

**Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Discussion Paper (24)

***The Syrian National Army (SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios  
for its Relationship with Damascus***

Ömer Özkizilcik, SETA Foundation

## **The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)**

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation established in 1995, with 53 member states, for the primary purpose of promoting peace, security and international cooperation through executive education, applied policy research and dialogue. The GCSP trains government officials, diplomats, military officers, international civil servants and NGO and private sector staff in pertinent fields of international peace and security.

## **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.

### **Editor:**

Abdulla Ibrahim, Project Lead Researcher

Tamer Badawi, Research Assistant

### **Author**

#### **Ömer Özkizilcik**

Ömer Özkizilcik works at the Security Department of SETA Foundation. Between August 2017 and September 2018, Özkizilcik worked at the Middle East Foundation. Since 2016, he has been the editor in chief of Suriye Gündemi. Özkizilcik's research focuses on the wider effects and repercussions of the Syrian conflict and the intra- and intergroup dynamics of local non-state actors in Syria.

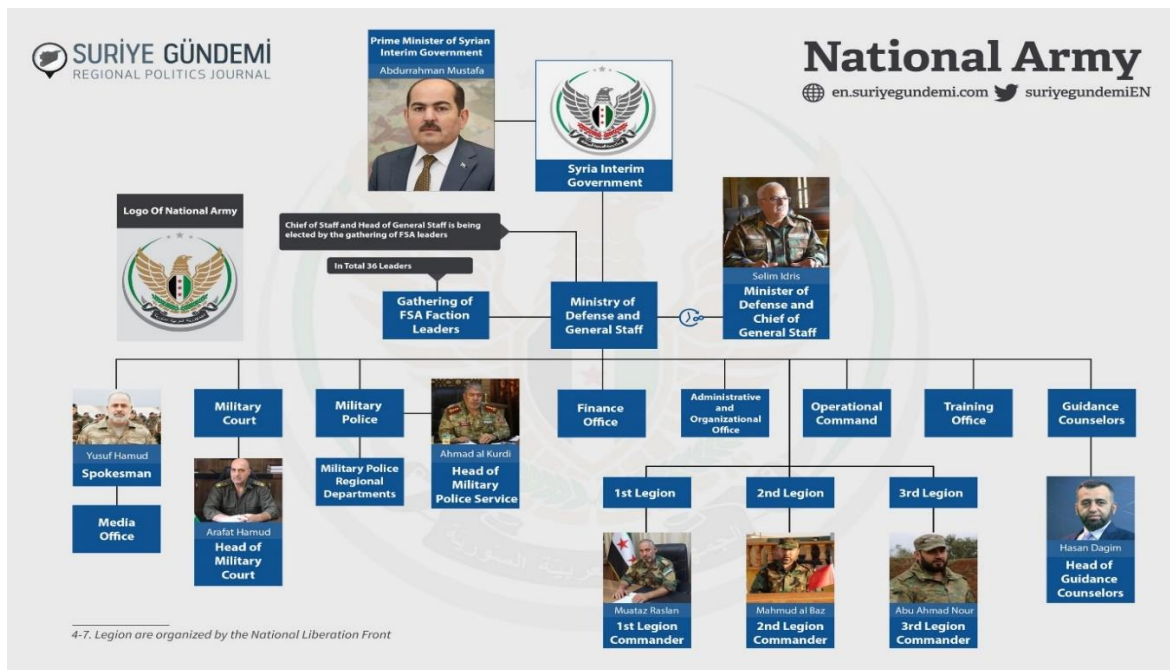
The ideas expressed are those of the author not the publisher or the author's affiliation

Published in October 2020

All rights reserved to GCSP

The Syrian National Army (SNA) is officially part of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and responds to the Ministry of Defense (MoD). Abdurrahman Mustafa, the President of the SIG, and Selim Idris, the Minister of Defense, oversee the SNA. Idris is also the Chief of Staff of the SNA. The SNA is then further divided into legions and factions. The commanders of the three key legions of the SNA, namely Muataz Raslan, Mahmud el-Baz, and Abu Ahmad Nour, are responsible for all of the factions of their legion. The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh legions are organised under the National Liberation Front (NLF). Each faction commander is officially under the legion's command, though each legion's number of factions vary, and each legion commander makes decisions as a representative of their legion in coordination with Selim Idris, the commanders of the other legions, and the council. The council is made up of SNA faction leaders who each maintain their own autonomous area and thus can exercise significant power. Therefore, most decisions need explicit or at least tacit approval from them. The SNA's Chief of Staff and the MoD have different offices operating autonomously from the factions of the SNA and only respond to Selim Idris. The SNA is additionally composed of eight offices (figure 1): The media office, the military court office, the military police, the guidance counselors' office, the finance office, the administration and organisation office, the operational office, and the training office.

