, domes our helmets, minarets our bayonets, and believers our soldiers"). The Turkish Constitutional Court considered this act as an attack against the secular principles of the Republic and accused him of religious intolerance.

won the parliamentary elections in November 2002 and has since headed the national government of Turkey. In 2002, the AKP defined itself as a conservative party and rejected the term 'Islamist' (Turkey's constitution established the country as a secular state and prohibits any political parties that promote Islamism or Sharia law). Yet the AKP's main appeal lay in its strong discourse against corruption and the establishment. Erdoğan himself publicly pointed out that he did not "agree with those who say the deep state does not exist. It does exist. It always has — and it did not start with the Republic; it dates back to Ottoman times. It's simply a tradition. It must be minimized, and if possible even annihilated."³¹⁴ After 2007 the ideology of the party shifted further towards Turkish nationalism and Islamism,³¹⁵ and began launching successive constitutional reforms, accompanied by arrest campaigns against the media and judiciary. This helped the AKP reach a level of influence over Turkish politics no other non-Kemalist party had ever had in the Republic's history.³¹⁶ If the Turkish 'deep state', controlled by the TAF, had previously executed three successful coups in 1960, in 1971 and in 1980 in order to defend the founding republican values against populist and left parties and people, one of the AKP's lasting legacies was to align the 'deep state', including the TAF, with the party's nationalist-Islamist values in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of July 2016.

Turkey has been a NATO member since 1952. After the military alliance asked the member states to establish special operations units that could organize armed resistance in case of Soviet invasion, all NATO countries including Turkey formed special units. Immediately after Turkey's 1971 coup d'état, Turkey established a special unit under the name "Department of Special Warfare" (Özel Harp Dairesi, ÖHD). While the ÖHD was formally part of the TAF's structure, few knew of its existence. This entity, also known by the nickname 'Gladio' (after the Italian branch of the same NATO/CIA operation), was tasked with carrying out covert operations for the state and making necessary preparations to cope with a possible Soviet invasion. It became the Turkish state's main instrument for carrying out its "dirty business" such as assassination, kidnapping, and sabotage against Turkish leftists and Kurdish political activists. Thus, the use of non-formal units became a feature of Turkish political and military culture.

³¹⁴ web.archive.org/web/20110719035831/http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2007/01/29/yaz09-40-105.html

³¹⁵ On April 2016, the Turkish Parliament Speaker and AKP politician İsmail Kahraman told a conference of Islamic scholars and writers in Istanbul that "secularism would not have a place in a new constitution", as Turkey is "a Muslim country and so we should have a religious constitution" (rb.gy/lqtv6m)

³¹⁶ Kemalism is the founding official ideology of the Republic of Turkey, implemented by the first president of the Republic Mustafa Kemal, and defined by sweeping political, social, cultural and religious reforms designed to separate the new Turkish state from its Ottoman predecessor and embrace a Modern, democratic and secular nation-state, with a Western-style modernized lifestyle.

Linked to the use of non-formal units, one must also mention the Grey Wolves, a group established as the youth branch of the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), the ideology of which is Pan-Turkism, seeking to unify all Turkic peoples into a single nation stretching from the Adriatic Sea to China. The main task of the Grey Wolves was fighting against perceived threats of the supporters of Turkish left parties and the Kurdish movement led by the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK). The involvement of the Grey Wolves in Turkey's Special Operations Unit increased significantly after the 1980 military coup. Upon the declaration of an alliance between MHP and AKP in 2015, ultra-nationalist Grey Wolves members became more publicly active in domestic politics and acted to deter and intimidate leftist opposition voices inside Turkey. Given its strict hierarchical organizational infrastructure, the Grey Wolves is controlled by the MHP in Turkey, and the political alliance between AKP and MHP provides government shelter and support to the Grey Wolves, as well as some legitimacy. But the activities and aggressive policies of the Grey Wolves have also caused problems in Europe, which has an important Turkish diaspora. In Germany and Austria are 270 registered centers linked to the Grey Wolves. In France, the Turkish ultranationalist group also has a presence, but in November 2020 the French government banned the Grey Wolves accusing the organization of leading violent actions and inciting hatred in France.³¹⁷ Some months later the European parliament also recommended in a report to place the "Turkish extremist nationalist 'Grey Wolves' on the EU's list of terror organizations".³¹⁸

Furthermore, as Turkey became an active party in the Syrian Civil War, the Grey Wolves joined the fighting alongside Syrian Turkmen, who are considered part of the pan-Turkic family. As was during the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), Grey Wolves began to enroll in new Turkmen armed brigades that were named after the Ottoman sultans such as Sultan Murat, Abdulhamid Han, Mehmet the Conqueror, and Yavuz Sultan Selim. The recruitment was even conducted publicly via Turkish pro-government newspapers such as 'Yeni Şafak' and 'Star'. The papers argued that



Grey Wolves militants in the Latakian mountains at south of Idlib region, February 2016

³¹⁷ <https://rb.gy/hkizcw> (www.apnews.com)

³¹⁸ vdc-nsy.com/archives/47791

these groups were in fact defending the Turkmen homeland inherited from the Ottomans. The involvement of the Grey Wolves in Syria under state sponsorship illustrated the bond between Erdoğan's Neo-Ottomanism (a political ideology that defends a greater involvement of Turkey in the territories belonging to the Ottoman Empire, reclaiming the elements of Islam and the Caliphate, as an alternative state vision to Kemalism) and MHP head Devlet Bahçeli's Pan-Turkism (an intellectual and political movement advocating the union of all Turkic peoples, from the ancient Ottoman Empire, Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan), especially in its vindication of the territorial project of the Misak-ı Millî. "The heedless people who ask the question, what are we doing in Libya, what are we looking for in Syria, are nothing but defeated and mankurts whose bayonets have fallen and their loyalty has melted away. The border line of homeland defense will start from the last threshold of the National Pact [Misak-ı Millî] map", said the president of the MHP Devlet Bahçeli.³¹⁹

