



**Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Discussion Paper (28)

***The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook***

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## **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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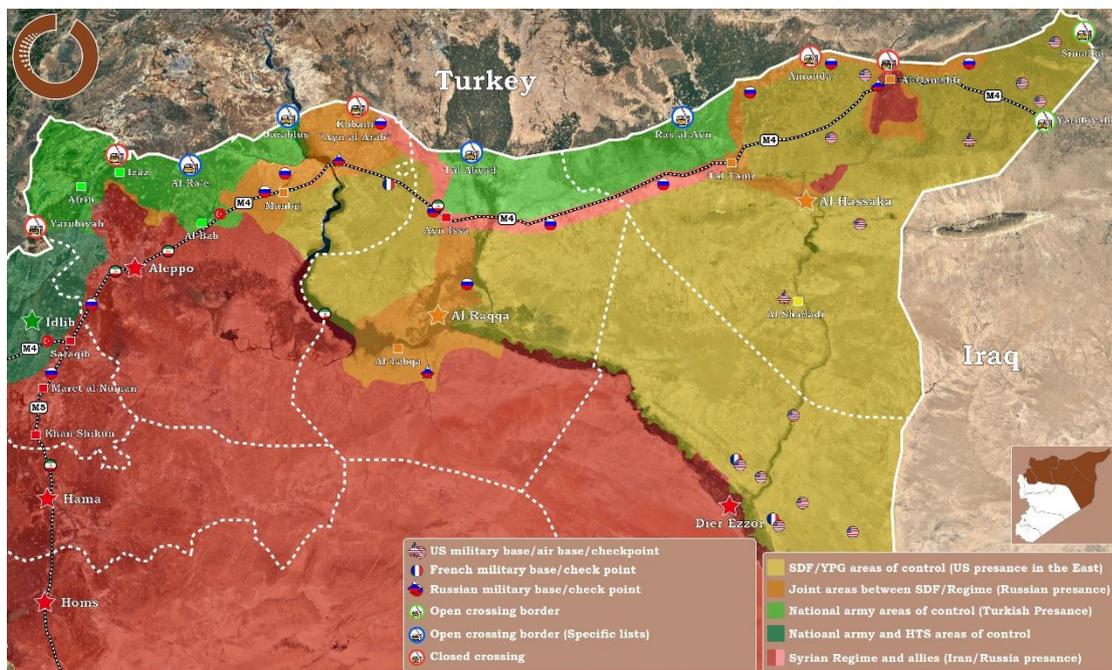
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On 30 December 2017, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) announced the establishment of the Syrian National Army (SNA). The main goal was to unite all military factions that fought as part of the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch military operations against the Islamic State (IS) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). In October 2019, and prior to the launch of Operation Peace Spring in the east of the Euphrates, the merger of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the SNA was announced, through an official ceremony in the presence of the SIG officials in Şanlıurfa, Turkey.

This discussion paper aims to clarify the key difficulties that have faced the SNA since its foundation until now. The paper will also outline potential scenarios for the SNA in future military and political realities. Figure 1 and Table 1 give an idea on the SNA's areas of control and that of rivaling local and international actors in Aleppo, Idlib, and al-Raqqa.

**Figure 1: Opposition areas of influence and control (Oct. 2020) <sup>(1)</sup>**



	Province Area km <sup>2</sup>	Regime Forces	Joint area (Regime & SDF)	SDF	Opposition held areas	
					National Army (Including NLF in Idlib)	HTS
Aleppo	18.482 km <sup>2</sup>	52%	8%	16%	22%	2%
Idlib	6.097 km <sup>2</sup>	49%	-	-	10%	41%
al-Raqqa	18.482 km <sup>2</sup>	52%	8%	16%	24%	-

Sources: multiple sources collected by the author <sup>(2)</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Map design by the Author using ArcGIS and Illustrator software (20 Oct 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Control percentage is based on mapping software used by the author, the margin of error is estimated to be between 1 and 2%.

