From Fragmentation to Integration: Prospects for Security Sector Reform in Post-Assad Syria

Wolf-Christian Paes, Senior Fellow for Armed Conflict; Lea Ellmanns, Research Analyst for Armed Conflict; Edward Beales, Research Assistant for Armed Conflict; Laith Alajlouni, Research Associate for the Middle East Programme; Gregory Waters, Independent Field Researcher in Syria

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Acronyms

AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
DAANES	Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
FMOR	al-Fatah al-Mubin Military Operations Room
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GDP	General Directorate of Provinces
GSS	General Security Service
HAD	Hurras al-Din
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IRFS	Syrian Islamic Resistance Front
IS/ISIS/ Daesh	Islamic State
ISIS-K	Islamic State – Khorasan Province
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
JaN	Jabhat al-Nusra, 'The Nusra Front'
JFS	Jabhat Fateh al-Sham
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MoI	Ministry of Interior
NLF	National Liberation Front
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PSD	Public Security Department
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SAAF	Syrian Arab Armed Forces
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SNA	Syrian National Army
SRG	Syrian Republican Guard
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units
YXG	Yenikeyen Xweparastina Gel

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Armed opposition fighters and civilians celebrate the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus on 13 December 2024 in Umayyad Square. (Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images)

Executive Summary

In late November 2024, a coalition of Syrian armed opposition groups, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), embarked on a military offensive against Syrian government forces. Initially targeting Aleppo, the rebel fighters met only limited resistance from the Bashar al-Assad regime and were able to continue advancing at a rapid pace towards the Syrian capital, Damascus. By early December 2024, the rebel coalition had taken control of most of Syria, including the strategically important cities of Hama and Homs. By 8 December 2024, the rebel forces had overthrown the decades-old authoritarian regime of Assad. In January 2025, Ahmed al-Sharaa, the leader of HTS, held the 'Syrian Revolution Victory Conference' in Damascus, during which he declared himself president of the interim authorities. He officially announced plans to disband all institutions of the Assad regime, including the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, and to integrate all armed opposition factions into a new armed force that would be under the command of a reformed Ministry of Defense, now firmly under HTS control. To understand this ongoing integration process, it is instructive to examine the various opposition forces in greater detail.

This report first traces the initial months after the fall of the Assad regime, including the post-revolutionary honeymoon and the approach taken by the interim authorities regarding force integration. It then focuses on the escalation of violence on the Syrian coast and the sectarian fighting in the south, demonstrating some of the shortcomings of the transitional authorities' current approach to security sector reform. From there, it outlines the role of regional and international actors that hold vastly different viewpoints towards the new government in Damascus, ranging from supportive to hostile. The report then maps out the main opposition groups that existed in Syria prior to the fall of Assad, outlining their backgrounds, ideologies, organisational structures and financing. This includes HTS, the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Syrian National Army and the National Liberation Front. It also maps out other non-state armed groups, including the Islamic State and the remnants of the Assad regime. Finally, the report concludes with some considerations for Syria's nascent security sector.

Figure 1: **Key events in Syria, November 2024–July 2025**

Source: IISS analysis

Introduction

In early December 2024, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, whose family had ruled Syria since 1970, was swept away by a coalition of opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which swiftly took control of most the country. The Syrian Arab Armed Forces (SAAF), which at the time of the Six-Day War with Israel in 1967 was one of the largest and best-equipped militaries in the Levant, offered surprisingly little resistance, having been modified from their primary role of defending the country against foreign opponents into an instrument of political patronage and domestic control by the Ba'ath regime.[1] One of its founders, Hafiz al-Assad, Bashar's father, had himself once been a senior SAAF officer and the defence minister at the time of the 1967 defeat. He, and later his son, oversaw the gradual erosion of the military, favouring loyalty over performance and using the military to face off domestic challenges. They were consequently left with limited resources to maintain parity with their foes.

As a result, during the civil war the regime supplemented its armed and security forces with foreign militias from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, as well as with Syrian militias recruited from loyal parts of the population.[2] The SAAF became a shell with limited capabilities, but nonetheless was involved in some of the bloodiest fighting of the war and committed numerous atrocities, including through the use of chemical weapons. It was therefore no surprise that the new, HTS-led government in Damascus moved swiftly to disband the SAAF, together with other pillars of the old regime, such as the Ba'ath Party. However, it still has to grapple with the question of how to ensure the security of the Syrian population against both internal and external opponents.

A crucial question in this regard pertains to the future of the non-state armed groups (NSAGs), which were formed during the civil war by both the Assad regime and the numerous opposition groups, and which in many ways were a defining feature of the conflict. Their number is hard to calculate, but some estimates during the early years of the war were as high as 1,000.[3] Over time most of them joined various umbrella groups, some of which have a distinct ethnic profile, such as the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Others, such as HTS itself, have their roots in the Sunni-jihadi realm, and still others, such as the Syrian National Army (SNA), are defined primarily by their international backers, such as Turkiye. Most fundamentally though, they can be classified based on their relationship with the old regime, with the remnants of militias of the Assad government on the one side, and the various opposition forces on the other. A few groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which remains active in parts of Syria, fought both the regime and the major opposition forces, while some ethnic groups, such as the main Druze militias, tried to remain neutral during the civil war. This report provides an overview of the major NSAGs, their political ideologies, leaderships and organisational structures, as well as their areas of influence, international supporters and relationships with the new regime.

The new regime quickly began to incorporate the different opposition groups under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defense (MoD), while also building a new public-order force called the General Security under the control of the Ministry of Interior (MoI), in an attempt to create a government monopoly on armed force. However, in practice, this process has been marred by HTS officials remaining firmly in control and that the integration of the different opposition forces largely only exists on paper. The old organisational structures and chains of command have remained intact, while the General Security forces, which also primarily consist of former fighters, are both poorly trained and few in number. In cases where the new government was threatened, for example during the March 2025 revolt of Assad loyalists on the Syrian coast, or during fighting between Druze militias and armed Bedouins in Suwayda in July 2025, the General Security forces were quickly overrun, leading to sectarian violence against

ethnic and religious minorities, obliging Damascus to dispatch forces under the MoD in an attempt to restore government authority. This report presents an overview of the developments related to the reform of the Syrian security sector since the revolution of December 2024, including the role of regional and international governments, some of which have been supportive while others remain hostile to the new rulers in Damascus.

While acknowledging that the future of Syria's security sector needs to be determined first and foremost by Syrians and their forthcoming, democratically elected representatives, this report will also examine the challenges that the country faces as it tries to rebuild its forces. Squeezed by both political and resource limitations, the new government is in the unenviable position of having to form new forces from a diverse coalition of NSAGs, many of which have a distinct ethnic or sectarian identity and therefore may not be acceptable as security providers to some of Syria's many minority and social groups. Some of these groups, including the SDF, have also not given up on their goal of political autonomy, which may well lead to conflict with the government in Damascus. In addition, the question of what to do with the former officers and non-commissioned officers of the SAAF, many of whom come from the Alawite community, remains unresolved. The experience of Iraq, where the United States-led administration demobilised all members of Saddam's military forces – many of whom later joined ISIS and led the country into disaster – should be seen as a cautionary tale for Sharaa's government.

It is widely accepted in Syria that the country requires a professional, well-trained and sufficiently equipped security sector to defend itself against both internal and external enemies. However, there seems to be a lack of a consensus that the dismantlement of the various NSAGs, rather than their integration into state structures, is needed to achieve this goal. The pathway for such a process would need to incorporate a well-structured and resourced disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, at the end of which most former fighters would return to civilian life. Only some, after a proper vetting process for past war crimes and other abuses, would be able to individually join the new forces. Embarking on such a process would carry significant political risks for the new government, but failure to do so would likely either lead to a situation reminiscent of the one in Lebanon, where following the civil war a weak national army existed side by side with a heavily armed and internationally connected sectarian militias, or even a return to the model of the Assad period, where the security sector was primarily an instrument of political patronage and repression rather than a non-sectarian defender of the nation.

1. Towards Security Sector Reform in Post-revolutionary Syria

When rebel fighters entered the Syrian capital Damascus on 8 December 2024 without any military opposition, it quickly became apparent that the regime of Bashar al-Assad had fallen. The military offensive dubbed *Operation Deterrence of Aggression*, led by HTS forces and supported by other factions (see Section 3), had started just days earlier on 27 November 2024. It had initially targeted Aleppo, which fell only two days later.[4] Despite support from Russian airstrikes, regime forces collapsed within 24 hours and many soldiers deserted while other units withdrew to Hama.[5] Emboldened by these unexpected successes, opposition groups decided to continue towards the capital, also capturing the strategically important cities of Hama on 5 December 2024 and Homs on 7 December 2024.

The pace of the rebel advances seemed to have caught both sides by surprise. Since the start of the civil war in 2011, the Assad regime had largely relied on its Iranian, Lebanese and Russian allies (see Section 2, Regional Players) to contain the rebel threat, while allowing the SAAF to deteriorate in a maelstrom of corruption and neglect.[6] With Tehran and its proxy Hizbullah engaged in military conflict with Israel following the Hamas-led 7 October 2023 attacks, and Moscow's attention focused on the Russia–Ukraine war, the regime in Damascus found itself without effective defences.[7] The leaders of the victorious rebel movement suddenly found themselves in effective control of much of Syria after Assad fled to Moscow, ending 50 years of the family's rule.

The news of Assad's departure was welcomed by the majority of Syria's population and, contrary to the expectations of many observers, initially there were few reprisals against the former regime representatives that had not managed to escape or go into hiding.[8] This was particularly noteworthy given that the police force of the old regime had disappeared alongside the other security institutions. The maintenance of law and order in post-revolutionary Syria then largely rested with fighters from HTS and their allies, in particular the SNA (see Section 3, the Syrian National Army), few of whom had any previous experience with police work.[9] These forces were now tasked with supporting the civil-policing efforts of HTS's small pre-existing police force, known as General Security. Together, these fighters were quickly deployed in all major cities to fill the power vacuum, but they lacked the numbers and the training to effectively control the whole country.[10]

The opposition groups quickly formed a caretaker government, which took over administration of the newly liberated areas.[11] On 29 January 2025, Ahmed al-Sharaa (see profile in Section 3, HTS), the leader of HTS, appointed himself as the president of Syria during the 'Syrian Revolution Victory Conference' in Damascus.[12] During the same event, which was attended by representatives of most armed factions – with the notable exception of the SDF and some southern groups – the interim authorities announced their decision to disband all of the institutions of Assad's regime, including the security apparatus, and to integrate the different armed factions into a new Syrian army under the authority of the Ministry of Defense in Damascus.[13] Sharaa stated that his priorities were 'filling the power vacuum, preserving civil peace, building state institutions'.[14]

Post-revolutionary Honeymoon

Despite his Sunni Islamist background, Sharaa was quick to reach out to leaders of Syria's many religious and ethnic minorities. Even prior to his formal appointment as president, he met with Christian and Druze dignitaries, assuring them that despite HTS 'being part of [the] Islamic environment, [this] does not mean the exclusion of other sects', but rather stated 'a duty to protect them'.[15] These remarks were addressed to domestic and international audiences, which were concerned that Syria, which during the rule of the Alawite Assad family had presented itself as a bulwark of secular governance against Islamic extremism, would now be dominated by Sunni fundamentalists.[16] Some observers noted that HTS, which had effectively governed the rebel enclave of Idlib in northwest Syria since 2017,

Celebrations in Damascus after the fall of Bashar al-Assad on 13 December 2024

(Bilal Alhammoud/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images)

had shown remarkable tolerance towards religious minorities, frequently meeting with representatives of the Christian communities and addressing their concerns.[17] Others questioned whether the 'post-jihadi technocratic' regime of Idlib, where the HTS-dominated 'Syrian Salvation Government' (SSG) had ruled over a population of some 4.5 million, could be translated into a governance model for the whole country with its much larger and more diverse population.[18]

Unlike in Idlib, some religious and ethnic minorities maintained their own military structures in their respective heartlands – particularly the Kurds in Rujova (also known as Syrian Kurdistan) and in northeast Syria (see Section 3, the Syrian Democratic Forces), and to a lesser degree the Druze in the governorate of Suwayda in the south (see text box in Section 3, Other Groups). This development had been tacitly tolerated and, in some cases, even encouraged by the Assad regime, whose security forces struggled to maintain control over large parts of Syria.[19] Due to the civil war, weapons and ammunition were easily available both in government- and rebel-held areas, and widespread unemployment provided a ready pool of potential recruits.[20] The most prominent example of an ethnic militia of this type is the Kurdish-dominated SDF, which was formed in October 2015 with the aim of defending Rujova against outside threats – particularly ISIS (see Section 3, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) but also Turkish-supported forces. Elsewhere in Syria, militias associated with the Assyrian and Yazidi minority communities were either part of larger opposition groups, such as the SDF, or were created and ultimately controlled by officials of the Assad regime, ostensibly also with the aim of defending their respective communities. In practice, however, the lines between 'legitimate' self-defence groups and organised crime have often been blurry, with many militias engaging in the smuggling of commodities, including the locally produced synthetic drug Captagon.[21]

