



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

THE SNA ENCYCLOPEDIA: A GUIDE TO THE TURKISH PROXY MILITIAS

AUGUST 2022



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SYRIAN AND MILITIA GROUPS

FSA: Free Syrian Army
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

DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES

AANES: Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
NES: North and East Syria
SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces
YPG/YPJ: People's and Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel/Jin)

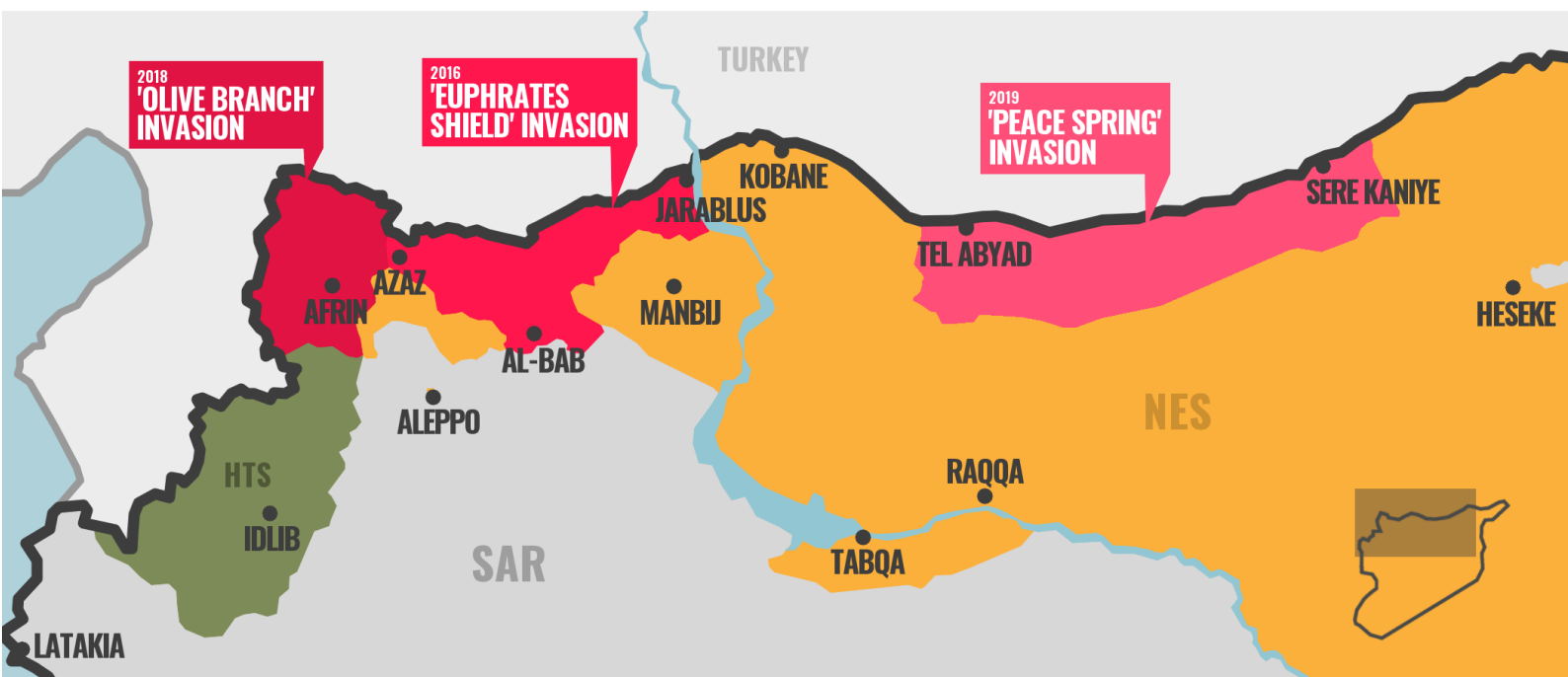
OTHERS

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

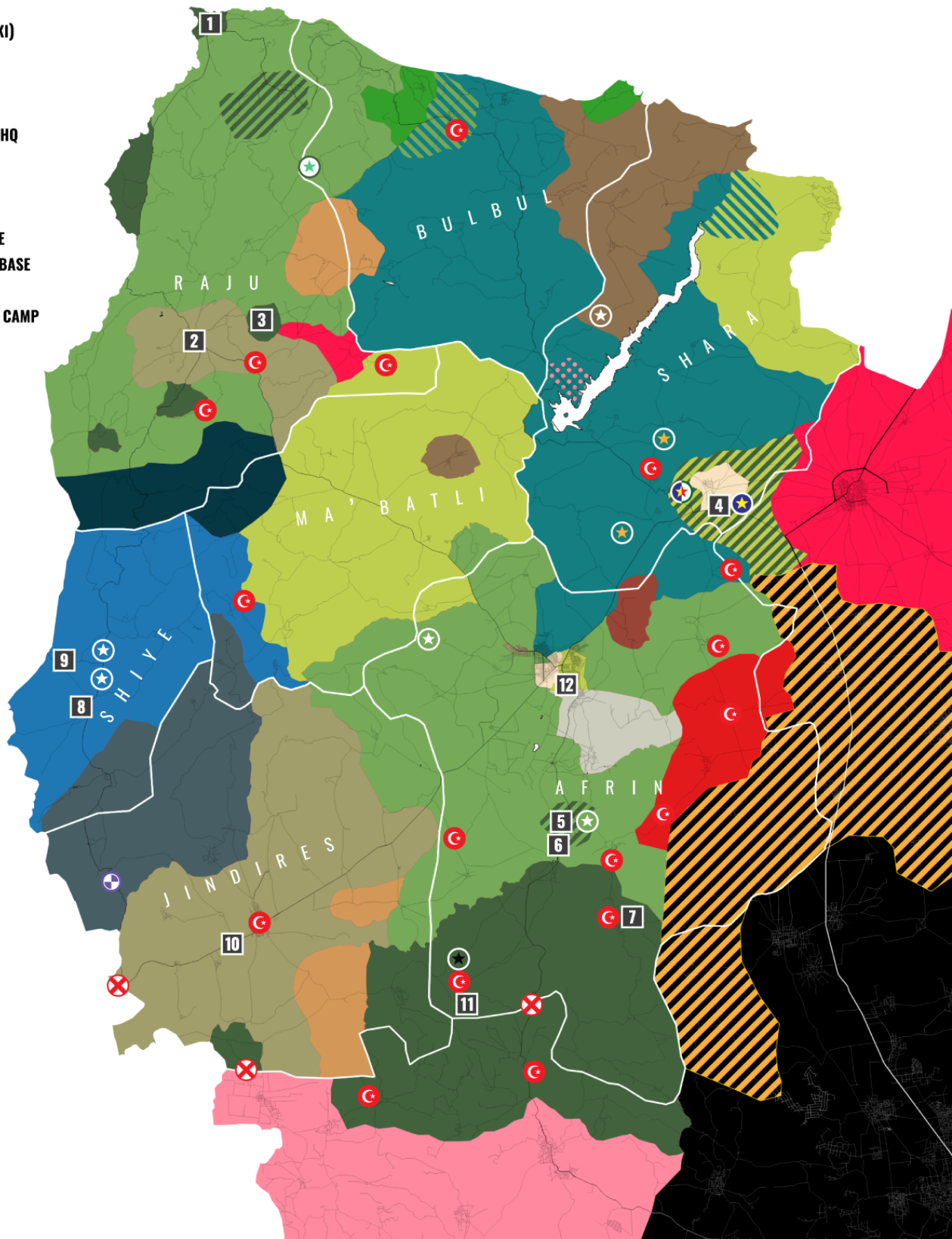
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION, JAYSH AL-NUKHBA, RAJUL AL-HARB
- AHRAR AL-SHAM
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- HAMZA DIVISION
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- JAYSH AL-ISLAM
- SULTAN MEHMED FATIH
- 13TH DIVISION
- SULEIMAN SHAH BRIGADE
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION
- SUQOUR AL-SHAM
- JAYSH AL-NUKHBA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

