



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (14)

Syrian National Army: Russian View

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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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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Introduction

In autumn 2017, the Council of the Syrian Islamic Scholars devised an initiative to unite all groups of the Syrian moderate opposition into the Syrian National Army (SNA), which was supposed to become FSA 2.0. At that time, 80% of the Syrian opposition factions, including Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, as well as the majority of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) armed groups were prepared to join the SNA. It was the first time since 2012 that the FSA had managed to bring all opposition forces under its banner, and the creation of a unified military network with a common structure and command gained a new impetus. However, the SNA project was five years too late and, by the time the rebels began to merge into this new unified army, the Syrian opposition had already lost the war.

The success of the “Syrian National Army” project compared to the “Free Syrian Army” was due not so much to corrective work done by the opposition as to Ankara’s increased influence. Turkey proved capable of gaining control over all Syrian opposition forces after each of its rivals (such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, the United States, and, to some extent, even Qatar) lost interest in the Syrian conflict in general, and in supporting opposition forces in particular. As these states gave up their active involvement in Syrian affairs or refocused on interaction with other internal actors, such as the Kurdish radical-left Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Turkey became the only possible partner for those Syrian rebel groups that managed to “stay afloat” and were still fit for the battle. Their survival no longer depends on the combat capabilities of the opposition’s armed forces, but rather on Turkey’s ability to politically and – since February 2020 – militarily stand up to Damascus and Moscow and their plans for the final resolution of the Idlib issue.

Formation and structure

The SNA was actually formed in the so-called Turkish “protectorate” or “buffer zone” in Syria, i.e. those Syrian regions where only Turkish military supported by Turkish aviation is authorised to operate. This significantly curtails the capabilities of al-Assad or his allies to carry out any military operation to regain these areas. This “protectorate” emerged as a result of the Euphrates Shield Operation (24 August 2016–29 March 2017) against ISIS and the Olive Branch Operation (20 January–24 March 2018) against Kurdish YPG. Both operations were carried out by Turkish armed forces together with their Syrian allies from the FSA units and affiliated armed groups. These Syrian factions formed the SNA’s core. Turkish military directly participated in retraining and re-equipping the opposition forces that joined the SNA project.

During the first stage of the SNA's establishment in the Euphrates Shield and the Olive Branch zones in Northern Aleppo, three corps (1st, 2nd, and 3rd), or legions, were deployed. Alongside experienced revolutionary fighters, these SNA units recruited a significant number of Syrian refugees and residents of Idlib and Northern Aleppo who had not previously belonged to any opposition faction or participated in any operation against al-Assad's regime troops. Recruits loyal to Turkey were given priority. They were primarily ethnic Turkomans, who make up a large portion of the SNA.

As an example, the Sultan Murad Division, which was once a small opposition faction formed out of Turkomans back in 2013 and included as few as 1,300 members, expanded significantly when it joined the SNA. It formed the basis for the 21st and the 24th SNA divisions. The same happened to other Turkoman factions. Meanwhile, after the National Front for Liberation (NLF) and Jaysh al-Izza joined the SNA in August 2019, it was decided to use them in order to establish four other SNA corps in Idlib (4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th).

Turkey has been implementing the "Train and Equip" programme in Idlib since May 2020, which retrains and re-equips over 14,000 SNA militants whose battalions are assigned to Turkish strongholds created in the region. It is not clear whether NLF groups also take part in this process or whether it is only available to SNA formations sent there from the Olive Branch and the Euphrates Shield zones. Moreover, the number of armed groups that make up the SNA is being gradually decreased and their independence is limited. Thus, only several large armed groups will probably remain with the SNA in the first stage of the reform. In the second stage, Ankara will apparently try to "dissolve" and "shuffle" these remaining groups.

Some smaller factions were dissolved in August, and their military personnel redistributed among the SNA units. The FSA's Division 23 (not to be confused with the SNA's 23rd Division) from the 343th Brigade (34th Division of the SNA's 3rd corps), for example, was disbanded by the command of the SNA's 3rd corps as part of the efforts to unify the military structure. Previously, Ankara had managed to force the restructuring of other armed groups as part of the SNA's 34th Division. In particular, the restructured units included Liwa as-Salyam, Division 51 (341st Brigade) and Faylaq al-Majd (345th Brigade). Similar processes reportedly happen in other SNA corps and divisions.

