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2.1. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied groups

HTS was the largest component of the operation 'Deterrence of Aggression'334 with an estimated 30 000 fighters.335 A Syrian economist gave a lower figure of 10 000 for the number of HTS fighters.336 HTS was reportedly divided into six brigades, special forces and an elite force known as the 'Red Bands'.337 The International Crisis Group assessed HTS forces to be stretched thin following their offensive to overthrow the government, being in urgent need of more personnel and resources.338 A notable allied faction joining the offensive was the Türkiye-backed National Liberation Front (NLF), a component of the SNA.339 For more information on the SNA, see section 2.2. Jaish Al-Izza, an opposition group present in northern Hama and parts of Latakia, with 2 000 to 5 000 fighters according to 2019 estimates, also reportedly joined the push into government territory.340 The pan-Arab daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi estimated the overall size of HTS and its allied factions to be about 43 000, with more than half of those troops maintaining their presence in their original areas of operation after pushing the government troops out, especially in northern Hama countryside, southern Idlib countryside, and western and southern Aleppo countryside.341

HTS and its allied factions, who had previously coordinated in Idlib under the Fateh Al-Mubin Operations room, formed the Military Operations Administration (MOA)342 in light of operation Deterrence of Aggression.343 It is made up of high-ranking members of the SSG that previously operated in Idlib.344 Following the overthrow of Bashar Al-Assad, troops comprising the MOA became the primary military force on the ground.345 On 24 December 2024, the MOA announced the dissolution of all military factions and their integration under the Ministry of Defence.346 HTS itself announced that it would lead by example, dissolve as an armed group and integrate into the armed forces.347 Among the first steps of establishing a new army was to promote some leaders of the individual factions as well as some defected officers into certain military ranks.348 Among those promoted were purportedly several foreign Islamist fighters of Albanian, Tajik and Uyghur origin.349 Following the ouster of Bashar Al-Assad, most soldiers as well as policemen either fled or were suspended.350 HTS has relied on its General Security units formerly active under its administration in Idlib as well as units under the MOA to support and supplement local police forces.351 Furthermore, recruitment centres were opened in provinces formerly under Assad's control to rebuild the police force.352

As of January 2025, the HTS-led coalition was in control of most areas previously held by the Assad government until early December 2024,353 amounting to just over 60% of Syrian territory.354 During its December offensive, the HTS further took control of the city of Deir Ez-

Zor previously held by the SDF.355 At the end of January 2025, the MOA seized a strategically important area near Zamla oil field south of Raqqa in the Syrian desert, a deployment that was assessed to aim at containing ISIL activity while also putting pressure on SDF troops stationed on the southwestern bank of Lake Assad.356 In the country's south, the MOA as of mid-January was still in talks with the former Fifth Corps and specifically its Eighth Brigade regarding their dissolution (see section 2.3), but managed to deploy its own troops in Jadal, Mseika, Mismiyeh and Lajat.357 In Afrin city in northern Aleppo governorate, troops from the Syrian Transitional Administration at the beginning of February 2025 arrived to take over control from the SNA.358

Since the fall of Assad, HTS has relied on its own units and close allies to secure governorates predominantly populated by minorities. Thus, unlike in other areas such as Homs, the SNA has been largely absent from coastal areas with Alawite populations359 where support for Assad has reportedly been strong.360 Etana noted that Idlib's security landscape in particular had considerably changed following Assad's fall, with much of the military presence relocated to key strategic areas in Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, Latakia and Tartous.361

During operation 'Deterrence of Aggression', HTS reportedly took over weapon depots and armoured vehicles from the Syrian Arab Army.362 Following Al-Asad's ouster, hundreds of Israeli airstrikes reportedly resulted in the destruction of the country's military stocks and defence infrastructure, as well as most of its missile systems and tanks.363 The newly appointed interim Defence Minister Murhaf Abu Qasra in an interview recounted how HTS had established its own military industry in Idlib, building drones for reconnaissance, drones armed with explosives and suicide drones as well as manufacturing armoured vehicles. They further developed their own artillery systems.364

During its offensive, HTS reportedly made efforts to avoid harming the civilian population.365 Furthermore, some areas that were previously held by the SDF were taken over based on agreements.366 Even so, six students were killed by rockets fired by the rebels which landed on a student dormitory in Aleppo city.367 Following its takeover of power, there were several reports of abuse being committed by HTS forces during security operations in Alawite areas, such as individuals killed in raids368 and detainees being held incommunicado.369 Especially foreign fighter groups under the MOA as well as the HTS elite forces 'Red Bands' were accused of committing violations during raids such as harassment and intimidation and in a few instances killings.370

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