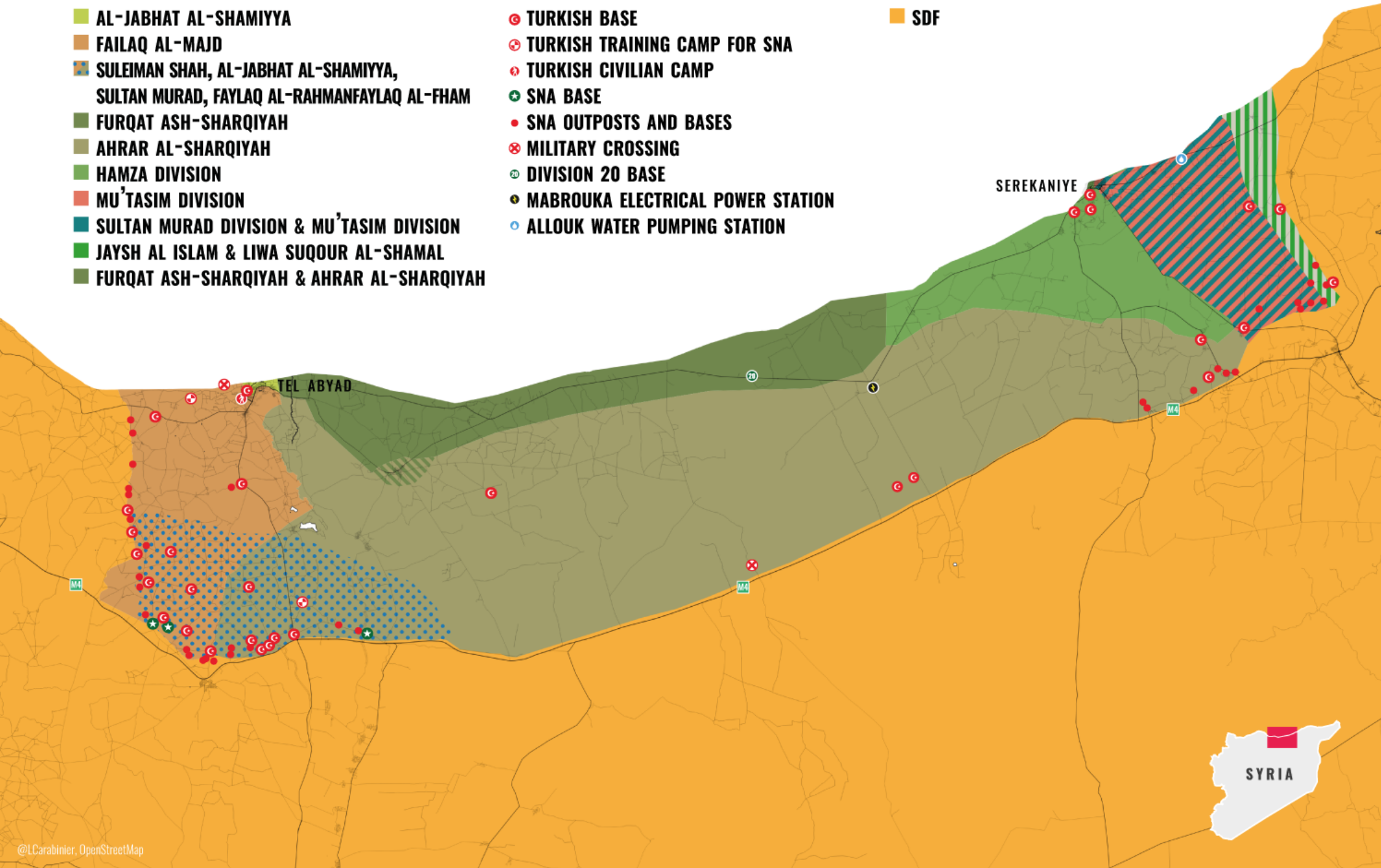


OCCUPIED M4 STRIP

- 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 a compilation of open-source information about the current state of the SNA militias active in the Turkish-occupied territories of Syria (as of August 2022). It updates the already existing descriptions of the SNA militias contained in our large report 'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria'. The latter report attempted to expand the scope of Rojava Information Center's 'State of the Occupation' quarterly reports, by providing a more thorough look at the relationship between the SNA and its political counterpart, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), as well as Turkish officials. With this encyclopedia, we seek to facilitate the work of researchers, humanitarian organizations, and official international and state agencies, and any other interested parties, in order to identify the myriad of armed groups present in northern Syria.

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.

The maps and graphs are based on data the RIC itself has collected, as well as that of third parties. The RIC cross-references its maps with open source and satellite data but nonetheless, the RIC makes no claim to completeness. Maps from Afrin and M4 Strip were created by cartographer and designer Eduardo Artica (@LCarabinier).

This 'Encyclopedia' omits the historical and political context in which the SNA militias have evolved to attain their current form, as the RIC already published a thorough report about the SNA militias, including an analysis of the history and current structure of the SNA, their relations with Turkey and the SIG.