At least initially, most armed groups welcomed the prospect of integration into a new national army, which would, at least in principle, answer to the Ministry of Defense in Damascus, which Sharaa staffed with HTS loyalists, including a number of foreign jihadists.[22] Unsurprisingly, enthusiasm for integration was most pronounced among the various Sunni Arab groups, many of which had been long-time allies of HTS. However, the SDF, which had been absent from the victory conference, also agreed on 10 March 2025 to integrate their soldiers into the Syrian Army and their civilian governance structures into the new state administration. This was possibly driven in part by

the prospect of reduced US support under the Trump administration, as well as the decision by Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan to declare an end to the group's armed struggle for Kurdish independence in Turkiye just days earlier.[23] Armed opposition groups willing to integrate also expected leadership positions for their respective commanders in the new army, as well as access to higher military salaries. However, the SDF and Druze commanders insisted that the structure of their units would need to remain intact and that they should not be expected to serve outside their established strongholds.[24] The transitional authorities agreed to this seemingly pragmatic approach out of necessity. In practice, however, this meant that, at least for a transition period, an attempt was made to restructure the various non-regime forces into a loose grouping under the MoD, rather than create a united force under central command. Moreover, the patchwork of local and regional militias would simply be 're-hatted', with the economic burden of paying salaries shifted to Damascus. The authorities also started a recruitment campaign aiming to ultimately achieve a force strength of 300,000 soldiers for the new army.[25]

Trouble on the Coast

While Sharaa invited members from many different groups to join the new government's security forces, former members of Assad's security apparatus were excluded. The previous national armed forces, the SAAF, had been formally disbanded alongside other pillars of the regime during the victory conference of 29 January 2025. While many of the demoralised and underpaid conscripts in their ranks welcomed these developments, others, in particular career SAAF officers and non-commissioned officers, saw no future for themselves under HTS rule. Unlike the conscripts, they were also not covered by the general amnesty announced by the new government.[26] Many expected prosecution for war crimes committed during the civil war. Many of these disenfranchised men are members of the Alawite community, which had dominated government positions during Assad's rule.[27] Following the fall of the Assad regime, many of them returned to the Alawite heartland on the Syrian coast, where some formed new armed groups. These included the Coastal Shield forces, led by Miqdad Fatiha, a former regime officer, and the

Security forces loyal to Syria's caretaker government by the coastal city of Latakia on 9 March 2025

(Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images)

Syrian Islamic Resistance Front (IRFS) (see Section 3, Regime Insurgents), a shadowy new group seen by some as a new Iranian proxy force.[28] On 6 March 2025, insurgents of the Coastal Shield forces and other networks attacked checkpoints and barracks across the Tartus and Latakia governorates, killing more than 200 members of HTS-affiliated General Security forces and MoD units, which reportedly numbered only a few hundred in the coastal areas at the time.[29]

The new government in Damascus responded swiftly to this challenge to its authority by deploying additional General Security and MoD forces to the coast. However, Sunni communities also mobilised independently, with thousands of armed civilians going to the coast without government orders. This collection of forces drew from different SNA and HTS units, as well as foreign jihadist groups (see text box on foreign fighters in Section 3, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). More than 1,400 Syrians, primarily Alawite civilians, were killed during the clashes over a period of less than 96 hours. The government's 'combing operations', targeting militants from pro-Assad groups, quickly turned into sectarian violence targeting the Alawite community as a whole. Human-rights observers have chronicled shocking cases of torture, looting and murder perpetrated by pro-government forces and armed civilians.[30] Forty thousand Alawites fled to Lebanon during and in the days following the violence.[31] While Sharaa was quick to announce the formation of an independent national investigation into the events, this episode shows the challenges of relying on poorly trained militia to maintain law and order in a society divided along sectarian lines.[32] It also undermined the trust of other ethnic and religious minorities in the country and damaged the government's standing abroad, with the United Nation's High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, calling the reports 'extremely disturbing' and demanding accountability for the perpetrators.[33]

Transitional justice

The Syrian population experienced unimaginable suffering under the authoritarian regimes of the Assad family from 1970 onwards, including mass killings, disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture and mass displacement. Since 2011, Syrians have also endured civil war and the atrocities perpetrated by armed factions, both within the Syrian opposition and outside of it. An integral part of broader security-sector reform, addressing the complicated legacy of Syria's violent past is a delicate yet crucial part of Syria's transition, which could help ensure that the country 'come(s) to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation.'[I]

The interim authorities have taken first steps towards such a process. In March 2025, they committed to establishing a victim-centred transitional-justice commission through Article 49 of the Constitutional Declaration. Two months later, Ahmed al-Sharaa issued Decree No. 20, which orders the formation of a National Authority for Transitional Justice. However, the authorities' approach is one-sided, focusing only on uncovering and redressing violations perpetrated by representatives of the former Assad regime.

This approach has been widely criticised as it risks being selective in the abuses it seeks to investigate and redress. All armed opposition actors, including HTS, SNA and SDF, have engaged in widespread and grave human-rights violations since 2011, particularly since the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. But these are not currently being addressed under the process.[II] The current framework also fails to account for the diverse experiences of conflict and violations that Syrians have been subjected to across the country, and the wide range of expectations towards a transitional justice process that comes with that. Notably, the new government's apparent policy of offering amnesty to all regime members 'without blood on their hands' does not address the demands for justice from those who were forced out of their homes, robbed or jailed.[III]

The transitional-justice process is also moving at a sluggish pace and risks falling short in terms of rebuilding the trust that has been lost between different social groups within Syria, between civilians and the interim authorities, and between the armed factions currently integrating into security forces under the Syrian Ministry of Defense.[IV] Failing to demonstrate accountability and justice to the population could increase the risk of retribution and might fuel violence and insecurity across the country. This is demonstrated by continued extrajudicial killings of suspected former members of the Assad regime and two major outbreaks of sectarian violence directly involving forces of the new government, in Latakia against the Alawite minority in March 2025 and in Suwayda between Druze and Bedouin factions in July 2025, which have seen thousands killed.[V]

Sectarian Fighting in the South

Among Syria's neighbours, Israel was particularly critical of the new regime in Damascus from the outset (see Section 2, Hesitant to Adversarial: Iran and Israel). Despite its occupation of the Golan Heights and Assad's close relationship with Iran, it had largely enjoyed a peaceful relationship with the Ba'athist regime. As far as Tel Aviv was concerned, an Alawite-led military government in Damascus was preferable to one led by Sunni jihadists.[34] In December 2024, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched an extensive air campaign against SAAF military assets, including naval facilities, airfields and weapons-production sites, with the goal of 'preventing them from falling into the hands of terrorist elements'.[35] Simultaneously, IDF ground forces moved into the demilitarised 'area of separation' between the occupied Golan Heights and the rest of Syria, seizing the strategically important Mount Hermon and moving as close as 20 kilometres from Damascus.[36]

During the months following the revolution, the Israeli government has remained very suspicious of the new regime, even as the US government and European states started to establish closer ties. At the same time, some representatives of the Druze communities, a religious minority living in the south of Syria (as well as in Lebanon and Israel) turned to the Israeli government for support. Unlike other Arab communities, Druze in Israel serve in the IDF and are considered to be loyal to the state.[37] They mostly maintained a neutral position during the Syrian civil war, but had also created their own militias in their heartlands, centred in the governorate of Suwayda (see text box in Section 3, Other Groups). It was here that sectarian violence erupted on 11 July 2025 when a Druze trader was stopped and robbed at a makeshift checkpoint by Sunni Bedouins along the Suwayda–Damascus highway. This incident triggered a spiral of violence as armed relatives of the trader took several Bedouins hostage, which in turn led to attacks on Druze.[38] Despite attempts by some local Druze and Bedouin sheikhs to de-escalate the conflict, the fighting continued, drawing a response from the government in Damascus, which, in a scenario reminiscent of the clashes in Latakia just a few months earlier, dispatched security forces to the governorate. Following reports of sectarian violence against Druze civilians by government forces, the IDF decided to intervene, striking government positions both in Suwayda and Damascus, with the stated goal of stopping the government's actions against the Druze.[39] According to the UN, some 1,000 people were killed in the fighting between Bedouins, Druze and government forces, including at least 539 Druze civilians. The human-rights violations chronicled include looting, sexual violence and abductions.[40] Other sources, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, reported as many as 1,386 killed on all sides.[41]

Following the Israeli intervention, government forces have been reduced to controlling the western and northern border towns of the governorate. Most of Suwayda is now under the command of an influential Druze religious figure, Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri. Hijri and the nascent administrative and security bodies he established in August have demanded self-determination or, in some cases, even annexation by Israel.[42] At the same time, as in the case of the violence in Latakia in March 2025, the reports about minorities challenging the authority of the new government have contributed to the radicalisation and mobilisation of Sunni Arabs from other parts of Syria.

The events on the coast and later in Suwayda illustrate the limitations of Sharaa's approach to security sector reform (SSR) following the revolution: government forces are spread too thinly to effectively control the country, with militias under the control of local leaders continuing to fill the security vacuum. With sectarian tensions running deep after decades of dictatorship and 14 years of civil war, little is needed to spark violence, which local forces often cannot control. Challenges to the authority of Damascus are then dealt with by dispatching Sunni militias from the capital, at times supported by armed civilians, which leads to atrocities against civilians, often those from religious minorities. The apparent failure to demobilise the various militias and to create non-sectarian security forces increases tensions between the different communities and ultimately threatens the prospects for a successful transition in Syria.

2. Struggling for Influence – the Role of Regional and International Actors in Syria

Under its new leadership, Syria is just as exposed and vulnerable to its geography as it was under the Assad regime, which became especially evident during the civil war. The unanticipated overthrow of Assad in December 2024 has undoubtedly changed the security situation of the Middle East. It upended the power dispensation inside Syria and dealt a major shock to the Levantine balance of power by defeating Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' in Syria.

However, it did not conclusively end the regional struggle for Syria. Instead, it opened a new chapter in the power struggle among regional and international players to shape Syria's politics and strategic orientation. What compels external players to become involved in Syria – regardless of who rules Damascus – is the intrinsic weakness of its state, its pivotal geographical position, its ethnic and religious diversity, its centrifugal and potentially destabilising propensities, and the concern that other external states – for these same reasons – will interfere in Syria. These five factors guarantee that external interest in Syria will endure for decades to come: it could manifest itself in positive ways, but just as equally in disruptive and competitive ones.

This intense competition has direct and profound implications for state consolidation as well as SSR in Syria. Not only is Syria's security sector broken, divided, deprived of resources and struggling to gain nationwide legitimacy and control, but external actors are also intent on shaping its future in pursuit of their own interests. This could include cultivating the right commanders, creating loyalties and dependencies, shaping the government forces' missions and funding specific units.

This could destabilise the country and disrupt any attempt to build efficient, professional and rule-abiding security forces, thereby fuelling instability. Ensuring that regional powers agree to support an SSR process will be key to rebuilding a national military with country-wide legitimacy and the ability to conduct operations in line with national, regional and global priorities such as fighting ISIS.

Therefore, mapping the regional interests and policy responses of regional countries and major powers is critical to understanding Syria's prospects for state consolidation and reforms, including in the security sector. Overall, regional and international players range from adversarial (e.g., Israel, Iran) to pragmatic (e.g., Jordan, Iraq and the US) to supportive (e.g., Turkiye). This chapter describes these key players' attitudes towards Syria's transition based on their own security interests and potential levers, as well as their relationship with the transitional authorities in Damascus.

Regional Players

A Supportive Neighbour: Turkiye

Sharing its longest land border with Syria, Turkiye remains the most assertive regional actor. It faces direct and existential interests in Syria, rooted in Syria's geography and demographics, regardless of who rules Damascus. Ankara's priorities include the containment of PKK-linked groups in northern Syria and creating the conditions for the return of Syrian refugees. These imperatives shape Turkiye's engagement with the new government and explain its substantial investment of financial and political capital in Syria's future. Ankara has significant strategic leverage over Damascus, which it can use to obtain guarantees and concessions from the new government. These levers include Turkiye's military presence in northern Syria; its sponsorship of local militias, including the SNA; its intelligence capabilities; and its control of cross-border trade, which is vital for Syria's economic recovery. These multidimensional levers enable Ankara to play an active role in supporting the new government in Damascus and maintaining a centralised, unified Syria, despite attempts by Israel and Iran to destabilise the country.

