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THE NEW SYRIAN ARMY: ORDER OF BATTLE



Kelly Campa and Brian Carter

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The background of the entire page is a light beige topographic map. It features intricate contour lines that create a complex, wavy pattern across the surface. The lines are more densely packed in some areas, suggesting steeper terrain, and more spread out in others. The overall effect is a subtle, textured backdrop that resembles a military or geographical map.

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Cover: Battles-in-Syria-with-Outlaw-Groups

A Syrian government fighter shows a victory sign as battles take place between the new Syrian government's Defense Ministry forces and the forces loyal to Bashar Assad on March 7, 2025, in outskirts of Jableh, Latakia countryside, Syria. (Photo by Mohamad Daboul / Middle East Images / Middle East Images via AFP) (Photo by MOHAMAD DABOUL/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images)

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THE NEW SYRIAN ARMY: ORDER OF BATTLE

Executive Summary

Syrian Transitional President Ahmed al Shara and his political allies are building a new Syrian army as part of their effort to unite Syria under their Damascus-based government. The establishment of a professional army that both responds to civil control and protects all of the Syrian people, regardless of ethnic, religious, or sectarian background, will be necessary to ensure Syria's long-term stability in the wake of Syria's civil war. Shara must balance integrating multiple competing armed groups into his army, professionalizing his forces, and ensuring that his forces remain ready and capable of providing security in the near term. Failing to address any one of these challenges risks destabilizing the country, which would undermine the stated US strategic objective of promoting long-term stability in Syria.¹ US decision-makers should evaluate Shara and the type of state he is building in large part by how Shara integrates Syria's post-war armed factions and the extent to which he invests in meaningful efforts to professionalize the new army.

Any evaluation of Syria's new government and its trajectory should proceed from a realistic assessment of the army's initial structure and its limitations. This paper presents, in its final section, the initial order of battle of the new Syrian Arab Army. Shara and his allies are constructing the new Syrian military out of the victorious civil war opposition factions that helped him topple the Bashar al Assad regime in December 2024. The new army's early characteristics indicate that Shara and his government will need to pursue three primary lines of effort in the coming months:

1. **Integration.** Shara aims to extend state control over Syrian territory and all Syrian factions, similar to the way in which he centralized Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) control over Idlib during the later years of the civil war. Multiple power centers within Syria remain, and Shara's own decisions—including his pursuit of a highly centralized government and his divisive appointments of US- and EU-sanctioned commanders — hinder this goal. Non-Sunni armed groups, including the Kurds and Druze, have largely refused to integrate into Shara's government on his terms and have formed political alliances to advocate

for guarantees of government protection or autonomy. The Syrian government and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) nominally agreed in mid-October 2025 to incorporate parts of the SDF as three new Syrian divisions and multiple independent special operations brigades, which is a positive development towards integration.²

2. **Professionalization.** The army's early deployments indicate that Shara and his Defense Ministry face substantial challenges in ensuring that its forces do not exacerbate Syria's existing political and military fissures. The decision to incorporate civil war militias, including those dominated by known war criminals responsible for ethnically-, sectarian-, and religious-motivated killings, into the army as entire units reflects the state's immediate need for cohesive units, but the Defense Ministry maintains weak command and control over some units as a result. Poorly disciplined units that have committed unsanctioned abuses during deployments have destroyed communities' trust in Shara and his government and are undermining his objectives. Shara will need, at a minimum, to expel sectarian actors who

have committed unsanctioned abuses from the army's command structures, which risks antagonizing key political allies.

3. **Capacity to Respond to Security Challenges.**

Shara is balancing the integration and professionalization of Syrian armed groups with protecting Syrians from significant security threats. These threats include the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), other insurgents and criminals, and the intercommunal violence that will continue to erupt as the country recovers from the civil war. Shara's reliance on loyal or allied commanders and reflagged civil war militias suggests that, in the short term, he is prioritizing designing a force to respond to emerging threats to state stability. He will nonetheless need to ensure that his need for expediency does not prevent him from undertaking the long, politically challenging professionalization process that is required to build a disciplined army.

Shara faces three major constraints as he begins to create the new army. First, Shara and his inner circle come from al Qaeda networks, which makes many Syrian minorities skeptical of their motives, regardless of their current ideological convictions. Second, Shara has understandably surrounded himself with his civil war allies and long-time supporters, all of whom are Sunnis who opposed Assad. Finally, the legacy of the civil war leaves extremely limited trust between different civil war-era factions that continue to hold competing visions for the future of Syria. The abusive behavior of some individuals and groups in Shara's coalition — both during and after the fall of Assad — has diminished trust even further and threatens to spur some groups, such as the Druze and Kurds, to organize themselves on a religious or ethnic basis. The abusive behavior, when coupled with the constraints Shara faces, could transform political differences in Syria into intercommunal conflict.

Shara and his principal subordinates in the Defense Ministry will need to provide transformational leadership and assume significant political risk in order to construct the type of professional army that will support Syrian long-term stability and avoid

intercommunal conflict. Shara has not yet demonstrated the fortitude necessary to disband abusive formations, particularly those backed by Turkey. The US experience in Iraq demonstrated that transforming sectarian military organizations required committed, transformational Iraqi leadership and significant political support from an external power. The US-backed effort to transform the Iraqi military faltered badly when the United States was no longer able to reward and encourage effective, transformational Iraqi leaders. US and Western support can encourage Shara to professionalize his army and punish abusive forces and commanders, but he will need to execute reforms with much less significant external support compared to his Iraqi counterparts in the late 2000s.

US policymakers can play a meaningful role in encouraging actions that will improve Syria's security sector and build long-term stability in Syria beyond the five-year transition period. The United States must evaluate the new Syrian government and its leadership based on its actions and avoid the temptation to evaluate the government and its leadership based on its intangible and unobservable values and unspoken motives. The United States should evaluate and support the development of the Syrian army and security sector in the following ways:

- **Set Clear US Objectives.** The United States should support the establishment of a new Syrian army that can contribute to Syria's long-term stability. Long-term stability will require that most Syrians trust the army and that the army incorporate at least some elements of other Syrian armed groups.
- **Ensure Accountability.** The United States should encourage the Syrian government to discipline and hold its forces accountable for abuses. Atrocities and the failure to hold the perpetrators responsible will make it much harder for this government to create long-term stability and prevent threats from Syria that threaten US interests and partners in the region.
- **Press for Security Sector Reform.** The fragility of Syria's post-war transition means that Shara probably feels forced to rely upon some

bad actors to ensure that the transitional government can provide near-term stability. The United States should place heavy pressure on the Syrian government to reform its security sector and sideline or disband problematic units.

- **Promote Inclusivity in the Army.** The United States should encourage the new Syrian government to recruit and build formations from Syrian civil war groups that do not belong to the Sunni opposition milieu, including the SDF and Druze militias.

- **Engage with Turkey.** Turkey's continued patronage of problematic actors in the new army will hinder any professionalization efforts. The United States should hold Turkey accountable for its ongoing support for groups in Syria that have contributed to ethnic cleansing and continue to mediate between the Syrian government and the SDF to build trust and avoid another destabilizing Turkish offensive.

I. Introduction

Syrian Transitional President Ahmed al Shara and his political coalition are building a new army as part of their effort to unite and consolidate their control over Syria after the nearly 14-year Syrian civil war. The army is built around the victorious Sunni Islamist armed groups that allied with Shara to topple the Assad regime in December 2024. Shara relies on a core group of loyalists and allied commanders, some of whom have fought with him for over a decade, to ensure that the new army remains loyal to the state and to him as its commander-in-chief. The army's initial structure and early deployments indicate that Shara will face substantial challenges in ensuring that the army will remain responsive to the state and, therefore, to himself. Shara has demonstrated his determination to create a strong, highly centralized Damascus-based government that exerts sovereignty over all of Syria. Numerous structural and contingent factors, including Shara's own background, the choices he is making, and the evolving landscape of the armed groups that survived the civil war, complicate Shara's ability to achieve this effect during the five-year transition period that Shara established. These factors could destabilize Syria if Shara fails to address them. The way that Shara secures allies and former adversaries' cooperation and integrates other armed factions into the new army will be a strong indicator of the sort of state that Shara aims to build and whether he will be successful.

Shara faces two fundamental constraints as he builds a new army. First, he and his inner circle rose to prominence during the civil war as members of al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. This structural constraint means that many Syrians continue to view him and his new government with extreme skepticism, his personal transformation over the course of the civil war notwithstanding. This skepticism will continue to complicate Shara's abilities to integrate certain non-Sunni groups into the army and the state, particularly as the army contends with poorly disciplined or forces motivated by ethnicity or religion. Shara has successfully subordinated smaller groups under Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) in the past, but all of these groups were Sunni. His background and journey from a leader of al Qaeda in Syria to the Presidential Palace in Damascus still shape how Shara approaches integrating and subordinating Syria's non-Sunni armed groups under his leadership.

Second, Shara is constraining his options through the choices he is making as he builds his new government. Shara has chosen to develop a very centralized government that includes minorities performatively rather than substantively and has autocratic characteristics and democratic trappings, at least during the transition period. Shara commissioned and signed a draft constitution that monopolizes power within the executive branch and provides no meaningful checks on his authority. He has expanded his governing coalition to

include several minorities and political figures from outside the HTS-aligned opposition, but these individuals are unaffiliated with major political groups in the country and the positions they occupy often lack real power. The sole Kurdish member of the cabinet, for example, is not aligned with any major Kurdish party. The security forces remain predominantly Sunni Arab and have at least twice committed atrocities against Syrian minority communities. Some of Shara's efforts to impose his authority undoubtedly reflect his objective of stabilizing Syria and preventing the country from dissolving into another civil war. Shara's decision to pursue state building and power consolidation in this way, however, coupled with the violence committed by the government, has discouraged members of the Kurdish, Druze, and Alawite communities and followers of other political trends from cooperating with the government. This approach may threaten Syrian stability in the future as well.

The Syrian government is still building the army, and it is currently in a highly formative stage that is likely to change in the coming months and years. Shara and his advisers are constructing a new Syrian military from the plethora of armed Islamist and other opposition groups with which Shara allied to topple the Assad regime. The new army consists primarily of factions that joined HTS as part of the Fateh al Mubin Operations Room that toppled Assad on the one hand and of Turkish-backed factions that were part of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Fajr al Hurriya Operations Room on the other. The groups that were in Fateh al Mubin answer to Shara, but he does not yet fully control the Fajr al Hurriya groups. Nearly all the groups that make up the new army have historical tensions with other factions in Syria that are not yet integrated into the army, especially the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Druze factions.

The Defense Ministry will need to recruit and train new troops and then ensure that it can control the disparate militias.

Defining Reflagging

The US Army defines reflagging as the process in which a force replaces “one unit’s designation, lineage and honors, flag and heraldic items, with those of a different unit, either through activation/inactivation or transfer, while retaining the original unit’s... personnel and equipment.”³ The Syrian Defense Ministry has chosen to reflag many militias by giving them a division, brigade, or battalion designation instead of their original name. Some units have already been reflagged multiple times. The Sultan Suleiman Shah Division was reflagged as the 25th Division in February 2025 and again as the 62nd Division in March 2025.⁴ These units have the benefit of cohesion because most of the fighters fought together during the civil war, but they are less likely to answer to the chain of command unless they were previously HTS units or fought within an HTS-led structure. These units are adding some new fighters to their organization now, but the unit culture will remain rooted in the civil war-era units for the foreseeable future. The government cannot alter a pre-existing culture simply by adding fresh recruits to a cadre of prior militiamen because the previous cadre will impose its beliefs and organizational culture on the new soldiers. This means units predisposed to commit abuses against civilians will remain predisposed to such actions for some time unless the militias are totally broken apart.

Shara's reliance on anti-Assad Islamist groups to comprise the bulk of his forces is unsurprising — there are very few other options given the constraints imposed by his background and choices — but this reliance will likely create challenges for the new government as it attempts to incorporate all components of the Syrian populace. Shara has opted to reflag civil war-era opposition groups as entire units within the new army rather than dispersing them among new units, likely in order to ensure that the Syrian government has sufficient forces to deploy rapidly in response to emerging security issues that threaten Syria's stability. Unsanctioned sectarian-based violence and other abuses during the early deployments of the army's reflagged units indicate that the Defense Ministry has weak command and control over some units, including but not limited

to Fajr al Hurriya factions that have never fought under HTS command. Shara may see his reliance on US- and EU-sanctioned pro-Turkish commanders and their reflagged militias as a political necessity at this time, but this reliance risks further abuses and the erosion of public trust in the new government because of its elevation of warlords and thugs.

Shara could choose not to disband or dilute these ethno-religious and sanctioned units, particularly if the units do not threaten his political control or challenge his authority. His steps to rein in particularly abusive groups and individuals have been tepid at best, which suggests that Shara does not view addressing abusive units as a top priority. His lack of concern over abusive units would be unsurprising—their activities have not yet challenged his rule in Damascus and, in some cases, addressing them risks alienating hardline allies — but nonetheless concerning for Syria's long-term stability. Significant external pressure may be required to force Shara to address this issue. This paper will address the possibility of external pressure in greater detail below.

The formation of a new army that is responsive to an institutionalized chain of command will be extremely challenging and will take years. The Defense Ministry will need to recruit and train new troops and then ensure that it can control the disparate militias that nominally fall under its control. Some of the militias are very large and are backed by Turkey, which will complicate the dissolution of militias and their regeneration as professional units if the new government undertakes such an effort. The formation of institutionalized command and control is an even greater challenge because the government will need to centralize its forces while simultaneously fighting against a variety of internal agitators, including insurgents who seek to destabilize the government or smugglers who rely on regime-era networks to traffic munitions and narcotics. The Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), other Salafi-Jihadi groups, former regime-affiliated insurgents and smugglers, and criminal elements remain viable threats to the transitional government. The new Syrian army will need to fight these groups to protect civilians and maintain Syrian stability, which will prove an extremely difficult undertaking for a newly assembled force. Other

government actions, such as any large-scale operations against the SDF, would make building the army even more challenging.

Turkey's influence on several Syrian militias integrated into the new army remains another structural constraint on professionalization and long-term stability. Turkey historically backed a large contingent of the Syrian opposition and chose to collaborate with known war criminals who have committed atrocities before and after the regime's fall. Turkey used these groups in three military offensives during the civil war that facilitated ethnic cleansing against Syrian Kurds, and some of these factions committed sectarian-motivated massacres against Alawites along the coast in March 2025.⁵ Shara likely sees retaining these Turkish-backed commanders' support as a political necessity, as mentioned above. Turkey's continued patronage of influential but problematic actors poses a significant obstacle to building a professional force, which would require it to expel sectarian actors from the army's command structures.

Shara is trying to maintain Syrian stability by unifying a plethora of armed groups both within and outside his coalition. Some of these armed groups have more troops than the forces loyal to Shara. The armed groups in Syria have conflicting objectives and theories about how to achieve Syrian unity, and Shara's reliance on certain powerbrokers risks constraining his options with others. The SDF, for example, seeks a federal Syrian state with security assurances for the Kurds. Its adversaries, which are primarily but not exclusively Turkish-backed militias that are now part of the state, seek to destroy the SDF to create a centralized Syrian state. Shara and his key loyalists have so far been able to avoid another calamitous Turkish-backed military offensive targeting the SDF, in part thanks to their moral authority within the opposition after toppling Assad and in part thanks to their relationship with Turkey. Recent renewed pressure from Turkey has threatened to upend the fragile balance that Shara has struck while he negotiates with the SDF, however. Turkey has reportedly given the Syrian government until the end of 2025 to integrate the SDF before Turkey takes military action, possibly with Syrian support. Such an ultimatum may lead to the resumption of large-scale conflict in northern Syria.

Shara is irreplaceable for a stable Syrian transition, but his assumption and maintenance of power will create its own challenges for stability over the long term. There is no other HTS leader capable of uniting the ruling coalition, and there is no alternative Syrian opposition figure who commands the degree of moral authority Shara does. Shara will nonetheless need to navigate the structural issues created by his history and the new challenges driven by his choices as he builds the government. Shara's effort to centralize the Syrian state under a single post-war government will likely require him to reconcile civil war-era disagreements and tensions. Syria's post-war landscape makes this

objective incredibly difficult — though not impossible — to achieve, particularly under the constraints described above. The construction of a truly professional and disciplined force would require Shara to assume significant risks that may endanger his personal control over Syria, including confronting his own political allies. It also remains unclear if or how Shara will govern beyond the five-year transition, regardless of whether his government is successful in uniting Syria under his rule. The early steps Shara takes to create a professional and inclusive army will determine the degree of Shara's success and indicate how Shara and his allies intend to govern after the transition.

II. A New Government in Damascus

From al Qaeda to the Presidency: Shara Rises to Power

Shara's rise to power began in 2003 when he crossed from Syria to Iraq to join the burgeoning Sunni insurgency following the US invasion. He has since remade himself several times, alienating large segments of the Salafi-jihadist milieu along the way. The political maneuvering that Shara employed throughout the civil war informs both how Shara engages with other Syrian groups and how other Syrian groups engage with him. Shara's transformation is the byproduct of his military and political savvy, two skills that he will certainly bring to bear during Syria's transition. Shara has apparently transformed himself, but his background still informs his decisions today, and no Syrian group is likely to forget Shara's history.

Shara entered Iraq to fight the US presence in spring 2003 using Assad regime networks, but he returned to Syria in November 2003.⁶ He went back to Iraq in 2004 and joined al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in Mosul.⁷ Private ISIS correspondence suggests that Shara experienced very little fighting before his arrest in Mosul in May 2005 by US

forces, however.⁸ Some sources have claimed that Shara was a "deputy" to Zarqawi, but this claim is unanimously disputed by senior US government officials and senior ISIS commanders, including an actual deputy to Zarqawi, ISIS spokesperson Abu Mohammad al Adnani, and ISIS "Caliph" Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in private correspondence.⁹

Shara's imprisonment in Camp Bucca, which was a breeding ground for future ISIS leaders when he was there, gave him access to senior ISIS leaders who would later facilitate his development of Jabhat al Nusra. Shara reportedly established a father-son relationship with Abu Suhayb al Iraqi, a deputy to AQI commander Abu Musab al Zarqawi and later a senior ISIS fighter who was also imprisoned at Camp Bucca.¹⁰ Shara also knew future ISIS spokesperson Adnani, a fellow Syrian and a future Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, AQI's successor organization and the predecessor to ISIS) governor of Mosul.¹¹ The Mosul ISI governor and Abu Suhayb likely acted as intermediaries who introduced Shara to key ISI leaders and enabled Shara to pitch ISI's Shura Council on his plan to return to Syria and establish a wing of ISI there. These intermediaries played a crucial role in Shara's rise because the Shura Council appointed him over Adnani, who was a more senior ISIS member at the time.¹²

Ahmed al Shara's Path: Al Qaeda to HTS


2003

Shara joined al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in Mosul at some point between late 2003 and early 2005.

