

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1809
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Udlændingestyrelsen
Titel:	Syria - Recruitment to Opposition Groups
Udgivet:	9. december 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. december 2022

Syria

Recruitment to Opposition Groups



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

The Danish
Immigration Service

This report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The report at hand does not include any policy recommendations. The information does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The report is a synthesis of information gathered from different sources, and it brings together condensed information in a relevant manner for the reader's COI needs and it organises information together thematically to form a coherent whole of the topic in question, instead of listing or quoting information source by source.

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December 2022

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Executive summary

The two major armed opposition groups in northwestern Syria as of November 2022 are the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was the main armed opposition group at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, no longer exists as a coherent military group. Ordinary Syrians use the term "Free Syrian Army (FSA)" to refer to opposition groups such as the Syrian National Army (SNA).

Recruitment to SNA and HTS generally takes place on a voluntary basis. There is no short supply of men willing to join the ranks of either of the two groups in the areas they control in northern Syria. Economic incentives are the primary reason for men joining both of these organisations. HTS' Islamic ideology is another incentive for young men to join that particular group. Even when armed conflicts or clashes occur, neither SNA nor HTS use forced recruitment of men for battle. However, there have been reports of cases of these groups using forced recruitment under certain circumstances during the Syrian conflict.

Although neither SNA nor HTS have institutionalised recruitment practices, HTS recruitment practices are more organised than SNA.

Neither SNA nor HTS recruit women by force. Women recruited to these organisations typically serve at checkpoints, where they search other women passing through. HTS also employs women in its morality police. Recruitment of minors by both the SNA and HTS still occurs in the areas they control.

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Introduction and methodology

The purpose of this brief report is to provide updated information on the recruitment practices of the two largest opposition groups operating in northern Syria, the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), as well as to describe the development of the former armed rebel coalition of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) since 2018.

This report is written accordance with the methodology of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), previously known as European Asylum Support Office (EASO).¹

The report is a synthesis of the information obtained from oral and written sources and does not include all details and nuances provided by the sources. In the report, care has been taken to present the views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. The individual sources should not be held accountable for the content of the report.

All consulted sources have been selected by virtue of their expertise on the topics of this report. Meeting minutes have been drafted from each meeting. These were forwarded to the four oral sources for approval, providing each individual source an opportunity to amend, comment or correct their statements to ensure that the minutes reflect the shared information most accurately. All sources interviewed for this report approved their statements, which can be found in Annex 1.

For the sake of transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting minutes have been given consecutive numbers, which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes. The consulted sources were informed about the purpose of the meetings and the fact that their statements would be included in a public report. Of the four sources interviewed for this report, one source requested anonymity and is referred to as "Syrian Human Rights Organisation" in the report.

During the meetings, sources also touched upon topics that are not addressed in the Terms of Reference (ToR). While not included in the report, the information is available in the minutes as some topics may be relevant for asylum cases. The Terms of Reference (ToR) are included in Annex 2.

Interviews for the report were conducted in October 2022. The situation regarding the recruitment practices of the SNA and HTS has been monitored continuously during the subsequent writing process in order to avoid the inclusion of outdated information in the final report.

It should be noted that the situation in Syria is changeable and unstable, and therefore the information provided in this report may become outdated. Therefore, the issues addressed in this report should be monitored periodically and updated accordingly.

The research and editing of this report was finalised on 9 December 2022.

The report can be accessed through the website of DIS, www.us.dk, and is available to all stakeholders working within the field of refugee status determination, as well as to the public.

¹ EASO (EUAA), *EASO Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

Abbreviations

COI	Country of Origin Information
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GoS	Government of Syria
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IS	Islamic State
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurdish-dominated military force in northeast Syria)
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
ToR	Terms of Reference
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (Kurdish military force in northeast Syria)

1. Syria: Recruitment to opposition groups

As mentioned in the introduction, this report provides updated information on the recruitment to the two largest opposition groups operating in areas outside of Syrian government control in northern Syria: the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The report also describes the development of the former armed rebel coalition the Free Syrian Army (FSA) since 2018. Recruitment to opposition groups operating in southern Syria and the Al-Tanf area in southeastern Syria are outside the scope of this report. Information pertaining to military recruitment to Kurdish forces in Haskah Governorate in Syria can be accessed in the DIS report; *Syria – Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate* published in June 2022.²

1.2. Free Syrian Army

As of 2022, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) no longer exists as a coherent military force. Since 2018, FSA has dissolved in southern and central Syria following the Syrian government's (GoS) takeover of opposition-controlled areas in 2018.³ Elsewhere in northern and northwestern Syria, in areas under opposition control, former FSA groups have merged with the Syrian National Army (SNA) after 2018, in part due to the decimation of such FSA groups in armed clashes with the GoS in Idlib in 2020.⁴

Emblematic of the merger of FSA units into SNA is the fact that the former FSA leader Selim Idriss is currently the leader of SNA and the minister of defence in the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) – a Turkish proxy administration that administers areas controlled by Turkey and SNA in northern Syria.⁵

As of November 2022, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a colloquial term ordinary Syrians use to describe opposition groups, which are not the Islamic State, HTS or Kurdish-led forces, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Ordinary Syrians refer to the term Free Syrian Army as a way to describe rebel and opposition groups that researchers, on the other hand, have identified as specific and individual armed opposition groups.⁶

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), all armed non-Islamic opposition groups refer to themselves as the Free Syrian Army, although every group has a name of its own and may in fact be part of (SNA).⁷ Similarly, in its 2022 report on the SNA, the Carter Center describes SNA as being composed of multiple FSA factions.⁸

1.3. Syrian National Army

SNA was originally formed in December 2017 by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), an opposition movement based in Turkey and in Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria. SNA was created by unifying rebel groups and factions fighting in Afrin and northern Aleppo governorate under a single umbrella, all the

² Denmark, DIS, *Syria - Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, [url](#)

³ Fabrice Balanche: 2,3; SNHR 1; Suhail Al-Ghazi 1

⁴ SNHR 1; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 1; Suhail Al-Ghazi 1; Fabrice Balanche 3

⁵ Fabrice Balanche: 3

⁶ Fabrice Balanche: 4; SNHR 2

⁷ SNHR: 2

⁸ The Carter Center, *The state of the Syrian National Army - Shifting networks of the Turkish-backed armed opposition in Syria's Northwest*, March 2022, [url](#), p. 3

while these groups would keep their own formation and command structure under the central umbrella of SNA.⁹

Consequently, SNA has been involved in continuous internal rivalries, mergers and splits between the various factions of SNA. SNA functions as an umbrella organisation for a number of armed opposition groups, but without a central leadership for the organisation; hence every faction has its own leader and operates independently. SNA relies heavily on Turkey and the organisation has been characterised as being a Turkish proxy force. Turkey pays the salaries of SNA fighters and provides training and weapons in return for SNA's manpower contribution to Turkey's military operations in northern Syria. As of 2022, SNA is the second largest armed opposition coalition operating in Syria, after the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group.¹⁰

During the course of 2021 and 2022, several steps and attempts to consolidate and unify its central command structures, resulting in a number of mergers of SNA groups throughout 2021.¹¹ The most substantial attempt to unify the central command structure of the SNA occurred in July 2021 with the creation of the *Azm Operations Room*, which initially consisted of major SNA groups, such as the Sultan Murad Division, the Levant Front and other SNA groups. As of March 2022, the Azm Operations Room had expanded and incorporated most major SNA groups. In spite of these developments, the Carter Center has reported that infighting, divisions and lack of a unified command between various SNA groups remain.¹²

In light of the armed clashes in Afrin between SNA groups and HTS in October 2022, Turkey has taken further steps to unify the command and control of SNA. During the clashes, HTS captured the city of Afrin from SNA groups and only withdrew from the city after the Turkish army intervened.¹³

1.3.1. Geographical presence

SNA is present in the northern and northwestern parts of Aleppo, Raqqah and Hasakah governorates, in areas where Turkey since 2016 has launched three separate military operations. These areas are known as the Operation Euphrates Shield area (2016), Operation Olive Branch area (2018) and Operation Peace

⁹ EUAA, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 53; Dutch MFA, *Country of Origin Information Report Syria of May 2022*, May 2022, [url](#), p.20; EUAA, *Syria: Security Situation*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 30