Turkiye has already declared a set of 'voluntary repatriation policies and declared its aim to reduce the refugee population'.[43] It is also pressuring the government in Damascus to weaken the influence of SDF and

other PKK-linked groups in northern Syria.[44] Ankara remains generally supportive of the government in Damascus, with the hope of achieving the goals it could not achieve under Assad. Ankara hopes that the new security forces will contain the PKK, prevent Iran from re-establishing its networks and block Israeli expansionism. Importantly, Turkiye has worked to align US policy with its priorities, with some initial success.

Hesitant to Adversarial: Iran and Israel

In contrast, Iran perceives the transition in Syria as a threat. It views the collapse of the Assad regime as a significant strategic failure and an existential test for Iran's regional reach, including its proxy-based deterrence strategy.[45] It had invested heavily to maintain its influence in Syria and embed itself in the country's security, social, political, religious, economic and demographic realms. It is estimated that Tehran had spent US$30–50 billion to uphold the Assad regime and achieve its strategic objectives in Syria, which include maintaining access to the Mediterranean, ensuring the continued flow of supplies to Hizbullah and maintaining the presence of its militias to deter Israel from directly targeting Iran.[46]

Iran has yet to redetermine its strategic approach to Syria, in part because of the setbacks it has suffered since October 2023. While Iranian officials expressed their support for Syria's unity and territorial integrity, they have so far shunned the new authorities in Damascus and accused them of sectarianism. In turn, Iran is accused of using proxy groups to undermine the transition in Syria, including by fuelling instability in Syria's coastal region by mobilising the Alawites in Latakia and Tartus against the transitional government through extensive social-media misinformation campaigns.[47] The new Syrian security forces have intercepted shipments of weaponry meant for Hizbullah and there is some evidence of pro-Iranian forces remaining in southern Syria. This indicates that Iran will persevere with its influence inside Syria, despite its much-weakened position.

Having unwittingly contributed to the rise of the new Syrian government, Israel has emerged as its most hostile neighbour. This adversarial stance stems from a distrust of the character, ambitions and regional alignment of the new Syrian authorities.[48] Israel would prefer a weak, decentralised Syria that would allow it to maintain relations with certain minority groups and establish a demilitarised buffer zone in the south of the country. Israel has therefore conducted hundreds of airstrikes against government facilities and positions, seizing territory across southern Syria and backing local Druze militias with the aim of blocking the government's attempt to extend its domestic authority.[49] At the same time, Israel has entered security talks with the new government in the hope that Syria would agree to peace on Israeli terms.[50] Damascus has so far rejected this, saying it would agree and honour the 1974 armistice agreement and would agree to peace within the Arab consensus.

In seeking to limit Israel's military intervention, Syria has few tools: its military and intelligence services are weak. Instead, it has sought to mobilise Arab diplomatic support, to tie Turkiye to its security interests and to cultivate US support. Indeed, Washington has spoken in favour of strong, centralised governance in Syria as well as regional integration to stabilise the country. This position may limit Israel's reach in Syria, but it also makes Damascus dependent on US whims.

Syria's Pragmatic Neighbourhood: Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council

Syria's contiguous Arab neighbours – Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq – have been pragmatic. Their approaches are shaped by a desire to maintain border security, create conditions for the return of refugees and gain economic advantages as Syria recovers. The policies of these countries are purely pragmatic and they prioritise containment over influence, as opposed to those of Iran, Israel and Turkiye.

Following 14 years of conflict in Syria, Jordan is keen to see a stable, friendly, centralised and unified Syria. Such conditions would facilitate the return of the 1.3 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, curb narco-trafficking, boost trade between Amman and Damascus, and provide Jordanian industries with land access to the European Union market through Syria and Turkiye. Despite its concerns about the character of the new regime and its ability to stabilise Syria, Amman is pursuing its objectives by extending its political and security support to Syria.

Iraq's relationship with the new government of Syria is more complex. While strategic imperatives require a pragmatic and functional relationship with Damascus, domestic political pressure on the Iraqi government compels Baghdad to remain cautious. The new Syrian president's past as an al-Qaeda operative in Iraq has prompted Iraqi political figures to reject his administration. However, Iraq's geography and the defeat of friendly Syrian militias leave Baghdad with no choice but to engage actively with the Syrian government. Baghdad needs to maintain secure borders with Syria, prevent the resurgence of ISIS and secure its required share of water supplies from the Euphrates. However, due to political sensitivities, Iraq's current interaction is limited to border-security cooperation. Other Arab states, in addition to the US, could help normalise the relationship between the two countries by advancing infrastructure projects and intelligence cooperation.

Among these immediate neighbours, Lebanon seems to be the one facing an existential challenge from these rapid developments in Syria. It is concerned about a potentially asymmetric relationship, owing to Syria's historical influence on Lebanese politics and its larger size. Lebanon worries that Damascus will reject improving relations as punishment as long as Hizbullah remains powerful. Additionally, Lebanon remains apprehensive about losing its economic significance for Syria and the broader region as sanctions imposed on Syria are lifted, and as Syria rebuilds its critical infrastructure, particularly its ports in Latakia and Tartus.

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also have a significant stake in Syria. The collapse of the Assad regime has raised hopes for restoring Arab centrality in the Syrian strategic calculus and eliminating Iranian influence. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are leading the GCC's engagement with Damascus. For Riyadh, the transition is an opportunity to assert its regional leadership and curb Iranian, Israeli and Turkish influence in Syria. As part of its broader regional-stabilisation strategy, Riyadh also has an interest in Syria achieving stability, as this would be beneficial for Saudi economic ambitions. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is expected to remain supportive of the new Syrian authorities – under several conditions, including eradicating the Captagon industry, countering Sunni and Shia extremism, and maintaining Syrian autonomy vis-à-vis Iran, Israel and Turkiye. Having stood against Assad even during the years of Arab normalisation with his regime, Qatar is the most supportive of the GCC countries. It was the first GCC member to recognise and establish overt relations with Sharaa's government and has a comprehensive set of levers at its disposal to exert influence in Syria. These include Qatar's history of unwavering support for the Syrian revolution, its longstanding relationship with Islamists in Syria, its robust ties with Turkiye and the US, as well as its substantial financial resources. It is expected to capitalise on these levers to support its strategy as an international energy provider and a diplomatic mediator.

International Players

International powers such as China, Russia, the US and the EU will also shape Syria's future. All of them have been affected by or have intervened in the Syrian conflict.

The EU, for instance, sees the transition in Syria as a significant strategic opportunity that can serve its goals at home and abroad. It sees the fall of Assad as a major opportunity to limit Iran's and Russia's influence in Syria and the transition as an opportunity to create the conditions for the return of Syrian refugees, which would help depolarise European domestic politics and societies. It has therefore sought a stable and unified Syria that is democratically governed and attractive to the Syrian diaspora. Its main tool is its technical and financial support for recovery and reconstruction, which has been conditioned on tangible progress towards a just transition, political inclusion and the upholding of human rights.[51]

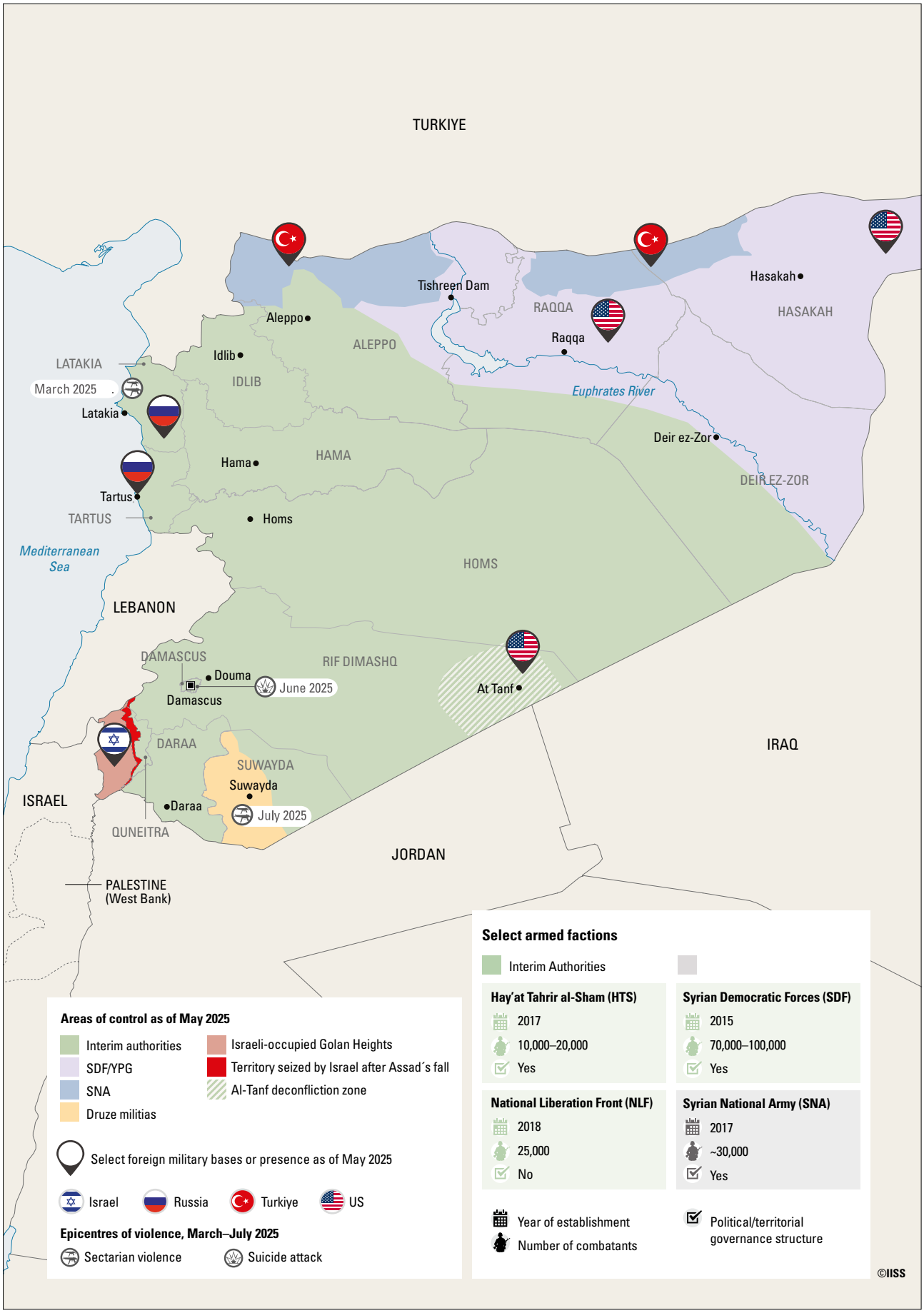
The US is also keen to limit Iranian and Russian influence in Syria. However, US policy in Syria is driven by broader macro-strategic objectives. Washington sees the transition in Syria as an opportunity to exit from a foreign conflict and create the conditions for American disengagement from the country.[52] It is trying to achieve these goals by leveraging its strong relationship with Turkiye, the SDF and other Syrian actors and by lifting sanctions. Washington's influence over the SDF and Damascus is critical in encouraging an inclusive SSR process. Furthermore, lifting sanctions will enable Damascus to mobilise the resources necessary for SSR.

By contrast, the collapse of the Assad regime has significantly reduced Russia's influence on Syria. Nevertheless, Russia remains eager to preserve its military presence in Tartus and Khmeimim as this safeguards its access to the Eastern Mediterranean, especially after investing more than US$20bn in the Syrian economy to keep Assad in power.[53] After the shock of Assad's fall, Moscow has quickly and pragmatically engaged with Damascus to maintain its presence in Syria. However, its influence in Damascus will be limited to the now-shrinking networks it had built up over the course of the 14-year Syrian conflict and to its influence in the UN Security Council. Importantly, Russia may be asked to hand over Assad and other senior regime officials to the Syrian judiciary, which would test Russia's credibility.

China's approach to Syria is shaped by security concerns and economic opportunism. Its primary concern has been the threat posed by the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).[54] Beijing is expected to make its engagement in Syria's post-conflict reconstruction contingent on clear steps being taken by the Sharaa government to crack down on TIP fighters in Syria.

The intricate web of regional and international interests in Syria is likely to further complicate the SSR process in the country. The heightened regional competition between Iran, Israel and Turkiye is likely to result in the provision of sustained support to militant proxies based on ethnic and sectarian grounds. Furthermore, the American desire to disengage from the conflict, coupled with the passive European approach to dealing with it, will limit these powers' ability to achieve significant milestones in the SSR process in Syria. The SSR process in Syria will therefore remain largely contingent upon whether Damascus can lead an inclusive and just political transition that deals pragmatically with the challenges associated with Syria's ethnic and religious diversity.