2005

US forces detained Shara in May 2005 and imprisoned him in Camp Bucca, where Shara gained access to senior ISIS leaders.

2011

Iraqi authorities released Shara and he returned to Syria to form Jabhat al Nusra as an expeditionary cell for the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

2010

The United States transferred Shara to Iraqi custody, where he was imprisoned at Camp Tajji.

2013

Baghdadi declared the existence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013 amid frustration over Shara's leadership of Jabhat al Nusra. Shara publicly declared his allegiance to al Qaeda core and leader Ayman al Zawahiri.

2016

Shara announced that Jabhat al Nusra had severed ties with al Qaeda and would become Jabhat Fateh al Sham, which Shara claimed had no ties to any foreign entity.

2015

Jabhat al Nusra gradually expanded its influence and control and focused on governance, social outreach, and humanitarian activities in northwest Syria.

2017

Jabhat Fateh al Sham merged with four other Islamist factions based in northern Syria to form Hayat Tahrir al Sham.

2024

HTS's offensive on Damascus led to the collapse of the regime in December 2024. Shara assumed the Syrian presidency in January 2025.

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Baghdadi, Adnani, and Abu Suhayb became disillusioned with Shara's management of the Syrian wing, Jabhat al Nusra, between 2011 and 2013, however.¹³ All three wrote testimonies that expressed concerns with Shara's lack of ideological purity, his obsession with media attention for Jabhat al Nusra and himself, his clear desire to separate Jabhat al Nusra from the main ISI organization, and his propensity to disregard orders from Baghdadi and the Shura Council.¹⁴ Shara sidelined Baghdadi's representatives and ignored Baghdadi's orders while disparaging the main organization and AQI's strategy in Iraq between 2003 and 2010.¹⁵ Baghdadi wrote in his March 2013 testimony that he had "determined to control the matter" of an announcement of an Islamic state in Syria himself, suggesting that these frustrations culminated in Baghdadi's decision to declare the existence of ISIS on April 8, 2013.¹⁶ This decision was an effort to force Shara to either submit or declare his subordination to Baghdadi by noting that Shara's Jabhat al Nusra was "only...part of [the Islamic State]."¹⁷ Shara ultimately declared his allegiance to al Qaeda Core and Ayman al Zawahiri, however.¹⁸

The expansion of the Syrian civil war and Shara's desire to strengthen his hand in Syria likely drove him to split from Baghdadi and subordinate himself directly to al Qaeda Core. Shara sought to embed himself and his group in the Sunni Syrian opposition to build greater influence over the trajectory of post-war Syria. Key ISIS leaders opposed this effort and prevented him from joining forces with opposition groups in Aleppo that lacked ideological purity.¹⁹ Shara would later use his relationship with the Syrian opposition to carve out a stronghold in northwestern Syria that allowed it to withstand ISIS's expansion in 2014.²⁰ Shara's gradual approach to influencing post-Assad Syria focused on social outreach, governance, and humanitarian activities alongside other rebel groups instead of alienating other stakeholders and forcing their obedience, like ISIS did.²¹ This approach allowed Shara to develop the "respect and dependence of other groups" that then enabled him to police their behavior and increase his influence over them.²² These efforts would have been impossible under Baghdadi's control

since Baghdadi demanded ideological purity and was uncompromising with other groups.²³

Shara's decision to split from al Qaeda and form Jabhat Fateh al Sham in 2016 similarly reflected his desire to strengthen his group in Syria while deprioritizing al Qaeda's broader goals. Shara formed Jabhat Fateh al Sham as part of his effort to embed his group into the broader Syrian opposition. Many opposition groups opposed a merger with Jabhat al Nusra because Nusra's affiliation with al Qaeda would make them a target for Russia and US counterterrorism campaigns.²⁴ Al Qaeda's leadership supported Shara's effort to distance himself from al Qaeda because it recognized the wisdom in his approach and was increasingly pushing al Qaeda affiliates globally to deprioritize external attacks against the West and build local power bases instead.²⁵ Other al Qaeda ideologues in Syria and key leaders outside Syria, including al Qaeda's current leader, Sayf al Adl, detested the split.²⁶ The decision to leave al Qaeda improved Shara's position within Syria because other Islamist groups became more willing to work with Shara's organization.

Shara's decision to shed his al Qaeda affiliation enabled him to form HTS with several other Islamist factions in 2017. HTS and its allies in northwestern Syria, recognizing their relative military weakness compared to the regime and its allies in the late 2010s, began to professionalize and unify their military forces in several opposition rooms. HTS established several institutions, including a military academy.²⁷ HTS also forcibly suppressed adversaries, including rival Salafi-jihadi groups, to enable HTS to unify the opposition factions. These efforts helped HTS bring superior, motivated, and unified forces against demoralized, hollowed out, and disunified regime forces in Syria in late 2024.

Shara was able to unite the coalition that brought down the Assad regime because he gradually remade himself from an al Qaeda commander to a politically savvy leader who presented himself more as a Syrian revolutionary than a jihadist. Syrians are unlikely to forget his history, however, and Shara's jihadist history and his close relationship with Syria's Islamist opposition will generate friction

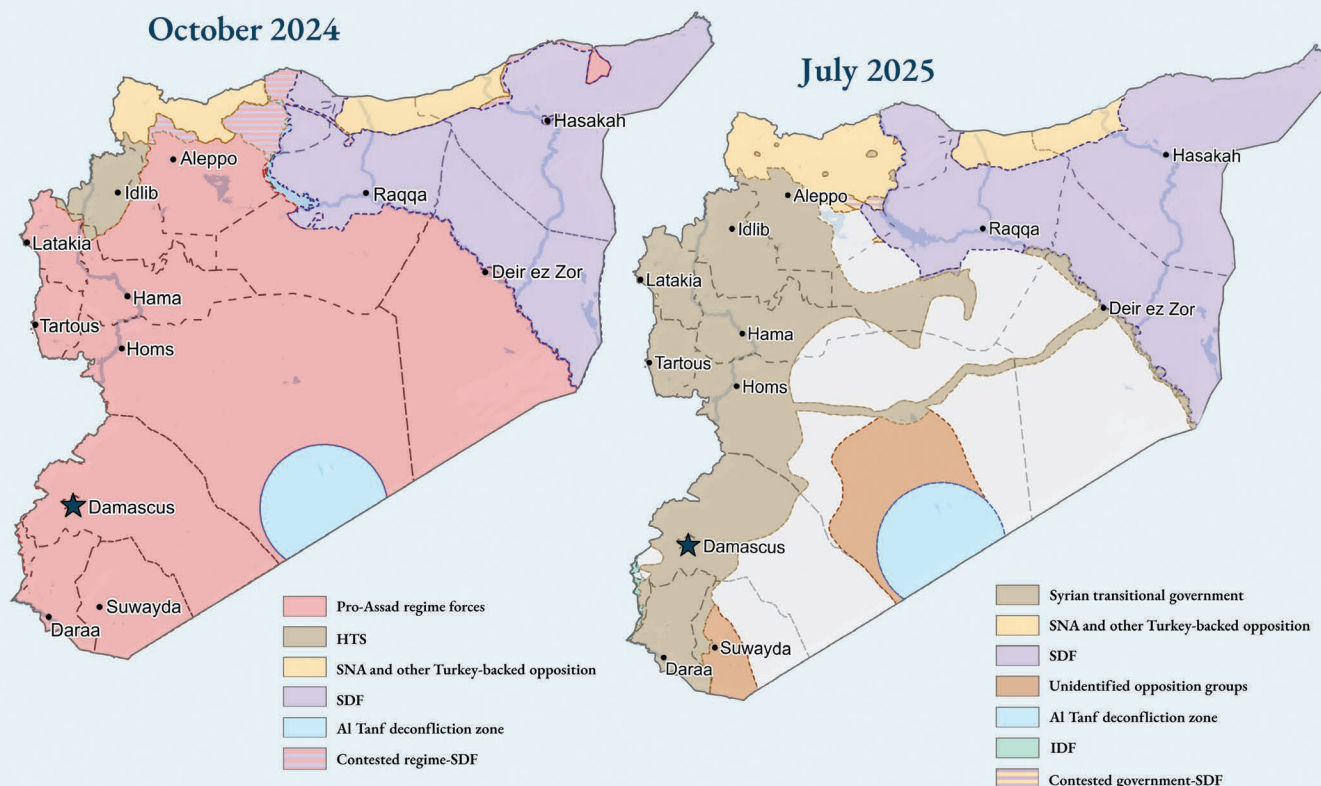
as he tries to build an inclusive Syrian state. Shara will need to integrate minorities who do not trust his transformation while navigating often complicated political relationships with his former rivals and allies in the Syrian opposition. Shara will need to incorporate both his rivals and allies into the new army to build a stable Syria.

Shara was able to unite the coalition that brought down the Assad regime because he gradually remade himself from an al Qaeda commander to a politically savvy leader who presented himself more as a Syrian revolutionary than a jihadist.

Creating an Army from the Major Combat Forces in Post-War Syria

Shara and his Defense Ministry are building an army out of the armed groups that survived Syria's civil war, each of which has distinct objectives and levels of international backing. Different coalitions of armed militias split control of the country before the fall of Assad in December 2024. The primary groups included Shara's HTS and its allies in northwestern Syria, Turkish-backed militias in northern Syria, the US-backed and Kurdish-dominated SDF in northeastern Syria, the US-backed Syrian Free Army around the Jordan-Syria-Iraq tri-border area, and the array of armed militias that formed the Assad regime and its military forces. These groups all pursued distinct and often conflicting objectives and frequently fought each other. Shara is now trying to integrate elements of these groups into the MoD and Syrian state, or has already nominally done so. Shara's ability to integrate these disparate organizations will depend on his ability to bridge the civil war-era political interests that separate the groups, some of which the groups see as existential.

Major Syrian Combat Forces' Control of Terrain Before and After the Fall of the Regime



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Hayat Tahrir al Sham was one of the most centralized and disciplined armed opposition forces in Syria prior to the fall of the regime. Shara and HTS sought to unify the Syrian opposition in order to overthrow Assad and control Syria, an effort that naturally brought them into conflict with many other Syrian armed groups. Shara and his contemporaries recognized the need for unity to defeat the Assad regime early in the civil war, but the opposition's disparate goals and the diversity of its backers made unity difficult to achieve.²⁸ Shara nonetheless endeavored to create unity within the Islamist opposition both before and after the creation of HTS. Shara forcibly integrated some Islamist groups, while others voluntarily joined

HTS.²⁹ Shara's centralization process gradually subordinated other opposition factions to him and forced other factions to abandon their objectives.³⁰ Some small groups resisted this process and either became part of the secular opposition or joined more extreme Salafi-jihadi groups, including ISIS, but HTS suppressed any opposition within its territory.³¹ HTS eventually asserted political control over its fiefdom in northwestern Syria and used the region as a beta test for its post-Assad governance. HTS centralized all military forces in Idlib under the Fateh al Mubin Operations Room, which it controlled.³² HTS and Shara justified the consolidation of power as part of the broader effort to defeat Assad.

Operations Rooms in the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian opposition had long used operations rooms to coordinate operations between different factions. These operations rooms established nascent chains of command and leadership structures to combat the regime.³³ The operations rooms did not dissolve the component organizations that joined the rooms, however.³⁴ The permanence of these rooms differed from organization to organization. Some were temporary alliances brought together for a single purpose, while others were much more enduring. HTS, for example, founded the Fateh al Mubin Operations Room in 2019 and continued to operate it until the fall of Assad.³⁵

Three main operations rooms contributed to the fall of Assad. Fateh al Mubin, which was led by HTS, launched the initial operation out of HTS-controlled territory in Idlib Province.³⁶ Fateh al Mubin experienced the heaviest fighting during the offensive against Assad in 2024.³⁷ Fajr al Hurriya, a collection of SNA groups, primarily fought the Kurdish-dominated SDF to reduce the Kurdish-controlled enclaves in northeastern Syria while mostly ignoring heavy fighting against the Assad regime.³⁸ Several factions that dominated Fajr al Hurriya are sanctioned civil war factions that have committed atrocities against civilians throughout the war. Finally, the Southern Operations Room, which was a diverse political and ethno-religious coalition consisting of Suwaydawi Druze militias and former rebels in the Daraa-based Eighth Brigade and Central Committees that had “reconciled” with the Assad regime, captured regime positions in southwestern Syria before advancing on Damascus.³⁹ Each of these organizations plays a role in the new Syrian army, with Fajr al Hurriya and Fateh al Mubin forming the bulk of the new Syrian officer corps and manpower. The groups within the Southern Operations Room sought to preserve their factions’ power and influence in southern Syria, and the operations room’s limited unity enabled Shara to individually court or crush its factions in order to integrate them into the army and internal security services.⁴⁰

HTS’s domineering behavior in the name of unity created frequent conflict with factions from the SNA, a loose coalition of factions that pursued different objectives closely tied to their relationship with Turkey. Turkey formed the SNA in 2017 as a large umbrella group of factions that operated near HTS-controlled territory along the Turkish border in northern Syria. The SNA lacked HTS’s central chain of command and organization, despite Turkish efforts to impose centralized control.⁴¹ Individual commanders hold wide influence within their individual factions, which makes command and control highly personalized.⁴² Individual SNA factions also hold both political and economic interests in northern Syria that HTS’s push for unity threatened.⁴³ HTS sought to infiltrate and weaken the SNA to gradually expand its control over northern Syria.⁴⁴ HTS collaborated with certain SNA commanders at times, including by supporting the Sultan Suleiman Division and Hamza Division against other SNA rivals in 2022.⁴⁵ The SNA’s total forces outnumber HTS’s troops, which explains why Shara is eager to add SNA fighters to a new Syrian army in desperate need of manpower and why he is hesitant to risk any large-scale confrontation with the SNA.⁴⁶

Shara is aligning himself with potentially destabilizing partners in the SNA factions that he is integrating into the new army. Certain SNA commanders and factions committed atrocities during the civil war and have continued to do so since the fall of the regime under the auspices of the new government. The United States sanctioned current Syrian division commanders Abu Amsa, Sayf Abu Bakr, Abu Hatem Shaqra, and the factions they led in 2021 and 2023 for committing serious human rights abuses against Kurds.⁴⁷ Several Syrian and international human rights groups contend that some of these factions have continued to perpetuate abuses in 2025.⁴⁸ Several SNA factions significantly destabilized the security situation on the Syrian coast by deploying to the area and massacring Alawite civilians. The structures of certain SNA forces are also deeply problematic. The United States sanctioned Ahrar al Sharqiya in 2021 for integrating former ISIS members into its ranks, for example.⁴⁹ Turkey’s support for the Sultan Murad Division also led the United States to add Turkey

to a list of countries implicated in the use of child soldiers in 2020, making Turkey the first NATO ally to be placed on this list.⁵⁰

Turkey exerted significant influence over the SNA during the war. Some SNA factions depended on Turkish backing for their existence.⁵¹ This dependence made them highly responsive to Turkish oversight and command, and the objectives of some factions became aligned with Turkish ambitions in Syria.⁵² Turkey used the SNA to pursue its own foreign policy objectives in the region, including by deploying SNA units to fight outside Syria, but most notably by attacking the Kurdish SDF.⁵³ Many SNA groups had, in practice, abandoned any serious effort to defeat Assad once they came under Turkish tutelage. Turkey's use of the SNA to target the Kurds stood out during the collapse of the Assad regime, when the SNA — operating under the Fajr al Hurriya Operations Room — attacked mostly Kurdish forces and left Assad's forces mostly alone.⁵⁴ Turkey reportedly continued to fund some of these factions at least until June 2025, which will make it more difficult for Shara to exert control over the former SNA groups in the army.⁵⁵ Units drawn from the SNA and paid by Turkey will have split allegiances to their own individual faction commander, Turkey, and Shara's government. The long-running animosity between Kurds and the SNA, which successive Turkish-backed offensives exacerbated, will make the Kurds less likely to join the Syrian state without assurances that Kurds can protect themselves.

The SDF seeks a Kurdish-governed federal entity within a united Syria, which has put them at odds with many of the Arab groups opposed to Assad during the civil war and in post-Assad Syria. The SDF evolved from the People's Protection Units (YPG) into a broad Kurdish-Arab coalition that oversees a large swath of territory in northeastern Syria.⁵⁶ Many Arab opposition groups — including those in HTS and the SNA — believe

Sanctioned Commanders in the Syrian Defense Ministry



Mohammad al Jassem (Abu Amsha)
62nd Division

- **United States, 2023:** Sanctioned Abu Amsha and his faction, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, for serious human rights abuses against Kurds in Afrin.
- **European Union, 2025:** Sanctioned Abu Amsha and his faction for participating in sectarian-motivated massacres targeting Alawites civilians in March 2025.



Sayf al Din Boulad (Sayf Abu Bakr)
76th Division

- **United States, 2023:** Sanctioned Abu Bakr and his faction, the Hamza Division, for serious human rights abuses against Kurds in Afrin.
- **European Union, 2025:** Sanctioned Abu Bakr and his faction for participating in sectarian-motivated massacres targeting Alawites civilians in March 2025.



Ahmed al Hais (Abu Hatem Shaqra)
86th Division

- **United States, 2021:** Sanctioned Abu Hatem and his faction, Ahrar al Sharqiya, for abuses against civilians (particularly Syrian Kurds) and for recruiting former ISIS members.



Fahim Issa
Assistant Defense Minister for the Northern Region

- **European Union, 2025:** Sanctioned Issa's faction, the Sultan Murad Division, for participating in sectarian-motivated massacres targeting Alawites civilians in March 2025.