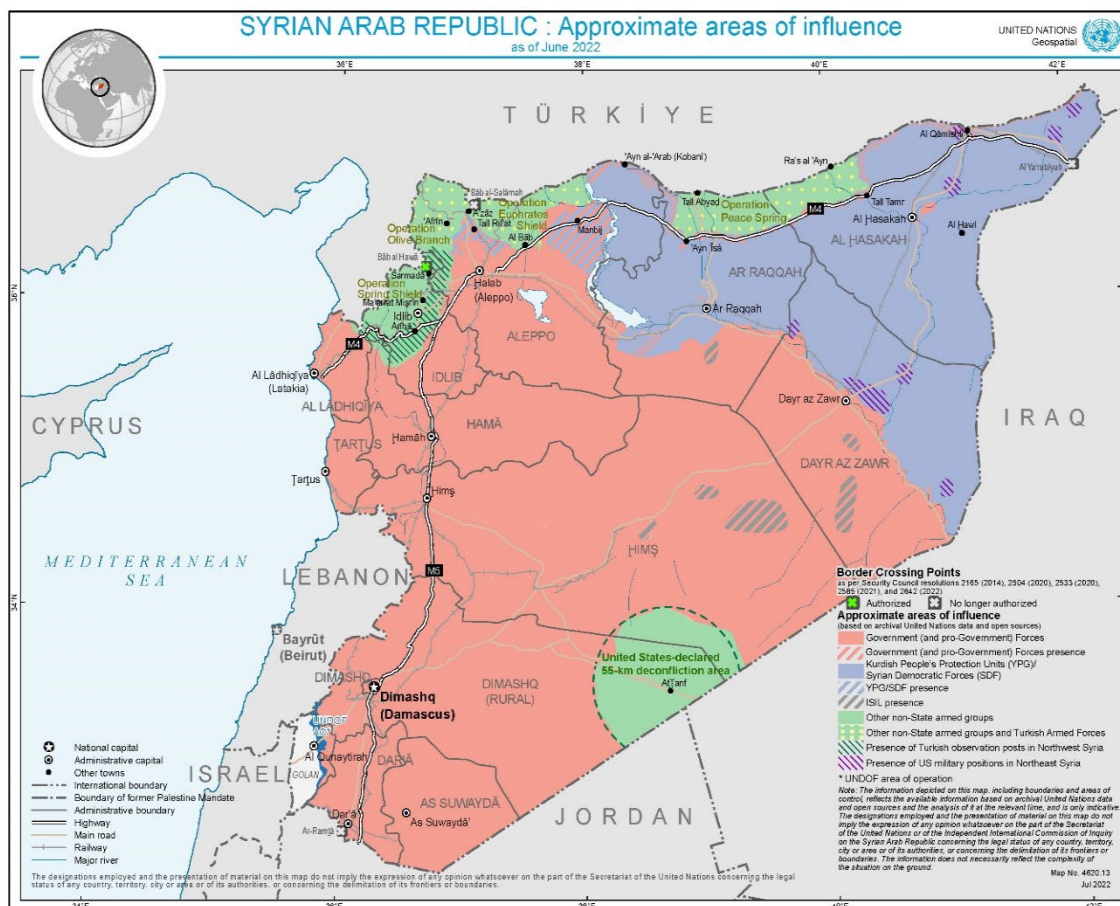
¹⁰ EUAA, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 53; Netherlands, MFA, *Country of Origin Information Report Syria of May 2022*, May 2022, [url](#), p. 20; EUAA, *Syria: Security Situation*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 30; Fabrice Balanche: 6, 7, 9; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 4, 6; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 1, 3; SNHR: 4, 5

¹¹ EUAA, *Syria: Security Situation*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 31

¹² The Carter Center, *The state of the Syrian National Army - Shifting networks of the Turkish-backed armed opposition in Syria's Northwest*, March 2022, [url](#), pp. 8-16, 19-20; According to the Carter Center the Azam Operations Room consisted of the following SNA-factions as of March 2022: Division 13 (incorporating the Sultan Muhammad Faith Brigade, Semerkand Brigade and Al-Wakkas Brigade), the Second Division, the Third Legion (incorporating the Sultan Malek Shah Brigades, Liwa 51, Jaish al-Islam, Liwa al-Salam, Al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Faylaq al-Majid), Suqur al-Shamal, the Thaeroun Front for Liberation (incorporating the First Division, Levant Revolutionaries, Sham Legion North Sector, Muntasir Billah, Sultan Murad, Suleiman Shah Brigade, Al-Mutasim Brigade, Hamza Division and Special Forces Division) and the Liberation and Construction Movement (incorporating Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Suqur al-Sham, Al-Sharqiya Army and the 20th Division). For an additional overview of the recent developments of the command structures of the SNA since 2020 please see: The Carter Center, *The state of the Syrian National Army - Shifting networks of the Turkish-backed armed opposition in Syria's Northwest*, March 2022, [url](#), pp. 8-20

¹³ The Syrian Observer, *Recap: Turkey Reorganizing National Army Factions*, 4 November 2022, [url](#); Middle East Eye, *Syria: Turkey to reorganise rebel groups as HTS withdraws from Afrin*, 25 October 2022, [url](#); Middle East Institute, *HTS, Turkey, and the future of Syria's north* 26 October 2022, [url](#); Foreign Policy, *Turkey Combats Jihadi Expansion on Syria Border*, 21 October 2022, [url](#);

Spring area (2019).¹⁴ These are illustrated on the map below in the areas marked with green and white dots.



Map 1: Syrian Arab Republic: Approximate areas of influence as of June 2022, © UN Geospatial¹⁵

1.3.2. Recruitment practices

SNA does not have a unified recruitment practice in the areas it controls. Even though SNA operates in areas alongside the Turkish army in Syria, the Turkish army is not involved in recruiting Syrians to SNA.¹⁶

SNA recruits on a voluntary basis.¹⁷ Associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2,

¹⁴ Netherlands, MFA, *Country of Origin Information Report Syria of May 2022*, May 2022, [url](#), p. 20; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 4; SNHR: 4; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 2; Fabrice Balanche: 5

¹⁵ UN Geospatial and United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Syrian Arab Republic: Approximate areas of influence as of June 2022*, September 2022, [url](#)

¹⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 6, 8; Fabrice Balanche: 11; SNHR: 6

¹⁷ SNHR: 7; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 5

Fabrice Balanche and a Syrian Human Rights Organisation consulted for this report stated that Arab Sunni Muslims and Turkmen Sunni Muslims are the ethnic and religious groups that make up SNA.¹⁸

Recruitment of men to SNA often takes place in markets, mosques and in smaller group settings, gatherings or through family members.¹⁹ According to the Syrian researcher and activist, Suhail Al-Ghazi, some specific SNA groups originating from eastern Syria, but now operating in SNA-controlled areas, only recruit individuals with tribal backgrounds from eastern Syria.²⁰

SNA does not actively seek to recruit members of the Kurdish and Yazedi minorities, since SNA does not trust these religious and ethnic groups. There are Kurdish fighters among some SNA groups, but these were recruited prior to the 2018 Operation Olive Branch.²¹

Al-Ghazi also mentioned that a person, whose family is not known to be supportive of SNA, is only allowed to join SNA if at least two current SNA fighters recommend the individual.²²

Although SNA reportedly operates a military academy, the duration of required military training for SNA fighters is not fixed or specified and varies between SNA groups. SNHR assessed that the training does not exceed six months.²³

1.3.3. Reasons for joining SNA

Economic incentives are a key driver for joining SNA, as SNA fighters can earn more money in SNA than by doing any other job in SNA-controlled areas. Other incentives for joining are SNA's opposition to the GoS and its religious, sectarian and ethnic hostility towards Shias, Alawites and Kurds.²⁴

Economic incentives have also played a key role for SNA fighters that have been recruited to fight as mercenaries in the conflicts in Libya and in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan/Armenia on Turkey's side in those two conflicts.²⁵

1.3.4. Prevalence of forced recruitment

Generally, SNA groups do not forcefully recruit men to join their ranks.²⁶ Some sources assessed that SNA does not need to recruit men forcefully, as there are plenty of men in SNA-controlled areas willing to join its ranks due to the economic incentives. In addition, many young men want to join SNA because the organisation has been involved in relatively few numbers of clashes since March 2020.²⁷ However, SNA