The Misak-ı Millî plan has lately gained notoriety as the centenary Treaty of Lausanne approaches and a real Neo-ottoman agenda is being promoted by the current Turkish government. The adverse outcome of the war for Turkey, with the capitulation of 1918 and Allied plans to form a future Greek state under British control on both shores of the Aegean Sea, boosted Turkish nationalism, a movement led by the military leader Mustafa Kemal (also known as Atatürk or "father of the Turks"). It is in this context that in the early 1920s, a plan known as Misak-ı Millî (National Pact) was drafted in the last term of the Ottoman Parliament, to regain its former territories (Western Thrace, the Aleppo region, Mosul Region and Cyprus), lost by his defeat in the First World War, by organizing referendums. This decree was published in February 1920 and led the British, French, and Italians to occupy Constantinople in March, and to the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres in August 1920 by the last Ottoman Grand Vizier. Kemal was elected president by the Grand Assembly in Ankara in 1920 and refused to accept the Treaty of Sevres, which provided for the creation of an independent state in Armenia, the separation of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Arabia from the former empire, creation of an autonomous Kurdistan and the delivery to Greece of the Anatolian zone of the Aegean Sea. The Turkish nationalist movement started the so-called Turkish War of Independence against the reigning sultan in 1920, which overlapped with the Greco-Turkish war to implement the resolutions of the Treaty of Sèvres. The victory of the Turkish nationalists in August 1922 allowed Mustafa Kemal to abolish the sultanate and renegotiate a new international Treaty for a new Turkish Republic. In July 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, defining the European borders of Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey, as well as those of Cyprus, Egypt, Sudan, Syria, and Iraq.

³¹⁹ twitter.com/MHP_Bilgi/status/1270070497288622085

In recent years Erdoğan himself started to repeatedly and publicly question the articles of the treaty, creating diplomatic tension with neighboring countries, showing that he believes that the Treaty of Lausanne will expire in 2023.³²⁰ The growing rift with Greece and Cyprus over the hydrocarbon sources and naval borders must be seen in that context, as well as the involvement in the war in Libya and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the reinforcement of the alliance with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq and the consecutive Turkish military operations in northern Syria and later creation of the SNA-SIG proxies. "We are determined to enter 2023, when we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of our republic, as a stronger, more independent, and more prosperous country economically, militarily, politically, and diplomatically," stated Erdoğan on the 98th anniversary of the Lausanne Treaty.³²¹

The other wheel set in motion by the Turkish intervention in Syria has been SADAT, established in 2012 as the only privately-owned defense consulting firm in Turkey. The company was founded by former General Tanriverdi, a member of Turkey's Special Warfare Unit and of northern Cyprus' Civil Defense Organization. Tanriverdi and Erdoğan have known each other since 1994 when both served in Istanbul, Erdoğan as mayor and Tanriverdi as commander of Maltepe military base in the city. The two leaders forged a strong relationship - Tanriverdi served as an adviser to Erdoğan and as a member of the Presidency's Security and Foreign Policy Committee until two years ago.³²² On SADAT's website, the organization, and Tanriverdi personally, advocate for pan-Islamic unity (particularly to counter Israel), while portraying the company as the platform for cooperation among (Sunni) Muslim-majority states. SADAT envisions ways in which these states can become self-sufficient military powers.

During the Syrian Civil War, and from the start, the firm helped the Turkish government train and supply opposition fighters from a variety of militias, including the forerunners of HTS. According to a 2012 report from the opposition *Aydınlık* newspaper, SADAT established several bases in the Istanbul and Marmara region for the purpose of carrying out this training. This report was one of the first in the Turkish media to identify the existence of SADAT, and its role as a trainer of proxy forces for Turkey. Recently, notorious public discussions erupted in Turkey after accusations that exiled mob boss Sedat Peker, once a vocal supporter of Erdoğan's government, helped send shipments of arms and military equipment including drones to the Turkmen rebels in Syria's Bayırbucak region after MIT trucks filled with weapons bound for Syrian jihadists were stopped by security forces near the border back in 2014,³²³ and

³²⁰ rb.gy/dhmscy (nordicmonitor.com)

³²¹ www.yenisafak.com/en/news/Erdoğan-marks-98th-anniversary-of-lausanne-treaty-3577101

³²² rb.gy/muqpoh (www.al-monitor.com)

³²³ rb.gy/wapr75 (www.duvarenglish.com)

that they were destined for al-Nusra Front.³²⁴ Syria was the first and prime example of a new method of Erdoğan's proxy warfare strategy, using local mercenary forces recruited with the involvement of a quasi-governmental agency SADAT, minimizing international criticism and judiciary responsibilities. These forces, and these methods, were then employed in Libya and Karabakh to further Turkish foreign policy goals, when militiamen from the SNA were sent to fight alongside the Turkish Army. Turkey also established 13 new recruiting offices for SNA militias across Afrin in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan. The SNA mercenaries would be paid between 2-3,000 USD for their service.³²⁵ In mid-2021, around 2,600 SNA militia Suleiman Shah Division fighters graduated under the Turkish standard, due to be shipped as mercenaries to Afghanistan, where they would guard Kabul Airport as US forces retreated. Only as a result of the rapid Taliban take-over of the country did Turkey's deployment never materialize.