Sources: OFAC, EU Council
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that the YPG collaborated with Assad to carve out Kurdish control of northeastern Syria, and many of the Arab opposition groups have fought the YPG and SDF.⁵⁷ The SNA has also committed

scores of atrocities against Kurdish civilians while working with Turkey to subdue Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria.⁵⁸ These factors make the SDF extremely reticent to join a highly centralized Syrian government that includes many officials and commanders who

The long-running animosity between Kurds and the SNA, which successive Turkish-backed offensives exacerbated, will make the Kurds less likely to join the Syrian state without assurances that Kurds can protect themselves.

have Kurdish blood on their hands and are refusing to articulate clear protections for the Kurds in a new state. The SDF has agreed in principle to join a united Syria, but neither the SDF nor the Syrian government has made serious efforts to integrate the SDF into Syria.⁵⁹ The SDF, likely fearful of the possible consequences of complete disarmament, has articulated clear and specific demands since it began talks with the HTS-led government in late December 2024. These demands

include joining the new Syrian army as an integrated unit, remaining deployed in northeastern Syria, and maintaining some regional autonomy in a “decentralized” system. Shara seeks a highly centralized Syrian government and has refused to capitulate to this demand.⁶⁰ Kurdish leaders have cited the violence between various SNA groups and Syrian minorities in recent months as a factor that has deepened the fear and mistrust between the SDF and Damascus.⁶¹

Achieving a Representative Government in Syria: The Legacy of the Civil War

Syria’s decades under authoritarian rule and 14 years of civil war created serious political divisions that are challenging the new government’s ability to unite Syria’s disparate communities and political groups. The ongoing post-war fighting in Syria is primarily a result of civil war allegiances that have not fully resolved themselves, including divisions between Syrian opposition forces and those that submitted or were perceived to submit to the Assad regime. Many of the groups in conflict with one another are from different ethno-religious communities, but the government’s decision to appoint individuals to “represent” a specific ethnic, religious, or sectarian group will not solve the divisions in Syria nor create a unified country.⁶² The government will need to include the leaders of different powerful political factions rather than focusing on performative representation of different ethnicities, religions, and sects in the government.

The three most obvious flash points for the resumption of large-scale fighting in Syria today — the Druze areas in the southwest, the Alawite areas on the coast, and the Kurdish areas in the northeast — reflect the political divisions left by decades of Assad’s rule and the ethno-religious composition of modern Syria. Each area has an ethnic or religious basis for grievances but also has political and economic grievances under Shara’s new government that only partially align with ethnic or religious divisions. The Alawites who revolted against the transitional government in March 2025 were predominantly Assadists, some of

whom had significant interests in smuggling between Lebanon and western Syria. Other Alawites opposed both these insurgents and smugglers and the Assad regime, illustrating that Syria’s divisions cannot be reduced to mere ethno-religious discord. Some of the Druze militias that rose against the transitional government in May and July 2025 similarly had economic interests in smuggling and the Captagon trade that is now under threat due to the government’s counter-smuggling and counter-narcotics campaigns. Other Druze militias supported Shara but lost political power when the Druze community mobilized against the government after Shara’s troops abused Druze civilians. The Syrian opposition to Assad, which now controls Damascus, has never had a good relationship with the Kurdish-dominated SDF because the opposition believed that the SDF had cut a deal with Assad to grant the SDF control of northeastern Syria, as noted above. The SDF and its predecessor organizations, given their concern first and foremost with securing Kurdish security and political control in Kurdish areas, were always more willing to speak with Assad than the Arab opposition was. Each of these divisions are fundamentally political, and the government’s efforts to “represent” different Syrian communities by appointing individual Kurds, Druze, Alawites, and others to specific positions will not solve these political problems.

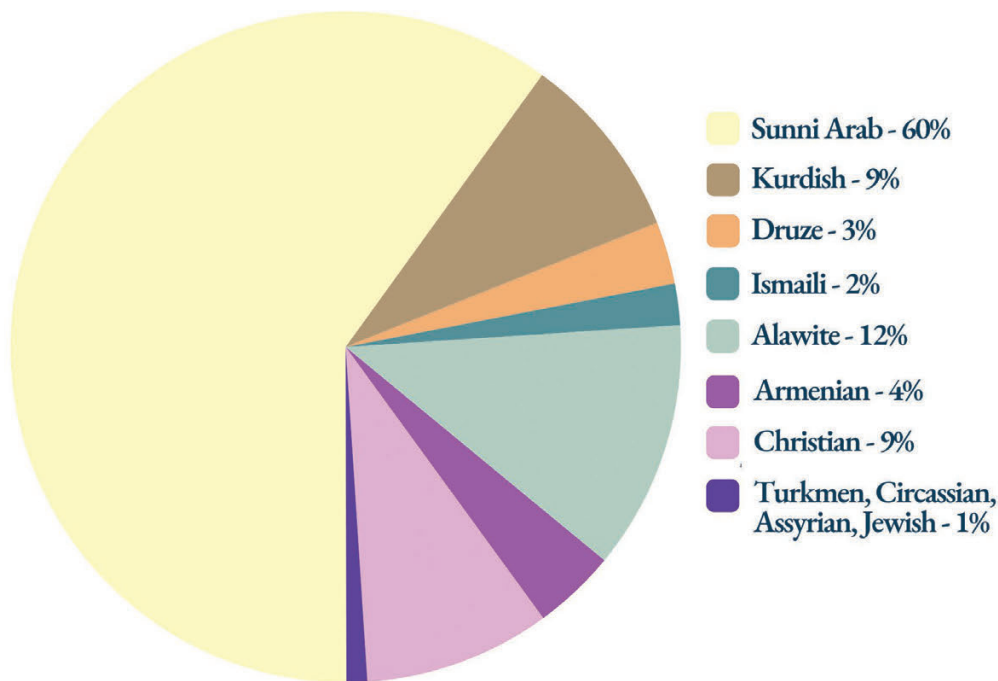
Government abuse can cause fundamentally political divisions to become ethnic, religious, or sectarian conflicts, however. Several dynamics, including the new government’s behavior, have pushed Syrian groups into intracommunal-based political alliances that are exacerbating intercommunal divisions between Syrian groups and the new government. The

Assad family's clientelist approach to governance created ethno-religious dynamics over decades that exacerbated existing political divides between Syrian groups and contributed to cycles of sectarian-motivated violence during the war. The ethno-religious behavior by some transitional government forces and anti-government militias in 2025 has worsened previous rounds of fighting and risks giving rise to more explicit ethno-religious alliances and divisions. The behavior of government forces in Druze areas in July 2025 has led to a total breakdown in relations between Druze militias and the government, for example. At least 40 Druze factions have now aligned along primarily religious and intercommunal lines in opposition to Shara and his government.⁶³ Shara will need to restrain or suppress the most egregious ethno-religious individuals in his ranks to prevent the emergence of truly ethno-religious fighting.

The Syrian government has “represented” minority groups in a performative manner that does not

provide representation to different political trends. For example, Shara selected one Kurdish cabinet member, but he did not represent any major Kurdish political trend, including those historically opposed to the SDF.⁶⁴ The established Kurdish parties are united in the belief that Kurdish rights need to be protected, possibly by autonomy and Kurdish security forces. These parties are excluded from ongoing political processes in Damascus, and their ongoing exclusion is a source of their opposition to Shara and instability for Shara's government.⁶⁵ The same is true of the Druze and Alawite cabinet members. These cabinet members do not need to be affiliated with the Assad regime — in fact, they should not be — but they should represent different political viewpoints, such as Druze groups that are pro-government but believe the Druze should have a say in the make-up of their security forces and local governance. The government and its supporters claim that the current appointees demonstrate a commitment to “representation” for all Syrian minorities, but appointing unaffiliated individuals does not

Ethno-Sectarian Groups in Syria, 2011

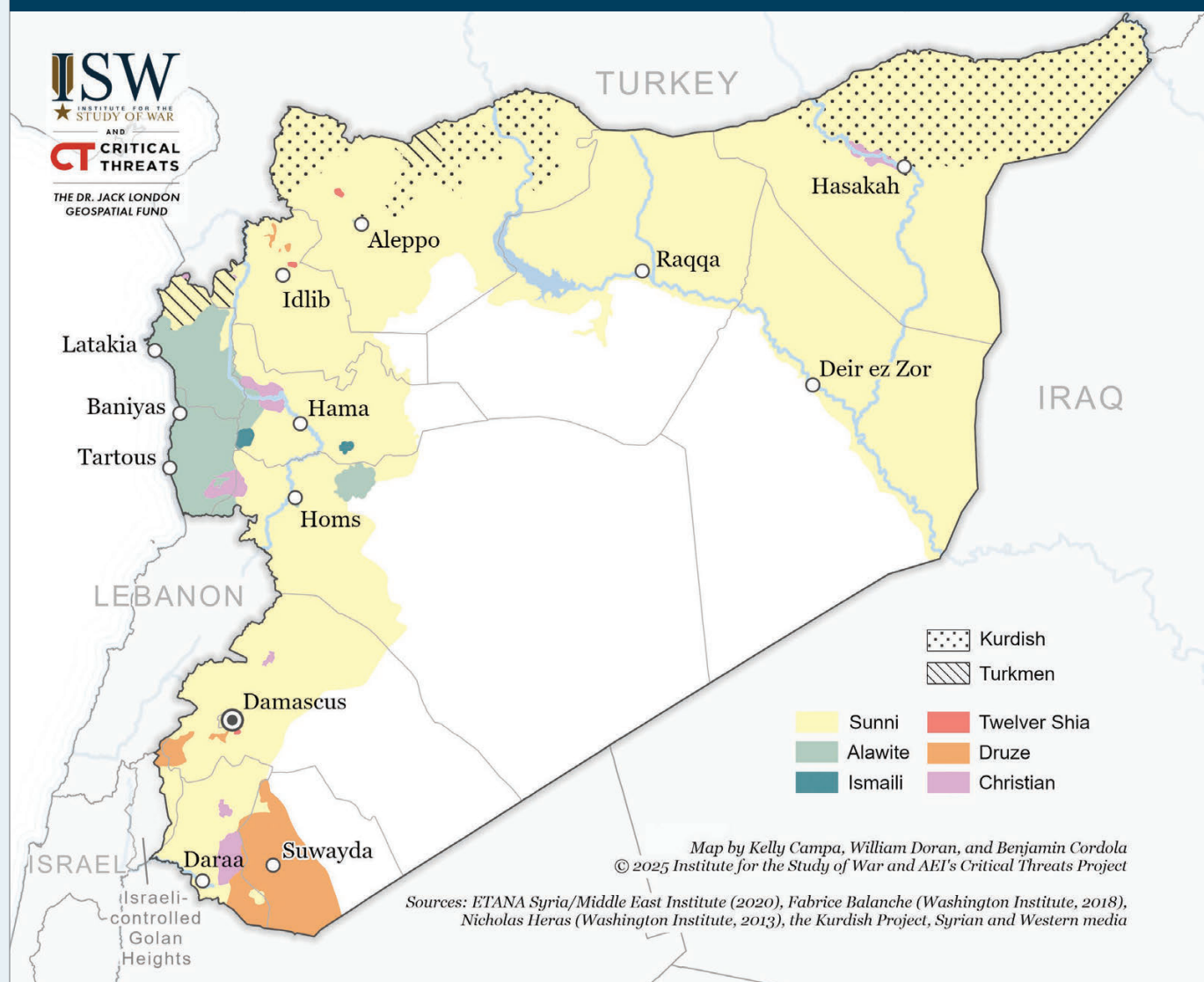


represent the majority political views in certain areas or of powerful groups in Syria.

Shara will need to genuinely represent opposition political factions while preventing the abuses against minorities that have poisoned the relationship between the government and minority groups and contributed to communal mobilization. Syria's civil war scars will make this process extremely difficult, but not impossible. Shara and his allies will need to recognize the real fears of Kurdish, Druze, and Alawite political groups and provide these groups the ability to assist in the

formation of the post-Assad Syria. Shara's ability and willingness to hold his forces accountable for sectarian-motivated crimes and take steps to prevent intercommunal violence will significantly influence both the willingness of the opposition to participate in his government and his ability to establish security and stability in the long term. His ability to discipline his forces and hold them accountable has been limited so far, which raises significant and necessary doubts about whether Shara is willing to confront hardliners and sectarians whose support he may need without US or international pressure to do so.

Syria's Ethno-Sectarian Communities, 2011



The Assad regime's military forces at the start of Shara's offensive in December 2024 were a conglomerate of different militias nominally organized as the Syrian Arab Army, resolutely pro-Assad paramilitary groups, Iranian-backed militias allied with Assad, and former opposition forces that held only loose allegiance to the regime. Not all these groups were destroyed when Assad's regime collapsed because many militias had different funding streams separate from the regime. Some groups, for example, sustained themselves through Captagon smuggling, while others received funding from Iran and other sources. Ongoing Syrian government interdiction efforts suggest that these criminal enterprises still exist, and efforts to destroy the criminal organizations could spur more fighting. Some of the violence along Syria's borders with Lebanon in early 2025 appeared connected to smuggling networks' efforts to defend their routes, for example.⁶⁶

Several groups were nominally loyal to the regime during the civil war due to the regime's accommodation or tolerance for their political and/or economic interests. Shara has already suppressed some of these groups, but others will prove more challenging to conquer and integrate. The Eighth Brigade, a group of rebels that reconciled with the regime in 2018, helped Shara topple Assad by advancing on Damascus from the south in December 2024.⁶⁷ Shara suppressed this group in April 2025 after the group disputed his authority.⁶⁸ Some of the Druze militias that rose against the transitional government in May and July 2025 similarly lost economic benefits during the

collapse of Assad. Shara's challenges in this respect are exacerbated by the ethno-religious abuses committed by some of the groups now loyal to the Syrian Defense Ministry.⁶⁹ Groups that had complex but generally positive relationships with the regime will surely want to keep their arms to secure their economic and political interests, and repeated violence against minorities will enable these groups to mobilize their communities against the government.

Shara seeks to create unity and stability to further his own rule, but his background and competing objectives of Syria's different armed groups will make creating stability and brokering peace between Syrian communities extremely difficult. The rapid growth of armed groups during the civil war created a dis-unified collection of militias that has proven and will prove extremely difficult for the Defense Ministry to corral into a professional army. Shara is integrating many of these groups without breaking them up to dilute their influence. This process risks building an army in which different units continue to pursue different objectives from those set forth by the Defense Ministry and from one another. The alternative, breaking the units down into individuals and thus destroying Syria's militias, would have risked spurring instability by attacking vested political and economic interests of military commanders. Such an action would very likely have generated instability that Shara cannot afford. Shara's choice to bring whole groups into the army is thus understandable, even if it is also problematic.

III. Building a New Syrian Army

Shara is building a new army to ensure the state's control over all of Syria while simultaneously protecting his own rule during the transition. Shara's primary objective during Syria's five-year transition period is to centralize state control over Syrian territory, as he

ensured HTS control over Idlib in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Numerous internal threats to his rule and to the unification of Syria remain, however, and creating a new military after the complete dissolution of the former state security services is no easy feat. HTS filled

Government abuse can cause fundamentally political divisions to become ethnic, religious, or sectarian conflicts.

the initial power vacuum with its own forces in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime, but the construction of a professional army that is both loyal to Shara and the state and representative of the populace will be necessary to ensure post-war stability.

The Defense Ministry is likely building a force designed to respond promptly to emerging threats to state stability in the short term while the ministry invests in longer-term integration and professionalization processes that will take months and years. Loyal or allied commanders and unity of command will likely allow Shara to organize the army and deploy units rapidly across Syria to address threats, but key features of the army's initial structure may complicate the government's efforts to unify Syria under its control. The ministry's decision to re-flag civil war militias as army units, especially militias dominated by known ethno-religious commanders and fighters, reflects the state's immediate need for cohesive units, but the Defense Ministry maintains little control over some units as a result. Army units responding to outbreaks of violence have further contributed to cycles of inter-communal violence due to poor discipline and weak command and control. The transitional government also continues to face difficulties integrating non-Sunni armed groups into the military due to political concerns about the loss of autonomy and government protection for minorities.

The New Army's Commanders

Shara has selected top commanders based on their organizational abilities as well as their closeness to HTS. Major General Marhaf Abu Qasra and Major General Ali Nour al Din al Nassan, two trusted advisers to Shara and HTS commanders, will serve as the defense minister and chief of the general staff, respectively.⁷⁰ Abu Qasra is a long-time HTS commander who was responsible for reorganizing HTS's military forces in preparation for the

offensive that toppled Assad. Nassan was a defector from Assad's army who was similarly responsible for "structure and organiz[ation]" within HTS forces.⁷¹ Both men commanded Fateh al Mubin forces during the December 2024 offensive.⁷² Shara has tapped commanders from other factions to fill key positions, appointing Ahrar al Sham's former military commander, Enad Darwish (Abu Mundhir), as the Defense Ministry's Administrative Affairs head, for example. But even individuals from other factions, such as Darwish, are very close to HTS.⁷³

Shara has appointed many other commanders to high-ranking positions based on their shared histories and demonstrated loyalty to him. Some of these commanders were in al Qaeda and Jabhat al Nusra, but their selection probably reflects Shara's trust in them after years of shared wartime experience rather than a desire to ensure ideological purity. These commanders supported Shara first against ISIS and again against al Qaeda. Their decision to support Shara against these groups entailed serious personal risk for them because ISIS was stronger and disavowing al Qaeda threatened to splinter Shara's remaining fighters.⁷⁴ Some of these men are also probably responsible for assassinations targeting former al Qaeda loyalists within HTS in 2020 when HTS moved to eliminate hardline al Qaeda threats to its rule and unity. Al Qaeda and other jihadists would presumably seek to kill these men for their betrayal. These commanders include former al Qaeda or Jabhat al Nusra members such as Republican Guard commander Brigadier General Abdul Rahman al Khatib (Abu Hussein al Urduni), Damascus Division commander Brigadier General Omar Mohammad Cifteci (Abu Mukhtar al Turki), 82nd Special Forces Division commander Brigadier General Khaled Muhammad Halabi (Abu Khattab), and the Defense Ministry's head of supplies and logistics, Brigadier General Hudhayfah Badawi (Abu Hafs Binash).⁷⁵ Their

The ministry's decision to re-flag civil war militias as army units, especially militias dominated by known ethno-religious commanders and fighters, reflects the state's immediate need for cohesive units, but the Defense Ministry maintains little control over some units as a result.

Senior Leadership of the Syrian Defense Ministry



HTS

HTS-led Al Fateh al Mubin
Operations RoomFajr al Hurriya
Operations Room

Unknown

— Sanctioned Entity



Commander-in-Chief
Ahmed al Shara
HTS



Chief of the General Staff
Ali Nour al Din al Nassan
HTS



Defense Minister
Marhaf Abu Qasra
HTS



Deputy Defense Minister
Mohammed Khair Shuaib
HTS



Assistant Minister for
the Northern Region
Fahim Issa
Sultan Murad Division



Commander of the
Syrian Air Force
Assem Hawari
HTS



Commander of the
Syrian Navy
Mohammad al Saud
Unknown



Al Fateh al Mubin Operations

Room (excluding HTS): HTS centralized all military forces in Idlib under al Fateh al Mubin Operations Room, which it controlled from 2019 until the offensive that toppled the regime in December 2024. These commanders' backgrounds and influence vary, but all probably accept HTS-led chains of command at this stage.