¹⁸ Fabrice Balanche: 10; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 5

¹⁹ Fabrice Balanche: 12; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 5

²⁰ These groups are Jaysh al-Sharqiyah (جيش الشرقية) and Ahrar al-Sharqiyah (أحرار الشرقية), who originated in eastern Syria but who have since relocated to SNA-controlled areas, Suhail Al-Ghazi: 5

²¹ SNHR: 7; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 6; Fabrice Balanche 11, 14; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 19

²² Suhail Al-Ghazi: 7

²³ Fabrice Balanche: 11; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 8; SNHR 6

²⁴ SNHR: 7; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 6; Fabrice Balanche 11, 14; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 19

²⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 18; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 7; Fabrice Balanche: 13; Syrians for Truth and Justice, *Turkey's Recruitment of Syrian Mercenaries to Fight in Libya: Process and Legal Consequences*, 11 May 2020, [url](#); The Guardian, *Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian fighters deployed to Libya to support government*, 15 January 2020, [url](#); Syrians for Truth and Justice, *Libya: Syrian Mercenaries Played a Key Role in Recent Tripoli Clashes*, 14 September 2022, [url](#); Foreign Policy, *Syrians Make Up Turkey's Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 5 October 2020, [url](#);

²⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 11, 13; SNHR: 8; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 5; Fabrice Balanche: 14

²⁷ Fabrice Balanche: 14; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 5, 6; Suhail Al-Ghazi 12

recruits that have joined SNA cannot choose whether to participate in the armed operations of the group when those occur.²⁸

Although the vast majority of current SNA fighters or men living in SNA-held areas joined SNA voluntarily, forced recruitment has taken place in a few cases. According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, forced recruitment of men with previous combat experience has occurred. In such cases, forced recruitment should be seen as a form of crowd control measure on the part of the SNA against former combatants.²⁹ Al-Ghazi also reported of six specific cases of suspected Islamic State (IS) or YPG/SDF fighters in areas captured by SNA and Turkish forces. SNA coerced and pressured these fighters into joining the SNA to prove their loyalty. Four of these cases occurred in 2016.³⁰

In 2018, there were examples of SNA forcing Kurdish men in the Afrin area to join SNA, because SNA believed them to be YPG/SDF proxy fighters. As of October 2022, Kurdish men are not being forcefully recruited by SNA.³¹

However, in cases where individuals want to avoid forced recruitment, they would use human traffickers to escape into Turkey.³²

1.3.5. Prevalence of men avoiding involvement in armed conflict

It is possible for men who are physically fit to be involved in armed conflict to avoid recruitment to SNA and live as civilians in SNA-held areas, as there are plenty of men willing to join the organisation.³³ SNHR stated that men are even allowed to leave SNA and live as civilians in SNA-controlled areas without facing any issues.³⁴

1.3.6. Recruitment of women

Women are not recruited to SNA due to the conservative ideology of SNA groups and the society in which they operate. If women serve in the SNA, they do so voluntarily and are not involved in combat or warfare. Instead, women serving in SNA tend to be the sisters and wives of SNA fighters and typically work at SNA checkpoints by searching and checking civilian women passing through the checkpoints.³⁵

1.3.7. Recruitment of minors

In its 2022 annual report on children and armed conflict, the United Nations verified the recruitment of 569 children by SNA in 2021.³⁶ Likewise, sources consulted for this report stated that SNA recruits minors. In some cases, minors are recruited down to the age of 14-15 if they are deemed physically fit by SNA. A main driver for minors to join SNA is the economic incentive i.e. the salary paid by SNA.³⁷ One source stated that SNA targets its minor recruits at orphanages and among children of deceased SNA fighters.³⁸ The Syrian

²⁸ SNHR: 9, 10; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 8

²⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 14, 17

³⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 15

³¹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 16

³² Suhail AL-Ghazi: 13

³³ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 12; SNHR:11; Fabrice Balanche: 15

³⁴ SNHR: 11

³⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 21, 22; SNHR: 13; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 11; Fabrice Balanche: 16

³⁶ UN Secretary General, *Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, 23 June 2022, [url](#), p. 25

³⁷ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 23, 24, 25; SNHR 12; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 9

³⁸ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 26, 27

NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice documented minors recruited to fight in Libya in 2020. The Syrian Human Rights Organisation stated that SNA has sent 300 minors in total to Libya and Azerbaijan.³⁹

1.4. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, which was formed in Syria in 2011 as al-Qaeda's affiliate in opposition to the GoS. Jabhat Al-Nusra quickly became a capable organisation that attracted a growing number of fighters. Jabhat al-Nusra became proficient at conducting insurgent attacks and securing economic revenues, chiefly from Gulf state donors, as well as from taxation and asset seizures in the areas under the organisation's control. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra was dissolved and instead Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was established. However, in 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham merged with several other Islamist groups, such as Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, Jaysh al-Sunna and Jabhat Ansar al-Din. Consequently, al-Nusra rebranded and reorganised once more to establish itself as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.⁴⁰

Since 2017, HTS has tried to shift from being a faction of the global jihad movement and an al-Qaeda affiliate into a de facto military and governing conservative power in northwestern Syria. Since then, the primary objectives of HTS has been establishing Islamic rule in the areas under its control by fighting the GoS and the Iranian militias, defending and preserving northern Syria, and pursuing unity amongst jihadist groups in northwestern Syria.⁴¹

In 2017, HTS formed the Syrian Salvation Government, consisting of ten ministries, including ministries of Interior, Justice, Endowments, Education, Health, Local Administration and Services, Economy and Resources, Development and Humanitarian Affairs, Higher Education, and Agriculture.⁴² The organisation thus operates more like a quasi-state entity with a central leadership that controls the different military, political and economic aspects and components of HTS.⁴³ According to a Syrian Human Rights Organisation, HTS is much more organised than SNA. The areas it controls are more secure and safe compared to the areas controlled by SNA.⁴⁴

1.4.1. Geographical presence

As of November 2022, HTS controls large parts of the greater Idlib area.⁴⁵ According to a Syrian Human Rights Organisation consulted for this report, HTS controls 50 % of Idlib Governorate.⁴⁶ HTS also controls parts of northwestern Hama Governorate and a part of the western countryside of Aleppo. Additionally,

³⁹ Syrians for Truth and Justice, *Turkey's Recruitment of Syrian Mercenaries to Fight in Libya: Process and Legal Consequences*, 11 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 17, 41-42; Syrian Humanitarian Organisation: 10

⁴⁰ Center for Strategic and International Studies - TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT, *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)*, 4 October, 2018, [url](#); The New Arab, *Will Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham reshape Syria's north?*, James Snell, 24 October 2022, [url](#)

⁴¹ Center for Strategic and International Studies - TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT, *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)*, 4 October 2018, [url](#)

⁴² MEI, *The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, Operations & Policy Center, 21 June 2021, [url](#)

⁴³ SNHR: 15; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 14-15; Netherlands, MFA, *Country of Origin Information Report Syria of May 2022*, May 2022, [url](#), pp. 25-27