Graduation ceremony of fighters from Hamza Divison, April 2021

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/zhdkt (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 a regular standing army, technically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). However, in practice, the subordination of the SNA to the SIG does not exist, since it is Turkey that appoints the SNA's senior positions and organizes the groups militarily.⁶ The SIG has benefited economically and diplomatically from its alliance with Turkey, since it decided to establish itself as the representative government within Turkish-occupied territories of Syria once the Euphrates Shield operation ended in April of 2017. RIC further addresses the connections between SNA, SIG, and Turkey in 'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria' report.

As of August 2022, the operational structure of the SNA can be represented with the following organization chart. (See graphic next page)

3. ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SNA FACTIONS

RIC presented a summary of the major SNA militias in its report 'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria' in July 2021. What follows is an updated version of this 'SNA 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.

⁶ rb.gy/lfgghy (stj-sy.org)

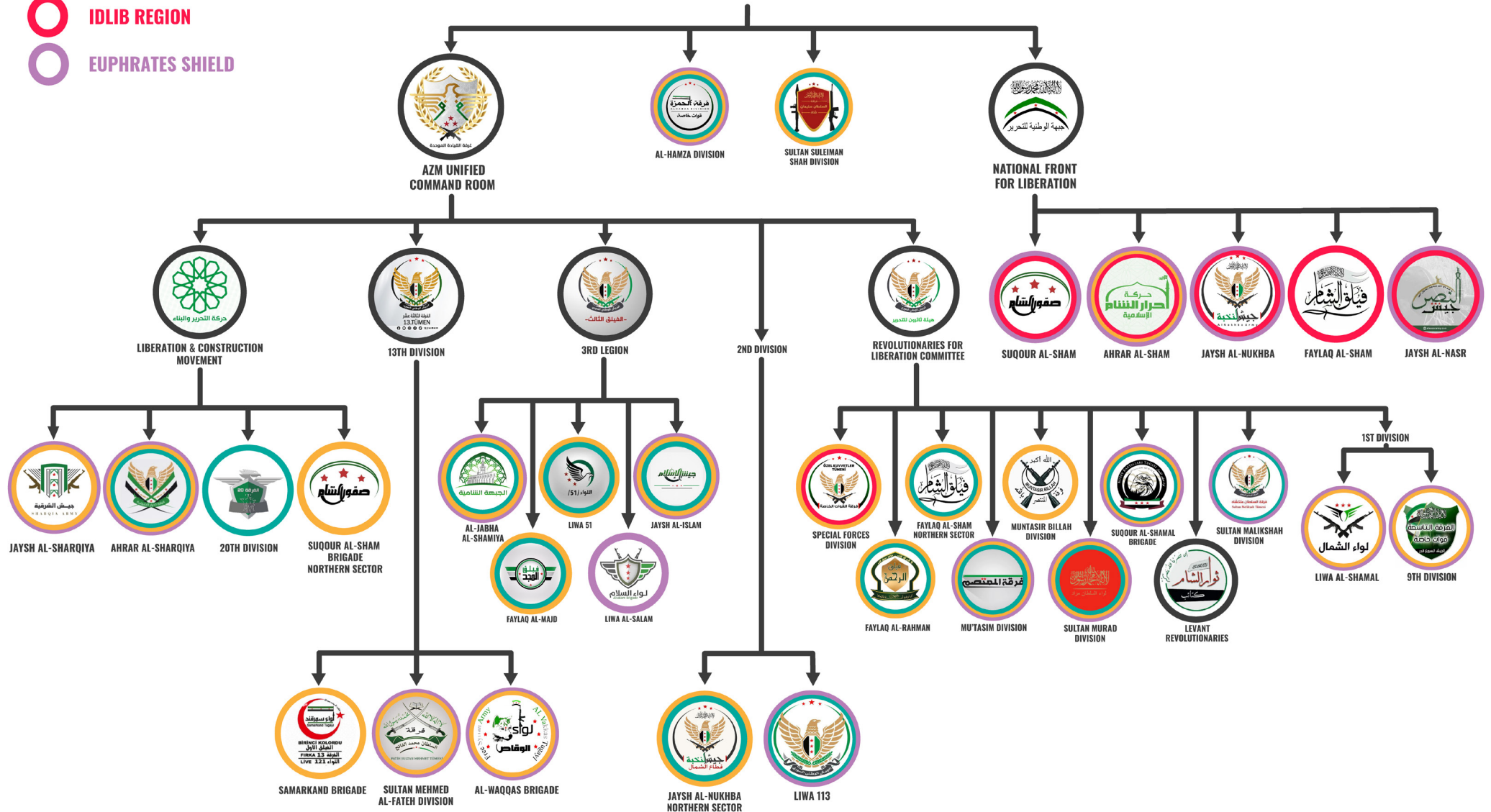
SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY (SNA)