In brief, apart from relying on the TAF for Turkey's extraterritorial military campaigns, Erdoğan used the Grey Wolves, SADAT, and other elements in the implementation of his neo-ottoman aims for Turkey. These organizations have been tasked with serving Erdoğan's ambitions abroad, while also, crucially, securing and guaranteeing Erdoğan's rule in Turkey against any coup attempts.



A SNA fighter flashes the Grey Wolves gesture as a convoy travels along the Turkish border with Syria, November 2020

³²⁴ rb.gy/muqpoh (www.al-monitor.com)

³²⁵ rb.gy/tcjele (rojavainformationcenter.com)

6.2 DOMESTIC SUPPORT FOR THE OPERATIONS IN SYRIA

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think-tank published a piece titled 'How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy' in September 2021 analyzing the connection between Turkish involvement in the Syrian Civil War and Erdoğan's internal political battle to remain in power.³²⁶ The timing and scope of Turkey's military operations in Syria are deeply rooted in domestic Turkish priorities. One of Erdoğan's main considerations has been the fear-mongering over the Kurdish autonomous territories on its southern border, which at home has served the president as a pretext for the Turkish government to suppress the rights of Kurds living in Turkey and limit their parliamentary representation to secure a landmark constitutional reform in 2017. In the following years, successive military operations in Syria have helped Erdoğan connect with increasingly nationalistic constituencies and drum up support around key electoral dates. Finally, after the failed coup in July 2016, the Turkish government's Syria policy played a major role in rebuilding the credibility of the TAF while redrawing the balance between civilian and military power.

The TAF today is a key actor in Erdoğan's political agenda even though, historically, the TAF has been the core of the secular Kemalist project in Turkey. Even as the AKP's Islamist turn took hold in the early 2000s, the TAF remained the central bastion against this drift. This all changed after July 2016, when a failed attempt at overthrowing Erdoğan's government took place in Turkey. During this coup, a section of the TAF, allegedly under the command of the outlawed Gülen movement, launched a coordinated operation in several major cities to topple the government and its president. Soldiers and tanks took to the streets and a number of explosions rang out across Ankara and Istanbul. After the coup plotters surrendered, Erdoğan said that "this uprising is a gift from God to us because this will be a reason to cleanse our army"³²⁷ and claimed that it had been led by the one who was his political ally for two decades, Fethullah Gülen.³²⁸ The Turkish government was handed the opportunity to suppress, once and for all, the army's influence on Turkish politics. In the first year after the failed coup, nearly 140,000 government employees were "dismissed or suspended" from their posts and more than 50,000 people were arrested. The purges heavily affected the TAF, where 45% of generals and admirals were dismissed. With Erdoğan's counter-coup underway, it was necessary to reconstruct the image and chain of command of the TAF, since the media and the government itself had discredited the TAF as a "parallel state" under the control of the Gülen movement. Additionally, by December 2016, the total number of Turkish military personnel had

³²⁶ carnegieendowment.org/files/Siccardi_-_Turkey_Syria-V3.pdf

³²⁷ economist.com/briefing/2016/07/23/after-the-coup-the-counter-coup

³²⁸ Fethullah Gülen is an Islamic cleric, living in exile in the US since 1999, and leader of the powerful Hizmet movement, which has a wide network of media, analysis centers, and education centers.

dropped by more than a third since before the coup attempt. That is why, as a study by the Council of Europe found:

One of the objectives of Turkey's 2016 and 2018 interventions in Syria was to rebuild Turkey's public support for the army. According to a series of surveys by Kas University, public trust in the Turkish Armed Forces dropped to a historic low of 47.7 percent in January 2017, a few months after the coup attempt and in the middle of Operation Euphrates Shield. Confidence in the armed forces was back to its usual level of approximately 60 percent a year later; the rebound followed the proclaimed success of Operation Euphrates Shield and ensured a high level of support for the government's Syria policy in the early days of Operation Olive Branch. Trust in the army dropped again in January 2019, before regaining its usual level in 2020 and 2021. By that time, the army had amply demonstrated its return to a high level of operational effectiveness.³²⁹

The most relevant political consequences of the Turkish military interventions in Syria have been in the electoral arena, more specifically in Erdoğan's struggle to stay in power. Two months after the victory of the Kurdish militia YPG/YPJ against ISIS in Kobane city in January 2015, Erdoğan officially ended the peace process with the PKK that began in 2013. A few days later, Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), announced his party's opposition to Erdoğan's proposed constitutional reform to change Turkey's system of government to an executive presidency. In June 2015, a Turkish general election was held, and, for the first time since 2002, support for the AKP decreased, leaving Erdoğan's party far from the parliamentary majority he had hoped for, and forcing him to enter negotiations to form a coalition government.

Kurdish residents watch from Turkey the developement of the Kobane battle against ISIS, December



The success of the HDP, which secured more than 13% of the vote and established itself as the country's second-largest opposition party was another shocking result. Elected Kurdish candidates represented a formidable obstacle to Erdoğan's goal of an executive presidency. The following months were marked by the resurgence of the armed clashes between the Turkish government and the PKK, and when the Turkish citizens went back to the polls in November 2015, Erdoğan's bloc won the parliamentary majority they had failed to gain in June, entering into an alliance with the right-wing MHP. It was then that the Turkish government deployed its full force in order to curtail the influence of Kurdish political representatives in Turkey. To this day, the Turkish state has imprisoned thousands of HDP officials, journalists, civil society activists, and anyone who publicly denounces Erdoğan's political line on terrorism charges. Erdoğan's campaign to link the HDP and PKK was extended to include the YPG/YPJ and the Kurdish PYD party in Syria. The latter are in favor of the application of democratic confederalism in Syria as propagated by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and do not hide that former members of the group operate within their ranks, as well as their support for the PKK guerrilla, yet act entirely independently of the PKK and do not stage attacks within Turkey's borders. Instead, the "securitisation" of the 'Kurdish question', after years of a rapprochement policy of the Erdoğan government towards Kurdish voters and a peace process with the PKK, served his government with a reason to criminalize and dismantle anything Kurdish-related, including the HDP – then a formidable opposition party.³³⁰ In the second instance, it rallied Turkish nationalist votes around Erdoğan, handing his political alliance the slim parliamentary majority he sought.