Fajr al Hurriya Operations

Room: Fajr al Hurriya is comprised of SNA groups that primarily fought the Kurdish-dominated SDF to reduce the Kurdish-controlled enclaves in northeastern Syria during the December 2024 offensive. These commanders did not answer to Shara or HTS prior to fall of the regime.

Department Heads and Representatives:



Supplies & Logistics
Hudhayfah Badawi
HTS



Administrative Affairs
Enad al Darwish
Abrar al Sham



Officer Affairs
Mohammed Mansour
Jaysh al Nasr



Higher Military Academy
Fadlallah al Hajji
Faylaq al Sham, NLF



Training Authority
Abdul Rahman Sarhan
Unknown



Ministry Spokesperson
Hassan Abdul Ghani
HTS

Syrian Army Division Commanders



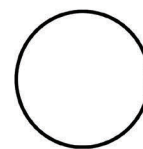
40th Division
Binyan Hariri
Abrar al Sham



42nd Division
Raed Arab
Abrar al Sham, Suqour al Sham



44th SOF Division
Abu Abdul Rahman Najib
HTS



50th Division
Unknown



52nd SOF Division
Haitham al Ali
HTS



54th Division
Hussein Obaid
Abrar al Sham



56th Division
Abu Osama al Munir
HTS



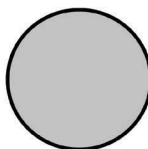
60th Division
Awad Mohammad
HTS



62nd Division
Mohammad al Jassem
Suleiman Shah Division



64th Division
Mohammad al Gharib
Faylaq al Sham



66th Division
Ahmed al Mohammad
HTS



70th Division
Issam Boudani
Jaysh al Islam



72nd Division
Aqil Mohammad al Amer
Unknown



74th SOF Division
Jamil Saleh
Jaysh al Izza



76th Division
Sayf al Din Boulad
Hamza Division



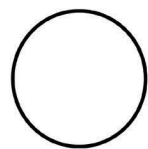
77th Division
Mohammad Adnan Zeitoun
Abrar al Sham, NLF



80th Division
Ahmed Rizq
Nour al Din al Zenki



82nd SOF Division
Khaled Mohammad Halabi
HTS



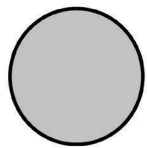
84th Division
Unknown



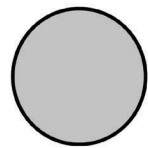
86th Division
Ahmed al Hais
Abrar al Sharqiya



98th Armored Division
Yousef al Hamwi
Abrar al Sham



Damascus Division
Omar Mohammad Ciftci
HTS



Republican Guard
Abdul Rahman al Khatib
HTS

- HTS
- HTS-led Al Fateh al Mubin Operations Room
- Fajr al Hurriya Operations Room
- Unknown
- Sanctioned Entity

appointments to military leadership likely indicate a preference for loyalty to Shara, not necessarily a preference for Salafi-Jihadists.

Shara's early appointments of Ciftci and Khatib, both of whom are foreign fighters, to two key posts responsible for protecting the regime further demonstrates his preference for leaders not only loyal to, but also dependent on him. The Republican Guard will presumably be used to protect the government, while the Damascus Division will protect the capital region. Ciftci and Khatib, who are Turkish and Jordanian, respectively, are more beholden to Shara than an average Syrian commander would be. Both men have few options if they betray Shara because a return to their home countries might land them in jail or worse, and they are unlikely to find more supportive patrons than Shara, who has continued to ensure that foreigners can remain in Syria.⁷⁶ The appointment of these two men suggests that Shara may be designing at least elements of the army to protect him personally.⁷⁷ Neither Ciftci's nor Khatib's units have been publicly active in recent months, however.

Shara's preference for HTS-aligned faction leaders as division commanders in the new army also illustrates his preference for loyalists and allies. Fifteen of 23 appointed division commanders are from HTS-aligned Islamist factions, including Ahrar al Sham, Jaysh al Izza, Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki, and other factions that HTS has either cajoled or coerced into subordination since 2017. Some of these commanders and their formations have fought under and answered to HTS-led structures for many years, and nearly all led HTS-aligned forces during the December 2024 offensive within HTS's Fateh al Mubin Operations Room.⁷⁸ HTS allowed these factions to retain varying degrees of command and control in northwest Syria depending on their ideology, size, or local influence, but all of these commanders most likely accept HTS-led chains of command at this stage. Shara probably recognizes that decentralizing power away from HTS's allies could lead to further strengthening of competing power centers that will challenge his control and destabilize the transition. Many of these commanders have also known and fought alongside each other throughout the civil war, which is a factor that can

The New Army's Division Commanders

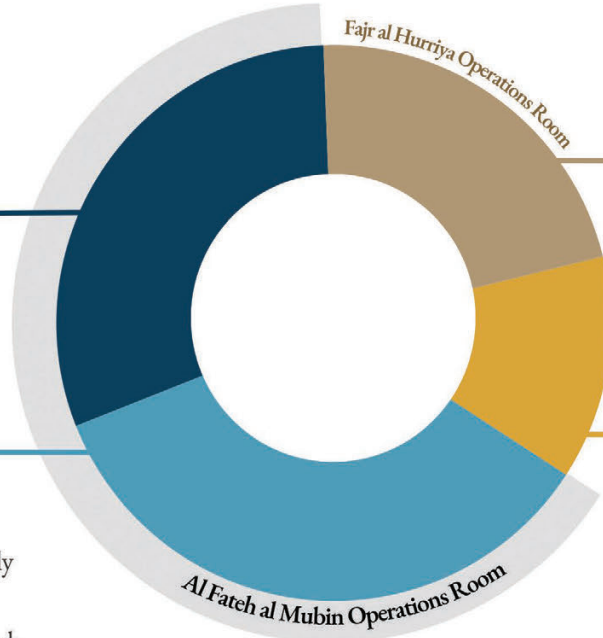


HTS Commanders

Seven, or about 30%, of Shara's new division commanders are directly from HTS.

Al Fateh al Mubin Commanders

Eight, or about 35%, of Shara's new division commanders are from groups that have previously fought under Shara and HTS's command as members of HTS's Al Fateh al Mubin Operations Room.



Fajr al Hurriya Commanders

Five, or about 22%, of the new division commanders fought within the Fajr al Hurriya Operations Room rather than al Fateh al Mubin. All of these factions are also members of the Syrian National Army (SNA).

Unknown Origins

CTP-ISW was unable to verify the backgrounds of three of the army's new division commanders.

improve interoperability between divisions and independent brigades. Both trusted commanders and unity of command will help Shara unify Syria under the control of his centralized government.

A combination of politics, manpower constraints, and a need for cohesive military units has likely driven Shara to appoint several US- and EU-sanctioned, pro-Turkish commanders to division-level posts or senior positions within the Defense Ministry. Shara and HTS have long histories of both collaboration and conflict with SNA commanders and their factions.⁷⁹ HTS endeavored to infiltrate and weaken the SNA to gradually expand HTS control in northern Syria, but HTS did occasionally collaborate with certain SNA commanders, including by supporting the Sultan Suleiman Division and Hamza Division against other SNA rivals in 2022.⁸⁰ Many SNA units are widely feared among Syrian communities for the abuses they committed against civilians during the civil war. Shara likely perceives his alliances with these organizations as a political necessity at this time due to their Turkish backing and connection to tribal and criminal networks. Several of these Turkish-backed commanders are effectively warlords with deep tribal ties and mafia-like economic networks in northern Syria, such as the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division's Mohammad Jassem (Abu Amsha) or Ahrar al Sharqiya's Ahmed al Hais (Abu Hatem Shaqra).⁸¹ These men could theoretically present the government with a significant security challenge if they decided to revolt. Shara's appointment of these men likely seeks to ensure that their powerful militias will be loyal to the new Syrian state and do not destabilize the country in the short term. Shara has also likely appointed non-loyalist commanders from outside his trusted circle because he must ensure that the army has enough manpower in cohesive units to tackle other security concerns, such as ISIS or regime remnants.

The Organization of the New Army

The initial organization of the new army suggests that Shara and his Defense Ministry are attempting to design a force that is nimble yet cohesive enough to respond to Syria's most proximate internal threats during the transition. The new Syrian Army will likely use independent brigades that can operate separately from their parent divisions in order to better address the low-intensity, intrastate operations the new army will likely face. A government official speaking to locals in Daraa Province in February 2025 explained that the division in Daraa would consist of four independent brigades.⁸² Individual brigades have deployed independently of their divisions for missions outside

The new Syrian Army will likely use independent brigades that can operate separately from their parent divisions in order to better address the low-intensity, intrastate operations the new army will likely face.

of their normal areas of operation since Assad's fall.⁸³ These self-contained brigades are easier to rapidly deploy in response to crises for which larger divisions would be unnecessary. It is not clear if the government intends these brigades to be easily plugged into division headquarters, as was possible within the US Army's

brigade-centric modular force.⁸⁴ A brigade-centric model will better meet the low-intensity intrastate threats that Shara's government will face because a brigade-centric force is nimbler than a division-centric force designed for state-on-state conflicts.

These brigades may be similar in size and structure to HTS civil war units, rather than full brigades. Centralized brigades in Idlib Province numbered about 600 to 800 personnel and included organic artillery and armor.⁸⁵ Brigades of this size would mean that each Syrian division is roughly equivalent in number of personnel to a small conventional brigade at 2,400 to 3,600 personnel. A Syrian military official stated in early June 2025 that each division aims to have 10,000 troops, but that most units are "still at skeleton stage," however.⁸⁶ CTP-ISW assessed that there are 20 active divisions in the new Syrian army as of September 2025, and it is unlikely that the new government could support this number of divisions

of 10,000 troops in the near term. Assad's army, for example, had only 13 divisions at the start of the civil war, and many of those units were unreliable.⁸⁷ Post-war Syria could not maintain eight more divisions with adequate manning than Assad did before the war and its economic consequences. The Defense Ministry has continued to simultaneously form new divisions while merging others together since March 2025, which suggests that the ministry will continue to restructure the army to adapt to changing circumstances in coming months. It is possible that the ministry may reflag some current divisions as brigades or battalions later.

Shara has decided to address the army's manpower constraints and political realities with a strategy to maintain unit cohesion by reflagging civil war-era opposition militias as "divisions," "brigades," or "battalions," apparently without changing their structure, personnel, or equipment. Reflagged units are folded into the Syrian army's chain of command but can operate as cohesive units almost immediately without the months of training usually needed to make units minimally combat effective. Units that mix militiamen from different factions would need time to rebuild unit cohesion as well. Current Defense Minister Abu Qasra observed in a 2020 interview that "you cannot mix fighters from Ahrar [al Sham], Suq[o]ur [al Sham], and HTS in the same brigade without risking chaos," describing HTS's willingness to respect each faction's existing structure within HTS's operations room.⁸⁸ The same fundamental logic applies to the new army, at least in the short term. The collapse of the regime has built new alliances between top commanders, but tensions between lower-level fighters in certain opposition factions that fought during the civil war have not dissolved. The relationship between HTS and SNA fighters on the ground remains defined by "vitriol and distrust," for example.⁸⁹ Shara would render these forces temporarily unable to conduct missions if he reorganized the units on the fly and thus destroyed unit cohesion.

Many Syrian divisions are either dominated by a single reflagged civil war faction — such as the Suleiman Shah Division in the Hama-based 62nd Division — or consist of multiple re-flagged factions. Jaysh al Islam and the Syrian Free Army (formerly known as Maghawhir al Thawra) together formed the Rif Dimashq-based 70th Division during Summer 2025, for example. The Defense Ministry has made factions separate even within divisions by reflagging some militias as brigades (rather than divisions). The Defense Ministry's initial reliance on independent brigades may mitigate any possible inter-unit tensions that would arise from reflagging multiple factions within a single division because these brigades do not appear to be deploying together under their division headquarters. CTP-ISW has not observed the formation of any explicitly multi-faction brigades or battalions yet.

Shara adds to the number of units he can employ to accomplish different security tasks by reflagging militias, but as a consequence, he has only relatively limited control over certain units, particularly those that have been dominated by factions that have never fought under HTS. Certain pro-Turkish commanders have pledged loyalty to Shara and the new government in Damascus, but some of these units have been sanctioned both before and after the fall of Assad for committing atrocities against civilians, including the Suleiman Shah Division, Hamza Division, Sultan Murad Division, and Ahrar al Sharqiya.⁹⁰ Turkey has aided and abetted these abuses by providing operational, logistical, and financial support to these factions.⁹¹ Shara's decision to integrate these groups into the army without changing their core structure or commanders preserves the unit cultures of factions that have committed atrocities. At least three of these units participated in the coastal massacres in March 2025, for example, even after their factions "dissolved" and their commanders swore allegiance to Shara. The Defense Ministry likely secures these commanders' and their

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factions' ongoing support for the new government in Damascus by reflagging them, however.

The Defense Ministry will need to transform the relatively informal armed groups that currently comprise the army into a professional military that is responsive to the chain of command. The defense minister and army chief of staff both have experience in professionalizing military forces between 2020 and 2024, and these challenges are not insurmountable.⁹² The 2020–2024 process restructured HTS into divisions and brigades, established a military college to train more

professional officers, and eventually enabled Shara to defeat the Assad regime.⁹³ Any professionalization process targeting non-HTS forces will require Shara to break up personal loyalty and patronage networks that currently exist, however, and other armed groups may resist these efforts.

Unit discipline has emerged as a significant early challenge for the new army in earning the support of the Syrian populace. The Defense Ministry retains weak command and control over some units, and particularly at the lower levels, likely in large part due to the reflagging of factions that do not answer to the Defense

Reflagged Civil War Factions in the Syrian Army

The Syrian Defense Ministry has likely reflagged many civil-war era opposition groups as army divisions, brigades, and battalions. Reflagged factions retain the former unit's personnel and unit culture but are less likely to respond to the formal chain of command. Some factions appear to dominate certain divisions, while other divisions contain multiple reflagged factions as brigades or smaller units:

Syrian Army Division

Opposition Faction

Opposition Faction

Sanctioned Opposition Faction

Reflagged
factions
within a new
division

- **High confidence** that the Defense Ministry has reflagged this faction as a unit in the new Syrian army
- **Moderate confidence** that the Defense Ministry has reflagged this faction
- **Low confidence** that the Defense Ministry has reflagged this faction

Western Syria

62nd Division

Suleiman Shah Division

82nd Division

Ansar al Tawhid

74th Division

Jaysh al Izza

84th Division

Turkistan Islamic Party

Central Syria

42nd Division

Saraqib Revolutionaries Front

Sultan Malik Shah Division

Southern Syria

44th Division

Liwa Tahrir al Sham

Jaysh al Nasr

77th Division

NLF 77th Division

70th Division

Jaysh al Islam

Syrian Free Army (Maghawhir al Thawra)

Northern and Northeastern Syria

60th Division

Northern Storm Brigade

Levant Front

76nd Division

Hamza Division

72nd Division

Sultan Murad Division

Musab bin Omair Battalion

Sultan Mehmed Fatih Division

Muntasir Billah Division

51st Division

Liwa al Waqqas

80th Division

Nour al Din al Zenki

Mutasim Division

86th Division

Ahrar al Sharqiya

Ministry and a lack of discipline among some civil war factions. The Defense Ministry's lack of control over its forces has led to numerous unsanctioned violations during unit deployments across Syria that range from looting to extrajudicial killings and, in the case of the March 2025 coastal violence, participation in large-scale massacres of civilians. Such behavior during the army's formative days risks severely eroding the Syrian population's trust in government forces, particularly when fighters with sectarian tendencies are deployed to sensitive areas. Salary delays or cuts and corruption also likely contribute to poor discipline, particularly at lower echelons.⁹⁴ The Defense Ministry has reportedly struggled to discipline military units due to a weak bureaucratic structure, which has led regional Interior Ministry officials to attempt to curb the militias' excesses.⁹⁵ The Defense Ministry has taken some limited recent steps to address its undisciplined forces, such as establishing a code of conduct, quietly arresting perpetrators, and forming commissions to investigate and hopefully prosecute crimes. The ministry's lack of transparency over the arrests of wrongdoers may not inspire public confidence in its internal processes, however.⁹⁶

The violations committed by new Syrian army units have intensified concerns among Syrians, and Syrian minority communities in particular, about the ability of Shara's government to restrain undisciplined fighters who may perpetrate violence against their communities. Shara has attempted to integrate the armed contingents of non-Sunni communities that neither joined the opposition nor explicitly fought in the Assad regime's Syrian Arab Army. These non-Sunni groups include the Kurdish-dominated SDF and disparate Druze militias in southern Syria. The mobilization of these groups during the civil war means that they existed as more coherent entities at the time of Assad's fall, and the political influence and arms that they hold as entities outside of the state threatens Shara's centralization project. Many factions have been unwilling to integrate into the state under the initial terms that Shara has offered, however. Shara has repeatedly emphasized that no armed faction will join the army "as a bloc" in his negotiations with the SDF, even as he has effectively allowed most other factions to join with their previous or similar command structures through the reflagging process.

Some Druze groups have also refused to "disarm" and initially signed agreements to join security services as a bloc, even as other Druze militias have actively fought the government. The efforts by the Kurdish-dominated SDF and the Druze militias to join the army as blocs indicate that both minority groups fear disarmament because it would leave them at the mercy of certain Sunni groups, some of which have already attacked and killed both Kurds and Druze. These efforts also reflect both groups' demands to maintain political autonomy through a decentralized model of governance, though the Kurds and the Druze have expressed this idea differently.

Sunni opposition factions will likely continue to dominate the army in the coming months despite Shara's efforts to negotiate with minority-dominated armed groups. Neither the army nor the General Security Service (GSS), which is a gendarmerie under the Interior Ministry, has meaningfully recruited Syrian minorities into their services, though the lack of non-Sunni fighters also likely results from individual Syrians' hesitancy to enlist. The training and integration of individual Syrians enlisting into the army — both Sunni Arab and otherwise — is an important step of the professionalization process.