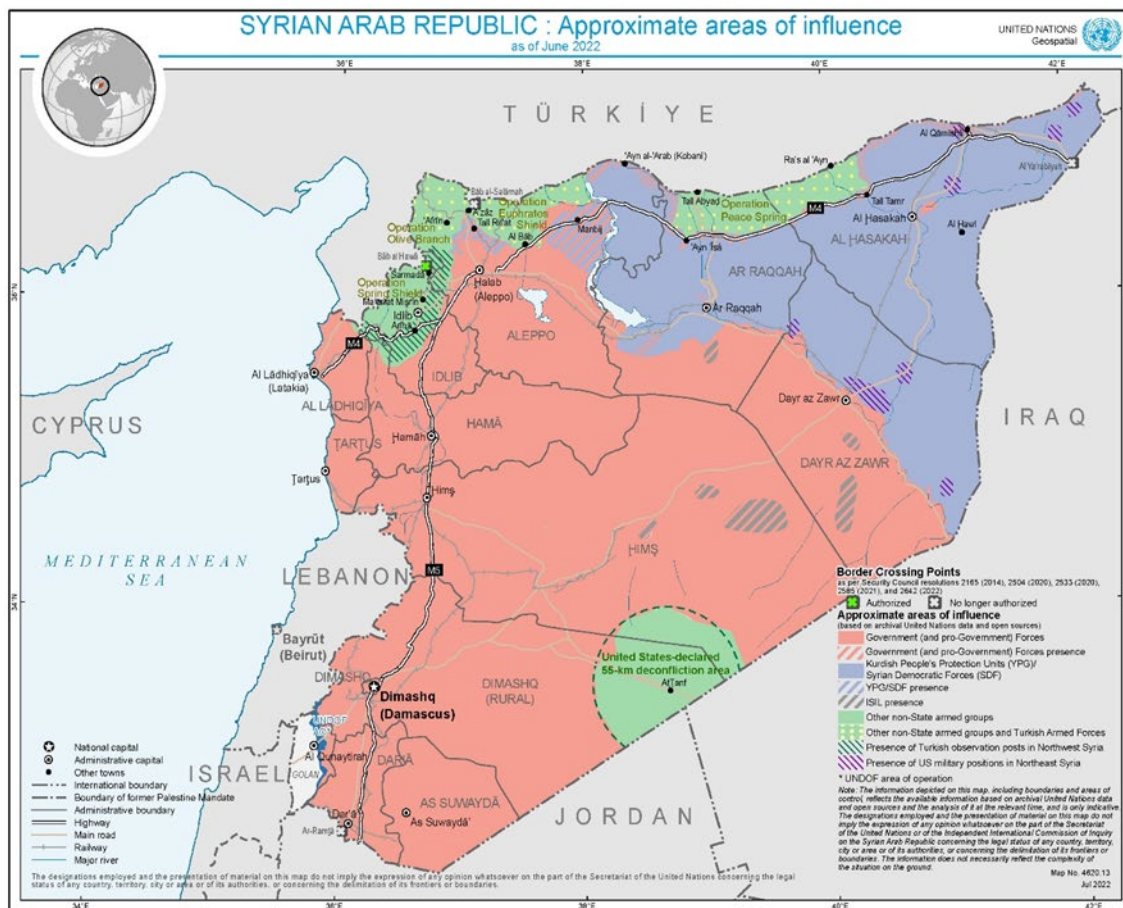
⁴⁴ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 13

⁴⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 28; SNHR: 14; Fabrice Balanche: 17

⁴⁶ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 12

SYRIA: RECRUITMENT TO OPPOSITION GROUPS

HTS controls areas in the northern Aleppo countryside and in northeastern countryside of Latakia.⁴⁷ This is illustrated on the map below in solid green and hachured green in the northwestern part of the map of Syria.



Map 1: Syrian Arab Republic: Approximate areas of influence as of June 2022, © UN Geospatial⁴⁸

1.4.2. Recruitment practices

HTS' recruitment typically takes place in mosques and via local sheikhs and clergymen. The focus in these recruitment processes is to make sure that new recruits share the same Islamist ideology as HTS.⁴⁹ HTS mainly recruits through recruitment campaigns in which men from the age of 18 are encouraged to join HTS' military branch.⁵⁰ These campaigns include the distribution of leaflets and announcements on social media platforms such as Telegram and Twitter. In an intensive recruitment campaign in May 2021, HTS'

⁴⁷ SNHR: 14; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 12

⁴⁸ UN Geospatial and United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Syrian Arab Republic: Approximate areas of influence as of June 2022*, September 2022, [url](#)

⁴⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 29

⁵⁰ SNHR: 17

recruitment became more organised with the establishment of the Military Recruiting Department with eight recruitment units and offices in the Idlib province.⁵¹

In addition to recruiting in HTS-controlled areas, HTS recruits Syrians at border crossing points, such as the Bab-Al Hawa crossing point on the Syria-Turkey border. There are limited numbers of cases of Syrians who had been recruited after they were sent back from Turkey to Syria. These persons were first kept in HTS detention centres or prisons, then underwent Salafi/religious training, and only then recruited to HTS.⁵²

HTS also recruits from SNA-held areas through family or tribal connections. However, HTS does not allow former opposition group fighters, such as former SNA fighters, to join the HTS. Nor does it allow opposition groups to open recruitment offices and training bases in HTS-controlled areas.⁵³

The Syrian Human Right Organisation stated that HTS has recruited 2000 foreign fighters.⁵⁴ However, according to Suhail Al-Ghazi, HTS does not recruit foreign fighters to the same extent as it did in previous years when SDF captured IS-held areas in eastern Syria, which led IS-fighters to flee from these areas to areas controlled by HTS. The change in recruitment practices occurred because HTS does not trust foreign fighters and considers them having close ties to al-Qaeda or IS cells, according to Suhail Al-Ghazi. In addition, there are less foreign fighters trying to enter Syria, and the ones already present in Idlib are not interested in joining HTS because they do not share HTS' ideology.^{55 56}

1.4.3. Type of training that HTS recruits undergo

The military branch of HTS is divided into 11 military formations. Each formation has expertise within specific areas.⁵⁷ Formations that are involved in armed combat are required to have well-trained fighters.⁵⁸ HTS established a military academy in March 2021 where fighters are trained in a variety of modern warfare styles and in using many types of weaponry.⁵⁹ Before new recruits get involved in armed activities, they are required to undergo three to four months of military training.⁶⁰ In addition to military training, those fighters will also have to undergo religious training, including courses in Islamic Sharia law.⁶¹

⁵¹ Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham expands recruitment to all of Idlib province*, 15 May 2021, [url](#)

⁵² Al-Ghazi: 34

⁵³ Al-Ghazi: 30, 33

⁵⁴ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 19

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazi: 30

⁵⁶ There are other opposition groups operating in the Idlib area who recruit foreign fighters. These groups include the Turkistan Islamic Party (Chinese Uyghurs) and some Balkan and Chechen groups. These foreign jihadi groups have complicated relationship with HTS after HTS changed from being an al-Qaeda-inspired jihadist group to a Syrian conservative group. The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) has a good relationship with HTS, while other foreign fighters' jihadi groups sometimes clash with HTS, which leads to HTS disbanding the group. In general, it is HTS who decides when and where to launch attacks and do not allow any other group to participate in governing the greater Idlib area. However, these groups are very marginal, and, except for the TIP, limited in numbers. These Islamic armed groups are small and have also been known to recruit minors and locals from these areas, Al-Ghazi: 31, 32

⁵⁷ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 18; Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham holds massive military maneuvers in Idlib*, 11 June 2022, [url](#)

⁵⁸ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 18

⁵⁹ North Press Agency, *HTS Recruits Residents Of Syria's Northwest To Weaken Other Factions' Role*,

23 December, 2021, [url](#); Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham holds massive military maneuvers in Idlib*, 11 June 2022, [url](#)

⁶⁰ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 17

⁶¹ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 17; Suhail AL-Ghazi: 37; Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham holds massive military maneuvers in Idlib*, 11 June 2022, [url](#)

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, HTS vets all new recruits before they are allowed to join the military branch of HTS. This takes place at the end of the obligatory sharia course, where the sheikh who oversaw the whole course tests the recruits in different Islamic issues and Quran memorisation.⁶²

1.4.4. Number of fighters at HTS' disposal

HTS has a large number of fighters at its disposal because many men living in HTS areas join its military branch.⁶³ However, the specific number of fighters at HTS' disposal is not known, according to the online media publication, Al-Monitor.⁶⁴ A Syrian Human Rights Organisation estimates that HTS consists of about 80,000 fighters currently.⁶⁵ According to Fabrice Balanche, HTS consists of 30,000 -50,000 fighters as of October 2022.⁶⁶ In October 2018, HTS had a fighting force of between 12,000 and 15,000 fighters.⁶⁷

1.4.5. Reasons for joining HTS

Young men mainly join HTS because of the attractive incentives that the organisation provides for its fighters.⁶⁸ HTS treats its fighters as an important part of its organisation, which altogether acts as a major motivational factor for joining HTS.⁶⁹ Besides paying salaries, HTS also provides food baskets and housing for its members.⁷⁰