The political function of the SNA

The SNA is part of the Syrian Interim Government, which acts under the auspices of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces in Turkish Gaziantep. The

SNA's commander also holds the position of the Minister of Defence in the Interim Government. In addition, the SNA takes part in the Constitutional Committee, where some delegates from its units are also present. This elevates the SNA to a new level compared to all the previous opposition alliances.

Significantly, when the High Negotiations Committee was founded in December 2015, the most unpleasant thing for Russia was that armed and political opposition groups were brought together as part of a unified platform. It became more difficult for Moscow to argue that emigrant networks opposing al-Assad are detached from realities and have no ties to the armed groups that confront Damascus using weapons and control some Syrian territories¹. Similarly, the SNA's institutionalisation and transformation into an organisation subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government raises major concerns for Russia.

Crucially, if Russian–Turkish dialogue on Syria fails, Ankara now has all the resources to create an “alternative Syria” with all statehood features in the SNA-controlled areas. It means that such a “Syria” will have its own territory, human resources, government, whose headquarters can be moved from Turkish Gaziantep to Syrian Idlib, and an army – the SNA – subordinate to this government.

SNA and HTS: are they really different?

Russia will therefore attempt to discredit the SNA to portray it at least as an organisation affiliated to Hayat-Tahir al-Sham (HTS), if not as an extremist or terrorist group. In fact, the actions of the SNA leaders and Turkey often fuel such speculations.

Turkey, for instance, so far has not used the SNA forces to neutralise HTS in Idlib despite the Moscow and Ankara deal (Memorandum signed in Sochi), which highlights the need to eliminate terrorists there. Moreover, during the HTS assault against the NLF at the beginning of 2019, the SNA took no action to support the NLF's Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, which was routed under its passive eyes. This made the NLF dependent on HTS, and local opposition councils in Idlib and the rest of the civil administration were replaced by the HTS-affiliated bodies of the Salvation Government.

¹ ХОДЫНСКАЯ-ГОЛЕНИЩЕВА, Сирийский кризис в трансформирующейся системе международных отношений, Диссертация на соискание ученой степени доктора исторических наук, МГИМО, Москва 2018 // KHODYNSKAYA-GOLENISHCHEVA, Syrian Crisis in the Transforming System of International Relations, Doctoral Thesis, MGIMO, Moscow, 2018

After the NLF joined the SNA in October 2019, it was hoped that this would result in the final dissociation of the opposition forces and HTS radicals. However, these hopes were dashed when the NLF and HTS actively interacted. Together, they created the common Operations Room Al-Fateh al-Mubin during the Dawn of Idlib Operation carried out by Russian and al-Assad's forces in 2019–2020. This action by the NLF directly impacts the image of the entire SNA, as, since October 2019, it has been perceived as and is officially part of the SNA.

During military operations in spring 2017, moderate opposition – not yet integrated with the NLF or the SNA at that time – tellingly refused to establish any joint headquarters with HTS, as they had their own Echo of the Levant command. Meanwhile, HTS and other radical units acted within We Follow Allah's Path Operations Room, which is why Russia doubted whether the dissociation of opposition and radicals in Idlib had actually happened. If moderate opposition had been totally independent from HTS, it would have established its own command as it did in 2017.

This means that it is too early to speak about an actual alliance between the NLF and the SNA, despite their ostensible merger. On the contrary, such formal consolidation without any practical steps towards a full-fledged integration can only impact negatively on the SNA's position. The joint actions by the NLF and HTS within Al-Fateh al-Mubin have given Moscow grounds to consider the SNA positions in Idlib a "legitimate target," and it is possible that it could extend such a precedent, if needed, to other fronts held by the SNA forces, where no HTS-affiliated radical elements are active, for instance, in Syria's northeast.

SNA members: Syrians or Turkish mercenaries? Fighters or criminals?