Some Sunnis who fought in the Syrian Arab Army or other regime structures are not re-joining the new army, likely due to political reasons. A need for manpower and expertise likely led the Defense Ministry to announce in April 2025 that it would accept personnel who defected from the Assad regime during the war. Officer Affairs Department head Brigadier General Mohammad Mansour stated in August 2025 that at least 3,000 defected officers have applied to serve in the new army or have already returned to service. The pattern of Syrian army recruitment suggests that the ministry is excluding Sunni personnel who stayed with the SAA until the end of the war. Abu Qasra told Syrian media in May 2025 that the Defense Ministry is classifying defected officers into two categories: defectors who fought with regime units during the civil war and defectors that the regime excused from military service in recent years due to personal reasons.⁹⁷ These classifications exclude the thousands of pro-regime forces who fought for Assad until the collapse of the regime. It is doubtful that the Defense Ministry would recruit

personnel who fought with the Assad regime up until December 2024, given the army's composition of revolutionary forces until the state has undergone serious transitional justice processes. A northern Syria-based source alleged that the Deir ez Zor-based 66th Division dismissed personnel in June 2025, allegedly affiliated with former regime forces, including the Iranian-backed 47th Regiment.⁹⁸

The structure of the Syrian army is likely to change — possibly even significantly—in the coming months as the army continues to recruit and integrate both civil war factions and individuals. The army's early deployments and combat experience have revealed a host of problems that longer-term professionalization efforts will need to address. The Defense Ministry has begun limited early steps towards this end by issuing new directives aimed at improving

discipline, including requiring all personnel to wear issued uniforms and requiring military academy attendance for civil war opposition commanders seeking promotion. Shara will need to ensure that his need for expediency and his accommodation of multiple powerbrokers do not remain significant hurdles towards the unification of Syria in the long term. Significant military restructuring of the opposition forces that the Defense Ministry has integrated will probably be necessary in order to ensure that effective command and control among new Syrian units, but such efforts can have major political risks for Shara if conducted unsuccessfully. These risks may make Shara and senior defense officials hesitant or extremely unmotivated to undertake the requisite actions to construct the type of army that would support Syrian long-term stability.

IV. The Future of the Syrian Army

Shara seeks to centralize state control over Syria and create stability during the five-year transition period he has announced. The way that Shara's government integrates remaining Syrian armed factions and invests in efforts to professionalize the new army will play a major role in determining the degree of success Shara will experience. The establishment of a professional army that is loyal to the state is one way through which Shara can increase his own new government's legitimacy and secure buy-in from the Syrian populace. The creation of a new army that is responsive to an institutionalized chain of command will be extremely difficult and will likely take years, however. Shara is rightly focused on short-term security improvement, but the army's initial organization and characteristics indicate that Shara and his Defense Ministry will need to pursue three primary lines of effort in the coming months:

- **Integration.** Multiple power centers within Syria remain and challenge the government's ability to centralize state control. Shara can sideline and control relatively small groups, but larger groups such as the SDF have proven more difficult to integrate.

- **Professionalization.** The Defense Ministry will need to ensure that the collection of militias that currently comprise the army is responsive to the chain of command and loyal to the state rather than other interests. Some elements of the governing coalition that Shara built may make Shara's effort to do this more difficult. The personnel within these units will need to be disciplined over time, and some will probably need to be purged.
- **Capacity to Respond to Security Challenges.** The Syrian government is juggling integration and professionalization as it tries to provide Syrians a modicum of security from ISIS, other insurgents and criminals, and the intercommunal violence that will continue to erupt as the country recovers from the civil war. These challenges mean that a misstep by Shara or other Syrian actors could plunge Syria back into internal conflict. An early small-scale example came in southwestern Syria in July 2025, when small clashes between Druze and Bedouin Arabs spiraled into a week of heavy fighting and intercommunal attacks perpetrated by undisciplined government forces.⁹⁹ Significant ethno-religious

behavior in the security services, which has so far only been addressed in a spasmodic and limited way, could exacerbate these challenges.

The new Syrian government must simultaneously contend with and address all three of these lines of effort, which will be remarkably difficult while it also needs to improve the economy, infrastructure, and other sectors destroyed by the civil war. All three lines of effort contain serious challenges that will complicate the success and speed of Shara's ability to establish control over Syria. The Syrian government is likely to pursue each of these lines of effort on different timelines — it will probably require multiple years of efforts to transform the collection of militias that currently make up the army into a professional force.

Shara will likely seek to create sufficient command and control over the five-year transition period. Shara has staffed key positions with HTS commanders and other key allies to create unity of command and ensure that his top subordinates report to him. He cannot rely on a “team of rivals” or professional officers because including his rival commanders would empower them to pursue their own parochial interests — rather than the interests of the Syrian state or Shara himself — and a cadre of professional officers loyal to state institutions does not yet exist. A professional officer corps of this sort may not ever form, depending on the type of state Shara hopes to create. Shara's emphasis on personal loyalty, if it continues, will solidify his control for as long as he hopes to keep control.

The establishment of effective command and control and discipline at lower echelons will be a more complex effort. Shara is currently only re-flagging militias, which is an efficient approach to get the army able to operate as soon as possible, as noted above, but the Defense Ministry still lacks both the leverage and local influence to control certain factions that it has nominally integrated.¹⁰⁰ The lack of discipline within some of Syria's new forces and their participation in sectarian violence has eroded some communities' trust in the army and the state. Other militias were likely still paid by Turkey as of June 2025, though it appears that the Defense Ministry has since assumed some of Turkey's

financial support to militias that have integrated into the army.¹⁰¹ Shara recognizes that moving too fast by sidelining powerful warlords quickly could also destabilize his government by encouraging some very powerful warlords to revolt against him.

Iraq holds valuable lessons for building military forces and ministerial capacity. Bad actors also took root in the early Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as the US worked to build new forces following the removal of Saddam Hussein, but US-encouraged, Iraqi-driven reforms eventually removed these actors over time and built a more capable ISF. Some of these bad actors, such as the Badr Organization, came from the ranks of the anti-Saddam opposition but were backed (and at least partially controlled) by an external actor (in Badr's case, Iran).¹⁰² A similar phenomenon exists in Syria today, as many new Syrian military units come from the non-HTS, anti-Assad opposition factions backed by Turkey. Many Iraqis did not trust the Iraqi National Police before 2007 and viewed it, with considerable justification, as a sectarian Shia organization designed to oppress Sunni communities.¹⁰³ The Iraqi Interior Ministry, after US pressure on the Iraqi government to appoint a reform-minded interior minister, removed both Iraqi National Police division commanders, seven of nine brigade commanders, and 25 battalion commanders.¹⁰⁴ The United States and Iraq also retrained all the Iraqi National Police units.¹⁰⁵ Iraqi citizens began to view the National Police as a non-sectarian force after a significant period of time.¹⁰⁶ Shara could undertake a similar program to identify and remove Turkish-backed commanders who have perpetrated abuses against civilians, though it would take years and considerable support from strategic leaders and external backers to accomplish. The removal of such commanders must also be accompanied by a reorganization of the units themselves.

The Defense Ministry will need to ensure that the collection of militias that currently comprise the army is responsive to the chain of command and loyal to the state rather than other interests.

Integrating Sectarian Militias into the Security Services: The Iraqi Interior Ministry as a Case Study

The case of the Iraqi Interior Ministry and Sunni Awakening suggests that Shara's government will need transformational leadership and significant political support to break up and dilute ethno-religious militias that have carved out fiefdoms within his army. The Iraq case clearly illustrates the problems inherent in any effort to integrate ethno-religious militias into state security services. The post-2003 Iraqi government, like Shara's government in 2025, was dominated by one sect (although to a lesser degree than in Syria today) and composed of groups opposed to the previous regime. Shara's government has—like Iraq—rapidly incorporated a collection of opposition militias into its state security services. The new Iraqi government faced significant problems taking this approach; so will Shara.

The United States and Iraqi governments, recognizing the need to rapidly create the Iraqi Interior Ministry, hastily incorporated militias into the ministry as units.¹⁰⁷ The Shia-controlled Interior Ministry in particular integrated sectarian Shia militias “with little or no screening process” and integrated “officers with a sectarian agenda...willy-nilly.”¹⁰⁸ The Iranian-backed Badr Corps, which was a Shia, anti-Saddam Iraqi militia that had been created by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in the Iran-Iraq War, quickly penetrated the Iraqi Interior Ministry.¹⁰⁹ The Wolf Brigade, a National Police brigade controlled by Badr, was a sectarian organization that detained 1,400 Iraqis, many of whom it tortured, and “perpetrated death squad activities” in its areas of operation until 2007.¹¹⁰ Other police units had similar sectarian histories and engaged in systemic abuses, while Interior Minister Bayan Jabr—a Badr member himself—denied allegations of abuse and protected the sectarians within the ministry's ranks.¹¹¹ Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki provided similar cover.¹¹²

The new interior minister in 2006, Jawad Bolani, and the new National Police commander, Hussein al Awadi, gradually purged many sectarian

commanders in Summer 2007 at great personal risk.¹¹³ The Iraqi government appointed Bolani under significant US pressure, but Bolani and Awadi drove and supported the reforms, not the United States.¹¹⁴ Transformation of the sort that Bolani and Awadi attempted takes years, not months, however. Some units and more individuals remained deeply sectarian, and extremist Shia elements continued to influence the Interior Ministry and National Police, but Bolani and Awadi conducted rolling purges to gradually remove problematic individuals and leaders over time.¹¹⁵ Bolani and Awadi fired 9,000 commanders and policemen between late 2006 and December 2007 out of a force of about 26,000 personnel.¹¹⁶ These purges ensured that even if another sectarian commander replaced his predecessor, the new commander would also be removed. Bolani and Awadi executed these reforms under threat of assassination. Likely Iranian-backed militias also assassinated one of Bolani's aides and 14 other inspector general investigators within the Interior Ministry, and pro-Shia militia cells within the Interior Ministry detonated a car bomb outside the ministry headquarters in 2006.¹¹⁷ Bolani's and Awadi's efforts ultimately caused the Iraqi people to gradually view the National Police as a non-sectarian force, and US officers came to view it as competent and professional.¹¹⁸

US support was a critical enabler for Bolani and Awadi's success, however. The United States pressured Prime Minister Maliki to appoint Bolani against Maliki's own instincts.¹¹⁹ US trainers embedded with National Police units, and the United States helped Awadi execute his ambitious re-training program. US support helped dramatically reduce sectarian activity and violence while US forces were present and set conditions for political progress and reconciliation.¹²⁰ The full withdrawal of US forces in 2011, however, provided Maliki with an opportunity to politicize the ISF again, which ultimately resulted in the collapse of the ISF in northern Iraq and ISIS's capture of Mosul.¹²¹

Shara and his principal subordinates — Defense Minister Major General Marhaf Abu Qasra and Chief of Staff Major General Ali al Nassan — will need to provide transformational leadership while also using their own political influence to build a

well-functioning army from a collection of militias. The US efforts to break apart sectarian militias in the Iraqi Interior Ministry demonstrate some of the challenges inherent in incorporating militias into a new military. Shara, Abu Qasra, and Nassan have not yet demonstrated a willingness to provide transformational leadership or use their political influence to force the professionalization of the army. Shara did not publicly punish soldiers accused of abuses during the fighting with the Druze in July 2025 when he was confronted with widespread reports of abuses. Shara views his political opponents as “separatists” or “regime remnants” who oppose a united Syria, or one led by Shara.¹²² Iraqi figures in the 2000s and 2010s similarly argued that Sunni groups supported remnants of the Saddam regime.¹²³ External pressure from the United States made Maliki overcome these biases and appoint Bolani. Syria’s primary backer, Turkey, is more likely to support abusive militias than rein in their excesses, given Turkey’s historic support for some of the most abusive militias now integrated into the army. Shara, Abu Qasra, and Nassan desire a peaceful, united Syria, but they will need to attempt to reform the Syrian military without many of the advantages Bolani and Awadi enjoyed.

Shara’s Historic Efforts to Subordinate Militias

Shara will need to gradually dismantle armed militias and their structures in order to establish command and control and improve responsiveness to the chain of command. Shara’s historical methods suggest that he will subordinate armed groups over time by rewarding those that cooperate while politically undermining those that do not and then eliminating them. Neither Jabhat al Nusra nor its successor organization HTS sought to “overtly [dominate] the opposition” during the Syrian civil war but instead gradually cultivated the “respect and dependence” of Syrian rebel groups to “direct the evolution of the” opposition.¹²⁴ Social

outreach and governance were key parts of Shara’s toolkit as a means to increase his own forces’ influence over local groups. HTS used incentives to draw factions closer into its sphere of influence, such as by increasing military support to Ansar al Tawhid to draw it away from Hurras al Din, and rewarded factions that were responsive to HTS direction, such as allowing cooperative factions to retain their organizational structure within Fateh al Mubin.

Any analysis of the future of the new Syrian army should avoid viewing Shara’s past behavior as inherently indicative of his future behavior, however. The integration of many disparate groups — particularly some of the powerful and problematic factions led by abusive Sunni or Arab supremacists — will present significant challenges. The Iraqi government only put transformation leaders in place to reform the Iraqi Interior Ministry after significant US pressure forced it to do so, as noted in the case study above. Shara may not have the fortitude necessary to disband ethno-religious formations, particularly those backed by Turkey or powerful warlords such as now-Assistant Defense Minister and Turkish ethno-nationalist Fahim Issa, if these groups do not present visible challenges to his rule or authority. Shara’s government has so far only taken extremely hesitant steps to rein in ethno-religious actors. This pattern of behavior would suggest that Shara does not have the will to break up these groups, at least at this time.

HTS and Jabhat al Nusra also used coercive means, including military force, to compel less-cooperative opposition groups to comply with their demands. HTS employed a variety of strategies to gradually weaken local Idlib councils in regions where other Islamist rebel groups still held influence after HTS seized the province in 2019.¹²⁵ HTS “adjusted the nature of its [engagement] with rebel groups to the unique characteristics” of each group to gradually assert dominance over these councils and factions, including by mixing “co-optation, local agreements, and repression”

HTS and Jabhat al Nusra also used coercive means, including military force, to compel less-cooperative opposition groups to comply with their demands.

to slowly undermine factions' and councils' political authority.¹²⁶ The group used still-firmer tactics with groups that took up arms against its rule, such as al Qaeda affiliate Hurras al Din, which HTS first politically isolated and then destroyed.¹²⁷

Shara's first steps toward subordinating militia groups in Syria indicate that he may employ a similar strategy that is flexible enough to meet different circumstances. Shara has adopted very different approaches that reflect the different challenges he faces in creating the new army. Shara crushed the Sunni Arab, Daraa-based Eighth Brigade after it attempted to resist government control.¹²⁸ He was only able to suppress the brigade because his allies politically undermined the group, enabling HTS to destroy it without a fight.¹²⁹ The way in which Shara's forces suppressed the Eighth Brigade is very similar to the way in which Shara suppressed some rival groups in Idlib Province between 2020 and 2024.¹³⁰ Shara's forceful response to the Eighth Brigade's insubordination probably reflected in part resentments held against Eighth Brigade commander Ahmed al Awda and his fighters, since Awda had reconciled with the regime and the Russians in a surrender deal in 2018.

Shara pursued a different model with the Suwayda- and Rif Dimashq-based Druze militias in May 2025. The international community's sensitivity about the Syrian state's suppression of minorities, including the Druze, has likely caused Shara to tread carefully as he has attempted to bring Druze militias under his control. Shara first attempted to cooperate with pro-government Druze factions such as the Men of Dignity in May 2025 while he sought to forcibly disarm former regime-affiliated Druze networks in Rif Dimashq and Suwayda, likely in order to dilute the latter's influence within the Druze community.¹³¹ This strategy demonstrated that the government's primary concern lay in the existence of pro-Assad remnants, rather than in ethno-religious motivations of Sunni Arab supremacy. The strategy

remained viable until government forces operating without orders — and who, unlike the government, do hold notions of religious supremacy — perpetrated dozens of atrocities in July 2025 against the Druze and significantly exacerbated Druze distrust of the government. Many Druze believe that the government is complicit in Sunni Bedouin and Syrian army attacks on Druze.¹³² About 40 Druze militias have since reorganized along primarily religious and intercommunal lines in opposition to the government and have recently coalesced into a structure under the supervision of Druze Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri.¹³³ Shara has not yet moved to suppress Hijri's movement.

Subordinating the SNA

The SNA presents a much more significant challenge for Shara than the Eighth Brigade or disparate Druze militias. SNA factions that make up at least five of the 20 active divisions do not always execute Defense Ministry directives and continue to pursue parochial interests that threaten state stability.¹³⁴ SNA fighters within the MoD also continue to be loyal to their commanders rather than to the chain of command. Many SNA commanders are likely still highly responsive to Turkish input and direction because of Turkish finances and political support.¹³⁵ A commander within the Hamza Division-dominated 76th Division told Syrian media in May 2025 that Turkey was pushing the factions it held sway over to "integrate" into the Syrian army within two months.¹³⁶

Shara has instead adopted a third model to integrate the SNA factions, given their size and Turkish backing. Shara appears to have decided to prioritize nominally integrating the SNA into the army and to

defer restructuring and reforming the SNA to a later date. Shara is unlikely to tolerate the SNA's disobedience forever, but he remains too militarily weak to defeat or suppress them, especially without Turkish approval. Shara, who has a close relationship

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with Turkey himself, understands that Turkey will support a reflagging process, but it might balk if he attempts to break up and destroy these militias.¹³⁷ The militias themselves could also revolt, which would destabilize Syria. HTS had about 15,000 fighters in 2022, compared to an estimated 30,000 core SNA fighters.¹³⁸ Pro-Shara units have certainly strengthened since the fall of Assad, to be sure, but a fight between Shara loyalists and SNA fighters would be disastrous for Shara.

Shara's previous tactics suggest that he will wait until his allies are militarily and politically stronger than the SNA before suppressing the SNA. Jabhat al Nusra's and HTS's suppression of Ahrar al Sham is emblematic of this more patient approach. Ahrar al Sham was a powerful coalition of Islamist militias early in the civil war, but its strength gradually waned after the death of many senior Ahrar al Sham leaders in 2014.¹³⁹ HTS defeated Ahrar al Sham in 2017 by cutting deals with local notables that allowed HTS to focus its forces against Ahrar al Sham holdouts in Idlib.¹⁴⁰ This approach would have been impossible early in the war, when Jabhat al Nusra controlled few fighters and Ahrar al Sham controlled thousands. HTS did not fully suppress Ahrar al Sham until 2019.¹⁴¹ This multi-year process demonstrated the way in which HTS uses a combination of political and military tools to defeat numerically stronger adversaries. Shara may decide to adopt a similar strategy with the SNA militias in the future.

