

THE
CARTER CENTER



THE STATE OF THE SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY

Shifting networks of the Turkish-backed armed
opposition in Syria's Northwest

ABSTRACT

The Syrian National Army (SNA) has been heralded by some as a point of unity for the armed opposition in Syria, a counterbalance to the power of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. This report examines the SNA's role in the field and its changing organizational composition.

March 2022

Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Hari Prasad, program associate, and Hampton Stall, senior program associate, of the Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program. In addition, the report was made possible thanks to the comments and feedback of interns and Carter Center staff. Alexander McKeever was also a great help as the report was developed.

Executive Summary

- The Syrian National Army, the second-largest armed opposition coalition fighting against the Syrian government, has been a critical actor but is facing a period of stagnation due to the lack of significant internal or external pressure, a dearth of current prospects for military advancement, and the deadlock over political progress. The creation of the Azm Operations Room attempted to address this issue by unifying the SNA, but results have been mixed. If the current dynamics persist, the SNA will likely continue to experience infighting, mergers, splits, and defections until it eventually disappears or — more likely — becomes entirely irrelevant. If this becomes the case, the constituent groups of the SNA would likely be usurped by more extreme actors.
- Internal rivalries and an unclear hierarchy have amplified the issue of infighting within the SNA, one that has negative effects for civilians in Turkish-held territories. The constant infighting also broadcasts a weakness to external rivals, particularly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, who take advantage of the disunified situation. This also relegates the SNA to the whims of its sponsor, Turkey, which has used the group as an auxiliary force abroad.
- The SNA remains relevant for any conflict that impacts Turkish interests as Turkey deploys SNA fighters on external battlefields, a dynamic that complicates efforts at conflict resolution and disarmament. Despite its role as a Turkish proxy, the SNA remains relevant to policymakers and humanitarians. The SNA still plays a major role in northern Syria and impacts the lives of millions of civilians. Any attempt at peacemaking, cease-fire implementation, or the protection of civilians must include efforts to talk to the SNA and Turkey.
- There is a popular sentiment that the SNA is no longer relevant, being described simply as a Turkish proxy. While Turkey's influence is true, the SNA remains relevant in the conflict. Whether for delivering humanitarian aid in the region or for conflict resolution purposes, it is vital to continue engagement with the SNA and Turkey. Despite the disorganized nature of the SNA, it still controls territory and plays an active role in conflict. Any attempt at brokering peace in Syria must involve discussions with Turkey and the SNA and work to make sure all factions adhere to any peace agreement. A unified SNA could lead to more independence from Turkey, a stronger bargaining position in peace talks, and greater effectiveness. However, at the moment, disunity continues.
- The Carter Center recommends that those looking to engage in peacebuilding or humanitarian efforts familiarize themselves closely with understanding the Syrian National Army's dynamics and the relationships among the armed opposition groups operating in

Syria's northwest, especially given some of their international ties. The armed opposition is not a cohesive organization, and even the larger coalitions still struggle to stymie violent infighting and internal feuds, things that can greatly impact programming and dynamics in opposition-held areas. Additionally, this means that agreements or representations/statements can come from an individual or group that says it is the SNA but is not actually representative of the whole SNA.

Introduction

In northern Syria, there are two main opposition contingents to the Government of Syria (GoS) based in Damascus. The largest is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a 2017 rebrand of the former Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which has solidified control in Idlib Governorate.¹ The second-largest opposition coalition is the Syrian National Army (SNA), which is concentrated in Aleppo Governorate, supported by Turkey, and composed of multiple Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions. Most SNA holdings and activity are within the bounds of Turkish-held territory in northern Syria. A May 2020 Carter Center [report](#) found that despite cascading announcements of mergers in the SNA coalition, many of the groups still operate as distinct units, actively engage in armed infighting, and act on behalf of their local constituents. Despite its fragmentation, the SNA has emerged as a potent tool for Turkish foreign policy beyond Syria: SNA fighters have been deployed to Libya and to Nagorno-Karabakh. There were even reports that Turkey planned to deploy the SNA to protect Kabul's International Airport before the Taliban took over Afghanistan.

The SNA suffers from internal disagreement, just like the previous iterations of the armed opposition. Infighting between SNA factions has added to the general instability in Turkish-held territory in northern Syria. Neither the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) nor HTS experiences the same level of conflict within its ranks as the SNA.