## The evolution and merger of the SNA with the NLF

Since the SIG's announcement of the SNA's formation on December 30, 2017, the entity has consisted of three core corps: The Sultan Murad Corps, the Levantine Front Corps, and the National Army Corps. The military structure of the SNA included a unified military command for all factions in the Euphrates Shield operation areas (northern and eastern countryside of Aleppo). Upon the formation of the corps, armed opposition factions were stripped of their names and they were redistributed in the three corps, with each corps including three divisions, each division including three brigades, and each brigade including three battalions.

**Figure 2: The hierarchy of the SNA**



The structure of 2017 of the SNA army as described merged with the NLF in 2019. The NLF had been formed by 11 factions of the Free Syrian Army in Idlib Governorate in May 2018. After the merger process, the SNA increased to seven corps, with three from the National Army from 2017 and four newly formed from the National Liberation Front. The Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition coalition affiliated with the SIG, announced SNA's new manpower reached 80,000 fighters. <sup>(3)</sup>

### The six challenges to the SNA

1. *Absence of a political project*: the SNA suffered from the absence of political will from the army's leadership or the SNC. The vague relationship between the SNA, SIG, and SNC contributed to the lack of a clear political vision that would direct armed action. In addition, Syrian political opposition institutions do not have any authority over the SNA and thus cannot display political or military harmony among the opposition.

<sup>3</sup> "Merging the National Army With the "Front", a Syrian step against who?" (Arabic), *The New Arab*, 5 Oct 2019. <https://bit.ly/3mjJrgT>

2. *Unclear command structure*: For many international actors, the declaration of the establishment of a unified “Syrian National Army” under the auspices of Ankara is unacceptable. Many are unwilling to recognize an army without a unified central command and basic elements of a regular and disciplined army, including a strong top-down hierarchy channelling effective military decision. This critical deficiency is attributable to the Ministry of Defense’s dysfunction and inability to exert enough control over the SNA’s factions.
3. *Lack of cohesion*: The SNA is built on a faction-based structure, which means that each armed faction within the SNA maintains its own structure in exchange for merging into the central operation to carry out the tasks assigned. The integration process of these factions did not go through the dissolution of current armed formations, but rather a process of restructuring, unifying, and coordinating under a common umbrella.
4. *Unclearity of the function, when military and civilian tasks mix*: The roles played by the SNA’s factions vary because they pledge to different loyalties, have different ideological orientations, and operate in different zones of influence and control. Therefore, the SNA rarely functions as a cohesive military structure as its own factions play different roles depending on the circumstance. For example, in the Aleppo countryside, policing is the primary task the SNA runs collectively, even while it differs from a conventional role of an army in battlefield formations. The NLF, while it was independent, operated in Idlib and the western countryside of Aleppo, fighting regime forces and taking part in overseas proxy conflicts. So, to maintain their relative autonomy and recruitment pool, NLF factions continue to impose themselves as the de facto dominant forces even while participating in the overall SNA-based policing role in that area. <sup>(4)</sup>
5. *Resistance to assimilation from the factions*: The factions with a strong ideological makeup tend to express keenness on maintaining their structures and seek to develop their institutions independently despite their involvement within the SNA because they work to present their institutions as a future alternative to the SNA’s institutions in case they collapse. These factions do not believe that assimilation into another body whose leaders do not belong to the ideological stream that they espouse is valuable. One of the clear examples of this is the Jaysh al-Islam armed group, which came to northern Syria after it clinched an agreement with the Syrian government in March 2018 to relocate from Eastern Ghouta. Since then, this group has embarked on establishing its own bases and gained more

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<sup>4</sup> Three interviews conducted over WhatsApp with SNA commander Mustafa Sejari and two other commanders from Faylaq al-Sham, 3 and 5 October 2020. In these interviews, commanders explained to the author the current situation of the national army and what problems the army encountered in the past.

power in the al-Bab (northeast of Aleppo), managed to maintain its structure, and maintained its relative autonomy versus the SNA even while cooperating within it.