AUGUST 2022



SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY

- M4 STRIP
- AFRIN
- IDLIB REGION
- EUPHRATES SHIELD





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 FSA⁷, and led by Murshid al-Khaled Aboul-Moutassem.⁸ 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.⁹ The group's fighters also received US military training in Qatar under the same program.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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'.¹³ 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.

⁷ pbs.twimg.com/media/Ctt0EIUW8AA9jNf.jpg:large

⁸ carnegie-mec.org/diwan/53910?lang=en

⁹ www.huffpost.com/entry/american-anti-tank-weapon_b_5119255

¹⁰ rb.gy/bdmkpd (https://www.washingtonpost.com)

¹¹ twitter.com/Syria_Rebel_Obs/status/813135865090371590

¹² twitter.com/ninth_brigade/status/853690995917115393/photo/1

¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

¹⁵ www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/division-20-interview

¹⁶ stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IS-Members-to-the-SNA-1.pdf

¹⁷ twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1217873718854275072

¹⁸ rb.gy/xosgxr (<https://www.al-monitor.com>)

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.^{22 23}

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,²⁴ 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-

²⁰ www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-war-turkey-disbands-rebel-battalion-alliances-collapse

²¹ rb.gy/ia7zmf (<https://www.syria.tv>)

²² www.enabbaladi.net/archives/182297

²³ rb.gy/mqwkd (<https://www.cartercenter.org>)

²⁴ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/turkey-syria-russia-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-bombing.html

ations room.²⁵ 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).²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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)²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ At the end of April, Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector announced its joining of the Revolutionary Liberation Movement, also part of Azm.³¹

²⁵ rb.gy/0uudow (english.enabbaladi.net)

²⁶ storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/d63d2259894f4575a37bc3e9b8d9720f

²⁷ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/political-military-wings-islamist-movement-clash-idlib

²⁸ ahraralsham.net/about-us/

²⁹ twitter.com/Ahrar_AlSham3/status/1531017155868778508/photo/1

³⁰ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/syrian-armed-groups-clash-outside-aleppo

³¹ 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.³² 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

³² 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.³³ Citizens in Afrin have spoken to reporters about al-Sharqiya's attempts to impose the veil and other Sharia law measures.³⁴ 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."³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸

³³ rb.gy/hcd3gl (rojavainformationcenter.com)

³⁴ rb.gy/1dj8lk (www.middleeasteye.net)

³⁵ rb.gy/yof9qw (www.amnesty.org)

³⁶ rb.gy/mtxphu (<http://www.francesoir.fr>)

³⁷ See our report: Ahrar al-Sharqiya: war crimes with impunity (October 2021)

³⁸ 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 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.³⁹ In the so-called Euphrates Shield Area, Ahrar al-Sharqiya control a 23km long strip between al-Rai and Aulan.



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

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.

³⁹ rb.gy/37y0ik (www.al-monitor.com)

⁴⁰ stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IS-Members-to-the-SNA-1.pdf

⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.

⁴² npasyria.com/en/80326/



AL-HAMZA DIVISION

Furqat al-Hamzah - فرقة الحمزة

Better known as Hamza Division,⁴³ 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'.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ Many of them have been sent as mercenaries to Libya and Armenia as well.⁴⁷ Hamza Division stands accused of torturing and raping women in their prisons and beating and humiliating captured Kurds,⁴⁸ 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.

⁴³ 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").

⁴⁴ dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/sna-structure-function-damascus

⁴⁵ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

⁴⁶ www.trtworld.com/middle-east/syrian-opposition-forces-open-first-military-barracks-42056

⁴⁷ rb.gy/6gzpot (www.ohchr.org)

⁴⁸ 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. When a new Turkish military operation set to be launched in October/November 2021 did not materialize, the SLF and 'the Revolutionaries Movement' merged into 'Revolutionaries for Liberation' in January 2022. Recently, in July 2022, the Hamza Division, along with the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, split from the Revolutionaries for Liberation, due to disputes within the group's leadership.

