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2.3. Other armed groups

○ (a) Dar'a factions

After the launch of operation 'Deterrence of Aggression' in northern Syria at the end of November 2024, armed opposition factions in Dar'a, Quneitra and Sweida formed the Southern Operations Room, which expelled the former government from these areas and marched on the capital.394 The Eighth Brigade under Ahmad Al-Awda, which had previously been part of the Russia-sponsored Fifth Corps of the SAA,395 notably joined the HTS-led offensive and marched on Damascus from the south, reaching the capital even before HTS fighters from the north.396 Following several meetings between factions from Dar'a and the MOA, in mid-December a convoy belonging to the latter arrived in Dar'a and reportedly took over police forces, customs and the Nassib border crossing with Jordan.397 Local armed factions were still acting as the de facto security forces in many areas in the south, and AP journalists visiting the western countryside of Dar'a in January 2025 reported not to have seen any visible presence of HTS forces there.398

At the beginning of January 2025, a spokesperson for the Southern Operations Room stated that the armed factions commanded by Al-Awda would hold on to their weapons despite the decision of the Transitional Administration to dissolve all factions, while being open to being integrated as a military body under the Ministry of Defence.399 While Al-Awda has not publicly challenged Al-Sharaa, he has maintained a distance from the Islamist rebel groups in the past and according to some reports wants to maintain autonomy in the south.400 The former Eighth Brigade is estimated to comprise about 800 fighters deployed in Busra Al-Sham, Al-Hirak, Khirbet Ghazaleh and in areas bordering Sweida governorate.401 Further smaller, well organised and heavily armed factions were active in western Dar'a and as of the beginning of February 2025 in negotiations with the Syrian Transitional Administration.402 In mid-February 2025, talks were being held between the Transitional Administration and the southern factions to form a 'Southern Division', also incorporating Al-Awda's groups.403 This division within the new army, comprising opposition groups from Dar'a and Quneitra,

was established on 17 February.[404] Etana assessed the subsequent agreement to establish the Southern Division to be a temporary fix to alleviate tensions between the two negotiating parties.[405] As of 21 February 2025, the Southern Division was still in talks with local commanders, including of the Eighth Brigade, about the makeup of the Southern Division and its tasks, while sources within the Eighth Brigade signalled steps being taken to facilitate a merger with the armed forces.[406]

○ (b) Syrian Free Army

The small US-supported rebel faction at Al-Tanf near the Iraqi border remained deployed there, reportedly waiting for developments on the US political scene before deciding on a merger with the MOA.[407] At the end of January 2025, the group's commander reportedly attended a meeting with Al-Sharaa to discuss merging into the security forces.[408] According to Aaron Zelin, expert on Syrian armed groups, the group had joined the Defence Ministry by mid-February 2025.[409] With the fall of the Assad government, the faction expanded its areas of operation, reaching 40 kilometres west and northwest to Palmyra,[410] filling the security vacuum left by the retreating Assad army.[411]

○ (c) Sweida factions

The Men of Dignity (Rijal Al-Karama) and the Mountain Brigade (Liwa Al-Jabal) are among the most prominent armed factions in Sweida.[412] The latter group, led by local strongman Chekib Azzam,[413] reportedly comprised about 7 000 fighters.[414] As the military operation against the former Syrian government was ongoing in the north, local factions in Sweida, including Men of Dignity, Mountain Brigade and Sheikh Al-Karama, decided to form a joint operations room to push out the former government forces, which was achieved on 8 December 2024.[415] Initially, these Druze factions showed reluctance to surrender their arms to the country's new leadership,[416] arguing that they were needed to secure the community's safety before a permanent government has been formed.[417] On New Year's Eve, Druze factions in Sweida city reportedly even blocked the advance of HTS forces into the town.[418] In January 2025, the Men of Dignity and the Mountain Brigade announced that they were ready to join a new Syrian army, provided that it would not be based on sectarian principles.[419] Druze

spiritual authority Sheikh Al-Hijri420 even linked the surrender of arms to the drafting of a new constitution,421 assurances of political representation and protection from external threats such as ISIL.422 All but one of Sweida's armed factions invited to attend Al-Sharaa's 'victory conference' in Damascus at the end of January 2025 chose not to attend.423 On 24 February 2025, a new military formation announced its inception, calling itself Sweida Military Council.424 According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), it comprised fighters previously aligned with the Assad government, but Sheikh Al-Hijri rejected this formation as 'separatists' who do not represent the Druze community.425 Questions were raised about the plans of this group, as its interest seemingly coincides with Israel's interest to demilitarise southern Syria under the guise of protecting the Druze community there.426

○ (d) Assad-aligned militias

Since the takeover by the transitional administration, remnant pro-Assad groups have conducted small-scale, targeted hit-and-run attacks against its forces across Syria.427 At the beginning of February 2025, a former commander of the Republican Guard announced the formation of a group named the Coastal Shield Brigade in the mountains of Latakia, threatening attacks on forces of the Transitional Administration in retaliation for alleged attacks on members of the Alawite community.428 A video published on 23 February signalled the inception of another new armed group loyal to the former government, calling itself the Special Units Company and aligning itself with the Coastal Shield Brigade.429 In early March, a new armed group called Military Council for the Liberation of Syria and led by former military officers of the Assad regime claimed responsibility for large scale attacks against General Security forces in Latakia governorate.430 It further announced as its objective the 'full liberation of Syrian territory from all occupying and terrorist forces'.431

These insurgent groups have been linked to the clashes with the government's security forces which took place in early March, particularly in the coastal areas (see section 4.1.2). However, ISW assessed that it is unlikely that a single, cohesive insurgent organisation has emerged to coordinate and execute the majority of targeted attacks against government forces.432

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