At the very time ISIS was reaching its zenith just over the border in Syria, the Erdoğan government was accused of failing to take action. Foreign ISIS fighters enjoyed freedom of movement between Turkey and Syria, while Turkey was accused of actively providing funds, logistics, training, and arms to the extremist group.³³¹ ³³² It was only in the aftermath of the Siege of Kobane (in January 2015), when the newly-formed SDF, of which the YPG/YPJ was the largest partner force, began forcing back ISIS with the help of the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. As the SDF announced in mid-2016 it would advance against ISIS-held Jarablus and al-Bab, threatening to connect Kurdish-majority Afrin and Kobane, president Erdoğan announced its first Syrian operation, baptized 'Euphrates Shield': "This morning at 4 a.m. [August 24th 2016] an operation started in northern Syria against terror groups which constantly threaten our country, like ISIS and the PYD".³³³ The military cam-

³²⁹ carnegieendowment.org/files/Siccardi_-_Turkey_Syria-V3.pdf

³³⁰ swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkeys-military-operations-in-syria-and-iraq

³³¹ danielpipes.org/14486/turkey-isis

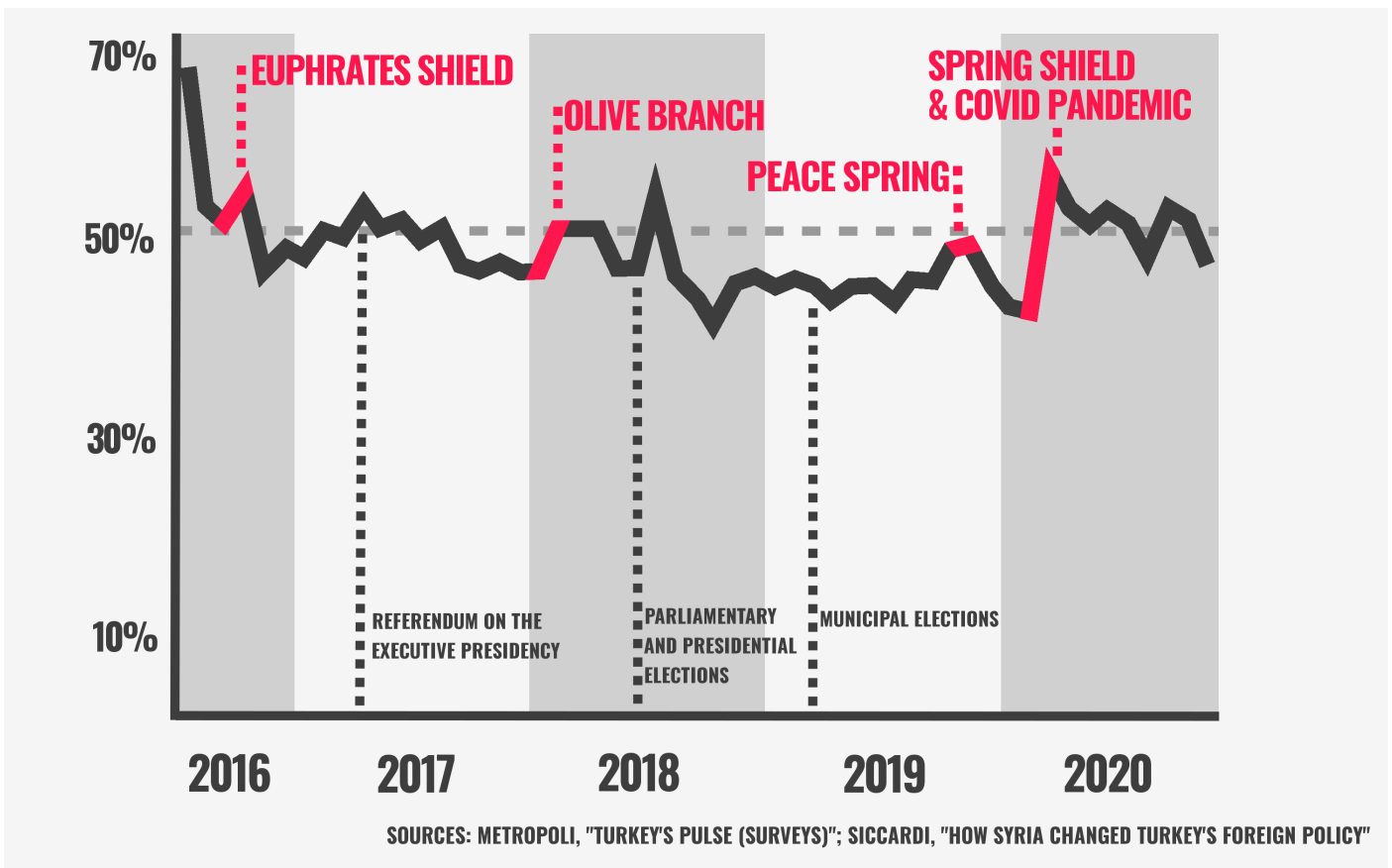
³³² newsweek.com/isis-and-turkey-cooperate-destroy-kurds-former-isis-member-reveals-turkish-282920

³³³ foxnews.com/world/turkey-takes-aim-at-isis-but-also-targets-americas-kurdish-allies

paigned cut off the SDF's advance towards Afrin and established the first area of Turkish control in northern Syria, a military victory and strategic success that enhanced Erdoğan's image.