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

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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵² Some of their militiamen were recruited to fight in Libya.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

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-

⁴⁹ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/will-hts-close-ranks-turkish-backed-factions-north-syria

⁵⁰ rb.gy/qzjkr6 (www.almodon.com)

⁵¹ rb.gy/ev7snt (www.amnesty.org)

⁵² rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/03/TNA_report.pdf

⁵³ rb.gy/svrgst (ahvalnews.com)

⁵⁴ 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,⁵⁵ among rumors of a possible merger between HTS and the SNA, though this never materialized.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ rb.gy/bnhtat (syrianobserver.com)

⁵⁶ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/will-hts-close-ranks-turkish-backed-factions-north-syria

⁵⁷ twitter.com/Ahrar_ALSham3/status/1531017155868778508/photo/1

⁵⁸ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/syrian-armed-groups-clash-outside-aleppo



AL-WAQQAS BRIGADE

Al Vakkas Tugayı – 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 Brigade⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹



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

⁵⁹ 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.

⁶⁰ rb.gy/iu5txg (akhbarlibya24.net)

⁶¹ 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 3,000.⁶² 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.⁶³



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

⁶² stj-sy.org/en/tell-abiad-civilian-shot-dead-by-members-of-glory-corp-in-the-national-army/

⁶³ Ibid.



FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
Al-Rahman Legion - فيلق الرحمن

Faylaq al-Rahman⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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.

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ www.dw.com/en/which-rebel-groups-are-fighting-in-syrias-eastern-ghouta/a-42663501

⁶⁶ rb.gy/vdfy4w (www.reuters.com)

⁶⁷ rb.gy/z9uh6p (www.newindianexpress.com)

⁶⁸ rb.gy/jfn43a (www.thenationalnews.com)

⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷² Later, Faylaq al-Sham also provided mercenaries for the Libyan and Karabakh conflicts in which Turkey was involved in 2020 and 2021.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

Faylaq al-Sham comprised between 4-10,000 militiamen in 2018, mostly Arabs,^{75 76} 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.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/sna-structure-function-damascus

⁷¹ www.naharnet.com/stories/en/241182

⁷² rb.gy/yof9qw (www.amnesty.org)

⁷³ rb.gy/cb2w4r (english.alarabiya.net)

⁷⁴ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/syrian-jihadi-group-idlib-goes-after-gas-stations?amp

⁷⁵ www.dw.com/en/pro-turkey-rebels-start-pullout-from-syrias-idlib-under-deal/a-45693917

⁷⁶ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ Partially funded by Saudi Arabia, it advocated for the “cleansing of the filth” of religious minorities, including Shi’a Muslims, in Syria.⁷⁹ With around 10-15,000 militiamen,⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ They have also sent mercenaries to Libya.⁸⁵

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 Suquor al-Shamal militia, Jaysh al-Islam currently controls the eastern frontline of the ‘M4 Strip’, near Tel Tamir, as well as territory to the south of Afrin city, including a recruitment camp in

⁷⁸ rb.gy/4ovovg (jisrtv.com)

⁷⁹ www.joshualandis.com/blog/zahran-alloush/

⁸⁰ rb.gy/here0f (medium.com)

⁸¹ www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syria-torture-army-of-islam_us_56f54d0fe4b0143a9b47fc59

⁸² rb.gy/7glcyw (www.amnesty.org.uk)

⁸³ SOHR, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=92283>

⁸⁴ SOHR, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=106133>

⁸⁵ rb.gy/svrgst (ahvalnews.com)

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.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷



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

⁸⁶ rb.gy/fve7vc (www.syria.tv)

⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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.

⁸⁸ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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.⁹² 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.⁹³



Jaysh al-Sharqiya checkpoint in Afrin city, November 2020

⁹⁰ rb.gy/14orrx (www.bellingcat.com)

⁹¹ rb.gy/3q71fr (www.mei.edu)

⁹² rb.gy/lfghyy (stj-sy.org)

⁹³ 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'.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ 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 2015.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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).⁹⁹ In August 2016, Levant Revolutionaries announced their re-merger with Army of Mujahideen,¹⁰⁰ but in January 2017, after the al-Nusra Front attacked and captured the bases of the Army of Mujahideen, it an-

⁹⁴ http://www.syriainside.com/articles/100_

⁹⁵ rb.gy/wpbx9a (hasanmustafas.wordpress.com)

⁹⁶ rb.gy/9b4zdn (www.dailysabah.com)

⁹⁷ documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/026/63/pdf/G1702663.pdf?OpenElement

⁹⁸ twitter.com/k_th_alsham/status/692295127583309824

⁹⁹ twitter.com/k_th_alsham/status/748912191282278400

¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴

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.¹⁰⁵ 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.¹⁰⁶ 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.