As unemployment is widespread in Idlib province, many find that joining HTS is their only opportunity to have a source of income.⁷¹ SNHR informed the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) that an HTS fighter's salary does not exceed 125 USD per month and payment of these salaries may be interrupted.⁷² According to Al-Ghazi, new fighters receive between 800 and 1200 Turkish Lira. As of October 2022, that is approximately 50-70 USD per month.⁷³

Two of the consulted sources stated that many young men also join HTS because they share the ideological and religious beliefs of the organisation.⁷⁴

⁶² Suhail Al-Ghazi: 29

⁶³ SNHR: 16

⁶⁴ Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham holds massive military maneuvers in Idlib*, 11 June 2022, [url](#)

⁶⁵ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 14

⁶⁶ Fabrice Balanche: 17

⁶⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies - TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT, *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)*, 4 October 2018, [url](#), p. 3

⁶⁸ SNHR: 17; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 35; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 16

⁶⁹ SNHR: 17

⁷⁰ SNHR: 17; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 35

⁷¹ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 16; Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham expands recruitment to all of Idlib province*, 15 May 2021, [url](#)

⁷² SNHR: 17

⁷³ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 35

⁷⁴ Fabrice Blanche: 18; SNHR: 17

1.4.6. Prevalence of forced recruitment

In general, HTS does not use forced recruitment.⁷⁵ HTS is not in need of recruits as large numbers of men willingly join the organisation.⁷⁶ In addition, HTS does not use forced recruitment since it is essential for HTS that its recruits are motivated and loyal to the organisation.⁷⁷

It is possible to live in HTS-held areas without having to serve in HTS. Men who choose not to join HTS will not face any issues with HTS as a consequence of not joining. They can live as civilians in the areas controlled by HTS.⁷⁸ There are 100,000s of people living in Idlib that are working and roaming freely and who are not recruited to the HTS.⁷⁹

However, HTS has used force or coercion in recruitment in some cases. According to Al-Ghazi, HTS coerces persons who have military experience to join HTS.⁸⁰ Additionally, local HTS police units have, on occasion, pressured men to join HTS, especially in connection with the attacks on Idlib by the Syrian government. However, there is no systematic practice of this kind of recruitment.⁸¹ There have also been cases of forced recruitment of men from IS sleeper cells in order to obtain firm control over these fighters.⁸²

1.4.7. Prevalence of men avoiding involvement in armed conflict

HTS does not allow fighters to quit or to choose whether to partake in armed combat. Only the leaders of HTS decide these matters. According to SNHR, men serving in the HTS military branch who want to quit, may be offered a higher salary if they are experienced fighters. However, if they quit, they will most likely be perceived as traitors and be tried before a HTS military court.⁸³

1.4.8. Recruitment of women

Recruitment of women takes place on a voluntary basis.⁸⁴ HTS does not recruit women into HTS units or battalions that participate in active fighting on the frontline in Idlib.⁸⁵ However, HTS recruits women in order to have female personnel to check women passing through HTS checkpoints.⁸⁶ Women also work in the HTS morality police in Idlib. Women who work at HTS checkpoints and in the morality police tend to be the wives or sisters of active HTS fighters.⁸⁷

⁷⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 36; SNHR: 18; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 16, SNHR: 18; Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham holds massive military manoeuvres in Idlib*, 11 June 2022, [url](#)

⁷⁶ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 16; SNHR: 18; Al-Monitor, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham expands recruitment to all of Idlib province*, 15 May 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁷ SNHR: 18

⁷⁸ SNHR: 20

⁷⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 38

⁸⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 36-37

⁸¹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 39

⁸² Suhail Al-Ghazi: 40

⁸³ SNHR: 19, 21

⁸⁴ SNHR: 23

⁸⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 41

⁸⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 41; SNHR: 23; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 21

⁸⁷ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 42

1.4.9. Recruitment of minors

In its 2022 annual report on children and armed conflict, the United Nations verified the recruitment and use of 380 children by HTS for the year 2021.⁸⁸ In the first half of 2020, HTS increased the number of recruited minors from 61 to 187 cases, according to Human Rights Watch.⁸⁹

The sources consulted in this report stated that HTS does not recruit minors to the same extent as previously during the Syrian civil war because HTS is trying to avoid recruitment of children to its forces.⁹⁰ SNHR stated that HTS currently only has few minors serving in its military branch.⁹¹ However, the actual numbers of minors serving in HTS as of November 2022 is not known.⁹²

Two sources stated that the age of boys who are recruited range between the ages of 12 and 18.⁹³ HTS recruits boys who are physically fit to become fighters.⁹⁴ Al-Ghazi stated that there are examples of minors who have been killed on the frontlines in the Idlib area between 2018 and 2020.⁹⁵

Minors tend to be recruited on an ideological basis through local mosques. This has also taken place in IDP camps through local sheikhs. Sometimes teachers in schools in HTS-controlled areas recruit minors to join HTS. In general, HTS recruitment of minors is predominantly based on the need to indoctrinate them into the ideology of HTS, rather than the need of manpower.⁹⁶

SNHR and a Syrian Human Rights Organisation confirmed that HTS recruits minors on a voluntary basis.⁹⁷ According to Al-Ghazi, HTS lures boys from poor families in IDP camps, where the father might be missing, with economic incentives to join HTS.⁹⁸

⁸⁸ UN Secretary General, *Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, 23 June 2022, [url](#), p. 25

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022 - Syria Events of 2021*, [url](#)

⁹⁰ Syrian Human Rights Organisation:20; SNHR: 22; Fabrice Balanche: 19

⁹¹ SNHR: 22

⁹² Suhail Al-Ghazi: 43; SNHR: 22

⁹³ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 44; SNHR: 22

⁹⁴ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 44; Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 20; SNHR: 22

⁹⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 44

⁹⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 43, 46

⁹⁷ Syrian Human Rights Organisation: 20; SNHR: 22

⁹⁸ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 45

Annex 1: Meeting minutes

Skype meeting with Suhail Al-Ghazi, 4 October 2022

Suhail Al-Ghazi is a Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus. His research focus is on military and security development in Syria.

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

1. Since SNA was formed in 2017 and since the government takeover of central and southern Syria in 2018, FSA has ceased to exist as a united and coherent group that has any impact.
2. As of 2020, only a few and small groups, comprising between 100 and 200 individuals, who were active in the areas between Idlib and Aleppo, referred to themselves as FSA. These groups were part of the National Liberation Front, which merged with other groups to form the Syrian National Army (SNA) in 2019, and which has full support from the Turkish army. However, as of 2022, no group uses the FSA name. These groups that were part of FSA called themselves FSA until they became part of the National Liberation Front or SNA.
3. The brand-name “Free Syrian Army” had also been used by an opposition group operating in the US-controlled Al-Tanf area in southeastern Syria. By October 24, 2022, the group changed its name to Free Syria Army (جيش سوريا الحرة) and no longer uses the FSA logo. This happened when the US-led coalition in al-Tanf area changed the leader of the group in October 2022.

Syrian National Army (SNA)

4. Since 2018 FSA has been replaced by Syrian National Army (SNA) and is under full control of the Turkish army which operates in northern and northwestern Syria. This includes Afrin, northern Aleppo province, northern Raqqa province and in northwestern areas in the Hasakah-province which are known as Operation Olive Branch area, Operation Euphrates Shield area and Operation Peace Spring area.

Recruitment

5. The SNA follows the same rules with regards to recruitment as FSA did. Recruitment is done mostly through networks of locals in the areas controlled by SNA. Recruitment is always initiated by the SNA groups and is typically done in markets, mosques and from smaller groups, gatherings or through family, clan and tribal connections. Some groups only recruit fighters from specific areas as for instance two SNA groups originating from eastern Syria, mainly Deir Ezzor and Raqqa provinces. Some groups only recruit persons from tribes. This includes SNA groups like Jaysh al-Sharqiyah (جيش الشرقية) Ahrar al-Sharqiyah (أحرار الشرقية). Some groups only recruit fighters from specific areas or tribal backgrounds. For example, both Ahrar al-Sharqiyah and Jaysh al-Sharqiyah are SNA groups from Deir Ezzor, Hasakah and Raqqa provinces now located in SNA-held areas and they only recruit fighters from tribes in these provinces.
6. SNA recruits and sends lists to the Turkish army. The Turkish army transfers, appoints or merges fighters and groups within SNA but it does not recruit Syrian fighters and send them to SNA.