Map 1: **Conflict map of Syria**



Sources: Etana Syria; IISS, IISS analysis

3. Mapping Syria's Armed Factions

The 14-year-long Syrian civil war, which culminated in December 2024 with the collapse of the Assad regime, saw the rise, fall and reinvention of a significant number of NSAGs – many, although not all, in opposition to the regime. The war produced a wide array of ideological, political, communal and criminal groups which have fought, cooperated, morphed, coalesced, reconciled and split again over territory, glory, grievances, resources and ideology. On the rebel side, Islamist armed groups proved more resilient than the more secular factions. While one jihadi group, the Islamic State (IS), pursued an extremist and expansionist agenda, another, HTS, became significantly more moderate, in part because of societal pushback. Meanwhile, the conventional military – the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) – underwent a process of 'militia-fication' and operated alongside regime militias, which ultimately eroded its performance, cohesiveness and sense of purpose.

The fall of the Assad regime has given new relevance to the various umbrella groups that once looked defeated or contained. These include HTS, the National Liberation Front (NLF), the SNA and the SDF. These groups are currently in the process of integrating into the new structures under the MoD of the interim authorities. In addition, other NSAGs should be factored into any security sector planning as their activities may prove destabilising to the interim authorities. The latter include the Islamic State and armed remnants of the former Assad regime. This section maps the main armed factions that existed in Syria in December 2024 amid the overthrow of the Assad regime.

Main Armed Factions

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Background

HTS is a nationalist Syrian revolutionary group with a Salafi jihadist background. In 2012, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) established Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN, or 'The Nusra Front') as an offshoot in Syria, led by Sharaa (then known by the *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammed al-Jolani). The Nusra Front remained affiliated with the ISI, attracting large numbers of foreign fighters, until breaking ties in April 2013. The Nusra Front affirmed its allegiance with al-Qaeda as the ISI transformed into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[55] In 2016, Jolani also severed ties with al-Qaeda and the Nusra Front became known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS).[56]

In 2017, several revolutionary factions, ranging from moderate to Salafist groups, merged into HTS, with the aim of creating a more effective fighting force against the Assad regime and other rivals. JFS became the backbone of this new group.[57] Over the next two years, HTS periodically fought other opposition factions in the northwest, focusing largely on those with Turkish support, which it saw as a major political threat.[58] These clashes resulted in some defections from HTS, but ultimately resulted in the subjugation of all factions in Idlib while any remaining factions were forced to abandon their political projects.[59] HTS was estimated to number 10,000–20,000 fighters.[60]

Ideology and mandate

Consistent with its mission to protect Sunni Syrians from the Assad regime, defeat the regime and establish Islamic rule, the Nusra Front became part of the broader opposition and focused its efforts on northwestern Syria after 2014.[61] Originally a Salafi jihadi group, it has been transformed under the leadership of Jolani, whose pragmatism drove the ruptures with the ISI and al-Qaeda in 2013 and 2016, and then the group's process of ideological moderation.[62] This arguably facilitated private donations from Gulf citizens and paved the way for local armed factions to join forces with the Nusra Front.[63] Overall, the group's change of purpose from a global to a Syria-specific jihad is a distinguishing factor, and included the establishment of a local, 'technocratic' governance model in 2017.[64]

Figure 2: **Key Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-related events, January 2012–December 2024**

Source: IISS analysis

Recruitment into HTS was reportedly voluntary and mainly took place through recruitment campaigns targeted at men over 18, through leaflets, social-media platforms and at Turkish–Syrian border crossings and in mosques.[65] In 2018, around 3,000–4,000 foreign fighters were part of HTS, but recruitment has since focused predominantly on Syrian nationals.[66] While the Nusra Front recruited child soldiers, HTS professionalised recruitment, arguably to prevent any such future accusations.[67] Salaries for HTS combatants were reportedly higher than those paid by other armed factions and went up to US$125 per month, in addition to housing and food baskets. Combatants cited ideological and religious reasons and lacking employment opportunities as their motivations for joining HTS.[68] In 2021, a military academy was founded where recruits underwent religious and military training before being allocated to brigades.[69]

Organisational structure and leadership

After 2017, HTS professionalised its organisational structure, which included political and military institutions.[70] HTS established the SSG, a technocratic governance body comprising civilian staff responsible for providing public services in northwestern Syria.[71] The SSG included an executive branch, headed by prime minister Ali Kidda from 2019–24, and a legislative branch, the General Shura Council. Jolani was advised both by the General Shura Council and the prime minister of the SSG, who went on to become the first minister of interior of the new transitional government.[72] While a certain degree of autonomy arguably existed between the SSG and HTS, the SSG depended on Jolani's support and HTS members were represented alongside civilian technocrats in some ministries.[73]

Militarily, HTS established the General Security Service (GSS) in 2020 to handle internal policing. In 2023–24, the GSS became the subject of protests that erupted in Idlib governate following allegations of detention and mistreatment of purged HTS members.[74] In response, Jolani subordinated the GSS to the MoI and reinstated local councils.[75] In May 2021, HTS established a military-recruitment department to professionalise its recruitment practices.[76] While the group was initially perceived to be curtailing religious freedoms of minorities, such as the Druze or Christians in Idlib, discourse

Ahmed al-Sharaa

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) transformation from an al-Qaeda offshoot to a local armed group with governance capabilities took place under the pragmatic leadership of Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa (*nom de guerre*: Abu Mohammad al-Jolani). A controversial figure and a designated terrorist with a US$10 million reward for information leading to his arrest, Sharaa has transformed from the leader of the most powerful Islamist faction in Syria to the country's head of state.

Sharaa's family background and regional political events shaped his political beliefs and led to his turn towards jihadism in early 2000. Born in 1982 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, his *nom de guerre* references his family's origin in the Golan Heights, from which his grandfather was displaced following the Israeli occupation in 1967.[VI] Sharaa returned to Syria aged seven, growing up in a middle-class family in the suburbs of Damascus. His father, Hussein al-Sharaa, was known for his opposition to the Ba'ath Party, which ruled in Syria and Iraq. In 2000, the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada motivated Sharaa to stand up for those he perceived to be the oppressed. Following the United States' invasion of Iraq, Sharaa travelled to Baghdad to fight against the US forces. During his time as a militant for al-Qaeda, he adopted the name al-Fatih Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. He was captured by US forces in 2005 and detained at Camp Bucca alongside other prisoners who later became prominent jihadi commanders.[VII] During his imprisonment, Jolani developed his initial thoughts on how al-Qaeda could operate in Syria.[VIII] After his release, which occurred prior to the Arab Spring uprisings in Syria in 2011, Jolani was appointed as a commander in the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq.

In 2011, ISI leader Abu Baker al-Baghdadi dispatched Sharaa to establish an ISI branch in Syria. In January 2012, Sharaa established the Nusra Front, a name chosen to hide the group's ties to al-Qaeda in order to gain the support of local Syrians – instead it portrayed itself as a group focused on fighting Assad regime. In 2013, as Baghdadi turned ISI into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Jolani refused to merge into the newly created group and severed the Nusra Front's relations with al-Baghdadi, instead declaring allegiance directly to al-Qaeda. In 2016, Jolani cut ties with al-Qaeda to separate his group's revolutionary agenda from al-Qaeda's agenda of global jihad, shifting the focus towards fighting the Assad regime and also ISIS. These pragmatic decisions allowed the Nusra Front to position itself as part of Syrian society, garnering widespread support among Sunni Syrians and making the group a key player within Syria's armed opposition. In 2017, Jolani rebranded the group as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. It subjugated many other armed factions in the Idlib region and became the most powerful Islamist faction in Syria. Around this time, Jolani began moderating his rhetoric towards different ethnic groups and minorities living in the areas under HTS control. His engagement with the public and governance provided by the Syrian Salvation Government also earned him some credibility as the technocratic government provided services to the civilian population in Idlib province. However, accusations of human-rights violations, including alleged torture in HTS prisons, persisted during this time.[IX] In early December 2024, with the fall of the Assad regime, HTS was dissolved and its commander reverted to his given name, Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Ahmed al-Sharaa, surrounded by supporters, at Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on 8 December 2024 prior to his address to the nation

(Aref Tammawi/AFP via Getty Images)

and practice towards religious minorities has shifted since 2022 owing to Sharaa's pragmatism.[77]

Resources, financing and external relations

By 2019, HTS had taken control of Idlib governate, home to almost 4.5 million Syrians.[78] As HTS expanded its territorial control, it established economic control and diversified its financial resource base, which was facilitated by the formation of the SSG. Revenues were derived from establishing a tax regime covering roads, property and small businesses, as well as a monopoly over electricity, water, fuel and waste disposal.[79] Control over border crossings facilitated the trafficking of humans and goods and led to significant revenue generation: HTS reportedly derived up to US$15 million from the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkiye alone. HTS also took control of the

financial infrastructure and set up al-Waseet company to transfer funds. This was later transformed into the al-Sham Bank, which remains operational in 2025.[80]

Like the Nusra Front, HTS pursued a pragmatic external-relations strategy. During 2012–15, this strategy framed the anti-regime struggle as part of a broader historical struggle between 'international imperialism and the Islamic world'.[81] Over time, the narrative became more nuanced. Following the split with al-Qaeda in July 2016 and the subsequent rebranding as JFS, Jolani positioned HTS as a Syrian national movement without links to global jihadist movements.[82]

Concurrently, Jolani began forging stronger relations with foreign actors after 2017 and consolidated his power by increasing cooperation with Turkiye and establishing back-channel communication with the US. Due to converging interests in northern Syria, Turkiye developed a working relationship with HTS to coordinate military patrols along the Idlib frontlines and share intelligence on ISIS activity. In 2020 and 2021, HTS actively sought a good relationship with the US by delivering messages to the former US special representative for Syria engagement, James Jeffrey.[83] HTS's pragmatic approach to the US and the West has paid off and contributed to the United States' perception of HTS as an important force in the fight against ISIS and an asset to the US strategy in Syria.[84]

Relationship with the Syrian transitional government

HTS forms the core of the transitional government: most officials in leading positions previously held appointments in the HTS or the SSG.[85] While synchronisation among officials can benefit centralised and effective governance during a transition process, concentrating power in the hands of HTS could prevent progress towards a just and inclusive political transition and undermine its legitimacy due to its past links to al-Qaeda.

The National Liberation Front (NLF)

Background

The NLF was a coalition of armed factions, operating as close allies of HTS from inside Idlib. These factions existed in a middle ground between the SNA and HTS, closely supported by Turkiye while cooperating with HTS and eventually operating out of HTS's larger al-Fatah al-Mubin Military Operations Room (FMOR). The latter, a committee of faction leaders that coordinates military operations, allowed Turkiye to retain proxies within Idlib and HTS to indirectly receive Turkish military support.

The NLF first formed in May 2018 as a merger of 11 Free Syrian Army (FSA)-branded and Islamist factions, and represented the major factions in Idlib that were neither close allies of HTS nor linked to SNA units. In 2019, two weeks of serious infighting between the NLF and HTS resulted in the NLF's defeat.[86] While some subunits defected to the Turkish-backed SNA in northern Aleppo, the NLF's leadership ultimately submitted to HTS's SSG while retaining a degree of military independence that allowed them to remain in Idlib.[87] From this point, the NLF's ties to HTS deepened and the subordinate factions coordinated directly via the FMOR and later sent officers to the HTS's military academy.[88] The NLF was estimated to contain 25,000 fighters by the end of 2024.[89]

Ideology and mandate

The NLF, made up of factions spanning the ideological spectrum, was simultaneously secular and Islamist. Factions included long-time local FSA-branded organisations like Jaish Nasr, which was part of the US-run *Timber Sycamore* programme, and the 1st and 2nd Coastal divisions, which participated in the 2014 Geneva talks.[90] In the middle were local FSA-branded Islamist organisations such as Idlib's Suqour al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham, closely connected to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood diaspora networks, was on the more extreme end of the spectrum. The wide ideological spectrum further enforced the NLF as a military coalition, rather than a political one. This adherence to purely military objectives was a strict red line set by HTS since 2019.[91]

Turkiye quickly began supporting the NLF, providing a crucial lifeline for many factions which had previously been supported by the US.[92] However, Turkish support was conditional on the NLF's participation in the 2018 Afrin offensive (known as *Operation Olive Branch*) and *Operation Peace Spring* (2019).[93] Thus, NLF forces were split between fighting Syrian regime forces

alongside HTS in Idlib and fighting SDF in north Aleppo alongside the SNA.