**Figure 1: The structure of the SNA**



**The Components of the SNA:**

A deeper look into the factions offers important insight into the SNA's constituent components. Among the 41 factions that joined the merger, 15 are in the NLF and 26 are in the first three legions of the SNA. 13 of these 41 factions were formed after the United States (US) cut its support to the armed Syrian opposition. Out of the 28 other factions, 21 were previously supported by the US,

three of them via the Pentagon's program to combat the Islamic State (IS). 18 of these factions were supplied by the US' Central Intelligence Agency via the Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi (more known by the acronym MOM), which is a joint intelligence operation for the 'Friends of Syria' to support the armed opposition. 14 out of the 28 were also recipients of the US-supplied TOW anti-tank guided missiles. A look at the enemies of these factions shows that they were fighting the Assad regime, IS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of the People's Protection Units (YPG), and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or its predecessor, the Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN). Of the total 41 factions that joined the merger, 27 were previously engaged in fighting IS, 30 factions fought the SAA and allied forces; 31 fought the YPG/SDF, and 11 factions fought battles with HTS or JaN. In terms of the geographical and ethnic composition of the SNA: 40 of the 41 factions have ethnic Arab majority fighters, 12 factions have ethnic Turkmen fighters, and nine factions have ethnic Kurdish fighters among their ranks. Eight of the 41 factions have fighters from eastern Syria, four factions have fighters from southern Syria, and all factions have fighters from northern Syria.

The factions that united and became the SNA are factions in Idlib, Latakia, Hama, western Aleppo, Afrin, and northern Aleppo. Numerically, the SNA comprises approximately 70,000-90,000 fighters in total. The biggest factions in the SNA in terms of manpower are Ahrar al-Sham, Ahrar al Sharqiyah, Faylaq al-Sham, Firka Hamza, Firka Sultan Murad, Free Idlib Army, al-Jabha Shamiyah, Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Ahrar, Jaysh al-Nasr, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, and Jaysh al-Nukhba (see figure 3). However, if the first three legions are counted, their manpower is estimated to be around 30,000-40,000 fighters.

Figure 2: The factions of the SNA



Factions of the National Army

17 October 2019



	Active Before Ezkouras 2014	Received Turkish Support	Received US support via MSM	Received US support via Pentagon	Received TOW missiles	Fought against Daesh	Fought against regime	Fought against FPO/FA	Fought against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/Heura	Arab	Turkmen	Kurd	Fighters from eastern Syria	Fighters from southern Syria	Fighters from northern Syria	Current Location in Idli	Current Location in northern Aleppo and Afrin
1st Coastal Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
1st Infantry Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
20th Brigade	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
2nd Coastal Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
51. Brigade	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
5th Regiment	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
9th Brigade	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Akrar al Sham	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Akrar al Shaqqiyah	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Central Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Fawa al Mustafa	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Fayhaq al Sham	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fika 23	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Fika Hamza	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Fika Muattasin	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Fika Shimal	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Fika Sultan Murad	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Free Idlib Army	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Jabhat Shamiyah	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Jaysh al Ahdad	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Jaysh al Ahrar	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Jaysh al Islam	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
Jaysh al Nasr	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Jaysh al Nakhba	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Jaysh al Shaqqiyah	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Jaysh al Thawri	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗
Liwa al Fatih	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa al Hauriyah	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Liwa al Shimal	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa al Shimal al Maghaweer	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa al Vakkas	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Muattasir Bilah	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Salam	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Samarkand	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Liwa Sultan Mahmud Farsh	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Sultan Osman	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Sultan Sulayman Shah	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Sufayr al Shimal	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Rijal al Harb	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Shuhada al Islam Darayya	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Sufayr al Sham	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Thawar al Jaiza	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓

**Figure 3: The factional composition of the SNA**



## The Role of the Syrian National Army for the Syrian Opposition and the Challenges for the Syrian Opposition:

The SNA's main function is its existence as the sole armed opposition in Syria. All of the armed opposition units in Syria who were not disbanded or reached a reconciliation deal with Syrian government forces (SAA) have united within the SNA. From the armed groups in Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Damascus, Daraa, Qalamoun, Deir Ezzor, Hasakah, and Raqqa, all of the surviving factions are present in the SNA, better organised than ever and with a direct link to the political opposition, a goal which couldn't be reached during the first years of the conflict because the political and armed opposition fronts did not have a sole state supporter with a unified policy. The SNA's connection to the political opposition is keeping a path towards a political solution in Syria possible. Otherwise, the political opposition would end up as a meaningless exile without any leverage.

As a result of military defeats, the SNA has centered its forces near the Turkish border. This geographical concentration is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it limits the ability of the Syrian opposition to project power to Syria as a whole, but on the other hand, it guarantees survival. Without the proximity to the Turkish border, the SNA would be incapable of holding ground against the massive military machinery of Russia. This proximity to the Turkish border is also a benefit to Turkey to secure its border region with a friendly armed force instead of IS, the YPG, Iran-backed militias, or the SAA and SAA-aligned militias. Therefore, the SNA is essential within Turkey's self-interests to combat national security threats in cross-border operations.