7. Unless a person is from a family that is known for its support to SNA, he should be recommended by at least two other fighters to be recruited.
8. SNA also operates a military academy, which is run by defectors from the Syrian Arab Army (the government forces of Syria).
9. Smaller groups fighting under SNA umbrella tend to register names of persons on their lists of active fighters in order to extract additional funds from the Turkish army, which are in charge of paying salaries to the SNA groups. The salary for the average SNA-fighter is between 500 and 800.Turkish lira, which as of October 2022 is equivalent to around 30 to 45 USD.
10. Displaced opposition fighters from areas in central- and southern Syria, who were previously denied or refused entry into reconciliation agreements with the GoS, have had their weapons confiscated upon arrival to SNA-held areas. These fighters have been distributed to various groups after their arrival from areas like Eastern Ghouta and the southern Damascus suburbs in Rif Damascus Governorate and Daraa Governorate, in order to prevent them forming their own groups in SNA-controlled areas.
11. Locals in Arab-majority areas controlled by the SNA do not face forced recruitment.
12. In general, it is possible for a person who does not want to join SNA to avoid recruitment. SNA has no supply shortage of fighters as SNA has up to 100.000 of men who are willing to join the SNA on a voluntary basis.
13. Although the vast majority of current SNA fighters or men in SNA held areas did not face forced recruitment, forced recruitment has taken place in a few cases. To avoid forced recruitment individuals will escape to Turkey by being smuggled by human traffickers.
14. If the SNA knows of individuals with previous combat experience, such individuals can be forced to join the SNA. In this case forced recruitment is used as a form of crowd-control against individuals that the SNA wants to keep a close eye on.
15. In some specific cases forced recruitment of Sunnis have occurred in cases where the SNA has not trusted Sunni-Arabs that were present in areas controlled by the SNA. The source knows of six cases of Sunni Arab men who were forced to join SNA after their areas became under control of SNA: Four of the cases were in north Aleppo countryside, which was under ISIS control but were taken by SNA in 2016 in the Euphrates Shield operation. These men were former opposition fighters who stopped fighting when ISIS controlled the area. When SNA overtook the area, it did not trust these men and considered them ISIS sympathizers. Later they were coerced to join SNA to show they were not ISIS. In these cases, the men were imprisoned and interrogated. During the interrogations, they were told that they would be released if they joined the SNA, to which they did. The men described in these cases believed they would not be detained for a longer period if they refused to join the SNA. The two other cases are also Sunni Arabs who lived in Afrin and were accused of being with SDF\YPG. They had to join SNA to prove their loyalty.

16. In 2018 there have been cases of Kurdish men being forced to join SNA in the Afrin area because these men were believed to be YPG-proxy fighters. As of October 2022, Kurdish men are not being forcefully recruited by the SNA.
17. Some opposition fighters coming from south Syria and Damascus were accused of being with ISIS and denied entry to SNA-controlled areas. Turkey did not want to allow fighters from groups that were hostile to Turkey to enter its controlled areas. However, some of the fighters were later allowed to enter and join SNA.
18. Local SNA fighters have been offered contracts to fight a mercenary soldier in Libya and Azerbaijan for other Turkish-supported groups in that country.
19. Members of the Yazidi and Kurdish minorities are not trusted by SNA and are therefore not actively sought recruited by SNA in the areas SNA controls. However, there are Kurdish fighters among some SNA groups but they were recruited prior to the 2018 Olive Branch operation.
20. Individuals in SNA-controlled areas are at a much higher risk of being extorted than being forcefully recruited compared to areas under AANES/SDF and government-controlled areas. SNA group's methods of extortion vary from demanding fees from ordinary civilians for passing checkpoints to enforcing fees for goods or products (fruit, grain, any merchandise) to demanding fees for granting specific permits (digging wells, construction, opening a shop, etc) and sometimes even on the work of NGOs. Therefore, people in SNA-held areas face extortion all the time but they are not being forced or arrested to join SNA ranks.

Recruitment of women and minors

21. Women are not recruited to SNA due to the conservative ideology of SNA groups.
22. However, some women work at checkpoints in SNA-controlled areas and at checkpoints between SNA-areas and government-controlled areas. At these checkpoints these women check and search women passing through the checkpoints. Most often these women working at checkpoints are the wives or sisters of SNA-fighters.
23. It is very common that minors are recruited to SNA-groups in SNA-controlled areas. The UN-Commission of Inquiry for Syria has previously reported the number as being 500 to 600 individuals, but the source estimates that the actual number is double or triple that number.
24. Minors recruited to the SNA are typically between 14-18 years old and have to be physically fit in order to join SNA.
25. Most of the society in SNA-controlled areas do not see it as a big problem that minors close to the age of 18 are recruited to SNA.
26. Minors are not directly forced to join SNA but rather coerced or lured into SNA.
27. In its recruitment of minors, SNA focuses on poor families where the father may be absent, and the minors are not going to school. The minors are also approached by SNA in public markets, where they might be working. In situations like these SNA lures minors with economic incentives to join SNA, since such minors can make more money by joining SNA than doing unskilled labor in SNA-

controlled areas. SNA also lures minors from orphanages into recruitment. The orphanages in general are run by NGOs that are ideologically close to SNA groups. Sometimes they target minors who are physically fit to join SNA. These orphans do not have much of a choice but to join as they live under harsh conditions. SNA lures them with money (salaries), food baskets, sometimes accommodation such as tents or houses. Some of the orphans are children of dead fighters whose families receive financial support from SNA groups and they are lured to join SNA like their fathers. The source assesses that the strategy of SNA for recruiting minors is to infiltrate local society in the areas that SNA controls. It is thus rather for reasons of control and security than for the need for manpower that SNA engages in the recruitment of minors.

Hay'at Tahrir Sham (HTS)

28. HTS has a geographical presence in the greater Idlib area.

Recruitment:

29. HTS uses a mechanism for vetting the fighters who want to be recruited before they are allowed to join HTS. A new fighter has to pass an obligatory Sharia course through which the person is taught about the HTS Islamic ideology. By the end of the course, which has a brainwashing character, the recruit is tested (both oral and written test) in different Islamic issues and Quran memorization by the sheikh who oversaw the whole course. This is a way for HTS, and other Islamist opposition groups since 2012, to vet the fighters. The recruitment is typically done through mosques and local Sheikhs and clergymen. The focus in these recruitment processes is to make sure that possible recruits have the right Islamic ideology that corresponds to that of the HTS.
30. HTS will focus its recruitment in areas that they control but they do not typically focus on recruiting IDPs or foreign fighters in these areas. HTS also recruit from SNA-held areas through family or tribal connection as there are no HTS recruiting offices in SNA-held areas. Several sources in HTS-held areas told Suhail Al-Ghazi that HTS recruited former ISIS fighters who fled east Syria when SDF captured all ISIS-held areas. HTS does not recruit foreign fighters as it did previously because HTS does not trust foreign fighters and consider them close to Qaeda or ISIS cells. At the same time, there are less foreign fighters trying to enter Syria, and those who are already in Idlib, are not interested in joining HTS as they do not share HTS changed ideology.
31. There are other groups which operate in the Idlib area who recruit foreign fighters. These groups include the Turkistan Islamic Party (Chinese Uyghurs) and some Balkan and Chechen groups. These foreign jihadi groups have complicated relationship with HTS after HTS changed from being an al-Qaeda-inspired jihadist group to a Syrian conservative group. The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) has a good relationship with HTS while other foreign fighters' jihadi groups sometimes clash with HTS which leads to HTS disbanding the group. In general, it is HTS who decides when and where to launch attacks and do not allow any other group to participate in governing the greater Idlib area. However, these groups are very marginal, and, except for the Turkistan Islamic Party, they are limited in numbers.