6. *Different political affiliations of the factions:* Like Jaysh al-Islam and also Ahrar al-Sham, some factions with an Islamist orientation view the Syrian opposition official institutions as only a cover for political legitimacy. They do not in reality believe in them. There is a believe that the armed factions tend to serve under the ministry of defence of the opposition's interim government only as a cover; while they build their own military and ideological project. Other factions serve as military arms for certain political figures within the SNC. In addition, the factions that represent large regional military blocs such as the Levant Front, Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, or the 20th Division, are potentially looking to ostensibly dissolve into military structures tailored to their original structure, and thus avoid losing influence and power. The SNA includes factions that have recruits from certain regions and tribal confederations, the most prominent of those are: Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, the 20th Division, and the Sharqiyah Army, where most of the elements of these factions belong to the al-Baggara tribal confederation that exists in Deir Ezzor Governorate.

### **Potential scenarios for the future of the SNA**

#### 1) Integration into the Syrian army:

The possibility of merging the SNA with the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) is among the policy options on the negotiation table and has been presented within the framework of a potential political solution that includes restructuring the Syrian military institution of Damascus. The Syrian armed opposition and the SNA, with tens of thousands of fighters, must be considered within any potential political solution because they can easily disrupt and destabilize a new system.

Turkey appears supportive of an integration option in the framework of potential final solution arrangements in Syria. Such integration classically means dissolution; however, Turkey is trying to ensure a stronger cohesive bloc of factions that would be difficult to disintegrate upon their merging with the SAA.

In southern and central Syria, Moscow had worked on a scheme of reintegrating some elements of the Syrian armed opposition factions into a newly designed formation within the SAA, i.e. the Fifth Corps. This has involved an extensive disarmament processes in Daraa, Ghouta, and the

countryside of Homs. However, the difference in context between the north and south of Syria is considerable to be able to entertain such a scenario in the North.<sup>(5)</sup>

## 2) Dedicated military restructuring programs:

Reintegrating armies is one of the last stages following security and political consensus emerging from conflict resolution negotiations. These negotiations often include plans for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR). Beyond reintegrating fighters of warring parties into one regular army, restructuring programs have several aspects, including the reintegration of fighters of armed groups into society. These non-military/security aspects emphasize the need for simultaneous progress in the areas of economic development, rule of law, and transitional justice. A political solution is one that provides the appropriate environment for DDR and SSR programs along with civil developments essential to their success.<sup>(6) (7)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the state of fragmentation that the SNA suffers from, Turkey and the SNA's leaders are keen to present it as the nucleus of a disciplined army that can protect northern Syria. Such an army would strategically reduce the need for harsh Turkish interventions to deter its adversaries, i.e. the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Maintaining and entrenching the SNA remains linked to the possibility of a potential political solution and more importantly a basic consensus between actors for restructuring the military and security institutions currently controlled by Damascus. The leadership of the SNA in the coming period must focus on the weaknesses of the entity's structure, assess its performance, and focus on military training according to internationally recognized norms and practices.

The challenge ahead for Syrian opposition's armed factions remains to establish a solid bloc that could form a critical mass within the future Syrian military establishment. After a final solution matures, all participating local military actors and their external sponsors will vie to shape the structure of the institution; holding a critical mass would mean holding considerable power.

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<sup>5</sup> "National Army: A marriage of convenience, or a strategic asset?" Enab Baladi, 21 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3dQKnX7>

<sup>6</sup> An interview with Sasha al-Allo, a Researcher at the Omran Centre for Strategic Center, 9 October 2020. Al-Allo wrote two chapters about the DDR and SSR programs in one of the books that the Omran Center for Strategic Studies published on the restructuring of the military institution in Syria: <https://bit.ly/3mbGYoX>

<sup>7</sup> "Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring," Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 31 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/3mbGYoX>