Having its roots in Idlib rather than SNA-run Aleppo, its adherence to military doctrine appears to have impacted the behaviour of ex-NLF factions today. In contrast to the widespread accusations of violations and illicit-economy activity committed by the SNA, many NLF components have built good reputations in their areas of operations since 8 December 2024.[94]

Organisational structure and leadership

By 2020, the NLF consisted of 17 factions, constituting all but one of the non-extremist or foreign-fighter factions still in Idlib that had not merged with HTS.[95] The NLF was initially led by a defected senior officer from Faylaq al-Sham, Turkiye's closest ally within the organisation, and defected officers from the leadership of the FSA-oriented Free Idlib Army and Jaish Nasr.[96] While other leadership positions changed, Faylaq al-Sham's Fadlallah al-Haji remained the head of the NLF until the regime collapsed, with Jaish Nasr's Muhammad Mansour as his chief of staff.[97]

The NLF experienced defections and mergers, reflecting its factional nature. Major groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham experienced internal splits and some commanders and fighters defected to the SNA. In December 2023, Suqour al-Sham's leader announced his group's exit from the NLF, causing a schism which led some members to remain in the NLF under a new name while others defected to the SNA.[98] The now-independent Suqour al-Sham remained in Idlib and cooperated closely with HTS and the NLF. Nevertheless, NLF factions remained involved in defending Idlib, with its leadership cooperating closely with HTS's FMOR.[99] Around November 2023, the NLF began merging several smaller factions in order to 'further unify and coordinate military efforts, and … increases the effectiveness of the factions'.[100]

Complicating matters was the fact that some units were split between the NLF and the SNA. Notably, Faylaq al-Sham maintained an Idlib sector within the NLF and a unit within the SNA's First Corps, and Faylaq al-Sham's commander, Haji, served as both the NLF's commander and SNA's chief of staff.[101] Even groups that were not split between the two organisations still had to support Turkish operations in northern Syria, weakening positions in Idlib, particularly in 2018 and 2019 when the Assad regime conducted major offensives.

Resources, financing and external relations

The end of the United States' *Timber Sycamore* programme in 2018 meant that many NLF units needed financial support. Turkiye became a key lifeline, but the financial and material support came with requirements to support Turkiye's anti-SDF offensives in 2018 and 2019.[102] Yet, some reporting suggests the NLF suffered from similar financial strains to those of some SNA units. Beginning in 2022, HTS began poaching NLF members and units by offering higher salaries, better military coordination and spots in the new military academy.[103]

After 8 December 2024, Turkiye continued to pay the salaries of NLF veterans, even after their factions had been integrated into the new MoD.[104] New recruits to these same units, however, are paid by the Syrian government.[105] The arrangement may signal a gradual handover of financial responsibility to Damascus.

Relationship with the transitional government and the status of integration

The NLF's close ties with HTS and the trust built between the factions is reflected in their integration into the new army. NLF factions were among the first to adopt new division names and regularly refer to themselves as under the MoD. These units support MoI units in specific geographic regions assigned to them.[106] Other factions have been transformed into new divisions, or some of their commanders have been shared among other units. Also, hundreds, if not thousands, of veteran NLF fighters have retired and thousands of new members have been recruited as part of the integration process.[107]

The most prominent NLF divisions in the new army are the 44th (based in the Damascus countryside), the 54th (Homs), the 64th (Idlib) and the 74th (Hama).[108] Other smaller NLF units can be found in new divisions operating in the coastal area and in the rural Homs desert.

The 44th Division unites several smaller Damascus-based NLF units, such as the 77th Division, Jaish Nasr and Liwa Tahrir al-Sham, alongside the Damascus-origin units of Ahrar al-Sham and HTS's own Abu Bakr

Saddiq and Amr Ibn Al-Aas brigades.[109] As is standard, each of the NLF units within the division have been given at least one of their own brigades.

The 54th Division, representing the core of Ahrar al-Sham, is based in Homs and is led by the former commander of Ahrar al-Sham.[110] The division has been given some responsibilities in sensitive areas such as the western Hama countryside.[111]

The bulk of Faylaq al-Sham has been transformed into the new 64th Division, based in Idlib and led by Faylaq's former Idlib sector commander.[112] Like all divisions, it has taken on hundreds of new recruits.[113] While based in Idlib, at least one brigade has been stationed in the Latakia countryside since 7 March, where it has built a good reputation among locals.[114]

While not officially part of the NLF, Jaish al-Izza remains an important component of the Idlib factional scene. The group, one of the oldest FSA-branded factions to survive the war, was a close ally of both HTS and the NLF for many years yet remained independent from both of their military structures. Jaish al-Izza was quickly renamed the 74th Division in mid-February and handed responsibility for the Masyaf region, replacing an undisciplined military unit which had committed violations against the region's Alawites.[115] The 74th Division has an excellent reputation among both Sunnis and Ismailis, as well as some Alawites, for its professional conduct.[116] The division has also incorporated some elements of Faylaq al-Sham as well as the NLF's 60th Division, but remains under the command of Jaish al-Izza's long-time leader.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Background

The SDF, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious military alliance, was formed in northeast Syria in 2015. The group has received support from the international community, particularly the US-led international coalition, in its fight against the Islamic State. In its early days, the SDF was estimated to number 60,000 combatants.[117] More recently, it was estimated to be 70,000–100,000 combatants strong, including internal-security forces.[118]

SDF members during a military exercise with the US armed forces in September 2022

(Delil Souleiman/AFP via Getty Image)

Figure 3: **Key Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-related events, summer 2011–July 2025**

Source: IISS analysis

Ideology and mandate

The SDF was established to protect the Syrian Kurdish population against the Islamic State.[119] The SDF and its political administration are inspired by the Turkiye-based PKK's Marxism–Leninism and Kurdish-nationalist ideology.[120] Syrian members of the PKK formed the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003, which aspires to a 'radical democracy' model based on gender equality and ethnic and religious diversity.[121] Notably, the PYD did not aim to establish a Kurdish nation-state in Syria, and the governance structure implemented after 2012 has expressed the PYD's commitment to Syria's territorial integrity.[122]

As the Arab Spring took hold in 2011, small self-defence units called *Yenikeyen Xweparastina Gel* (YXG) were set up across northern Syria, including in Kurdish neighbourhoods in Aleppo and Damascus. These units were formalised into the People's Protection Units (YPG) in 2012 and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in 2013 to protect the Syrian Kurdish population. This process was prompted by the withdrawal of government forces in 2012, resulting in most political and military institutions being handed over to PYD leaders.[123] The YPG and YPJ were the military wing of the PYD.[124] In October 2015, the SDF was formed as a coalition of the YPG, the YPJ and various armed factions previously affiliated with the FSA.[125]

The SDF's membership is diverse, in part due to its practice of forced conscription. In 2019, at least half of the SDF was estimated to be made up of Arab combatants, with Christian and Yazidi combatants also represented.[126] Nevertheless, the SDF is run entirely by Kurds from the YPG or from the PKK itself.[127] The SDF relies on both compulsory and voluntary recruitment, overseen by local military councils and based on the signature of a contract providing two years of service.[128] Since the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, economic security and political and social mobility gained via patronage networks have been key motivators for attracting and retaining Arab and non-PYD-affiliated Kurds.[129]

The training of SDF combatants is largely ideological. In 2012, YPG General Mazloum Abdi requested the establishment of academies for ideological training, and over time the total training period has increased from ten days to more than six months, the bulk of it consisting of ideological education.[130]

Organisational structure and leadership

The SDF is highly organised and has a unified command structure. The group is headed by Abdi as commander-in-chief and governed by a military council made up of representatives from the SDF's various armed factions.[131] This military council selects the SDF's commander as well as the leadership, which is reportedly made up of 9–13 members. The SDF is made up of various divisions and security forces, and includes the internal police forces (*Asayish*), the HAT counter-terrorism force, the YAT rapid- intervention force, the elite YPG forces, the YPJ forces and intelligence forces.[132] These are reinforced by various regional military councils.[133]

A political counterpart emerged alongside the SDF, becoming known as the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES).[134] Starting in 2012 as a loose collection of self-administrating entities in Afrin, Kobani and Jazira, a complex system was created to govern the vast territory and resources that were coming under SDF control as it reclaimed territory from the Islamic State. Leadership positions are jointly held by a man and a woman, and all governance institutions have a women's quota of 40%.[135] DAANES has embraced religious freedom, implemented a new economic system and built an education system with three different languages of instruction (Arabic, Syriac-Aramaic and Kurdish).[136]

Resources, financing and external relations

In December 2024, the SDF controlled around 40% of Syria's territory in the northeast.[137] This area is home to two-thirds of Syria's natural resources, including farmland and vast petroleum deposits. The oil fields in Hasakah were already under the control of the YPG in 2012 and the SDF gained access to the oilfields previously controlled by ISIS when it defeated the group in Deir ez-Zor.[138]

As the SDF established territorial control, DAANES implemented an economic-development programme for northeast Syria, which was underdeveloped due to the policies of the Assad regime.[139] In Afrin, several industries ranging from olive oil to textiles were developed and revenue generated from exports to regional countries, including Jordan, Kuwait and Libya.[140] The imposition of customs duties on trade and taxes on the population, including on income, provided further

sources of revenue.[141] However, SDF territories have experienced an economic crisis since 2021: although DAANES traded most of its oil to the Assad regime, it rarely received payment for these shipments.[142] This growing debt severely undercut the administration's ability to pay public-sector salaries.[143] Consequently, the SDF and DAANES have relied on international members of the Global Coalition Against Daesh to pay military salaries. The US in particular has supported the SDF since its inception and has contributed to SDF salaries.[144] The US and France also helped facilitate negotiations between the SDF and the new authorities regarding integration into the security sector.[145]

Relationship with the Syrian transitional government and the status of integration

Before December 2024, the SDF had mostly amicable relations with HTS and has engaged in dialogue on political and economic matters.[146] However, the SDF refused to join the HTS-led anti-regime offensive in late November 2024, sending its forces through regime territory in Raqqa to take over frontline positions in the Aleppo countryside. The SDF remained unwilling to engage with HTS until after the fall of Hama, creating some animosity. Negotiation efforts around the SDF's integration into the new army have been ongoing since late December 2024. The group has agreed to integrate, conditional on remaining a separate and autonomous military structure within the broader army and continuing to be stationed in their areas. However, the transitional government has rejected this.[147]

The SDF's own centralised political apparatus also clashes with the HTS-dominated transitional government's centralised system.[148] On 10 March 2025, Sharaa and Abdi signed a US-mediated agreement outlining the SDF's integration. However, implementation has been slow due to concerns over the constitutional declaration issued by Damascus – without consultation or involvement of the SDF and DAANES – on 13 March 2025.[149] In late July 2025, Abdi reaffirmed the SDF's commitment to integrate, yet progress remains slow.[150]

Despite this, positive signals have emerged from the various negotiations. One example is the agreement around checkpoints. These are manned by General Security, linked to the authorities in Damascus and the *Asayish* around Aleppo. While they are not manned jointly and are separate checkpoints, they do send a positive signal about potential cooperation and constitute a potential model that could be built upon, not least because the transitional authorities have in some parts reportedly accepted the presence of female *Asayish* members. Nonetheless, the women's units of the SDF might prove to be a sticking point in further negotiations and an obstacle to more profound integration, as might demands to continue serving in the northeast of Syria.[151]

The Syrian National Army (SNA)

Background

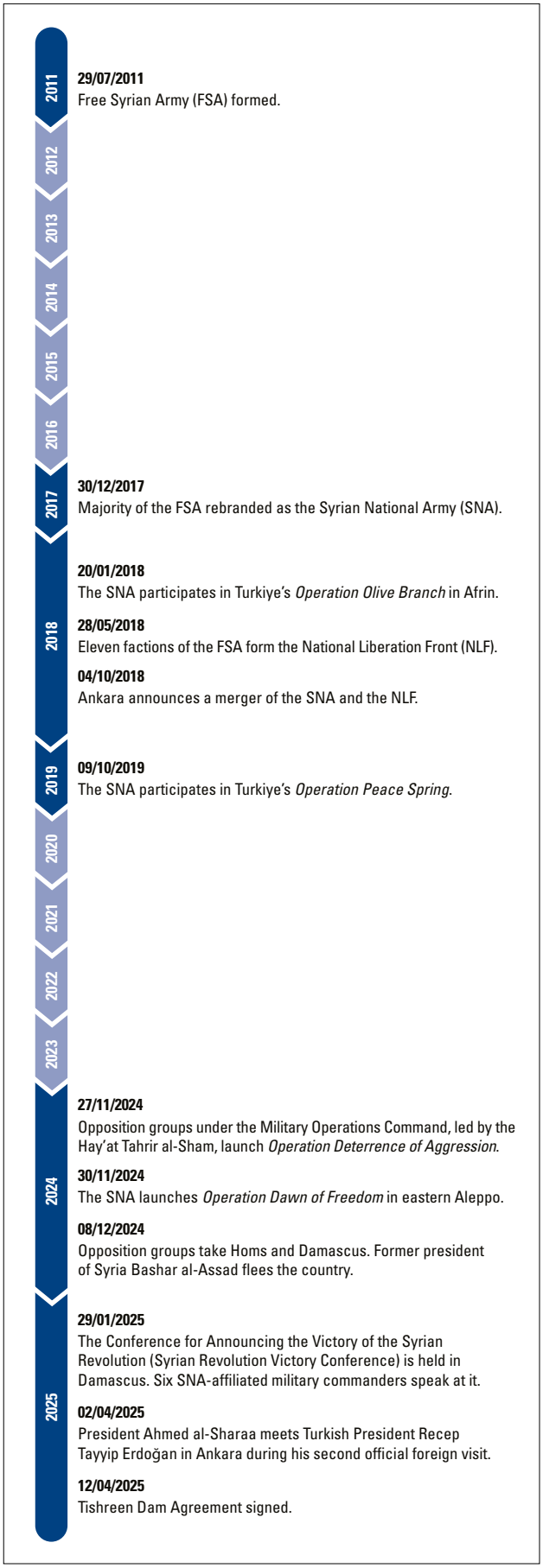
The SNA is a loose umbrella of different armed factions, supported by Turkiye and select Gulf states. It was formed in 2017 in Aleppo, at a time when Syrian opposition groups consolidated and external actors became more involved in the civil war.[152] In 2011, defectors from the SAA formed the FSA, which was rebranded as the SNA on 30 December 2017, with the exception of some former FSA factions, which formed the NLF in Idlib in May 2018 (see Section 3, the National Liberation Front).[153] The SNA is highly fragmented and its three corps include more than 40 armed factions, numbering around 30,000 combatants.[154] As such, the SNA is characterised by internal rivalries.[155]

Ideology and mandate

The SNA is a secular armed opposition group, widely recognised as a Turkish proxy reporting to the Turkish military and intelligence service.[156] It lacks the ideological cohesion that could unite its different factions.[157] The SNA fought mainly against the SDF, which Turkiye considers to be a terrorist group due to its links to the PKK, and was deployed against ISIS in the border areas.[158] Fighting the Assad regime was only a marginal part of its mandate.