Since the 5 March 2020 cease-fire, Syria has seen the longest period without significant frontline changes. Nevertheless, Syria remains in ongoing conflict. The SNA has made attempts to unify and coordinate its actions. Despite its many internal issues, the SNA remains an important player in the Syrian conflict due to Turkey's continued support and the SNA's activity on the battlefield. As the SNA remains relevant to Turkey's role in Syria, it is important to understand how the SNA is evolving. This report tracks the change in SNA structures over time and the ebbs and flows of its political significance.

¹ Syria Mapping Project, "Power Through Strength: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Solidifying Control in Northwest Syria," *The Carter Center*, November 9, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/f12a006dfaf84cc58a4348cbb23ab137>.

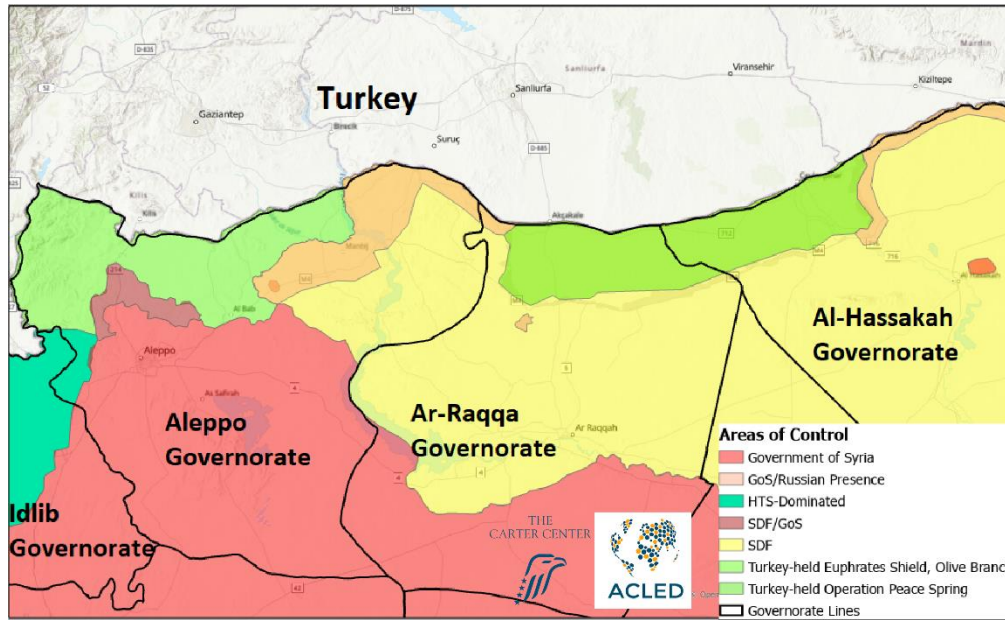


Figure 1: Turkish-held areas across northern Syria as of 15 March 2022. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Infighting and Criminality

Infighting within the SNA is a severe problem for the political leadership and residents within Turkish-held areas of Syria. Between 5 March 2020 and 10 December 2021, there have been at least 184 reported incidents of clashes among SNA fighters. There are numerous reasons for infighting. The chain-of-command structure is poorly defined, and there have been few attempts at unification or centralization.² This is openly acknowledged by SNA commanders.³ In addition, tensions between those displaced to SNA-held areas and those who have resided there longer have deepened fault lines within the SNA. For example, a dispute can occur when armed groups from Aleppo Governorate assault displaced Syrians from Ghouta — a former opposition stronghold — triggering a reaction from SNA factions originally from Ghouta.⁴ Another reason for infighting revolves around criminality and economic duress. Factions often clash over smuggling goods, human trafficking, etc.

To illustrate how widespread infighting in the SNA has become, a visualization of recorded conflict events between opposition factions is included (Fig. 2). The visualization is derived from data from

² Navvar Saban, “The Past, Present, and Future of the Syrian National Army,” *Al-Sharq Strategic Research*, August 31, 2021, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/08/31/the-past-present-and-future-of-the-syrian-national-army/>

³ Muhammad Al-Sheikh, “القائد العام لغرفة ”عزم“ ل”نداء بوست“: أبوابنا مُشرعة لكافة تشكيلات الجيش الوطني”, *Nedaa Post*, September 11, 2021, <https://nedaa-post.com/article/Art5210Y8GTu0E6>

⁴ Ammar Hamou and Omar Nour, “Three Years After ‘Olive Branch’: A Militarized Afrin and Continued Violations Against Its Residents,” *Syria Direct*, February 10, 2021, <https://syriadirect.org/three-years-after-olive-branch-a-militarized-afrin-and-continued-violations-against-its-residents/>

the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project. Nodes in the visualization are sized by the amount of intra-opposition combat in which the units recently have been involved.