32. These Islamic armed groups are small and have also been known to recruit minors and locals from these areas.
33. Hay'at Tahrir Sham (HTS), which controls the Idlib area, does not allow other opposition groups (FSA before and now SNA) to be recruited to HTS or to open recruitment offices and training bases, but locals can only join SNA in SNA-held areas.
34. HTS also recruits Syrians from border-crossing points, such as Bab-Al Hawa between Syria and Turkey. There are limited number of cases of Syrians who had been recruited after they were sent back from Turkey to Syria. These persons were first taken to HTS detention centres or prisons and then they were put through Salafi/religious training and then recruited to HTS.
35. New fighters receive between 800-1200 Turkish Lira. As of October 2022, that is approximately 50-70 USD per month. HTS also provides houses and food baskets to the families of its new fighters.
36. HTS do not tend to use forced recruitment on an individual basis. Rather HTS uses different forms of coercion to recruit men. In several cases, HTS forced other small groups to disband and forced their fighters to join HTS ranks after going through th Islamic Salafi and Sharia religious training as described earlier.
37. Men serving in HTS are forced to undergo religious training. If a person has military experience, he can be coerced to join HTS. Only men with unique and distinctive military experience will face this type of pressure. Such an individual will also need to support the ideology of HTS in order to join the organization.
38. There are a 100.000 of people living in Idlib that are working and roaming freely and who are not recruited to HTS.
39. However, pressures by local HTS police units for men to join HTS have occurred, especially in connection with the attacks on Idlib by the Syrian government. But there is no systematic practice for this kind of recruitment.
40. There have been cases of forced recruitment against men from ISIS sleeper cells in order to have firm control on these groups rather than for a strictly military purpose i.e., the need for manpower.

Recruitment of women and minors

41. Women are not recruited into HTS-units or battalions that participate in active fighting on the frontline in Idlib. Instead, women work at HTS checkpoints to check and search other women passing through the checkpoints and to combat the smuggling of goods by women.
42. Women are also employed in the HTS morality police in Idlib. Women who work at HTS checkpoints and the morality police tend to be the wives or sisters of active HTS-fighters.
43. Minors tend to be recruited on an ideological basis through local mosques. This has also taken place in IDP camps through local sheikhs. It is impossible to trace the actual number of minors serving in HTS because information on the topic is sparse.

44. Boys who are physically fit down to the age between 12-14 years, have been recruited to HTS. There are examples of minors being killed on the frontlines in the Idlib-area in battles between 2018 and 2020.
45. Minors are to a larger extent pressured and exploited rather than being forcefully recruited to HTS. HTS tend to recruit minors from poor families in IDP camps where the father might be missing and lure minors with financial incentives to join HTS. These minors also are indoctrinated by mosques, relatives, friends or teachers. However, they are not taken against their will or forced to join HTS' ranks.
46. Sometimes teachers in schools in HTS-controlled areas have recruited minors to join HTS. In general, HTS recruitment of minors is more based on the need to indoctrinate them into the ideology of HTS rather than the need of manpower.

Skype meeting with Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 10 October 2022

Free Syrian Army (FSA)

1. Since 2018 The Free Syrian Army has dissolved in connection with the reconciliation agreements that were concluded between the Syrian Government and the Turkish backed opposition groups in Syria. Many fighters from FSA joined SNA, while a small number of FSA fighters created their own small armed groups. These small groups are also dissolving, as they cannot survive with the scarce resources they have. An example of some formations that are not part of SNA: Jaish al Ezza faction, Failaq al Sham faction, and some small scattered groups.
2. All non-Islamic opposition armed groups refer mostly to themselves as FSA, even though every group has its own name and may be a part of SNA. Even civilians refer to these groups as FSA.

Syrian National Army (SNA)

3. SNA is one of the largest opposition groups in north-western Syria. The beginning of the formation SNA happened back in May 2017. SNA is present only in north-west Syria, and is concentrated in the northern rural Aleppo Governorate, which is under the control of the armed opposition factions. A large number of the fighters in SNA are former FSA fighters.
4. SNA is an umbrella organisation for many opposition armed groups which work independently from each other. These groups have different sizes and they are referred to as either corps or battalions. SNA has a central command of officers, who defected from the Syrian regular army, but this command is theoretical, and the actual controllers are the leaders of the formations, and most of them does not have a military background.
5. SNA does not have a central leadership but every group in SNA has its own leader and work independently from each other.

Recruitment to SNA:

6. The different SNA groups have different military training. The duration of training for SNA recruits is not specified, but it is most likely not to exceed 6 months.
7. SNA groups depend on voluntary recruitment. SNA groups pay salaries to its fighters New recruits join the formations of SNA to fight against the Syrian government and prevent it from controlling areas controlled by SNA. Money is not the only motive for joining, but it plays a key role in the decision.
8. SNA groups do not use forced recruitment. The source has not heard of any case of forced recruitment to the SNA.
9. Persons who join SNA, cannot choose not to participate in the armed operations of the group.
10. Sometimes SNA groups clash with each other over territorial disputes. They also clash over fighters, for example when a fighter leaves one group to join another SNA group.
11. Persons who choose not to join any SNA group, live as civilians in the areas controlled by SNA without facing any issues with the SNA groups. Even men who do not want to be members of SNA anymore are allowed to go back as a civilians and will face no issues.

Recruitment of minors and women:

12. SNA groups recruit children from the age of fourteen if they are physically fit like grown-ups. The phenomenon of child recruitment by SNA and FSA is limited and voluntary and depends on the minor's physical stature. However, SNA groups do not register recruited children in their registration systems. The source asessed that it is important for SNA to appear as an organisation that upholds human rights principles, which is why SNA wants to hide the fact that they are recruiting children.
13. Women can be recruited to SNA but on a voluntary basis. However, women are not given combat tasks but rather they are used to check other women at checkpoints.

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS)

14. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham controls large parts of Idlib Governorate, a small part of north-western rural Hama Governorate, and parts of the western and northern rural areas of Aleppo Governorate.
15. HTS is well organised and operates more like a state that has a central leadership and good control over its territory and civilians. HTS does not only have a military branch but also has branches that are responsible for social and economic aspects of the community that is under territorial control of HTS.

Recruitment to HTS:

16. Many men join HTS and therefore HTS has a large number of fighters at its disposal. HTS has more fighters than SNA.

17. HTS mainly recruits through recruitment campaigns where men from the age of 18 are encouraged to join the military branch. HTS uses religious rhetoric to motivate men to join its military and it also advertise for the relatively attractive salaries that are paid to recruits. HTS does not provide high salaries to its members, but covers other aspects of life necessities such as food baskets, housing, and others. HTS treats its members as an important part of its formation and seeks to fulfill their needs, which constitutes a major attraction factor for its members added to the religious discourse. HTS's fighter salary does not exceed 125 USD, and payment of these salaries may be interruptions sometimes.
18. HTS does not recruit by force because HTS is not in need of recruits as the number of men, who have joined it or who want to join, is huge. In addition, it is important for HTS that its recruits are motivated and loyal to the organisation.
19. Men who join the military branch of HTS cannot choose whether they want to take part in armed combats. It is the leaders of HTS who decide this.
20. Men, who choose not to join HTS, will not face any issue with HTS as a consequence of not joining the organisation, and they can stay as civilians in the areas controlled by HTS.
21. Men who are in the HTS military branch and want to quit, may be offered a higher salary if they are experienced fighters. However, if they quit, they will most likely be perceived as traitors and be tried before a military court.

Recruitment of minors and women:

22. The recruits in the military branch of HTS are mostly over the age of 18; however, HTS has few recruits that are between the ages of 14 to 18. SNHR does not have data that documents the actual number of minors serving in HTS. HTS is trying to avoid the recruitment of children, but it does not prevent it. The phenomenon of child recruitment by HTS is limited and voluntary and depends on the minor's physical stature.
23. Women are only recruited to the police and on a voluntary basis. The task of women in the police is to deal with other women, for example by conducting pad-down screenings and searches of women at checkpoints.

WhatsApp meeting with Syrian Human Rights Organisation, 10 October 2022

Free Syrian Army

1. FSA as an army that represented the Syrian revolution and which ceased exist since 2018. Most fighters from FSA are today in SNA – an army which is ostensibly operates Turkish proxy force in Syria

Syrian National Army:

2. SNA operates in the area from Afrin, which is controlled by Turkey, to Jarablus. It also operates in Tell Abyad and Ras al Ain in al-Hasakah Governorate in north-eastern Syria. There is a large number of SNA fighters on the frontline on the Idlib border which protects Turkish military bases.
3. SNA is not a united army, but rather it is an umbrella for a number of different groups that work together and sometimes fight each other to take control of different areas and smuggling points. In Afrin for example, each group in SNA controls and rules a specific area.
4. The number of the fighters of the groups in SNA is between 30.000 to 40.000 fighters.