A month after the end of operation 'Euphrates Shield', in April 2017, a constitutional referendum was held in Turkey to replace the existing parliamentary system with an executive presidency and a presidential system. The referendum went ahead with several irregularities in the ballots and was won only by a whisker, with 51% of votes in favor and 49% against. Yet Erdoğan finally achieved an invaluable expansion of his powers as president of the Republic of Turkey, effectively dismantling the separation of powers and taking legislative authority away from parliament. Since then, Turkish military operations in Syria show a similar pattern, in which the beginning and end of each operation have had direct results in popular polls in Turkey, be it support for the AKP-MHP government and President Erdoğan, or for the TAF (see graphic below).

TURKISH MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SYRIA AND ERDOĞAN'S APPROVAL RAITING



Francesco Siccardi,³³⁴ author of the Carnegie Endowment publication, describes this interdependence between the Turkish Military Operations in Syria and Erdoğan's approval ratings as follows:

Notably, the key moments since 2016 in the Turkish government's fight against the Kurds and its interventions in Syria have coincided with Turkey's major votes: the April 2017 referendum on the executive presidency, the June 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections, and the March 2019 municipal elections.

Turkey's military operations in Syria have boosted the Turkish government's increasingly nationalistic rhetoric and weakened its political opponents. Operations 'Euphrates Shield' and 'Olive Branch' were crucial to drumming up the support of nationalists in the lead-up to the April 2017 referendum and the June 2018 elections, respectively. Meanwhile, Operations Peace Spring in October 2019 and Spring Shield in February – March 2020 both followed historic drops in Erdoğan's approval ratings (see figure 1).

[...] Reinforcing the partnership with the nationalists became crucial to securing Erdoğan's future election as the country's first executive president. Operation Olive Branch was critical in this respect. Turkey's March 2018 military victory against the Kurdish forces in Afrin Canton was quickly followed by an announcement that the presidential and parliamentary elections originally scheduled for November 2019 were to be brought forward to June 2018.

[...] Since 2018, the People's Alliance [the electoral alliance between AKP and MHP] has been steering the Turkish government to the right. On the foreign policy front, this shift has translated into a more assertive stance, with flashpoints in the eastern Mediterranean, Libya, the south Caucasus, and (of course) Syria. On the domestic front, this strategy has gone hand in hand with increasingly nationalistic rhetoric and measures to further undermine the role of Turkey's democratic opposition.

The HDP has remained the target of government attacks. The crackdown has intensified after key moments, such as the AKP's defeat in the March 2019 municipal elections, in which the support of the pro-Kurdish party was crucial to securing the victory of then candidate and current mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, and the October 2019 Operation Peace Spring, on the margins of which seven HDP mayors were removed from office on terrorism charges.

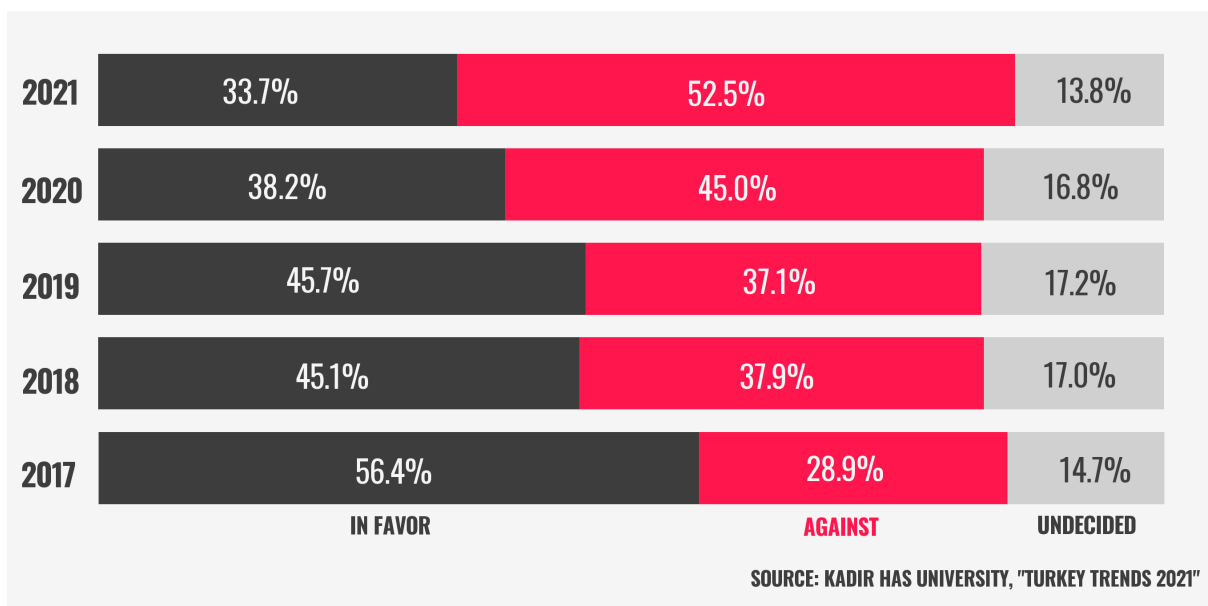
[...] These trends are in full swing in the lead-up to Turkey's next general election, currently scheduled to coincide with the Republic of Turkey's centennial in 2023. On June 21st 2021, the Turkish Constitutional Court accepted an indictment lodged by Bekir Şahin, the chief public prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, against the HDP for alleged links to the PKK. In the next few months, the trial could lead to the dissolution of the HDP and a ban to prevent its members from running for office for the next five years.³³⁵