Despite the continuously improving relationship between the SNA and Turkey since Operation Euphrates Shield, persistent factionalism remains a challenge to relations. Turkish efforts to harmonise and amalgamate the factions emerging from the armed opposition are progressing slowly. Complicating the situation is mass internal displacement bringing Syrians of all backgrounds to the Turkish borders for survival. Many SNA factions have been evacuated from other parts of Syria or had to flee towards the Turkish borders. The SNA, as well as the people living in the opposition-held areas in Syria, are a small representation of Syria. However, a big portion of the general population also had to flee towards Turkey due to bombardment by the SAA and allied forces, Russia, Iran, and terrorist organisations such as the YPG and IS. Except for the heartland of the Assad regime in Syria's coast and the Druze from Suwaida, nearly all Syrians have now gathered in these areas. The areas of Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring have had a 230% population growth since 2004 in contrast to the 40% population decrease in government-held areas. This incredible increase in population creates new social problems which also affect the SNA.

Due to persistent factionalism and the accommodation of people from all across Syria, solving local problems may mirror solving the national problems but the local problems have an additional difficulty of outside spoilers. Neither the Assad regime nor the YPG or IS wants to see the opposition-held areas flourish. Therefore, they are trying to sabotage the security and the international legitimacy of the SNA and the SIG. The YPG is actively conducting terror attacks, most notably by car bombs, in an attempt to paralyse and embarrass the SNA.

The SNA is viewed as an existential threat by the YPG, IS, and Damascus. Tarnishing the SNA's image is a common goal for all of them. While IS tries to convince the Sunni Arab population that the SNA are heretics, Damascus is trying to portray them as terrorists, foreign agents, and criminals. The propaganda to diminish the legitimacy of the SNA by IS and Damascus to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has been ongoing since 2012. However, the new dynamic is the YPG's efforts to target propaganda to Western countries that do not back Damascus. Former advocates of the FSA and the moderate opposition are now under the influence of YPG's propaganda which is systematically supported by CENTCOM officials and the Western press, especially since Operation Peace Spring.

#### The Future of the Syrian National Army:

Although it is too early to speak of a political settlement as the Syrian war does not appear to be ending, this section presents options for the future of the SNA.

Obviously, the future of the SNA is dependent on the future of Syria and will be determined within the framework of a political settlement. Without overall political progress, a rapprochement or way forward between Damascus and the SIG is very unlikely. The presence of the SNA is a major milestone to support any kind of political process in Syria and the sole guarantee that there will be any. Without the SNA, a military solution is most likely, as seen in the FSA's experience in Deraa. In Deraa, Russia enforced reconciliation deals on the FSA who had initially rejected these deals. However, a military disintegration enforced by a regime military takeover is regarded as a no-go in Ankara. Ankara insists on the existence of the SNA until a political settlement can be agreed upon, including a Turkish-Russian agreement. Maintaining and developing the strength of the SIG and the SNA under its command ensures and reflects this commitment.

Depending on the terms of the agreement of a prospective political settlement and the content of the new Syrian constitution, the SNA can evolve into different roles. One of three scenarios is likely to materialise:

- 1) *Integration with the SAA as part of a wider political and security restructuring process:*

Based on a survey the author conducted, 90% of SNA soldiers would join a central Syrian



army if genuine political transition takes place and a new legitimate government is formed. In the case of a full transition with real power-sharing and free elections, the SNA would likely be integrated into this restructured army.

- 2) *Loose affiliation with the SAA in the case of a power sharing agreement, in the absence of security guarantees:* In this scenario, a political settlement resolves or freezes the conflict between Damascus and the Syrian opposition which enables centralised rule over Syria. Without comprehensive institutional transformation, the SNA would maintain its hierarchy but could become loosely embedded into the SAA as an autonomous entity. In this case, two options are possible. The first would see a geographical division in which the SNA receives salaries from Damascus and the deployment of the SNA in specific areas of Syria (most likely the areas currently held by the SNA). The second option would be an organisational division without geographical limitations in which the SNA would constitute the Sixth Corps of the SAA, have its command structure, weapon storages, and revenues, but receive salaries from the central government. The 6<sup>th</sup> Corps of the SAA would be different from the current 5<sup>th</sup> Corps sponsored by Russia as the dynamics of its creation would be fundamentally different. One was formed after a military defeat and reconciliation agreements, the other would be formed after a political settlement.
- 3) *Consolidation of the current structure, with more local Syrian control:* In this scenario, a political settlement does not weaken the central government and allows ways for localised governance or even autonomous administrations. The SNA would preserve its structure and way of operation but would be less dependent on direct Turkish aid as Ankara's discord with Damascus would end. Depending on the details of the settlement, the SNA could become a local military force heavily armed with an independent military structure.

Among these options, the preferred one for Turkey would be the first scenario as it foresees a real political transition, free elections, and a legitimate government in Syria. Turkey believes that Syria will come to peace with itself and with Turkey when the Syrian people can determine their future. The instable situation in Syria is viewed as a burden on Turkey and the costs of this instability are much higher than the benefits of maintaining the SNA in the long-term. Turkey views the SNA as a national security imperative rather than a choice and is willing to contribute to a comprehensive solution in Syria, viewing the existence of the SNA as a facilitator for this solution. However, the realities surrounding Syria are suggesting other trajectories. Unfortunately, amongst the named three options, Turkey's preference is the least likely one. Therefore, as events unfold, Turkey might need to seriously consider the other two options or come up with a fourth scenario.