Such a strategy would require Shara to ensure that the Defense Ministry has sufficient ministerial capacity and leverage to successfully dismantle and subordinate SNA groups before moving to do so. The Defense Ministry needs to be able to fully compensate fighters in order to build influence with former factions. Syrian media reported in late July 2025 that new Syrian army personnel have continued to face delays in receiving full salaries from the Defense Ministry, citing the complaints of SNA groups based in the Peace Spring exclave.¹⁴² The Defense Ministry will also need to strengthen its institutional capacity in order to challenge militias and hold fighters accountable for breaking the code of conduct. This will be difficult to do in regions where the Defense Ministry's influence

is weaker than that of the local unit. Shara will probably wait to move against certain units until the Defense Ministry has stronger leverage to use against these groups.

Shara's patient strategy with the SNA could backfire and cause serious instability and conflict in Syria within the five-year transitional period, however. Shara has appointed several SNA commanders accused of human rights abuses to command army divisions.¹⁴³ Three of these commanders are under current US sanctions for perpetrating human rights abuses in northern Syria during the war, particularly against Syrian Kurds. Abu Hatem Shaqra, current commander of the 86th Division, is under sanctions for integrating former ISIS fighters into his faction's ranks.¹⁴⁴ This approach has also likely complicated ongoing integration negotiations with the Kurdish-dominated SDF, as the appointment of commanders who have targeted and killed Kurds does not assuage the fears of the SDF or of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) about the transitional government's ability and willingness to protect Kurds, regardless of the transitional government's statements. These SNA commanders have also participated in several Turkish-backed cross-border offensives into Syria targeting the YPG, and Turkey threatened in January 2025 that it would do so again in order to "destroy" the SDF.¹⁴⁵ Kurdish armed groups may also express frustration that Shara has allowed certain SNA factions to join the army with their formations intact while Shara has remained unwilling to allow the SDF to integrate as a "bloc."

Integrating the SDF

Shara is likely attempting to cajole the SDF into joining the transitional government through negotiations, while he remains open to political subversion and military force if the SDF does not agree to fully submit to centralized Damascus rule. Shara and the SDF signed an eight-point framework agreement on March 10, 2025, that called for the integration of all civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the Syrian state.¹⁴⁶ This agreement has resulted in a few successes, but neither the government nor the Kurds has budged

on their key demands. The SDF seeks for the government to recognize Kurdish rights, allow Kurds to administer Kurdish areas within the Syrian government, permit the creation of an SDF armed force, and write a new constitution with better protections for minorities. The government seeks a centralized Syrian state, though it is willing to allow some Kurdish rights.¹⁴⁷

The SDF is extremely unlikely to agree to the government's demands. The SDF also does not trust the government and fears attacks by the SNA against the Kurdish community if the SDF gives up its weapons. It has routinely highlighted government abuses targeting Alawites in western Syria and the violence targeting the Druze in southern Syria as evidence that its fears are justified.¹⁴⁸ The Syrian government has also failed to uphold its part of the framework agreement to integrate the SDF, which causes diminished trust between the two parties.¹⁴⁹ The government could decide to integrate the SDF in a way similar to how the government has previously attempted to slowly integrate Druze militias by giving them leadership of the local GSS, but this approach would not meet SDF demands for greater Kurdish rights and a new constitution. This approach has also failed to resolve all issues with the Druze and local communities, as the July 2025 violence in Suwayda Province made clear.

Turkey is an extremely destabilizing actor in northern Syria that has facilitated ethnic cleansing against Syrian Kurds. Turkey launched three successive campaigns in northern Syria against the Kurds during the civil war. These operations, executed with SNA support, forcibly displaced Kurdish civilians and replaced them with Syrian refugees living in Turkey, which constitutes ethnic cleansing.¹⁵⁰ The intent behind these Turkish efforts is to accelerate demographic change and turn Kurdish areas along the Turkish border into Arab areas. Turkey's current behavior also risks disrupting the fragile balance that the Syrian government has struck with the SDF as negotiations continue.

Turkey has become increasingly disillusioned with integration negotiations between the SDF and the Syrian transitional government in recent months. Turkey pressured Syria to withdraw from the US- and French-brokered integration negotiations in Paris with the SDF and is likely encouraging the Syrian government to increase military and political pressure on the SDF to disarm and integrate into the state.¹⁵¹ Pro-government Turkish media have pushed the narrative that Turkey and the Syrian transitional government are preparing for a joint offensive against the SDF.¹⁵² These reports likely seek to pressure the SDF to integrate into the Syrian state and surrender its territory by threatening a military operation against it. Turkey's demands may trigger a resumption of large-scale war in northern Syria, which runs contrary to the US policy objective of stabilizing Syria.

The transitional government may decide to gradually suppress the SDF through political subversion and

then military force, if necessary. This course could cause renewed internal conflict in Syria. The SDF's poor treatment of Arabs in the areas it controls has provided an opening for the government to subvert the SDF.¹⁵³ It is unclear to what degree the govern-

ment is encouraging Arab defections, but multiple Arab armed factions defected from the SDF immediately after the fall of Assad and have continued to mobilize against the SDF in more recent months.¹⁵⁴ The Syrian government could engage local notables to ensure that they do not back the SDF in the event of military confrontation. The SDF has 100,000 fighters but only 45,000 Kurdish fighters who could be relied upon against the Syrian government or the SNA.¹⁵⁵ The core of the Kurdish force is the People's Protection Units (YPG), a battle-hardened force that could defend against a government attack for a considerable amount of time and destabilize the country with insurgent activities.

ISIS will likely attempt to exploit the gaps created by a weaker SDF or government forces. ISIS remains a viable insurgency in the Euphrates River Valley, and

The transitional government may decide to gradually suppress the SDF through political subversion and then military force, if necessary.

it could strengthen further if pressure on it is lifted in the event of a US withdrawal or SDF requirements to defend against a Turkish-backed invasion. ISIS's increased use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and suicide vests suggests that the group has rebuilt support zones from which it can plan and execute logistically and tactically complex attacks. Other ISIS-aligned groups are also active in western Syria — areas in which ISIS has not operated at scale in years — which could provide openings for ISIS to rebuild itself in new areas. Outbreaks of conflict and other setbacks during the transition can distract the Defense Ministry from the significant time and energy that counter-ISIS training and building this capacity among Syria's new forces will take.

ISIS or ISIS-influenced actors are only one of several internal fights that Shara will need to manage as he builds the new Syrian army. Shara will also need to tackle issues with Druze militias, regime remnants, violence between local communities, and other non-ISIS extremists. The US experience in Iraq — while it involved much heavier and more frequent combat — is illustrative of the challenges Shara faces as he builds his army. The US-backed Iraqi government, like Shara's government, prioritized improving security conditions. US forces and Iraq had to improve institutional capacity to sustain these forces in the field, however.

V. Recommendations for US Policy in Syria

The United States should use both sanctions and its newfound relationship with the Syrian government to encourage decisions that will create long-term, sustainable stability in Syria. The senior defense appointments made by the government should not sacrifice long-term strategic success for short-term expediency. There are several key ways that the United States should evaluate and assist the development of the Syrian security sector:

Set Clear US Objectives. The United States must define clear objectives for its re-engagement with the Syrian government. The US strategic objective in Syria should be the establishment of a government that creates long-term stability — not the appearance of stability — and prevents bad actors such as Iran, Russia, or extremist groups from using Syria as a launchpad to threaten the United States and its allies and interests. Long-term stability requires most Syrians to trust their government and for the government to be at least minimally representative. The Assad regime appeared to be stable in the 2000s, but its reliance on minorities and a small cadre of

Sunnis contributed to the 2011 Revolution and ensuing civil war. A new government that relies on Sunni Arabs and small cadres of minorities may similarly appear stable while it creates entry points for Iran or other bad actors to recruit and destabilize Syria in the future.

Press for Security Sector Reform. The challenging political and security situation in Syria means that Shara probably feels forced to rely upon some bad actors to ensure that the transitional government can stabilize the situation. The United States should be willing to accept this reality in the short term while continually pressuring the government to improve its security sector and sideline, remove, or disband problematic units. The degree of US pressure to reform the military should increase as the security situation stabilizes or if bad actors contribute to a worsening security situation.

The atrocities committed in March 2025 by Abu Amsha's 62nd Division and Sayf Abu Bakr's 76th Division seriously worsened the security situation in western Syria, for example.¹⁵⁶ The Syrian

The United States must define clear objectives for its re-engagement with the Syrian government.

government has attempted to absolve the division commanders of blame by claiming that the atrocities were the actions of an undisciplined few. The history of both Abu Amsa and Abu Bakr demonstrates that both men set conditions and culture within their units that have made atrocities against certain minorities acceptable and perhaps even encouraged, however.¹⁵⁷ The United States should place heavy pressure on the government to remove Abu Amsa and Abu Bakr and break up their militias as soon as possible. The United States should be realistic about the timeline on which it demands these removals because the sacking of powerful warlords, such as the commanders of these units, could damage stability and security more if they revolt against the government in response. The United States should not let the Syrian government use these risks as a crutch to prevent any removal of Abu Amsa and Abu Bakr, however. The individuals who currently control the Syrian government have previously destroyed other problematic militias over a relatively short two- to three-year period at great risk to their governance projects.¹⁵⁸ Shara orchestrated the destruction of various al Qaeda military coalitions that sought to overthrow his HTS-controlled government in northwestern Syria, for example. The United States should also closely monitor the activities of other sanctioned groups within the new army, like Ahrar al Sharqiya and the Sultan Murad Division, and heavily pressure the Syrian government to reform or restructure these groups over time. The United States should be prepared to levy further sanctions against these groups if they continue to perpetrate human rights abuses while nominally integrated into the army.

Engage with Turkey. Any move against Turkish allies in Syria would require Turkish support. Turkey's role as the primary backer of the victorious opposition means that it retains significant sway over members of the ruling coalition and their rank-and-file fighters. The United States should continue to hold Turkey accountable for its ongoing

support and empowerment of destabilizing actors in Syria that conduct or plan to conduct ethnic cleansing. Turkey will need to accept the reality that the establishment of a professional Syrian army will require the Syrian government to destroy the patronage networks of pre-existing militias, including Turkish partners. Turkey is currently leveraging its growing formal defense ties with the Syrian Defense Ministry to encourage the latter to increase military and political pressure on the SDF. The United States can continue to play a useful role as a mediator between the Syrian government and the SDF to increase the SDF's trust in the government while preventing Turkey from launching a military operation that is bound to destabilize Syria.

Promote Inclusivity in the Army. The United States should encourage the new Syrian government to include other civil war factions in the new army. The new army is predominantly Syrian opposition militias and does not include formations built from SDF or Druze groups. The SDF and Druze groups have agitated for their own formations because they fear integration into the Syrian state without adequate protection from the militias that Shara has incorpo-

rated into his new army. The abuses committed by these militias have caused both the Kurdish and Druze populations in Syria to unite politically and militarily to an extent seen only rarely in both communities. A Syrian government decision to attack either the Druze or the Kurds could badly destabilize Syria. The rumored US-mediated agreement to form three SDF divisions and multiple special operations brigades and integrate them into the new army is a step in the right direction, but the United States will need to pressure the government and the SDF to first officially agree to and then implement any agreement.¹⁵⁹

Ensure Accountability. The Syrian transitional government will find it harder to build a capable military if the security situation deteriorates.¹⁶⁰ The government will need to use significant force to suppress the insurgent threats it faces, but the United States should ensure that "significant force" does not translate into atrocities that imperil the

The United States should encourage the new Syrian government to include other civil war factions in the new army.

US strategic objective in Syria. The United States should encourage the Syrian government to discipline and hold its forces accountable for abuses. Atrocities and the failure to hold the perpetrators

responsible will make it much harder for this government to create long-term stability and prevent threats from Syria that threaten US interests and partners in the region.

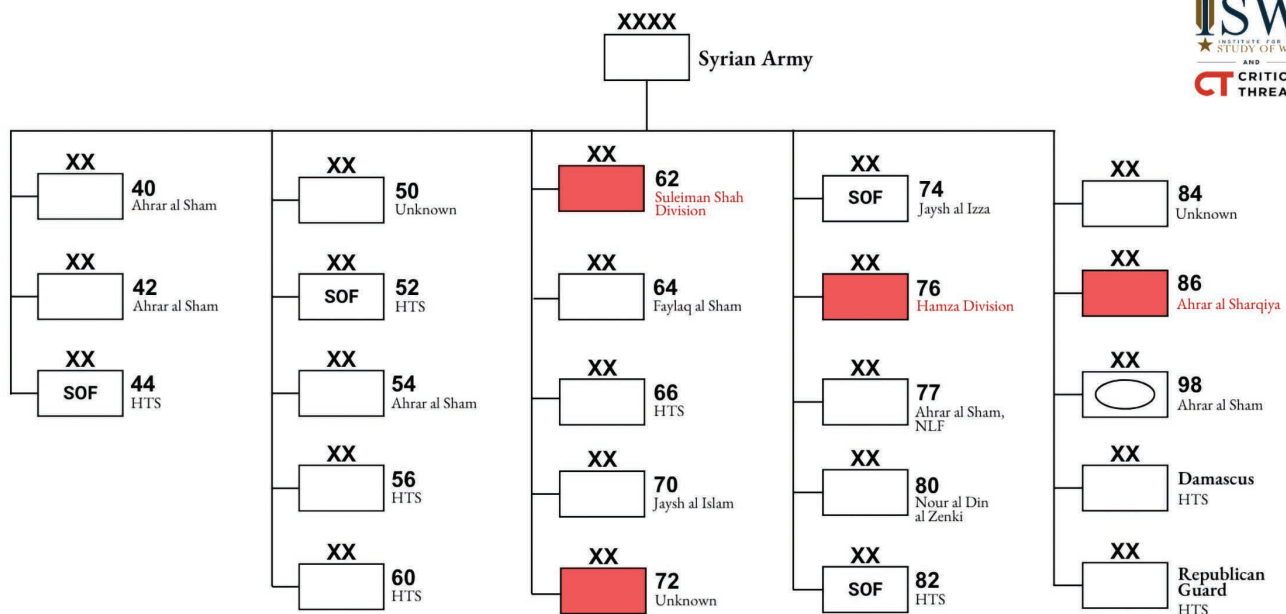
VI. The Syrian Order of Battle

This section presents the new Syrian army's initial order of battle (ORBAT). The Syrian army's structure will likely evolve in the coming weeks and months as the Defense Ministry continues to slowly incorporate armed factions into the formalized chain of command. The full integration of certain Syrian minority populations, such as the Kurds, will probably lead to the formation of new divisions, for example. The army's formal structure may also change to reflect significant increases in army personnel as the Defense Ministry expands recruitment in areas under its control. Several army divisions that the government built in January and

February 2025 have likely dissolved and merged into newer formations in more recent months, which suggests that the Defense Ministry will continue to adjust the army's current structure to adapt to new circumstances.

This order of battle identifies new Syrian units at the division, brigade, and battalion levels, in addition to these units' commanders and assessed area of responsibility. CTP-ISW only presents brigade and battalion-level units (and their commanders) when such reporting is available. Several divisions are identified as "special forces" divisions, which reflects Syrian media's description of such divisions.

The Syrian Order of Battle



*Unit contains factions or commanders under US or EU sanctions

Note: The descriptor under each unit number refers to the civil war-era factions of each unit's commander. Many division commanders have brought personnel from former faction into their new units. These units are gradually becoming more diluted as the Defense Ministry continues to formally assign factions to units and recruits new fighters across Syria.

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The authors assessed the divisions' areas of responsibility based on local reports that describe the units' deployments, engagements with local communities, and other activities. These areas of responsibility may change as units grow or are restructured. This report also presents CTP-ISW's assessment of the status of each division as of September 2025. The Defense Ministry has dissolved several divisions that were active in early Spring 2025, and several divisions that have seen little activity since their announcement may have since been dissolved or may never have materialized in full form.

This order of battle draws on open-source information from Syrian social media, the Syrian transitional government, Syrian news outlets, and regional Arabic-language media. The Defense Ministry has officially announced a limited number of division-level appointments and has generally refrained from acknowledging any appointments to lower echelons. CTP-ISW has identified a significant number of lower-level commanders through social media posts on Facebook, X, and Telegram. This report also references the work of Syria researcher and Middle East Institute fellow Gregory Waters, who has researched, published, and maintained a report on the new army's structure since March 2025. Waters' assessments and sources are credited when applicable.

Senior Leadership

Minister of Defense: Major General Marhaf Abu Qasra (Abu Hassan al Hamawi or Abu Hassan 600), [HTS]. Abu Qasra is HTS's top military commander and commanded the offensive that toppled the Assad regime in December 2024.¹⁶¹ Abu Qasra was responsible for reorganizing HTS's military forces between 2020 and 2024 in preparation for the offensive and also developed HTS's drone unit during this time.¹⁶² Abu Qasra formerly served in the SAA as a field artillery officer but was discharged sometime before 2011.¹⁶³ Abu Qasra's role in Jabhat al Nusra is unclear, but he likely held a fighting position at some point during the Jabhat al Nusra years given his appointment as HTS military commander.¹⁶⁴ Abu Qasra is from Halfaya, Hama Province.

Chief of the General Staff: Major General Ali Nour al Din al Nassan (Abu Hamza or Abu Yousef al

Homsi), [HTS].¹⁶⁵ Nassan commanded SAA infantry and armored units before defecting in 2011 or 2012.¹⁶⁶ Nassan's exact path to HTS is unclear, but his previous combat experience suggests that he was a member of Jabhat al Nusra or Ahrar al Sham. He reportedly participated in Jabhat al Nusra's and Ahrar al Sham's 2014 offensive against the regime in Wadi Deif and has been identified as the former commander of the Ali bin Abi Talib Battalion.¹⁶⁷ Nassan later surfaced as an HTS commander responsible for the "structural and organizational file."¹⁶⁸ Nassan is from Taybat al Imam, Hama Province.

