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1.3.2. Integration of armed groups

In January 2025, the MoD began forming a new Syrian army by integrating former opposition factions. Many of these groups, including those affiliated with HTS, have joined the MoD structure. Instead of requiring reforms or restructuring, the MoD has largely rebranded these factions as official army divisions or brigades.94 The MoD reunites different military factions such as core HTS units, HTS-aligned groups, Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) units, and newly established MoD divisions. These military forces operate under a fragmented and complex chain of command, with varying degrees of coordination with the MoD.95 Despite the government's efforts to integrate armed groups into the new ministry, most have resisted merging.96 The most prominent ones are discussed in the sections below.

In May, the MoD announced that all armed groups have been integrated into its structure while stating that 'remaining small military groups' had 10 days to complete the process without naming which groups were yet to comply.97 However, as of late May the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) assessed that the interim government 'does not exert complete control over various armed factions that make up the MoD'.98

○ (a) Sna factions

According to ISW, SNA factions continued to control Tal Abyad and Ras al Ain as of May. SNA was assessed to 'continue to operate in their previous formations and areas' despite its formal integration into the MoD.99 SNA factions maintained independent revenue streams through Turkish salaries100 and have operated autonomously from the MoD.101

According to Syria analyst Gregory Waters, some SNA factions such as the Suleiman Shah Brigade are powerful enough to impose their own demands on the ministry and their autonomy has been even more evident in the frequent violations they committed.

GSS units, including those stationed along Syria's coast, often faced resistance when attempting to curb such violations.[102] SNA commanders involved in serious human rights violations have been appointed to key government military positions. They include Mohammad al-Jassem (Abu Amsha) as commander of the 62nd Division, Saif Boulad (Saif Abu Bakr) as leader of the 76th Division, Fehim Isa as Assistant to the Minister of Defence for Northern Affairs, and Ahmed al-Hais (Abu Hatem Shaqra) as commander of the 86th Division.[103] The 86th Division is reportedly responsible for Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Hasaka and its commander Ahmed al-Hais (Abu Hatem Shaqra), formerly the leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, has been implicated in human rights abuses, including the killing of prominent female Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf.[104] In May, the EU placed three of the SNA factions - the Suleiman Shah Brigade, the Hamza Division and their commanders, and the Sultan Murad Division, on its sanctions list due to their role in violence in the coastal areas in March.[105]

Despite the presence of government forces in Afrin since February 2025, STJ reported that SNA factions, particularly the Suleiman Shah Brigade/al-Amshat continued to have a presence in the area.[106] Some SNA factions who integrated into the 72 Division of the army were operating west of the Tishreen Dam in Aleppo governorate.[107] SNA factions nominally integrated into army divisions were deployed across the country, particularly in Aleppo and Hama governorates.[108]

○ (b) Dar'a factions

In April, tensions between the interim government and the Eight Brigade, a local armed group controlling Busra al-Sham (Dar'a governorate), triggered by an assassination attempt on a MoD official[109], prompted the military deployment of the GSS in the area. This ultimately led to the Eight Brigade announcing its dissolution, disarmament and readiness to integrate in the MoD on 13 April. In the period that followed, the GSS established a security presence in the area, set up checkpoints and confiscated the group's heavy weapons[110] while also calling on residents to surrender their weapons.[111] According to Syria expert Haid Haid, the Eight Brigade and its commander Ahmad al-Awda, who had previous ties to Russia and backing from regional powers like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jordan,[112] represented a major rival to al-Sharaa in

southern Syria.113 Meanwhile the government started recruiting individuals for the army's main division in Dar'a (the 40th Division)114 near Busra al-Sham in a move interpreted as a way to reduce the influence of the Eight Brigade on the security in southeastern Dar'a.115 By 10 May, the government reported that the army's 40th Division confiscated all weapons held by factions formerly part of the Dar'a Province Central Committee, a coalition of local factions which included the Eight Brigade. Reports indicate that Dar'a Province Central Committee agreed to disband and fully integrate into the 40th Division.116

○ (c) Druze factions

Following the violence in parts of Rural Damascus and Sweida in late April and early May, the government reached a security agreement with the Druze sheikhs whereby GSS forces would be deployed in Sweida governorate and would assume control of the Damascus – Sweida road.117 The interim government agreed that the police force in Sweida governorate would be made up of local residents, with the governor and police chief appointed by Damascus.118 Druze factions which have had good cooperation with the interim government such as the Men of Dignity, Ahrar Jabal al-Arab Gathering, and Sheikh of Dignity, retained their weapons and reportedly make up approximately 80 % of the GSS in the governorate. The agreement between the interim government and Druze leaders also provides for the reinstatement of dismissed police officers, including those who previously held power under the Assad regime.119 As of early May, around 700 Druze militiamen were fast-tracked into the GSS in Sweida with a further 1 300 to be processed.120 Despite the agreement between the interim government and Druze leaders in Sweida, security incidents continued. These included an incident in which an armed group briefly held the governor of Sweida hostage to demand the release of a prisoner.121

Meanwhile, Druze communities located outside the main enclave in Sweida have negotiated separate security arrangements and will continue to maintain local security through the retention of arms.122

○ (d) Turkistan Islamic Party

On 18 May, Syrian media reported that the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) was reflagged as the 84th Division.[123] In June, the U.S. approved the interim government's plan to integrate around 3 500 foreign fighters, primarily from TIP into the 84th Division. This decision, marking a departure from the U.S.'s previous stance, was reportedly intended to mitigate the risk of foreign fighters joining non-state extremist armed groups.[124]

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