Recruitment to SNA:

5. SNA only recruits Sunnis and does not use forced recruitment. SNA has a large number of fighters and a lot of men are interested in joining it.
6. Economic incentives and sectarian/religious and ethnical hate speech discourse are used as instruments to motivate people to join SNA. Thus, SNA pays salaries to its recruits and encourages them to take part in the war against Shia, Alawites and Kurds which are perceived as the unbelievers or enemies of Sunni Arabs.
7. SNA is the only opposition group that has sent mercenaries to Libya and Azerbaijan.
8. SNA groups clashes sometimes and the different SNA-groups can be involved in armed clashes against PYD/SDF. A recruit cannot choose not to participate in these clashes.

Recruitment of minors or women:

9. SNA recruits children from the age of 15. The number of recruited children is unknown according to the organisation. Poverty is the main reason why children join SNA. In addition, many children do not go to school and do have not much to spend their time on. They either join by themselves or their parents send them to be recruited with SNA.
10. SNA has sent 300 minors as mercenaries to Libya and Azerbaijan.
11. SNA does not recruit women and tries to avoid to involve women as the cultural and religious perception of the role women does not include involvement in warfare.

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12. HTS controls 50% of Idlib Governorate, a couple of villages of north-western Rural Hama Governorate, north-eastern Rural Latakia Governorate and villages in western Rural Aleppo Governorate.
13. HTS is much more organized than the SNA for instance. The areas it controls are more secure and safe compared to SNA.
14. HTS has about 80.000 fighters and has a central leadership that controls the different components of HTS.

15. HTS operates more like a state that has a government that rules and takes care of different aspects of the civilians lives.

Recruitment to the HTS:

16. HTS does not use forced recruitment and men are recruited voluntarily. A large number of young men wants to join HTS as it their only opportunity to have a source of income in the areas controlled by HTS.
17. Recruits go through religious and military training for three to four months before they get involved in the activities of HTS.
18. HTS is divided in different units and each unit has competences in specific areas. Units that are involved in armed combats are required to have well-trained fighters.
19. HTS has also recruited 2000 international fighters/persons who are not Syrians.

Recruitment of minors and women:

20. Previously HTS recruited children; however, recently HTS is trying to avoid recruitment of children to its forces. However, children who are physically fit and wants to join are allowed to be recruited.
21. Women are only recruited in order to have female personnel who can check women at checkpoints.

Skype meeting with Fabrice Balanche, associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2, 11 October 2022

Fabrice Balanche is an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2. He has conducted field studies and research and written books and articles about Syria, including the Kurdish areas of Syria. His last field study in the Kurdish areas of Syria was carried out in January-February 2022.

Free Syrian Army

1. Since the summer of 2018 we have seen the destruction of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), especially in the south of Syria in Daraa Governorate and in East-Ghouta area of Rif Damascus governorate
2. In Europe among researchers in 2018, what was understood at FSA are secular opposition groups who were small in numbers and the most important groups were based in Daraa and Idlib-area and were supported by Turkey at that time. The groups in Daraa governorate, Al-Rastan in Homs/Hama governorate and in East Ghouta in Rif Damascus were destroyed in 2018 by the Syrian army are when Syrian government forces regained control of central and southern Syria
3. As of 2022 FSA no longer exist as a coherent military unit. Since the ceasefire between Turkey and Russia in March of 2020, most FSA groups, which were on the frontlines in the battles in Idlib-area against Syrian government forces and Russia, were severely decimated in numbers due to the fighting. These groups has since sought shelter and protection in areas de-facto controlled by Turkey and Syrian National Army (SNA) groups, in areas such as Afrin, Jarabulus, Al-Bab and Tel Abyad and

Ras Al Ayin and have been incorporated into the ranks of various SNA-groups. As an example, the former leader of FSA, Selim Idriss is now currently considered to be the leader the Syrian National Army and the minister of defence in the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) a Turkish proxy administration, which administers areas controlled by Turkey and SNA in northern Syria

4. As of 2022 the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a colloquial term used by ordinary Syrians to describe opposition groups, which is not the Islamic State, HTS or the Kurdish forces such as the SDF. Syrians refer to the term Free Syrian Army as a way to describe a rebel and oppositions groups, who researchers on the other hand have identified as specific and individual armed opposition groups.

Syrian National Army

5. SNA is comprised of around 50.000 - 70.000 fighters and has a geographical presence in Afrin, Jarabulus, Al-Bab, Azaz, Tel Abyad and Ras Al Ayin, which are areas under direct control of the Turkish army. Between 1.5 and 2 million people inhabited these aforementioned areas by Turkey and the SNA.
6. SNA is to be considered a Turkish proxy force. SNA is comprised of a number of Turkish-backed rebel groups. In some of those groups some fighters were previously members of the Islamic State which joined SNA-groups, and were active in the takeover in the area around Tel-Abyad in 2019.
7. SNA is not considered as a united army but it is an umbrella for a number of different groups, like the Sultan Murad groups for instance, but these groups still have their own organization. Turkey has tried to integrate these groups in a coherent force of SNA, but there are still examples of infighting between different SNA groups over the control of checkpoints smugglings routes etc.
8. Turkey's main strategy for SNA is to control the various groups in SNA and integrate them in to one coherent fighting force and to use this force against Kurdish forces in the AANES controlled areas in north-east Syria. Turkey wants to create a belt of security between Kurdish areas and Turkey in Northern Syria and it does not see a point in overstretching the area Turkey controls through its proxies such as SNA.
9. The Turkish army and its officers do not exercise any control over these groups when it comes to manpower, other than being in charge of paying salaries to the groups, but salaries are also only paid out to commanders of SNA groups, who then distributes the salaries to the fighters.
10. Arab-Sunni Muslims and people of Turkmen-Sunni Muslims are the ethnic and religious groups which make up SNA.

Recruitment to SNA:

11. SNA does not have military service or a unified conscription of young men. The economic situation in the areas is such that there is a large economic incentive for men of fighting age to join SNA because they can make more money with SNA than in any other jobs in these areas.
12. There is still recruitment of young men of fighting age in the areas controlled by SNA. The source do not know whether everybody is welcome but SNA is recruiting men in the area that they control and mostly recruit through family or extensive family networks.

13. Some fighters have been recruited as mercenary fighters by Turkish mediation to fight for Azerbaijan against Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020 and in the Libyan conflict since 2020.
14. The source assessed that SNA does not need to forcefully recruit individuals since it attracts men with economic incentives for joining SNA. There have been relatively fewer numbers of armed clashes in the areas since March 2020, which have lessened the risk of joining SNA.
15. It is possible for civilians to avoid recruitment to SNA as there is no obligation to join SNA and SNA has plenty of people willing to join it.

Recruitment of women:

16. The source assumes that women are not recruited to SNA.

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17. The current geographical presence of HTS is the Idlib area, together with the Huras Al-din and the Turkmen Islamic party also being present in the Idlib area. HTS consists of 30.000 -50.000 individuals
Population of the Idlib is around 2.5 million people.

Recruitment to the HTS:

18. HTS is a very ideological movement and people principally join it because they share the group's jihadist beliefs, but you can still join if you want to get paid to fight in HTS.

Recruitment of minors:

19. HTS is known to have recruited minors in the past. The group have used suicide bombers in past, in 2015. Suicide bombers have typically been teenagers in the HTS allied group Turkistan Islamic party, which operate in the Idlib-area.

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Annex 2: Terms of Reference (ToR)

Syria: Recruitment to opposition groups

1. The Free Syrian Army (FSA)
 - 1.1. Development of FSA since 2018
 - 1.2. Current organisation of FSA
2. Syrian National Army (SNA)
 - 2.1. Geographical presence
 - 2.2. Recruitment
 - 2.2.1. Prevalence of women and minors being recruited
3. Hay'at Tahrir Sham (HTS)
 - 3.1. Geographical presence
 - 3.2. Recruitment
 - 3.2.1. Prevalence of women and minors being recruited