Deputy Minister of Defense: Major General Mohammed Khair Hassan Shuaib (Abu al Khair Taftanaz), [HTS]. Shuaib previously served as the Idlib-based commander for the HTS-led Fateh al Mubin Operations Room from 2019 until December 2024.¹⁶⁹ Shuaib also reportedly founded the HTS-controlled Syrian Salvation Government's military college in Idlib Province.¹⁷⁰ Shuaib commanded special operations units and the "Abu Bakr" faction in Jaysh al Fatah from March 2015 until January 2017.¹⁷¹ Jaysh al Fatah was a coalition of Syrian Islamist opposition groups that joined HTS in 2017.¹⁷²

Assistant Minister for Northern Region Affairs: Brigadier General Fahim Issa, [Sultan Murad Division].¹⁷³ Fahim Issa commands the Sultan Murad Division, a Turkish-backed militia that fought under the SNA.¹⁷⁴ The Sultan Murad Division has committed human rights abuses against Kurdish civilians and detainees throughout the civil war, and the United States added Turkey to a list of countries implicated in the use of child soldiers in 2020 for the "tangible support" that Turkey provided the Sultan Murad Division.¹⁷⁵ The Sultan Murad Division was also one of the SNA factions that participated in expeditionary operations on behalf of Turkey in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Niger.¹⁷⁶ The EU more recently sanctioned the Sultan Murad Division in May 2025 for its involvement in human rights abuses on the Syrian coast in March.¹⁷⁷ Issa also previously commanded the SNA's Second Corps and Thairoun Liberation Front.¹⁷⁸ Issa is reportedly a member of the far-right Turkish nationalist group Grey Wolves.¹⁷⁹ Issa is from Tal al Hawa, Aleppo Province.¹⁸⁰

Ministry Spokesperson: Colonel Hassan Abdul Ghani, [HTS].¹⁸¹ Abdul Ghani previously served as Fateh al Mubin's spokesperson during the 2024 offensive.¹⁸² Abdul Ghani fought with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) until he was arrested by the regime in 2012. He joined FSA-affiliated Kataib al Haq based in Idlib and Hama after his release and eventually joined Jabhat al Nusra sometime before 2016.¹⁸³ Abdul Ghani is from Souran, Hama Province.

Head of Administrative Affairs: Brigadier General Enad al Darwish (Abu al Mundhir), [Ahrar al Sham].¹⁸⁴ Darwish is the former general commander of Ahrar al Sham's military wing.¹⁸⁵ Darwish led the tripartite military council that HTS, Ahrar al Sham, and Faylaq al Sham formed in Idlib in 2020 to better centralize military efforts alongside current Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra and current 64th Division commander (and then-Faylaq al Sham commander) Mohammad al Gharib.¹⁸⁶ Darwish led a revolt with former leader Hassan Soufan against Ahrar al Sham's leader Jaber Ali Pasha in October 2020.¹⁸⁷ Jaber Ali Pasha dismissed Darwish from his command after he initiated the revolt, and Darwish was excluded from Ahrar al Sham's leadership council as part of the reconciliation agreement in January 2021.¹⁸⁸ Darwish's former deputy, current 54th Division commander Hussein al Obaid, eventually succeeded him as Ahrar al Sham's military commander.¹⁸⁹ Darwish is from Hama City.¹⁹⁰

Head of Officer Affairs: Brigadier General Mohammad Mansour, [Jaysh al Nasr, National Liberation Front].¹⁹¹ Mansour formerly led Jaysh al Nasr, which was an FSA-affiliated coalition that operated in Hama and Idlib provinces.¹⁹² Jaysh al Nasr formed the National Front for Liberation (NLF) along with ten other factions in May 2018.¹⁹³ Mansour was the NLF's chief of staff under the former NFL commander Fadlallah al Hajji, who currently serves as the director of the Defense Ministry's Higher Military Academy.¹⁹⁴ The NLF is a nominal member of the SNA, but it remains more aligned with HTS. HTS's support for and coordination with the NLF since 2022 aimed to both weaken the NLF and draw it into HTS's sphere of influence.¹⁹⁵ NLF-affiliated factions like Jaysh al Nasr were members of al Fateh al Mubin and fought in

the December 2024 offensive.¹⁹⁶ Mansour is from Qalaat al Mudiq, Hama Province.¹⁹⁷

Head of Supplies and Logistics: Brigadier General Hudhayfah Badawi (Abu Hafs Binash), [HTS].¹⁹⁸ Syrian media has speculated that Badawi is a former AQI fighter.¹⁹⁹ Jabhat al Nusra appointed Badawi to oversee Idlib City and the Bab al Hawa crossing after Jabhat al Nusra seized a swath of territory from the Assad regime in 2015.²⁰⁰ Badawi later commanded HTS's Talha bin Obaid Allah Brigade after its formation in 2020.²⁰¹ He also reportedly held a position managing HTS's finances.²⁰² Badawi's brother and former Jabhat al Nusra fighter, Qutayba Badawi (Abu Hamza), is the current head of the Syrian General Authority of Land and Sea Ports.²⁰³

Head of Organization and Administration: Brigadier General Mohammad Salem al Mukhleef (Abu Hamza).²⁰⁴ Mukhleef is a former General Assembly member of the Syrian National Coalition who represented Deir ez Zor's provincial council.²⁰⁵ He holds a law degree from the University of Aleppo.²⁰⁶ Mukhleef is from Marat, Deir ez Zor Province, and is the chairman of Marat's local council.²⁰⁷

Director of the Training Authority: Brigadier General Abdul Rahman Sarhan.²⁰⁸

Director of the Higher Military Academy: Brigadier General Fadlallah al Hajji (Abu Yamen), [Faylaq al Sham, National Liberation Front].²⁰⁹ Hajji has long been a prominent figure in the pro-Turkish Syrian opposition. Hajji defected from the SAA in 2012 and joined the Idlib-based Revolution Shield Brigade.²¹⁰ Hajji then joined Faylaq al Sham in 2014 and rose to oversee the faction.²¹¹ Hajji was appointed Chief of Staff to the Syrian Interim Government's (SIG) Defense Ministry, which oversaw the SNA, after its formation in 2017. Hajji assumed command over the NLF after its formation in 2018. Current Officer Affairs head and then-Jaysh al Nasr commander Mohammad Mansour was Hajji's chief of staff.²¹² Hajji later served as Deputy Chief of Staff in the SIG's Defense Ministry after the NLF merged into the SNA in 2019. He allegedly resigned from the NLF in 2020 but reportedly participated in the offensive that toppled the regime with NLF forces in 2024.²¹³ He is from Kafr Yahmul, Idlib Province.²¹⁴

Syrian Army

Southern Syria

40th Division (aka the “Southern Division”)

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Daraa and Quneitra provinces. The 40th Division is reportedly headquartered in Izraa.²¹⁵

Commander: Colonel Binyan al Hariri (Abu Fares Daraa), [Ahrar al Sham].²¹⁶ Hariri defected from the Syrian Arab Army in 2011 as a warrant officer and later helped create Ahrar al Sham in Daraa Province. Hariri moved north in 2018 instead of reconciling with the regime and oversaw Ahrar al Sham’s “coastal sector.”²¹⁷ Ahrar al Sham leader Jaber Ali Pasha dismissed Hariri from his position in 2020, which spurred officials close to HTS, including former leader Hassan Soufan and military commander Enad al Darwish, to organize a revolt against Pasha.²¹⁸ Hariri later graduated from HTS’s military academy in Idlib.²¹⁹ The Syrian Defense Ministry promoted Hariri to the rank of colonel in December 2024 and recently assigned him to command a task force overseeing Daraa Province in southern Syria.²²⁰

- **Infantry Brigade.** Colonel Baraa al Nabulsi, [Jaysh Moataz Billah].²²¹ Based in Western Daraa. Possibly the 121st Brigade.²²²
- **Special Operations Forces (SOF) Brigade.** Dahi al Qatfan (Abu Suleiman).²²³ Based in Daraa City.²²⁴

Damascus and Rif Dimashq

44th Special Forces Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Western Rif Dimashq Province.²²⁵

Commander: Brigadier General Abu Abdul Rahman Najib, [HTS].²²⁶

- **2nd Brigade.** Colonel Mohammad Khalifa.²²⁷
- **3rd Brigade.** Colonel Firas al Bitar, [Liwa Tahrir al Sham].²²⁸
 - **314th Battalion.**²²⁹
 - **Abu Bakr Saddiq Battalion.**²³⁰
- **78th Brigade.** Abu Ahmed Shihabi.²³¹
- **95th Brigade.** Colonel Hamza Zuleikha (Abu Malik Zabadani).²³²
- **150th Brigade.** Colonel Haitham Ajlouni (Abu Khaled Fajr), [Ahrar al Sham].²³³
- **Abu Bakr Saddiq Brigade.** Samir al Saleh (Abu al Zubayr Qalaa), [HTS].²³⁴
- **Amr Ibn al Aas Brigade.** Colonel Bashar al Hassan (Abu Islam al Ghab).²³⁵
- **Nasr Brigade.** Colonel Qutayba Hababa, [Jaysh al Nasr].²³⁶

52nd Special Forces Division (formerly the 103rd Division)

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Syria-Lebanon border region from the Qalamoun Mountains, north of Damascus, to Talkalakh, western Homs Province.²³⁷

Commander: Brigadier General Haitham al Ali (Abu Muslim Afs/al Shami), [HTS].²³⁸ Ali formerly commanded HTS's Ali bin Abi Talib Brigade.²³⁹ HTS arrested and tortured Ali on accusations of espionage during a crackdown in 2024.²⁴⁰ Ali resumed command of the brigade after his release.²⁴¹ Ali is from Afs, Idlib.²⁴²

Chief of Staff: Colonel Abu Khattab al Hasakah.²⁴³

Note: Haitham al Ali was originally appointed commander of the Homs-based 103rd Division in January 2025.²⁴⁴ Haitham al Ali assumed command of the 52nd Division in April or May 2025.²⁴⁵ The 103rd Division does not appear to have been active since March 2025, suggesting that the unit has merged into the 52nd Division.²⁴⁶

- **1st SOF Brigade.**²⁴⁷ Colonel Abdel Moneim Daher (Abu Suleiman al Ays), [HTS].²⁴⁸
 - Chief of Staff: Mahmoud Ali Abu Amara Batar, [likely HTS].²⁴⁹
- **6th Brigade.**²⁵⁰ Colonel Araba Idris (Abu Ghazi), [Sultan Murad Division].²⁵¹
 - Chief of Staff: Colonel Maher al Marai Abu al Nasr.²⁵²
- **77th Brigade.** Colonel Basil Idris, [FSA-affiliated 77th Battalion].²⁵³
- **Ali bin Abi Talib Brigade.** Abu Adnan 500.²⁵⁴
 - Chief of Staff: Colonel Ahmed al Issa (Abu Bilal al Hanish).²⁵⁵
- **Talha bin Ubaid Allah Brigade.**²⁵⁶
- **Al Dalla Martyrs Battalion.**²⁵⁷

70th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Damascus suburbs, eastern Rif Dimashq, and parts of the western Badia desert.²⁵⁸

Commander: Issam Boudani (Abu Hammam), [Jaysh al Islam].²⁵⁹ Boudani has led Jaysh al Islam since 2015, when Syrian or Russian airstrikes killed former leader Zahran Alloush.²⁶⁰ Jaysh al Islam operated primarily in Eastern Ghouta during the early years of the war but relocated to Aleppo Province after 2018.²⁶¹ Turkey increasingly backed Jaysh al Islam during the course of the war. Jaysh al Islam eventually fully integrated into the SNA as part of its Third Corps.²⁶² The UAE detained Boudani on unspecified charges as he was leaving the country in late April 2025.²⁶³ Boudani is likely still detained as of August 2025, and his deputy, Ali Abdel Baqi, appears to be overseeing the 70th Division in Boudani's stead.²⁶⁴

Chief of Staff: Brigadier General Ali Abdel Baqi (Abu Marouf), [Jaysh al Islam].²⁶⁵

- **3rd Brigade.**²⁶⁶ Likely formerly referred to as the 72nd Brigade.²⁶⁷ Youssef al Ghazawi (Abu Mahmoud), [likely Jaysh al Islam].²⁶⁸
- **76th Brigade.**²⁶⁹ Colonel Dhriar Hishan, [likely Jaysh al Islam].²⁷⁰
 - **113th Brigade.**²⁷¹
 - **1st Battalion.**²⁷²
- **Unspecified Battalion.**²⁷³ Youssef Leila Abu Omar, [Jaysh al Islam].²⁷⁴

- **Note:** The US-backed Syrian Free Army (formerly known as Maghawir al Thawra) confirmed in May 2025 that its forces integrated into the 70th Division.²⁷⁵ Syrian media reported in late October 2025 that the unit had left the 70th Division and joined the Ministry of Interior's forces, however.²⁷⁶

77th Division

Status: Likely dissolved.²⁷⁷ The 77th Division was active along the Syria-Lebanon border between March and May 2025. The division has seen little activity since June 2025, however, and a Syrian social media user suggested that the unit was in the midst of being dismantled.²⁷⁸ A Washington-based analyst observed the reassignment of three commanders from the 77th Division into other divisions, including the 44th Division, in early June, further suggesting that the unit is being dissolved.²⁷⁹

Assessed area of responsibility: Syria-Lebanon border and western Rif Dimashq.

Commander: Mohammad Adnan Zeitoun (Abu Adnan al Zabadani), [Ahrar al Sham, National Liberation Front].²⁸⁰ Abu Adnan formed a local battalion in Zabadani, Rif Dimashq, that joined Ahrar al Sham in 2013.²⁸¹ Abu Adnan served as Ahrar al Sham's emir in Zabadani during the Assad regime and Hezbollah's siege on the area in 2015 and eventually rose to command Ahrar al Sham's military wing in 2017, but resigned about a month later.²⁸² Abu Adnan joined the NLF and commanded the NLF's 77th Division.²⁸³ He also led the Damascus Gathering, a faction that included about 800 fighters from the Zabadani area, that left Ahrar al Sham with him.²⁸⁴ Abu Adnan negotiated and signed an agreement with Ahmed al Shara in May 2024 to cease hostilities between HTS and the Damascus Gathering.²⁸⁵ Abu Adnan and his men participated in the offensive that toppled the regime.²⁸⁶

Damascus Division

Status: No public activity since Syrian media announced a battalion commander's appointment in April 2025.²⁸⁷

Assessed area of responsibility: Damascus and the capital region.

Commander: Brigadier General Omar Mohammad Ciftci (Abu Mukhtar al Turki), [HTS]. Ciftci is a Turk who joined AQ in 2004. He reportedly was part of the leadership group that decided to split Jabhat al Nusra from al Qaeda.²⁸⁸ Turkey sanctioned Ciftci for his involvement with al Qaeda but removed him from the sanctions list in December 2024 when Ciftci was promoted to brigadier general.²⁸⁹

- **Unspecified Battalion.** Abu Basir Makhala, [HTS].²⁹⁰

Republican Guard

Status: Little to no activity since February 2025.²⁹¹ Syrian media identified a Republican Guard brigade commander in May 2025.²⁹²

Assessed area of responsibility: Likely Damascus.

Commander: Brigadier General Abdul Rahman al Khatib (Abu Hussein al Urduni), [HTS]. Khatib, a Jordanian citizen of Palestinian origin, went to Syria and joined Jabhat al Nusra in 2013.²⁹³ Khatib is reportedly a member of the HTS Shura Council and worked with HTS's tripartite military council along with Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra.²⁹⁴

- **Unspecified Brigade.** Colonel Abu Subhi Tal Hadiya, [HTS].²⁹⁵

Hama

54th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Hama Province.²⁹⁶

Commander: Brigadier General Hussein al Obaid (Abu Suhaib), [Ahrar al Sham].²⁹⁷ Obaid has commanded Ahrar al Sham's military wing since January 2021.²⁹⁸ Obaid was the deputy of former commander Enad Darwish prior to the October 2020 revolt that Darwish led with Hassan Soufan against then-Ahrar al Sham commander Jaber Ali Pasha.²⁹⁹ Obaid supported the revolt and was briefly dismissed from his position as a result in late 2020.³⁰⁰ Obaid is from Kafr Zita, Hama.³⁰¹

- **2nd Brigade.**³⁰²
 - **3rd Battalion.**³⁰³
 - **4th Battalion.**³⁰⁴
- **555th Special Tasks Brigade.**³⁰⁵
- **Elite Brigade.**³⁰⁶

62nd Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Eastern Hama Province.³⁰⁷

Commander: Brigadier General Mohammad Hussein al Jassem (Abu Amsha), [Sultan Suleiman Shah Division].³⁰⁸ Abu Amsha commands the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division. The Sultan Suleiman Shah Division and the Hamza Division, another civil war-era militia, formed the SNA Joint Force. Abu Amsha and his men have participated in Turkey's three major incursions into northern Syria during the civil war. The United States sanctioned Abu Amsha and the Suleiman Shah Division in 2023 for serious human rights abuses against Kurds in Afrin.³⁰⁹ The SNA's command also investigated Abu Amsha in 2021 for his crimes against civilians.³¹⁰ An unspecified MoD official said in February 2024 that Shara appointed Abu Amsha to his command in part due to his tribal power base in northern Aleppo, which indicates that Shara is prioritizing the near-term centralization of state authority over longer-term security and stability.³¹¹ Abu Amsha and the Suleiman Shah Division deployed as the 62nd Division to the coast in March 2025 and participated in the sectarian-motivated massacres targeting Alawites.³¹² The EU sanctioned him and his division for his involvement.³¹³

- **2nd Infantry Brigade.**³¹⁴ Colonel Abu Ibrahim al Damlakhi.³¹⁵
- **101st Brigade.**³¹⁶ Saif al Jassem, [Suleiman Shah Division].³¹⁷
- **102nd Brigade.**³¹⁸
 - **Specialized Infantry Battalion.** Colonel Abdulaziz Mohammad al Ahmad (Abu Hussein al Naimi), [al Naim Division].³¹⁹
 - **Specialized Infantry Battalion.** Faisal Fasih al Krit (Faisal Abu Jihad).³²⁰
- **103rd Brigade.**³²¹ Basil al Jassem (Alamdar Abu Muhammad), [Suleiman Shah Division].³²² Brother of Abu Amsha.³²³
 - **Abu Shadi al Naimi SOF Battalion.**³²⁴
- **105th Brigade.**³²⁵ Fadi al Jassem (Abu Malek), [Suleiman Shah Division].³²⁶ Brother of Abu Amsha.³²⁷

- **106th Brigade.**³²⁸ Younis al Jassem (Abu Hamza).³²⁹
- **444th SOF Brigade.**³³⁰ Malik al Jassem (Abu Siraj), [Suleiman Shah Division].³³¹
 - **Abu al Qasim al Homs Battalion.**³³² Abu al Qasim al Homs. ³³³