³³⁴ rb.gy/bg4jkm (be.linkedin.com)

³³⁵ carnegieendowment.org/files/Siccardi_-_Turkey_Syria-V3.pdf

Although Erdoğan has so far used repeated invasions of northern Syria to garner political support (the four Turkish military operations in Syria happened when Erdoğan's approval rating fell below 50% and have always produced a spike in public approval to at least 50%), Turks are growing increasingly wary of cross-border military operations, in part because, since the beginning of the military operations in August 2016, a total of 273–329 Turkish Forces servicemen have reportedly been killed.³³⁵ During previous key electoral moments, the number of Turks in support of renewed invasions steadily beat those who did not. Yet since 2020 those numbers have been reversed. In 2021, a majority of the Turkish population (53%) did not support Turkey's wars in the name of counter-terrorism; only a third (34%) still saw them in a positive light (see graphic below).³³⁶

TURKISH SUPPORT FOR CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS

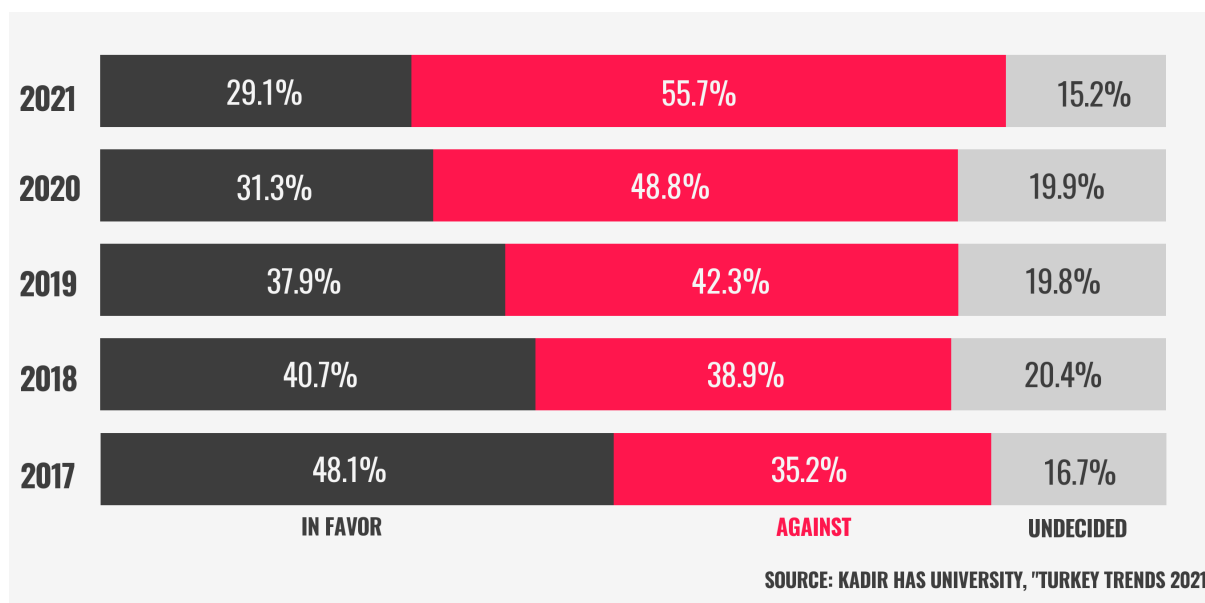


Likewise, support for the presence or establishment of military bases abroad has also been decreasing since 2017, to the point where currently only 29% of the Turkish population is in favor of said option. This loss of public support is significant for the Turkish government, as the Turkish Army has numerous military bases and observation posts in Syria, both in the SNA-controlled and HTS-controlled Idlib areas (see graphic next page).

³³⁶ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_Armed_Forces_casualties_in_Syria#cite_ref-11

³³⁷ khas.edu.tr/sites/khas.edu.tr/files/inline-files/turkeytrends-web-press.pdf

TURKISH SUPPORT FOR MILITARY PRESENCE ABROAD



In summary, it is clear that the successive Turkish military operations in Syrian territory cannot be separated from the electoral campaigns launched by the current Turkish president, Erdoğan. The timing and scope of Turkey's military operations in Syria have been deeply rooted in domestic Turkish priorities. A major contributing factor as of May 2022 that could condition Turkish action in Syria is the growing political price the Turkish president is paying for the roughly 3.7 million Syrian refugees who sought refuge in the country. The issue is high on voters' agenda, with rising xenophobia following Turkey's economic woes, national opinion polls show significant support for sending Syrians back to their country (though the Syrians are at the center of the controversy, the rising popular resentment is directed at all categories of foreigners from Middle Eastern and Western Asian countries).³³⁸ Erdoğan, who had previously resisted opposition calls to repatriate Syrians, announced plans to 'voluntarily' return one million Syrians to 13 occupied areas in May 2022.³³⁹ In summary, the continued presence of the Turkish Army in Syria is, more than ever, in the hands of its commander-in-chief. With opinion polls increasingly disfavoring further incursions, and a progressive loss of support for the Turkish government, he may feel forced to rethink his policy in light of the upcoming 2023 Turkish presidential election – or decide to double down on the existing course.

³³⁸ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/turkeys-potential-xenophobia-goes-beyond-syrian-refugees

³³⁹ rb.gy/suvmbn (www.al-monitor.com)

6.3 THE FUTURE OF SNA AND ERDOĞAN

Due to the multiple connections between Turkish state institutions which Erdoğan now directly controls (the TAF, the MIT, etc.) and SNA militias, and the fact that the Turkish occupation as a political project of the Turkish president, one can conclude that the very existence of the SNA depends on Erdoğan's political future. Fighting any Kurdish autonomy movement has been Erdoğan's electoral battle horse for at least eight years. In his attempt at projecting power beyond Turkey's borders and becoming a key regional player with a say on the international stage, Erdoğan has employed former-revolutionary Syrian militias in North Africa, the Caucasus, and, of course, Syria. Where the SNA militias once fought the Syrian government, Turkey has turned them into proxies against its main rival in the country, the AANES, to which most Syrian Kurds belong to.