Given the high level of autonomy between the various corps and factions, ideology, salaries and recruitment, the strong links between Turkiye and the Second Corps mean that its combatants receive a higher monthly

Figure 4: **Key SNA-related events, July 2011–July 2025**



Source: IISS analysis

salary of US$100, compared to the US$20 paid to Third Corps fighters.[159] Accordingly, material incentives feature prominently among Second Corp's recruits' motivations, while the Third Corps has attracted recruits for ideological reasons. Moreover, the Second Corps' involvement in illicit economies, reportedly also involving the exploitation of local populations, has also resulted in higher salaries for its combatants.[160]

The SNA is largely made up of Sunni Arabs but also includes Turkmen fighters.[161] Reportedly, training has professionalised overall since its establishment. In line with efforts to modernise its military and law enforcement, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) established a military school entitled 'Defense Ministry Warfare School' in May 2024.[162] Turkiye has also provided training to SNA fighters.[163]

Organisational structure and leadership

Led by General Hassan Hamada, the SNA is heavily structured around individual factions and their commanders.[164] The First Corps, led by Moataz Raslan, includes different factions within its divisions, such as the Sham Legion.[165] The Second Corps, led by Fahim Issa, comprises an estimated 13 different factions, including the prominent Sultan Suleiman Shah, Hamza and Sultan Murad divisions, numbering around 22,000 fighters in total.[166] The Third Corps, led by Azzam al-Gharib, reportedly formed in 2021 and is made up of seven divisions, including the prominent Sham Front, Jaysh al-Islam and parts of Ahrar al-Sham.[167] These factions have engaged in substantial infighting throughout the SNA's existence.[168]

Before 8 December 2025, the political body SIG, linked to Turkiye and the SNA, governed northern Aleppo governate.[169] The SIG was established by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the main opposition umbrella during the civil war, in March 2013.[170] The international community has recognised the SIG, made up of nine ministries, including those for finance, health, education, justice, the interior and defence.[171] The SNA reported to the SIG's Ministry of Defense, which was supported by – and dependent on – Turkiye.[172]

To increase accountability, the SIG established a military-judiciary mechanism in 2018 and implemented a military code.[173] In 2024, Turkiye attempted to

centralise the SNA and transform the SIG–SNA structure. To curb inter-factional confrontation, the MoD set up a Military Advisory Council and established a military police force.[174] Moreover, revenues were centralised and placed under the control of SIG's MoD.[175] While smaller factions were reportedly open to such centralisation, more powerful SNA factions – especially those that had used their military presence to derive both economic and political power – resisted.[176]

Differences among SNA factions also manifest their treatment of the civilian population. In particular, the Second Corps' factions have often been identified as mistreating populations, through arbitrary arrests, rape, forced displacement and other human-rights violations. Notably, violations have often taken place against Kurdish civilians have often been the victims. Turkish favouritism towards the three powerful factions of the Second Corps arguably contributed to a lack of accountability and impunity.[177]

Resources, financing and external relations

The three corps and the various factions within them have different levels of external relations and access to resources. The Sultan Murad, Hamza and Sultan Suleiman Shah divisions of the Second Corps have received preferential treatment from Turkiye, allegedly due to their ethnic ties, which reportedly entailed greater resource allocation.[178] Other financing streams for the Second Corps included revenue derived from the Bab al-Salama and Hamran border crossings, which also allowed it to attract more fighters.[179] Turkiye reportedly kept revenues derived from its shared border with the SIG to retain control over the different factions.[180] Overall, Turkiye and some Gulf states, notably Qatar, have financially supported the SNA, including through paying combatants' salaries.[181] The involvement of SNA factions in illicit economies also varies, with the Second Corps in particular implicated.[182]

Some SNA factions are listed under different sanctions regimes. In May 2025, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, the Hamza Division and Sultan Murad Division were sanctioned by the EU due to alleged involvement in sectarian violence in Latakia.[183]

Relationship with the transitional government and the status of integration

The SNA's relationship with HTS has ranged from cooperation to confrontation.[184] Nevertheless, the SNA agreed to integrate and is under the command of the MoD. Compared to the SDF, Sharaa made concessions towards the SNA, and most of its units, while remaining largely intact, have merged into different divisions with commanders originating from outside the SNA. Some commanders of larger SNA factions were appointed to senior positions in the new government, in line with Sharaa's approach of avoiding the alienation of the leaders of powerful factions. Accordingly, the Hamza Division and the Suleiman Shah Brigade have been turned into their own divisions. For example, Muhammad Hussein al-Jasim (whose *nom de guerre* is Abu Amsha), commander of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, sanctioned by the US, was appointed as commander of the 62nd Division.[185]

However, integration is incomplete and parts of the SNA, in particular the Second Corps, remain under Turkish influence.[186] There are still issues regarding the behaviour of SNA divisions and their lack of accountability.[187] Salaries for SNA combatants continue to be paid by Turkiye and Qatar. However, since June 2025, salaries have been transferred to the transitional authorities, who dispense them through an app used to pay all public servants.[188]

Tensions between the SNA and the SDF are likely to create instability and pose a challenge to efforts to create a cohesive security sector. The SNA launched its own operation, *Operation Dawn of Freedom*, on 30 November. While framed as part of HTS's anti-Assad offensive, the SNA targeted areas under the control of the SDF and the advancing SDF units, which had initially proceeded south to support Assad in Aleppo.[189] SNA factions took control of Manbij in rural Aleppo. Despite integration, SNA units under the MoD engaged in continued clashes along the Tishreen Dam near Manbij, at times receiving direct military support from the Turkish army.[190] This led to a ceasefire agreement between the SDF and the Syrian authorities in April 2025, but tensions persist.[191]

Other groups

Regime Insurgents

Background

The Assad-regime insurgents, known within Syria as *fuloul* ('remnants'), emerged out of the collapsed military and security forces during the final days of the Assad regime. The opposition's seizure of Aleppo on 29 November 2024 triggered a wave of desertions from the SAA that only increased as more territory was lost.[192] The seizure of Hama city on 5 December 2024 and then Homs city on 7 December 2024 caused additional waves of desertions and mass retreats, as soldiers abandoned their positions and returned to their villages.[193] On 8 December 2024, as Assad fled the country, the remaining soldiers stationed in bases and outposts across the country were told by their commanders to lay down their weapons and return home.[194] The next 24 hours saw tens of thousands of conscripts, military volunteers and militiamen returning home, many to the coastal Alawite regions of Latakia, Tartus and western Homs and Hama.

While Alawites did not make up the majority of the armed forces, they formed the core of the regime's assault units, special forces, intelligence branches and most ideologically committed militias.[195] These fighters enjoyed privileges during the war and their coastal villages were well stocked with weapons caches.[196] Many Alawite generals had long been tasked with establishing and commanding militias, serving as a link between the ideologically committed pro-Assad militia networks, known as *shabiha,* and the state's various security branches.[197] These widespread personal and professional connections would prove to be critical for quickly building an insurgent network combining criminal groups with ex-security forces, all with easy access to personal weapons stockpiles that had been established prior to Assad's fall.

This insurgent network is built on two layers. The core consists of ex-officers of the SAA and *shabiha* leaders, both inside and outside Syria, who are ideologically committed to Alawite rule in Syria.[198] They are supported via targeted recruitment of other, less ideologically motivated ex-soldiers, unemployed men and Alawite youth. These peripheral recruits are motivated by financial incentives, due to mass unemployment, and by security concerns following attacks against former soldiers and Alawite civilians by the forces of the new government and Sunni vigilantes.[199]

These two layers are also reflected in the Alawite community's internal subsets. Alawites in Latakia are more commonly part of the same clan as the Assad family. The regime historically drew on this community – which was more ideologically committed to the Assad cause – for its most sensitive positions.[200] Meanwhile, the Alawites from Tartus, while also widely serving in the army, were not as central in the core regime-security apparatus, nor as ideologically driven. These differences have played a major role in the variances in insurgent recruitment and loyalty, with Latakia at the heart of the insurgent networks and Tartus more peripheral, while Hama and Homs have seen almost no insurgent activity.

Ideology and mandate

While there are no official media outlets or statements for the regime insurgents, much of their ideology is derived from the Alawite sheikhs who exert influence over or are directly involved in their movement. The Supreme Islamic Alawite Council in Syria, formed in February 2025 and led by Sheikh Ghazal Ghazal, an Alawite figure based outside Syria, is the main anti-Damascus religious body. It brings together many diaspora Alawite figures along with Syrian-based pro-Assad sheikhs.[201] While not publicly associated with the insurgents, many ex-Assad security members state that Ghazal is their most influential leader, especially in Latakia.[202]

Since its foundation, the Supreme Council has called for international intervention in the Alawite regions and the withdrawal of the new government's armed forces.[203] These calls are framed as humanitarian, seeking to 'protect the Alawite people', yet they also include the demand that security and police forces must be 'composed of the people of the coast from its various components, with fair representation, especially in leadership positions related to the Ministries of Defence and Interior'.[204] 'Fair representation' for the coast would constitute Alawite control over security in the region.

The Druze

The Druze emerged as an Islamic sect in the 11th century and have since been persecuted by many different rulers in Syria, including the Assad regime. This persecution, which has sometimes taken the form massacres and forced conversions, has placed survival at the heart of their strategic, political, and social choices.

The Druze are spread across the Levant, including Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. In Syria, they live in the mountainous area of Jabal al-Druze in Suwayda, the Damascus suburbs, Mount Hermon and a small pocket in rural Idlib. Despite only making up 3% of Syria's population, they have played a significant role in Syrian politics.[X] A notable Druze figure, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, played a major role in supporting the Great Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and spearheaded the Great Syrian Revolt (1925–27) against the French mandate. After independence, Syrian Druze were brutally repressed by the Shishakli regime. Under the rule of Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad, they were further marginalised and barred from senior government positions.[XI]

Throughout the Syrian civil war, as a survival strategy, the Syrian Druze maintained 'strategic neutrality' between the Sunni-dominated opposition factions and the Assad regime.[XII] The Assad regime allowed them to create militias to defend their communities, which in turn allowed Assad forces to focus their military efforts elsewhere. Still, many Druze served in the regime's army, either through compulsory service or as high-ranking officers. The latter included a Druze Republican Guard brigadier-general accused of committing many war crimes against Sunnis in Damascus, Homs and Deir-ez-Zor.[XIII] Other Druze officers from Suwayda served as senior intelligence directors.

Although there is broad agreement on maintaining their autonomy, the Druze community is divided into various political leanings. During the civil war, Druze militants formed three different factions: Jaysh al-Muwahhidin, Sheikh al-Karama Forces and the Mountain Brigade. Jaysh al-Muwahhidin was formed to protect Druze communities in Suwayda in response to clashes between opposition groups and regime forces in early 2013, and for tactical reasons was largely allied with the regime. The Sheikh al-Karama Forces were formed under Sheikh Wahid al-Balous in 2014 to protect Druze communities. While initially neutral, the group became increasingly willing to confront the regime after Balous was assassinated in 2015, allegedly by the regime. The Mountain Brigade, established in 2014, maintained a delicate balance between the opposition and the regime by shifting allegiance over time, operating as a pro-government force during the fight against ISIS.