74th Special Forces Division

Status: Active

Assessed area of responsibility: Southwestern Hama. ³³⁴

Commander: Brigadier General Jamil al Saleh, [Jaysh al Izza].³³⁵ Saleh defected from the regime in 2012 and led the FSA-affiliated Lataminah Martyrs' Brigade.³³⁶ The group merged with other local factions to become Jaysh al Izza in 2015.³³⁷ Jaysh al Izza began to cooperate with HTS in 2019 and has been a member of Fateh al Mubin since at least 2023.³³⁸ Jaysh al Izza participated in the December 2024 offensive that toppled the Assad regime.³³⁹

- **Armored Brigade.**³⁴⁰
- **SOF Brigade.**³⁴¹
- **SOF Battalion.** Lieutenant Colonel Shaheen Bakkar Abu al Amir, [Faylaq al Sham].³⁴²

82nd Special Forces Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Hama and coastal Syria.³⁴³

Commander: Brigadier General Khaled Muhammad Halabi (Abu Khattab), [Ansar al Tawhid].³⁴⁴ Abu Khattab is the HTS-appointed commander of Ansar al Tawhid. More moderate elements of the former Salafi-jihadi group Jund al Aqsa formed Ansar al Tawhid in 2018 after HTS militarily defeated Jund al Aqsa and forced extremist fighters to flee to Raqqa.³⁴⁵ Ansar al Tawhid cooperated closely with AQ-affiliated Hurras al Din until HTS encouraged Ansar al Tawhid to cut ties with Hurras al Din by increasing HTS's military support to the group in 2020.³⁴⁶ HTS killed or arrested Ansar al Tawhid's remaining extremist fighters and put Abu Khattab in command of the unit, which suggests that Abu Khattab is loyal to HTS rather than Jund al Aqsa.³⁴⁷ Abu Khattab participated in the offensive that toppled the regime.³⁴⁸ He is from Sarmin, Idlib Province.³⁴⁹

- **Armored Brigade.**³⁵⁰
- **Artillery Brigade.**³⁵¹
- **Armored Battalion.**³⁵²
- **Al Sanouf Brigade.**³⁵³

Coastal Syria

50th Coastal Division (formerly 400th Division)

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Coastal Syria. Based in Latakia.³⁵⁴

Commander: Unknown. One Syrian outlet identified a man named "Ahmed Ismail" as the division's commander, but CTP-ISW was unable to verify Ismail's appointment.³⁵⁵

- **1st Infantry Brigade.**³⁵⁶

- **40th Brigade.**³⁵⁷ Colonel Bassem Zenklo (Abu Mohammad), [National Liberation Front].³⁵⁸
- **Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan Brigade.**³⁵⁹
- **Uqba bin Nafi Brigade.** Muhammad Abdul al Bahri (Bahri al Shami).³⁶⁰
- **Shaheen (UAV) Battalion.** Abu Yaman.³⁶¹

56th Division (formerly 128th Division)

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Coastal Syria. Based in Tartous.³⁶²

Commander: Brigadier General Abu Osama Munir, [HTS].³⁶³ Munir assumed command of HTS's Abu Bakr al Siddiq Brigade in March 2024.³⁶⁴ Munir fought in Aleppo during the offensive that toppled Assad and commanded MoD forces operating along the coast in March 2025 during the massacres there.³⁶⁵

- **1st Elite Brigade.**³⁶⁶
- **2nd Elite Brigade.**³⁶⁷
 - **2nd Battalion.**³⁶⁸ General Administrator: Jabel Muhammad al Jassem, [HTS].³⁶⁹
- **SOF Brigade.**³⁷⁰ Chief of Staff: Ayman Muhammad Tata Abu Muath, [HTS].³⁷¹ A Washington-based analyst noted that this unit may not be distinct from the two above-mentioned elite brigades.³⁷²

84th Division

Status: Syrian sources and regional media have suggested that the 84th Division is in the early stages of its formation.³⁷³ CTP-ISW has not observed any forces operating as the "84th Division" as of September 2025.

Assessed area of responsibility: Reportedly, northwestern Syria. Rumored to be headquartered in Latakia.³⁷⁴

Commander: Unknown.

- **Unspecified Brigade.** Brigadier General Abdul Aziz Dawood Khadrabradi (Abu Mohammad al Turkistani), [Turkistan Islamic Party].³⁷⁵ A Syrian military official said that the 3,500-man brigade consists mostly of Uyghur fighters, likely referring to TIP.³⁷⁶

Idlib

64th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Eastern Idlib Province.³⁷⁷ Reportedly based at Abu al Duhur Military Airport, southeast of Idlib City.³⁷⁸

Commander: Brigadier General Mohammad Ahmed al Gharib (Abu Asayd Houran), [Faylaq al Sham].³⁷⁹ Gharib commanded Faylaq al Sham's Idlib sector.³⁸⁰ HTS, Ahrar al Sham, and Faylaq al Sham created a tripartite military council in Idlib in late 2020 to better centralize military efforts.³⁸¹ Gharib led this council alongside current Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra and administrative affairs head and then-Ahrar al Sham military commander Enad al Darwish.³⁸² Gharib is from Tal Mardikh, Idlib.³⁸³

- **641st Brigade.**³⁸⁴
 - **Fourth Battalion.**³⁸⁵
- **642nd Special Tasks Brigade.**³⁸⁶

- **5th Battalion.**³⁸⁷ Possibly the Omar al Farouq Battalion.³⁸⁸ Based in Morek.³⁸⁹
- **6th Battalion.**³⁹⁰
- **7th Battalion.**³⁹¹
- **8th Battalion.**³⁹²
- **643rd Brigade.**³⁹³
- **SOF Brigade.** Naseem al Khatib (Abu Jamil Taftanaz), [Faylaq al Sham].³⁹⁴

98th Armored Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Southern Idlib and northwestern Hama.³⁹⁵

Commander: Yousef al Hamwi (Abu Suleiman), [Ahrar al Sham].³⁹⁶ Abu Suleiman founded Ahrar al Sham in Hama.³⁹⁷ He was later appointed general commander of Ahrar al Sham in October 2022 amid internal rifts within the organization.³⁹⁸ Abu Suleiman also led Maghawir al Sham, which consisted of several groups that defected from Ahrar al Sham in 2021 but came to recognize Abu Suleiman as Ahrar al Sham's commander when he was appointed in 2022.³⁹⁹ He is from Halfaya, Hama.

- **1st Brigade.**⁴⁰⁰ Mahmoud Ahmed al Muhammad.⁴⁰¹
- **Engineering Battalion.**⁴⁰²

Aleppo

60th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Aleppo City, eastern Aleppo Province, and western Raqqqa Province.⁴⁰³

Commander: Brigadier General Awad Muhammad (Abu Qutayba al Shami), [HTS].⁴⁰⁴ Abu Qutayba was a commander within Jabhat Fateh al Sham before the group merged with other factions to form HTS in 2017.⁴⁰⁵ A 2019 document identified Abu Qutayba as the general administrator of HTS's Aleppo sector.⁴⁰⁶ Abu Qutayba assumed command of HTS's Saad ibn Abi Waqqas Brigade in 2020.⁴⁰⁷ Abu Qutayba is from Deir Hafer, Aleppo.⁴⁰⁸

Chief of Staff: Mazdar Najar Abu Bakr, [Levant Front, SNA Third Corps].⁴⁰⁹

- **Elite Brigade.**⁴¹⁰
 - **Al Hariri Battalion.**⁴¹¹
- **Salam Brigade.** Ala Brou, [Free Syrian Army].⁴¹²
- **Al Sanouf Brigade.**⁴¹³
- **Shamiyah Brigade.** Saleh Amouri, [Northern Storm Brigade].⁴¹⁴
- **Engineering Battalion.** Saleh al Aboud al Shabat (Abu Abdul Aziz), [HTS].⁴¹⁵

72nd Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Northern Aleppo Province. Headquartered in Afrin.⁴¹⁶

Commander: Brigadier General Aqil Mohammad al Amer, [Unknown].⁴¹⁷ The MoD promoted Amer to colonel in late December 2024.⁴¹⁸ Amer is from Manbij.⁴¹⁹ A Manbij-based Facebook account referred to Amer as a hero of the "organization," which suggests that he fought within HTS.⁴²⁰ CTP-ISW has been unable to independently confirm this.

- **3rd Brigade.**⁴²¹
- **4th Brigade.** Colonel Dogan Suleiman, [Sultan Mehmed Fatih Division].⁴²²
- **5th Brigade.**⁴²³
 - **Third Battalion.** Adnan Obeid (Abu Haddou).⁴²⁴
 - **Musab bin Omair Battalion.** Faraj Muhammad Khair al Sheikh (Abu Jaafar), [Ahrar al Sham].⁴²⁵
- **6th Brigade.** Chief of Staff: Ahmed Elias, (Abu Musab al Tawil).⁴²⁶
- **Al Waqqas Brigade.** Saad Abbas, [Liwa al Waqqas].⁴²⁷
- **Unspecified Brigade.** Omar Abd al Razaq (Abu Bashir Maara), [Sultan Murad Division].⁴²⁸
- **Eighth Battalion.** Lieutenant Colonel Bashar al Lili.⁴²⁹

76th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Aleppo Province.⁴³⁰

Commander: Brigadier General Sayf al Din Boulad (Sayf Abu Bakr), [Hamza Division].⁴³¹ Abu Bakr is a US- and EU-sanctioned commander who leads the Hamza Division. The Hamza Division forms one half of the SNA Joint Force alongside the Suleiman Shah Division. Abu Bakr and the Hamza Division have fought in several Turkish operations targeting the YPG in northern Syria. The United States sanctioned Abu Bakr and the Hamza Division in 2023 for committing serious human rights abuses against Kurds in Afrin.⁴³² The Hamza Division also conducted arbitrary killings, torture, and other targeted violence against Alawites in early March 2025.⁴³³ The EU Council sanctioned Abu Bakr for his command of forces involved in the massacres in May 2025.⁴³⁴

- **1st Brigade.**⁴³⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Farhan al Younes, [Hamza Division].⁴³⁶
 - **102nd Battalion.** Najib Nahlawi, [Hamza Division/SNA Joint Forces].⁴³⁷
 - **103rd Battalion.**
- **2nd Brigade.**⁴³⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Shadi al Nasser (Abu Yazan), [Hamza Division/SNA Joint Forces].⁴³⁹
- **3rd Brigade.** Lieutenant Colonel Mohamad Noura (Abu Jafaar).⁴⁴⁰
- **4th Brigade.** Ahmed Barir.⁴⁴¹
- **Al Sanouf Brigade.**⁴⁴² Lieutenant Colonel Manaf al Daher, [Hamza Division].⁴⁴³
 - **Kafr Jannah Battalion.** Captain Ali al Abawi (Abu Faris al Mayadeen).⁴⁴⁴
- **SOF Brigade.**⁴⁴⁵ Colonel Jamal al Khalaf.⁴⁴⁶
 - **202nd Battalion.**⁴⁴⁷

80th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Aleppo Province.⁴⁴⁸

Commander: Brigadier General Ahmed Mohammad Rizq, [Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki].⁴⁴⁹ Rizq is a prominent commander within Harakat Nour al Din al Zenki, an Aleppo-based militia that HTS co-opted and subordinated to itself in 2019.⁴⁵⁰ This led Harakat Zenki to fracture into several blocs. Rizq led a bloc that retained the "Zenki" name and joined the HTS-aligned Shabha Gathering in northern Aleppo.⁴⁵¹ Rizq and his men participated in the offensive that toppled the regime.⁴⁵²

Chief of Staff: Colonel Khaled Omar (Abu al Yaman), [Nour al Din al Zenki Movement].⁴⁵³

- **Artillery Brigade.** Colonel Salim al Tamer.⁴⁵⁴
- **Infantry Brigade.** Moatasem Abbas Abu Abbas, [Mutasim Division].⁴⁵⁵
- **SOF Brigade.**⁴⁵⁶

Syrian Badia

42nd Division (formerly 118th Armored Division)

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Central Syrian Desert. Headquartered in Palmyra.⁴⁵⁷

Commander: Brigadier General Raed Arab (Abu Arab), [Suqour al Sham, Ahrar al Sham].⁴⁵⁸ Abu Arab was reportedly a leader within Suqour al Sham, which merged into Ahrar al Sham in 2015.⁴⁵⁹ Abu Arab commanded an Ahrar al Sham SOF brigade.⁴⁶⁰ Abu Arab backed then-Ahrar al Sham leader Jaber Ali Pasha when former Ahrar al Sham leader Hassan Soufan, current MoD Administrative Affairs Head Enad Darwish, and current 54th Division commander Hussein al Obaid attempted to overthrow Pasha in late 2020.⁴⁶¹ The Liberation and Construction Movement appointed Abu Arab to command its military wing in January 2024.⁴⁶² The Liberation and Construction Movement was an alliance between four SNA factions with roots in eastern Syria, including Suqour al Sham.⁴⁶³ Abu Arab worked under the current 86th Division commander Abu Hatem Shaqra, who was the movement's commander-in-chief.⁴⁶⁴ Abu Arab is from Tabqa, Raqqa.⁴⁶⁵

Note: Abu Arab was originally appointed commander of the Palmyra-based 118th Armored Division in March 2025. Syrian media has referred to him in more recent months as the commander of the 42nd Division. The 118th Division does not appear to have been active since March 2025, suggesting that the unit has merged into or reflagged as the 42nd Division.⁴⁶⁶

- **2nd Brigade.**⁴⁶⁷ Abu Barzan al Sultani, [Army of the Eastern Lions, Liberation and Construction Front's 20th Division].⁴⁶⁸
- **3rd Brigade.** Mahmoud al Baz, [Sultan Malik Shah Division].⁴⁶⁹
- **60th Brigade.**⁴⁷⁰
- **SOF Brigade.**⁴⁷¹
- **Tank Brigade.**⁴⁷² Mohammad Gharib (Abu Ibrahim), [Saraqib Revolutionaries Front].⁴⁷³
- **4th Battalion.**⁴⁷⁴

Northeastern Syria

66th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Deir ez Zor and Raqqa provinces. The 66th Division has been active from the Syria-Iraq border to the east up to Maadan, Raqqa Province, to the west.⁴⁷⁵

Commander: Brigadier General Ahmed al Mohammed (Abu Mohammad Shura), [HTS].⁴⁷⁶ Abu Mohammad was a member of the HTS Shura Council and assumed command of the Zubair bin al Awam Brigade in 2020.⁴⁷⁷ Abu Mohammad is from Tabqa, Raqqa Province.⁴⁷⁸

- **2nd Brigade.** Based in Deir ez Zor.⁴⁷⁹ Possibly also referred to as the Special Tasks Brigade.⁴⁸⁰ Ahmed al Aboud (Abu Shahab Tayana), [Liberation and Construction Movement].⁴⁸¹
 - **Chief of Staff: Mohammad Abdul Jabbar Abu Alaa Duwair.**⁴⁸²
- **Raqqa Brigade.**⁴⁸³ Mahmoud Mohammad.⁴⁸⁴
 - **Northern Sector.** Abu Jihad al Raqqa, [Ahrar al Sharqiya].⁴⁸⁵
- **Zubair bin al Awam Brigade.**⁴⁸⁶ Abu Khalid al Arabi.⁴⁸⁷
 - **Badia Battalion.** Abu Jassim Huwair.⁴⁸⁸

86th Division

Status: Active.

Assessed area of responsibility: Deir ez Zor, Raqqa, and Hasakah provinces.⁴⁸⁹

Commander: Brigadier General Ahmed al Hais (Abu Hatem Shaqra), [Ahrar al Sharqiya]. Abu Hatem is a US-sanctioned warlord from Shaqra, Deir ez Zor Province.⁴⁹⁰ Ahrar al Sham in Deir ez Zor expelled Abu Hatem for banditry and other crimes prior to 2016.⁴⁹¹ Abu Hatem then founded and commanded Ahrar al Sharqiya in 2016, a SNA faction comprised of fighters from eastern Syria who were close to Abu Hatem.⁴⁹² The United States sanctioned Ahrar al Sharqiya and Abu Hatem in 2021 for committing abuses against civilians, particularly Syrian Kurds, including human trafficking.⁴⁹³ The United States reported that Ahrar al Shaqriya integrated former ISIS members into its ranks, and a number of former ISIS officials swore allegiance to Abu Hatem.⁴⁹⁴ Abu Hatem led Ahrar al Sharqiya's detention facility in Aleppo Province, where hundreds of detainees have been executed since 2018.⁴⁹⁵ Abu Hatem is close with 62nd Division commander Abu Amsha and 76th Division commander Sayf Abu Bakr.⁴⁹⁶ Abu Hatem was appointed commander in chief of the Liberation and Construction Movement in January 2024, while 42nd Division commander Raed Arab oversaw the movement's military wing.⁴⁹⁷ His appointment generated a wave of criticism and concern from Syrian minority communities.⁴⁹⁸

- **1st Brigade.**⁴⁹⁹
 - **Unspecified Infantry Battalion.** Naaman Salloum al Matar.⁵⁰⁰
 - **Unspecified Infantry Battalion.** Ibrahim Ahmed al Khalaf.⁵⁰¹
 - **Unspecified Infantry Battalion.** Khalil Shami al Sawadi.⁵⁰²
- **2nd Brigade.** Chief of Staff: Abdul Rahman Ramadan al Muhaimad (Abu Aisha), [likely SNA].⁵⁰³
- **Badia Brigade.**⁵⁰⁴
- **5th Battalion.**⁵⁰⁵

- **Artillery Battalion.** Abdullah Jamal Hussein.⁵⁰⁶
- **Artillery Battalion.** Muhammad al Hussein.⁵⁰⁷
- **Special Tasks Battalion.** Colonel Hassan Tayseer al Ali (Abu Ali al Ashqar), [Ahrar al Sharqiya].⁵⁰⁸

Syrian Air Force

Commander: Brigadier General Assem Hawari (Abu Assem), [HTS].⁵⁰⁹

Chief of Staff: Brigadier General Mustafa Hussein Bakour, [Jaysh al Izza].⁵¹⁰

Head of “Planning and Statistics:” Brigadier General Abdul Rahman Hallaq, [Raad al Sham Division].⁵¹¹

Head of Training Department: Brigadier General Yahya Bitar.⁵¹²

Syrian Navy

Commander: Brigadier General Mohammad al Saud, [Unknown].⁵¹³

- **Naval SOF Battalion.**⁵¹⁴

Endnotes

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