¹⁰¹ www.syriahr.com/en/59855/

¹⁰² twitter.com/Ahmad_Hamaher/status/953950882789543936

¹⁰³ www.brecorder.com/news/399757/

¹⁰⁴ rb.gy/a5wwtf (www.clingendael.org)

¹⁰⁵ twitter.com/Amjadal2slam/status/1198330601230786565

¹⁰⁶ orient-news.net/ar/news_show/184718



LIWA 51
Brigade 51 - الليواء 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.¹⁰⁷ 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

¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹

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.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹ 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.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-structure-of-the-syrian-national-army

¹⁰⁹ afrinpost.net/ar/archives/9323

¹¹⁰ twitter.com/First1Legion/status/1408485611292577792/photo/1

¹¹¹ sdf-press.com/?p=37148

¹¹² twitter.com/wexP2S7t8yGMwRf/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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ 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

¹¹³ carnegie-mec.org/diwan/57605?lang=en

¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ The militia has a minor footprint within the occupied territories, though it claimed to employ 1,000 fighters in 2017.¹¹⁶ It has participated in all Turkish invasions of Syria, having been accused of abusing, beating and trampling captured YPG soldiers in Afrin.¹¹⁷ It reportedly sent a high number of mercenaries to Libya and recruited militiamen from other factions for Turkey.¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹ 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 2021.¹²⁰ 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.

¹¹⁵ 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.

¹¹⁶ www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/04/free-syrian-army-training-camps-turkey-islamic-state.html

¹¹⁷ <http://www.rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?pageid=242071>

¹¹⁸ rb.gy/6gzpot (www.ohchr.org)

¹¹⁹ rb.gy/fkbph9 (www.securitycouncilreport.org)

¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ ¹²² 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.¹²³ 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 2015.¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵

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,¹²⁶ 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.

¹²¹ warontherocks.com/2016/01/a-cause-for-all-turks-turkey-and-syrias-turkmen-rebels/

¹²² rb.gy/5tmggy (web.archive.org)

¹²³ www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/12/4_battalions_from_qa.php

¹²⁴ rb.gy/9b4zdn (www.dailysabah.com)

¹²⁵ www.middleeasteye.net/news/turks-head-syria-defend-turkmen-brothers

¹²⁶ 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.¹²⁷ However, on May 30th 2017, Faylaq al-Sham expelled the Northern Brigade from its ranks and dismissed its commander, Captain Mustafa Rami al-Kuja,¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹

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.¹³⁰ 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.

¹²⁷ setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/10/A54En.pdf

¹²⁸ twitter.com/TerrorMonitorAR/status/869997289665843200

¹²⁹ www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/catismayi-turk-ordusu-son-anda-engelledi-327115.html

¹³⁰ twitter.com/st1division/status/1398976736973492233



SAMARKAND BRIGADE

Liwa Samarqand – Semerkant Tugayi

لواء سمرقند

Also known as 'Faylaq Samarkand',¹³¹ 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.¹³² 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.¹³³ 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.¹³⁴



جانب من الفعالية الثورية بمناسبة الذكرى العاشرة للثورة السورية التي أقيمت
Celebration in the Samarkand Brigade camp of Manzikerd, March 2021

¹³¹ 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.

¹³² www.syriahr.com/en/153473/

¹³³ rb.gy/ypftvb (afrinpost.net)

¹³⁴ 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.¹³⁵ 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.¹³⁶ 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.¹³⁷ 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.¹³⁸

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.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ rb.gy/0ocvlz (www.syria.tv)

¹³⁶ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/515983

¹³⁷ rb.gy/0ocvlz (www.syria.tv)

¹³⁸ twitter.com/OGNArabic/status/1442860214529654786

¹³⁹ 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 Melikshah 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.¹⁴⁰ 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.¹⁴¹ 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.¹⁴² 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. Recently, in July 2022, the Sultan Malikshah Division left the Third Legion to join the rival Revolutionaries for Liberation operations room.¹⁴³

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.¹⁴⁴ Sultan Malikshah Division is also present in al-Bab countryside frontlines, in the 'Euphrates Shield' area.



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

¹⁴⁰ 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.