Civilians protesting the humanitarian situation in Suwayda on 28 July 2025 after clashes in the Druze-majority Suwayda province

(Shadi Al-Dubaisi/AFP via Getty Images)

After 8 December 2024, the Sheikh al-Karama Forces and the Mountain Brigade announced their willingness to integrate into the new national army as long as it was not controlled by a single religious sect and not used to supress minorities.[XIV] Jaysh al-Muwahhidin had previously been dissolved, but some of its members joined the newly formed Suwayda Military Council, which is antagonistic to the new government and demands Druze autonomy and decentralised governance in Syria.

Regionally, Syrian Druzes' need for protection and their demands for autonomy allowed Israel to position itself as their protector in South Syria. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has emphasised that Israel aims to create a buffer zone in southern Syria and prevent the Syrian military from entering Quneitra, Daraa and Suwayda provinces, in order to protect Syria's Druze minority.[XV]

Overall, the Syrian Druze still aim to safeguard their historical autonomy and protect their rights. Their maintenance of heavily armed non-state militias, with loyalties to different political factions within their community, makes the Druze unique among Syrian minorities and complicates political engagement with the authorities. Without a clear political process that guarantees a just transition leading to a pluralistic and democratic government in Syria, tensions between the Druze and the interim authorities will persist.

This demand is in line with those made in private by the affiliated sheikhs prior to the 6 March 2025 uprising, who claimed that full Alawite control was the only acceptable outcome for the coast regions.[205]

The insurgents can therefore be classified as separatists, rather than necessarily pro-Assad. It is not clear that the end goal is the return of Assad's reign to Syria, but rather, Alawite control over majority Alawite region

at the least, if not a full return to Alawite control over the entire country. At the core of the insurgent ideology is a deeply rooted anti-Sunni sectarianism, expressed as both a cultural and intellectual superiority against 'uncivilised' Sunnis and an insistence that all Sunni Syrians are religious extremists.[206]

Organisational structure and leadership

The insurgent network's true structure and size is unclear. Several regime militia and military leaders have publicly announced the names of different groups, such as Fatiha's Coastal Shield Brigade and Brigadier Ghaith Dallah's Military Council for the Liberation of Syria.[207] Other groups include the Makzun Regiment, which maintained a Facebook page calling for attacks against government forces until its alleged commander was arrested in late July 2025.[208] Rather than isolated cells, these are likely to be parts of an interconnected network linked through senior regime officials and militant pro-Assad Alawite sheikhs.[209] These commanders often maintain their own weapons caches, which they can then use to arm their fighters or unaffiliated local Alawites.[210]

Alawite sheikhs play an important role in connecting the insurgent networks. Sheikhs such as Ghazal and Saleh Mansour have been critical for mobilising anti-Damascus support.[211] As one of the last vestiges of the regime's social structures designed to control Alawite society, especially in the rural coastal areas, these sheikhs play a central role both in radicalising locals and mediating conflicts between Alawites and the new government.[212] Since 6 March 2025, local officials appointed by the new government have worked with some of these local sheikhs to prevent new insurgent attacks.[213]

One common claim is that only low- and mid-level regime officers have remained in Syria, while most senior members and those guilty of egregious crimes fled to Iraq, Lebanon or Russia. However, operations carried out by the new authorities consistently uncover very senior officials, including the former heads of intelligence directorates, still hiding in Syria.[214] Others have simply adopted civilian lives, using their wealth to open new businesses in their communities, knowing their neighbours will not turn them in to the authorities.[215] One difficulty for locals and the new government is that many senior regime commanders had retired after 2020, giving them enough time to fully integrate into the local civilian economy.[216]

In late July 2025, the new government's security forces in Latakia conducted a multi-day operation resulting in the arrest of three insurgent cells.[217] Among the detained men was a colonel from the Syrian Republican Guard, the elite division of the Assad regime led by his most loyal officers, who is reportedly the head of the 'Coastal Operations Room', accused of being the main organiser behind the 6 March 2025 uprising.[218] Other insurgent commanders who were detained or killed included a senior air-force intelligence officer and the former commander of a Latakia-based militia.[219]

The core of the 'remnants' is a close-knit network of ideologues who are devoutly pro-Assad and reject any Sunni-run government. They use typical recruitment tools, including security and financial incentives, to expand their support among Alawite ex-regime soldiers and the civilian population, relying heavily on support networks outside Syria.

Resources, financing and external relations

Foreign networks have played a key role in supporting the regime insurgents, both before and since 6 March 2025. Alawite diaspora networks are integrated into the religious councils influencing the insurgents, including the Supreme Islamic Alawite Council.[220] Diaspora lobbyist groups have actively pushed propaganda and policies in Western capitals, attempting to secure international military intervention in support of Alawites and re-sanctioning the new government in Damascus.[221] The efforts of these diaspora networks have been key to the insurgent media war, especially in the lead-up to the 6 March 2025 uprising, when news about diaspora lobbying efforts was widely shared on coastal Facebook pages.[222]

Former senior Assad officials now living in Lebanon and Russia have also supported the insurgent networks. Authorities in Damascus have accused Assad's cousin and former business tycoon Rami Makhlouf of funding insurgent cells in order to support their recruitment efforts.[223] Regime militia commander Muhammad Jaber and generals Giath Dallah and Suhail al-Hassan are also accused of directing insurgents from outside the country.[224]

Foreign support has also been critical, especially in financing and supplying insurgents. Iran, working

through Hizbullah, reportedly sends money to insurgent leaders, which they then pass out to unemployed ex-security members.[225] This financial support has allowed the insurgents to buy local sympathy by supporting families who are otherwise entirely unemployed. It has also helped recruit new fighters.[226] Lebanon has served as a key weapons hub for the insurgents, with several significant weapons seizures in Latakia and Homs uncovering seemingly mass-produced improvised explosive devices and weaponised drones.[227]

Relationship with the transitional government and the status of integration

Starting in late December 2024, the Assad insurgent network carried out steady attacks against the forces of the new government. Some of these attacks were in reaction to government arrest operations, but gradually they became more organised, targeting checkpoints and patrols.[228] They were carried out mostly in Latakia and Tartus, though several also occurred along the Homs–Lebanon border as cells attempted to smuggle weapons and people back and forth. Several clashes occurred in the Damascus countryside in January and February 2025 as Sunni ex-regime fighters carried out their own operations against local government forces.

While these insurgent networks mostly focused on trying to remove the security presence along the coast, several attempts were made to carry out high-profile attacks against Sharaa and foreign officials in Damascus.[229] In February 2025 in particular, insurgent activity was driven by a desire to isolate Damascus from the international community and to convince Western countries to support an autonomous Alawite state, which ultimately proved unsuccessful with the lifting of US sanctions against the country.

On 6 March 2025, insurgents conducted a massive, coordinated set of attacks targeting government checkpoints across Latakia and Tartus.[230] They succeeded in capturing most government positions outside the major coastal cities. However, thousands of government forces and armed Sunnis descended on the coast in response, engaging in three days of widespread killings against Alawite civilians.[231] Since then, local government officials have begun engaging directly with many Alawite sheikhs and ex-officers who have influence among the insurgent networks, aiming to prevent new attacks and encourage the handover of weapons caches.[232] This diplomatic engagement has significantly reduced insurgent activity. However, many of the underlying grievances around insecurity and unemployment for ex-soldiers and political power for the sheikhs remain unaddressed, fuelling continued recruitment to the insurgents' cause.[233]

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Background

The Islamic State (IS, ISIS or Daesh) evolved from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), founded by Jordanian national Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in October 2004. After Zarqawi's death in June 2006, AQI rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) with Iraqi national Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its first emir. In April 2013, the ISI expanded into Syria and adopted the name 'ISIS'. In June 2014, the group declared a global caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaiming himself its first caliph.

The power vacuum that emerged during the first two years of civil war allowed ISIS to establish itself in Syria. ISIS built proto-state structures and governance systems, ruling over twelve million people across 100,000 km^2 at its peak in late 2014.[234] The group attracted thousands of fighters, including many foreign militants. According to the more conservative estimates, it had between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters in Iraq and Syria, while other assessments suggest over 50,000 in Syria alone in 2014.[235] Major cities and towns in Syria were ultimately captured by ISIS, including Raqqa, Manbij, Mayadin, al-Bukamal and, partially, Deir ez-Zor.

By December 2017, the US-led Global Coalition Against Daesh had recaptured 95% of ISIS territory.[236] The group's last stronghold, Baghouz, was seized by the SDF in March 2019, ending its territorial caliphate.[237] Since then, ISIS has shifted back to its insurgency mode.[238]

Ideology and mandate

ISIS is a Salafi jihadist group, aiming to establish an Islamic caliphate governed by an extremist interpretation of sharia law. Central to its worldview is the idea that the caliph is obliged to wage an offensive jihad, which underpins the group's pursuit of territorial control.[239] This differs from al-Qaeda's goal of overthrowing

corrupt Middle Eastern regimes and replacing them with 'true' Islamic ones, which is why it prioritises targeting the US as the main source of the region's problems. Al-Qaeda believes that US military and economic support sustains these regimes, preventing their collapse under internal jihadist pressure.[240]

ISIS promotes a Takfiri narrative, labelling all Shi'ites and any Muslims who reject its own interpretation of the Koran as *murtaddin* (apostates), thereby justifying their killing under extreme and fundamentalist interpretations of sharia law.[241] Moreover, ISIS adheres to an apocalyptic theology. Central here is the belief in a final battle near Dabiq in northern Syria, where ISIS fighters – regarded as divinely chosen – will confront and defeat 'Roman' (Western) forces with the aid of the Mahdi, an end-time figure.[242] This idea was famously articulated by Zarqawi in 2004, when he declared that 'the spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify … until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq'.[243]

At its peak in 2014, ISIS's rule was characterised by fear and brutality, mass killings and forced displacement and genocide against the Yazidi people in Iraq.[244] Now, having gone back to being a mobile insurgent force, its efforts are focused on reorganising, recruiting and training, besides carrying out terrorist attacks.[245]

A particularly pertinent issue is indoctrination and training in prisons and detention camps, where thousands of ISIS-affiliated individuals are incarcerated. The SDF holds approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters in at least 26 facilities in northern Syria, alongside around 30,000 individuals linked to ISIS at the al-Hol and Roj camps.[246] ISIS's Ansar al-Afifat Brigade – tasked with intelligence gathering, training young people for operations, recruitment and managing financial resources – was recently reactivated by an ISIS operative who infiltrated the al-Hol camp in November 2024.[247] Many minors have also been recruited from camps and deployed to the *Badiyat al-Sham* (Syrian desert).[248]

Organisational structure and leadership

Key bodies include the Shura Council – an advisory body to the caliph – and the Delegated Committee – an executive body in day-to-day governance. The General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) has played an important role in managing ISIS global operations, including appointing leaders and coordinating activities across various regions. The GDP has its own regional *makatib* ('offices'), which currently include – but are not necessarily limited to – the *makatib* of Ard al-Mubarakah (covering the Levant and Arabian Peninsular), Bilad al-Rafidayn (Iraq), al-Furqan (Chad Basin and the Sahel), al-Karrar (Somalia and other parts of East, Central and Southern Africa) and al-Sadiq (Central and South Asia, as well as overseeing Islamic State – Khorasan Province) (ISIS-K).[249]

Under sustained counter-terrorism pressure, ISIS has shifted from a traditional hierarchical model to a more decentralised and cellular structure. Recently, functions have been transferred from the GDP to the Delegated Committee, which offers overarching strategic guidance as opposed to detailed command and control.[250] Consequently, regional offices and affiliated groups now operate with greater autonomy, including in their decision-making capacities.