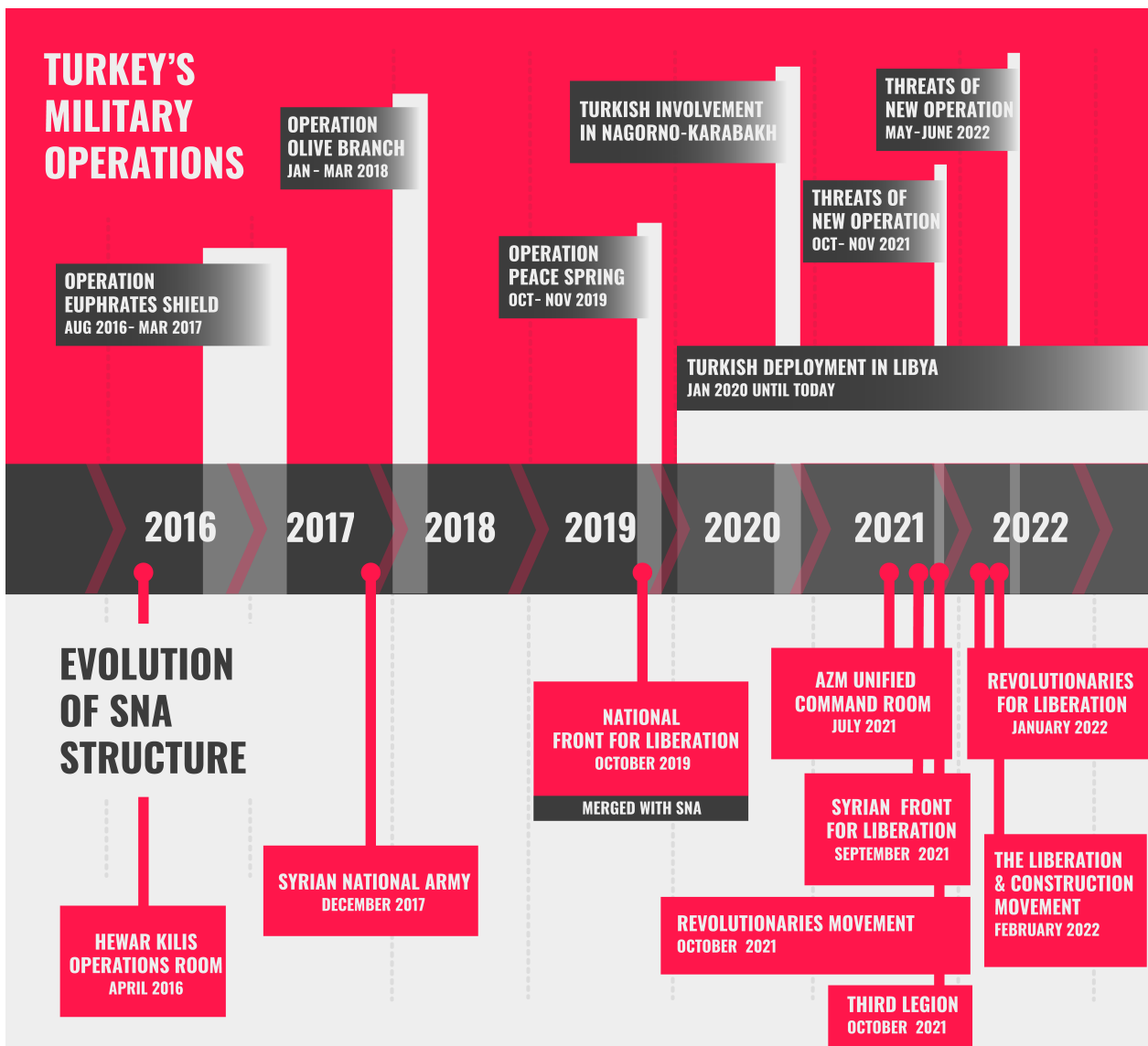
Just as Turkish military operations in Syria and Erdoğan's approval ratings are correlated, so too are the birth and structure of the SNA and subsequent Turkish invasions of Syria. As the first and second sections of this report show, there is a pattern of the SNA, before each Turkish military intervention, reorganizing its internal structure in order to make the invasion more effective. This pattern has repeated itself across the 'Euphrates Shield', 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring' invasions, as well as before Turkey's renewed invasions plans, which were scheduled for October/November 2021, but which Erdoğan finally tabled due to a lack of political will by either the US or Russia (see graphic next page).