The Russian side also claims that the SNA can no longer be considered Syrian opposition or to represent Syrians, as SNA fighters are not just proxies, but in fact Turkish mercenaries, and Ankara can use them across the globe wherever it needs. These claims were borne out when Syrian mercenaries affiliated with SNA groups appeared in Libya and, in late September 2020, SNA fighters were observed in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict zone in Azerbaijan. However, such allegations cannot be levelled at the entire SNA, as only some of its armed groups – Sultan Murad, Al-Hamza, and Suleyman Shah, among others – were active in Libyan and Azerbaijani conflicts.

In addition, Russia has accused the SNA of criminal behaviour: locals' rights are routinely violated, and their property seized, people are kidnapped in SNA-controlled areas, and its commanders fight to divide up influence. It should be noted that much work has been done to

improve discipline in the SNA, and in November 2018 criminal and the most belligerent groups were routed during a special military operation carried out by the SNA's military police supported by Turkish special forces.

SNA future: another area of Turkish–Russian cooperation?

The SNA's future will largely depend on interaction between Moscow and Ankara in Syria and on Turkey's readiness to provide military protection to this network. There are four possible scenarios:

- 1) The SNA's worst-case scenario would be a dramatic change in Turkey's stance on Syria and withdrawal not only from Idlib but also from the Euphrates Shield, the Olive Branch, and the Peace Spring zones. Although such a scenario seems unrealistic with current Turkish authorities, it should not be ruled out. Turkish military presence in the Syrian Arab Republic and its assistance to the SNA have no set time limits, which means that Ankara could withdraw from Syria at any moment and terminate its support of the SNA.

However, it is unlikely that the SNA would cease to exist in such conditions, as some of its groups would continue to play the role of a Turkish "foreign legion" and move to other regions of Ankara's interest. Apart from Libya, Azerbaijan, and Iraq, they could also appear, for instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa or in the Horn of Africa.

Given this scenario, another part of the SNA would apparently "reconcile" with al-Assad with Russian assistance. Such "reconciliation" would be likely to be arranged in the same way as happened in Daraa and Quneitra. However, the scale of the northwestern opposition's integration into pro-governmental forces would be much broader considering the larger number of members.

- 2) The second scenario would keep the current status quo with some minor or more significant changes if the peace process drags on while Moscow and Ankara maintain dialogue. In this case, SNA positions could possibly be strengthened, and its combat capabilities improved, in particular, through its participation in conflicts in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. If Ankara managed to hold Idlib, eventually the SNA would be able to either suppress HTS radicals or force their leaders to disband the organisation and move its militants to the SNA.
- 3) The third scenario, which extends the second one, has been mentioned above. It involves the foundation of an "alternative Syria" in opposition-controlled areas (some experts call it "Turkish Republic of the Northern Syria" similarly to Cyprus), when the government is moved from Gaziantep to Syria. This could also happen if the dialogue on Syria

between Russia and Turkey reaches a complete deadlock, or countries break off their relations, as happened in 2015. In this case, Moscow would view any direct confrontation with Ankara in Syria, which is inevitable in the event of any attempt to handle the opposition issue by force, as too risky.

- 4) The fourth scenario implies tangible progress in the peace process, including the regime's readiness for major concessions and political reforms. This could potentially happen in the event of an economic collapse or a new social upheaval in Syria. If this occurred, the SNA could become a full-fledged part of the Syrian armed forces and join them without any "reconciliation" procedure or any need to turn in weapons. For example, all the seven SNA corps could transform into seven new divisions of the Syrian armed forces, which would make two full-fledged army corps (not volunteer assault corps) headed by SNA commanders. In this case, SNA commanders or dissident generals would secure positions in the Ministry of Defence or in the General Staff.

Nevertheless, Russia has not considered such a scenario yet. The only way for the SNA to integrate into the regime's forces is through "reconciliation," turning in their weapons, and the integration of some SNA units (far from all of them) into the 5th Assault Corps, possibly with some new units (6th and 7th Assault Corps) set up. However, neither Turkey nor the SNA would accept such a scenario.