The global leader of ISIS is known by the *nom de guerre* Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, while his true identity is debated. In February 2025, the UN stated with 'growing confidence' that Qurashi is Abdul Qadir Mumin, head of ISIS in Somalia.[251] Appointing a leader outside Syria and Iraq could signal a move towards an even more decentralised structure within Syria.[252] Until March 2025, the second global leader was Abu Khadija al-Iraqi (AKA Abdallah Makki Mosleh al-Rafi'i), who also led ISIS in Syria until he was killed by a US airstrike in Anbar province in western Iraq.[253] As of July 2025, the identity of his direct successor remains unknown, although some reports have named Abu Abdul-Qader (AKA Jassim Khalaf Wawood al-Mazroui).[254] Most other key leaders are in Syria.[255]

According to the UN, up to 3,000 ISIS fighters were active in Syria and Iraq in the first half of 2025, mostly in the *Badiyat al-Sham* and the Jazira regions. The group has also expanded covertly into populated areas near Damascus and the Aleppo countryside, Homs and southern regions (including Tulul al-Safa, Suwayda and Daraa).[256] The number of fighters may rise, with reports of ISIS-affiliated individuals moving towards Syria, including one mentioning that ISIS–K had deployed fighters.[257] ISIS is also exploiting the change in government in Syria to free more of its fighters from camps.[258] ISIS has continued its plans to attack prisons and has

instructed fighters to escape.[259] Continued clashes involving the SDF have also undermined security and destabilised the region, increasing the likelihood of large-scale prison escapes.[260] Notably, 70 detainees linked to ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din escaped from a prison in March 2025.[261]

Resources, financing and external relations

ISIS relies on a complex financing architecture, which is based around its network of subsidiaries. Before 2019, ISIS generated substantial revenue from extortion, kidnapping and oil sales, which was facilitated by its control of substantial territory in Iraq and Syria.[262] The broader ISIS umbrella is estimated to have access to US$10m in reserves, which has been used to create and run ISIS offshoots in Africa and Asia.[263] Since losing control of territory in 2019, ISIS – with the exception of these offshoots – is no longer able to derive revenue from the aforementioned streams. However, revenues generated by these overseas subsidiaries can be used by ISIS in Syria and Iraq to sustain its activities. Recently, ISIS moved towards cryptocurrencies to transfer funds

Foreign Fighters

Since the Syrian civil war began in March 2011, tens of thousands of foreign fighters have entered the country. They include individuals from Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and China, who are drawn by sectarian loyalties, ideological convictions and other perceived opportunities. Beyond the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), they have joined groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) (primarily composed of Uyghurs), Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs), Katibat Imam al-Bukhari (Uzbeks) and Ajnad al-Kavkaz (Chechens).

Today, foreign fighters inside Syria can be divided into two categories: ISIS members – mostly detained in prisons in northeast Syria – and allies of the new government. While large numbers of foreign fighters have been killed or repatriated, approximately 5,000 of those allied to the new government (or far more, according to some estimates) remain in the country.[XVI] Most are Uyghurs, including roughly 3,500 associated with the Syrian branch of the TIP, a transnational jihadist group that has long been affiliated with the HTS.[XVII]

Most foreign fighters are in the northwest of Syria, particularly in Idlib, while others are based in urban areas including Damascus and Homs. Many have married Syrians, started families and plan to stay, unable to return home. Their presence has at times fuelled sectarian violence, including the March 2025 killings of 1,400 Alawites in Latakia and Tartous. Specifically in relation to the violence that took place from 6–10 March, investigators found that 'local factions and foreign Islamist groups under the nominal authority of the Ministry of Defence played the most significant role in committing these violations.'[XVIII]

The HTS has tolerated and at times used foreign fighters, though after 2020 it shifted towards sidelining and dismantling rival jihadist factions. Nevertheless, President Ahmed al-Sharaa has been actively seeking to integrate allied foreign fighters into Syria's defence apparatus. With limited capacity and political will to enact disarmament, incorporation appears more feasible. In December 2024, six out of 49 new military appointees were Jordanian, Turkish or Uyghur foreign nationals who assumed the senior rank of colonel or brigadier-general.[XIX] Lacking indigenous support bases, they are less likely to launch coups.

The United States initially opposed this policy. On 25 March 2025, the exclusion of foreign fighters from senior governmental and military roles was one of the conditions delivered by the US deputy assistant secretary for the Levant and Syria, Natasha Franceschi, to Syria's minister of foreign affairs and expatriates, Asaad al-Shaibani. Later, during a summit in Riyadh on 14 May, President Donald Trump urged Sharaa to 'tell all foreign terrorists to leave Syria'.[XX]

Yet by June 2025, Washington and Damascus had quietly agreed to selective integration. Alongside Syrians, 3,500 foreign fighters – mostly Uyghurs, and reportedly including TIP and Ajnad al-Kavkaz members – are being incorporated into the new 84th Division. Reports also suggest that the Syrian government has offered citizenship to select foreign fighters and their families.[XXI]

This strategy of integration risks increasing the international backlash. Israel's concerns about threats along its border with Syria, including the presence of foreign fighters, could prompt it to continue its intervention in the country. However, this strategy might unintentionally create power vacuums, rich for exploitation by militants. Russia and China fear that experienced fighters, including those from the Caucasus and Xinjiang, might gain training and legitimacy within the Syrian Army, thereby increasing the risk of terrorist attacks like the one carried out by the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K)'s in Krasnogorsk, Russia, in March 2024. In response, these countries might escalate diplomatic pressure on Syria and intensify intelligence operations abroad.

and receive financial support from donors. ISIS is a widely designated terrorist entity, including by the US, as well as under the UN and EU sanctions regimes.[264]

Relationship with the Syrian transitional government

Given its contentious relationship with HTS, it is likely that ISIS will continue to have a hostile relationship with the Syrian transitional government. Clashes between ISIS and the Nusra Front began after the latter refused to join ISIS in 2013 and instead aligned with al-Qaeda. In 2017, as the Nusra Front rebranded itself as HTS and established governance in Idlib governate, it also engaged in a bloody, multi-year counter-terrorism campaign against ISIS cells.[265]

ISIS is likely to continue to pose a challenge to security sector reform in Syria. It has steadily increased its activity in the country, from 187 attacks in 2018 to 416 in 2024, demonstrating that it retains significant capabilities.[266] ISIS also exploited the rapid departure of regime forces after the fall of Assad in early December 2024, raiding weapons stores in the formerly regime-held desert, as well as Russian military bases.[267] The number of active ISIS fighters and the large number of detained former fighters and their families on Syrian territory are further causes for concern.[268]

Conclusions

By the autumn of 2025, Syria's revolutionary government, which overthrew the decades-long authoritarian rule of the Assad family to much domestic and international applause, faces significant challenges pertaining to territorial control, political legitimacy and economic prospects. With very limited economic and military resources at its disposal, Sharaa's government must chart a course towards national reconciliation, balancing the desire to re-assert central authority with the security interests of Syria's religious and ethnic minorities. The latter remain deeply suspicious of a government dominated by Sunni Islamists. In the field of SSR these issues have come to a head, not helped by the fact that Syria's neighbours continue to meddle, constraining Damascus' freedom of movement. The government and its international partners face several strategic conundrums:

- The decision to integrate most armed factions into a new Syrian national army under the control of the MoD, while allowing the respective units to retain their own leadership structures, was arguably the most crucial step taken by the new government. While politically expedient at the time, it carries several political risks, most notably that in the case of a falling-out between different groups in the future, armed factions could easily go back to fighting each other. This pattern has been observed in other post-conflict environments (for example, in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).[269] To avoid this, it would be necessary to rotate officers and non-commissioned officers between the different units and focus on the establishment of a national training course for members of the security forces from different regions, with the aim of establishing a shared identity and *esprit de corps*. Given the resource constraints faced by Damascus, such a process would likely require significant international support.
- Officers and non-commissioned officers of the SAAF, many of whom are from the Alawite community, are the only group excluded from integration into the new national army. This group, which could number as many as 70,000, does not fall under the general amnesty and many members are now wanted for war crimes by the new government.[270] War crimes were committed overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, by regime forces during the civil war (see box 1 on transitional justice). While the decision to exclude former regime soldiers from the new army seems understandable, it has caused significant economic hardship and has already led to resentment among Alawites. To avoid the same situation as in Iraq, where the disbandment of Saddam Hussein's army in May 2003 contributed directly to the emergence of insurgent groups and ISIS, it would be desirable to allow former SAAF soldiers to rejoin the new army after a comprehensive screening programme for human-rights abuses and to assist those who are unable or unwilling to rejoin with socio-economic reintegration into civilian life.[271]
- Another challenge for Damascus is that many of Syria's ethnic and religious minorities do not trust the new regime. According to one opinion poll from April 2025, the vast majority of Sunni Arabs were optimistic about the future but Kurdish, Druze, Alawites and Christians felt significantly more pessimistic.[272] This is particularly true for perceptions of security, which implies that Sharaa's ambition to establish a monopoly of armed force for the regime actors will continue to face pushback from at least some communities. The massacres on the coast in March 2025 and in Suwayda in July 2025 have shown the limitations of the current approach to the maintenance of law and order, which mostly relies on a makeshift police force comprising poorly trained former militiamen. They have also shown the potential for the mobilisation of armed Sunni civilians, which have turned out en masse to defend the new government against both real and perceived sectarian challenges. They have also

made it harder for Damascus to convince the largest standing militia not under its control, the SDF, to integrate into the regular military. These developments underline the urgent need for Damascus to intensify the training of a professional and non-sectarian police force that would be accepted by Syria's minorities.

- One issue that remains unresolved for now is the question of what kind of defence force Syria needs in the future and how to finance it. While a future force structure exists on paper, in practice the military largely consists of light infantry supported by Russian T-72 main battle tanks, Mi-8 helicopters, armoured personal carriers and artillery.[273] More advanced weapons systems, such as the fighter aircraft, warships and missile systems of the SAAF, were destroyed by the IDF during their airstrikes in December 2024, ostensibly to avoid them falling into the hands of the rebels and to remove any future threat from Syria. The new government has already announced plans to acquire advanced weapons systems from abroad, initially from Turkiye, but will need to invest significantly in the training necessary to operate them.[274] It might also have to consider bringing back technical specialists, such as pilots and engineers, from the disbanded SAAF. In addition to the massive logistical and financial challenges of re-establishing a military force with advanced capabilities, there is also the question of whether Syria's neighbours, particularly Israel, would accept such a force on their borders, or whether they would continue their policy of striking the forces of the new regime.
- Beyond the need to modernise Syria's new army, there is also the question of how to find the necessary resources to pay the salaries of the many militiamen who were integrated under the umbrella of the MoD. The SAAF had an official force strength of some 169,000 soldiers in 2024, and according to some reports Damascus is planning to almost double that number for the new army.[275] At the time of writing, some military salaries are still paid from abroad, most notably by Turkiye. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have announced that they would co-finance non-military public-sector salaries in Syria for an interim period, providing some budget relief.[276] Nevertheless, given the need to rebuild the country's public infrastructure after the civil war, the interim authorities will struggle to pay for a military of this size, not least because the current structure of salary payments is potentially open to abuse.
- Given the lack of transparency in the process of restructuring Syria's security forces and the absence of civilian oversight, added to the fact that senior MoD positions in Damascus have been filled by HTS loyalists, there is a risk that the new force will become an instrument of control and patronage for the new authorities, much like the SAAF was during the Assad regime. Such an outcome would be undesirable for several reasons, including that such an organisation would not be accepted by many Syrians as a 'neutral' security provider, but also that a potentially bloated and inefficient security apparatus would not be able to defend the country against both internal and external enemies.

Considering the challenges outlined above, the question of how to structure Syria's nascent security sector will be of critical importance for the country in the months and years ahead. Damascus is in the unenviable position of having to juggle the competing priorities of integrating the various armed groups into a coherent force while permitting at least a certain level of local autonomy to forces such as the SDF. There is also the urgent need to establish a non-sectarian police force capable of dealing with challenges to regime authority, as well as unresolved questions regarding the future of former SAAF officers and non-commissioned officers. Dealing with this explosive mix of security-related issues is made even more complicated by the complex geopolitical situation of Syria, some of whose neighbours continue to meddle in its affairs.

Despite the importance of this issue, international partners have been reluctant to support SSR efforts, beyond some technical training efforts by Syria's neighbours Turkiye and Jordan. Unlike other post-conflict countries in a similar situation in the past, Syria does

not receive significant support from international organisations such as the UN, the EU or NATO, nor does it have a key donor such as the US or the United Kingdom, which could provide both technical advice and material support for such an undertaking. The Gulf states, for all their deep pockets and political support for Damascus, do not have the required expertise and experience in managing such a process. While the new government is seemingly committed to reform, so far it has not shown openness towards international involvement, seeking bilateral relationships over an integrated multilateral approach. It therefore remains to be seen whether the current process leads towards stability for Syria or, instead, a new cycle of violence.

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The International Institute for Strategic Studies – UK
Arundel House | 6 Temple Place | London | WC2R 2PG | UK
t. +44 (0) 20 7379 7676 **e.** iiss@iiss.org **w.** www.iiss.org

The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Americas
2121 K Street, NW | Suite 600 | Washington DC 20037 | USA
t. +1 202 659 1490 **e.** iiss-americas@iiss.org

The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Asia
9 Raffles Place | #49-01 Republic Plaza | Singapore 048619
t. +65 6499 0055 **e.** iiss-asia@iiss.org

The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Europe
Pariser Platz 6A | 10117 Berlin | Germany
t. +49 30 311 99 300 **e.** iiss-europe@iiss.org

The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Middle East
14th floor, GFH Tower | Bahrain Financial Harbour | Manama | Kingdom of Bahrain
t. +973 1718 1155 **e.** iiss-middleeast@iiss.org