¹⁴¹ rb.gy/lya89m (www.syria.tv)

¹⁴² rb.gy/taudzq (stj-sy.org)

¹⁴³ twitter.com/Tha_Eroon/status/1551972826634223617

¹⁴⁴ rb.gy/taudzq (stj-sy.org)



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 Division¹⁴⁵ 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.¹⁴⁶ 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



¹⁴⁵ 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.

¹⁴⁶ 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 Division¹⁴⁷ 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.^{148 149} 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.¹⁵⁰ Amnesty International has also documented cases of illegal detention and torture of POWs and media activists, and "beating men for fun".¹⁵¹ 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.¹⁵² 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

¹⁴⁷ 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.

¹⁴⁸ www.trtworld.com/middle-east/syrian-opposition-forces-open-first-military-barracks-42056

¹⁴⁹ english.iswnews.com/3144/the-most-important-turkish-backed-groups-operating-in-northern-syria/

¹⁵⁰ rb.gy/7glcyw (www.amnesty.org.uk)

¹⁵¹ rb.gy/cwfifs (www.amnesty.org)

¹⁵² 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'.^{153 154}

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.¹⁵⁵ 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.¹⁵⁶ 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.¹⁵⁷ Nowadays, Sultan Murad is part of the Revolutionaries for Liberation. Its previous militia grouping, the Revolutionaries Movement, failed to resolve its internal tensions.

¹⁵³ rb.gy/hcd3gl (rojavainformationcenter.com)

¹⁵⁴ rb.gy/lfghyy (stj-sy.org)

¹⁵⁵ www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-confirms-internal-fight-in-free-syrian-army--114338

¹⁵⁶ rb.gy/ug6pl9 (<http://afrinpost.net>)

¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸ 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.¹⁵⁹ 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.

¹⁵⁸ 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.

¹⁵⁹ 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.¹⁶⁰

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.¹⁶¹ ¹⁶² 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-

¹⁶⁰ www.syriahr.com/en/222403/

¹⁶¹ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/538597

¹⁶² 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."¹⁶³ '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.¹⁶⁴ Recently, in July 2022, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, jointly with the Hamza Division, split from the Revolutionaries for Liberation, due to major differences within the group's leadership.¹⁶⁵



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.¹⁶⁶ 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.¹⁶⁷ 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

¹⁶³ rb.gy/ufsdzv (www.rozana.fm)

¹⁶⁴ twitter.com/Tha_Eroon/status/1501276420265459716

¹⁶⁵ rb.gy/nhgr80 (www.alaraby.co.uk)

¹⁶⁶ rb.gy/ozlr9e (www.al-monitor.com)

¹⁶⁷ rb.gy/veopuy (verify-sy.com)

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 Sultan 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.¹⁶⁸

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.¹⁶⁹ He owns several restaurants and car dealerships in Turkey.¹⁷⁰ 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.

¹⁶⁸ rb.gy/67oivo (afrinpost.net)

¹⁶⁹ www.syriahr.com/en/206384/

¹⁷⁰ rb.gy/ozlr9e (www.al-monitor.com)



SUQOUR AL-SHAM BRIGADE

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.¹⁷¹ 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.¹⁷² Recently, in February 2022, Suqour al-Sham - Northern Sector joined in the creation of LCM, within Azm,¹⁷³ with Raed Arab, the leader of Suqour al-Sham, as the LCM military commander.¹⁷⁴

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.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-structure-of-the-syrian-national-army

¹⁷² www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-send-syrian-rebel-fighters-fight-haftar-libya

¹⁷³ rb.gy/o7oab3 (ninarpress.net)

¹⁷⁴ rb.gy/3q71fr (www.mei.edu)

¹⁷⁵ en.suriyegundemi.com/between-rock-and-a-hard-place-the-armed-syrian-opposition-in-idlib



SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BRIGADE

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.¹⁷⁶ 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,¹⁷⁷ 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.¹⁷⁸ 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.¹⁷⁹ 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.¹⁸⁰ 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-

¹⁷⁶ skoor144.site123.me/

¹⁷⁷ twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/1316657541036871683

¹⁷⁸ www.syriahr.com/en/159958/

¹⁷⁹ www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507722

¹⁸⁰ 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.¹⁸¹ Today, the Suqour al-Shamal Brigade remains active as part of the Revolutionaries for Liberation.



Military show of Suqour al-Shamal, December 2018

¹⁸¹ rb.gy/6ahx83 (www.almodon.com)

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