The situation in northern Syria has to be evaluated as an extension of internal Turkish politics. An extension that could well end in a definitive annexation of the territories to the Turkish Republic, since in the regions of Afrin, al-Bab and Azaz, Jarablus, Tel Abyad, and Sere Kaniye, the process of Turkification is the military, political, social and cultural norm, which has been implemented by the SNA and the SIG. These goals have been cemented by the revival of the Ottoman irredentist 'Misak-ı Millî' ('National Pact') plan by President Erdoğan and his circle since his successful 2017 presidential referendum. Under the 1920 Ottoman Misak-ı Millî, Cyprus, parts of Georgia and Greece, the Syrian coast, and the territory between Aleppo and Mosul (including most of NES) should rightfully belong to the Turkish state. According to the president himself, Turkey should "reclaim" this National Pact.³⁴⁰

³⁴⁰ rb.gy/tmsa6j (www.bloomberght.com)

For the time being, Turkish support for the SNA seems certain, both because Turkey still finds itself with the necessary international acquiescence to remain in Syria, and because of the value that the militias hold for Turkey to be able to execute its foreign policy. There is, however, also the chance of a reversal, where Erdoğan withdraws support for the SNA, either because the current policy course in Syria becomes unfavorable (unlikely), or (more likely) due to a loss of political power following the 2023 Turkish presidential elections. Either way, the total or partial loss of Turkish support would be a definitive blow for the SNA militias and the territories they operate in, since they currently only survive on Turkish material and military support (such as currency, food, electricity, fuel, weapons, intelligence, etc.).

EVOLUTION OF TURKISH MILITARY OPERATIONS AND THE SNA



7. CONCLUSION

As this report has shown, the militias of the SNA, today occupying northern Syria, together with the SIG, and remnants of the Syrian opposition, have been co-opted by the Turkish government. Many of the militias now present in the SNA once fought against the government of Bashar al-Assad. Yet with the beginning of Turkish incursions into Syria in 2016, the SNA has been tailored to meet Turkish strategic objectives. This almost never includes fighting the government's SAA, but is rather focused towards Turkey's main enemy in the region: the SDF. Similarly, the Syrian territories in which the SNA is active today - bar the limited footprint it has in Idlib - is in a process of Islamization and, more importantly, Turkification.

Although the SNA militias are formally structured as a regular army according to legions, divisions, and brigades, on the ground the militias are organized in coordinated operations rooms, created by their ideological affinity, location, and proximity to Turkey. In this sense, as of June 2022, the militias inside the SNA are organized in four main blocs: the NFL on one side, and the three operations rooms under the Azm Unified Command Room, as the Third Legion, the Revolutionaries for Liberation, and LCM. This new structure began to form at the end of 2021, when Turkey threatened a new military invasion in the territories of the AANES, in order to gain operational effectiveness, but also as a way to control internal power struggles, infighting, and human rights violations by the militias. Thousands of cases of unlawful arrests and kidnappings, arrests involving extortion or torture, deaths, gender-based violence, theft, and extortion committed by the Turkish-backed militias have been recorded by domestic and international NGOs. According to the RIC's own database of rights violations in Afrin and the 'M4 Strip', in 2021, the SNA militias together with the Military and Civil Police, the MIT, and the Turkish army, unlawfully arrested 1,095 civilians (of which 236 extorted and 114 tortured during their arrest), committed 107 cases of gender-based violence, extorted civilians 434 times (outside of arrests), and murdered 88 civilians.³⁴¹

Despite the much-publicized rights violations, the presence of public former ISIS fighters within the SNA, including the protection of current prominent ISIS leaders in SNA controlled territories, as well as the various sanctions and inclusion on the list of terrorist organizations imposed by the international

³⁴⁰ See our quarterly State of the Occupation reports (rb.gy/kow9hn)

community on the different SNA militias, the situation on the ground does not appear to be changing for the better. On the contrary, the SNA's restructuring, which can only happen with Turkish approval, appears as an attempt to whitewash such crimes.

Beyond the SNA's dependence on the TAF and MIT, the successive Turkish military operations in Syria have been deeply rooted in domestic Turkish priorities and the foreign agenda of the AKP-MHP governmental coalition. For example, each time there was a Turkish Military Operation in Syria, Erdoğan's approval ratings went up, as well as helping to rebuild the Turkish public's support for the TAF. In addition, militiamen from the SNA were sent via Turkish private security companies to fight alongside the Turkish Army in Libya and also to help Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is also a pattern in the birth and structuring of the SNA according to which, anticipating each Turkish military intervention, the militias reorganized themselves to make the invasion more effective. These facts corroborate that the SNA militias are now proxies of Turkey, that Turkey is legally obliged to respect all its treaty and customary international law obligations, both those related to armed conflicts and international human rights law, that apply for cases of occupation regarding the treatment of civilians or their property which in this case are under de facto Turkish authority.

Therefore, the current situation in northern Syria has to be seen and evaluated, not only as a continuation of the Syrian Civil War, but as an extension of Turkish domestic politics. Thus, the successive Turkish military operations, rather than a solution to the conflict in Syria, have been a resource that President Erdoğan has used to his own electoral benefit, in addition to fulfilling geostrategic objectives. In this context, the SNA militias are now at the front-line of the 'neo-Ottoman' expansion project of the Turkish government, converted into a Turkish proxy force against the population of the former and current AANES-controlled territories.

Yet, Turkey's future appears more uncertain than ever. A weak lira and deteriorating economic prospects at home did not prevent the Erdoğan government from launching a renewed incursion into Iraqi Kurdistan in early 2022 – this time, as it seems, with the support of the Kurdistan Regional Government – against its long-time enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Nor did it stop Erdoğan from seeking to invade the SDF-held regions of Shehba and Manbij in summer of 2022.

A new Turkish invasion in Syria will mean continuing with the project of demographic change of northern Syrian territories via construction of new settlements and forced “voluntary return” of the Syrian refugees that nowadays reside in Turkey. It would continue the consolidation of a new Islamist project, at the expense of the model of democratic coexistence between Kurds, Arabs and other peoples that has been implemented for years in the north and east of Syria. More importantly, if this expansion of the Turkish occupation in Syria occurs, it would have the consent of both Russia and the United States, since Turkey now cannot take a single step in the Middle East without the approval of both powers. So one thing is for sure, the future of the SNA-SIG, as well as that of the people of Northern Syria, will be decided outside of Syria.

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