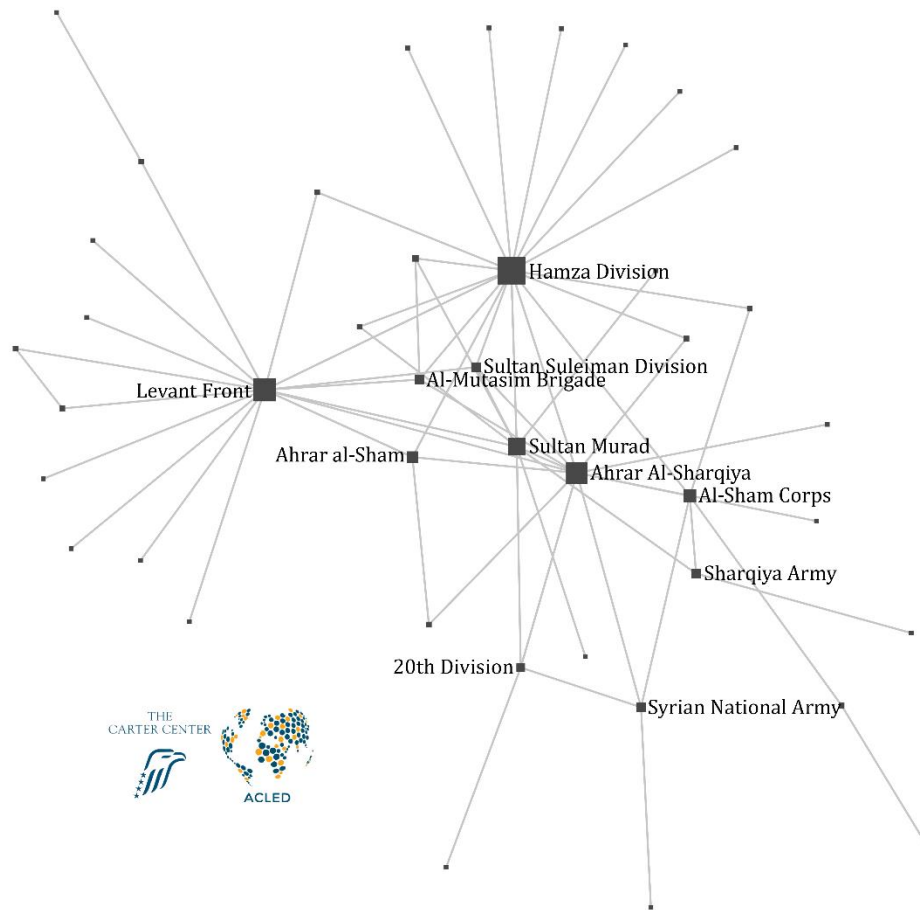


Figure 2: Hostile interactions between Syrian opposition groups. Nodes sized by amount of direct actor-actor tensions each actor was involved in February 2020 - November 2021. Edges are not weighted but represent recorded hostilities between groups. Network visualization is undirected as target and initiator are often disputed. Data from The Carter Center and ACLED.

Notably, Hamza Division, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, and the Levant Front (Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya) stand out for their involvement in intra-opposition conflict. Hamza Division and the Levant Front are among the largest groups in opposition-held territory, a factor that has likely contributed to their involvement in combat. Hamza’s prominence in this chart is compounded by the internal disputes within Hamza, wherein Hamza Division fighters have fought against other Hamza Division fighters in the last two years. Ahrar al-Sharqiya, on the other hand, is known among researchers and opposition activists alike for its engagement in combat with other opposition groups – it has also recently been sanctioned because of its actions against civilians in its areas.⁵

These hostile interactions have been on and off for the last two years in Syria’s northwest. For reference, see Figure 3, which shows a major spike in internal conflict following the 2020 cease-fire between the GoS and the armed opposition and a recent uptick at the end of 2021.

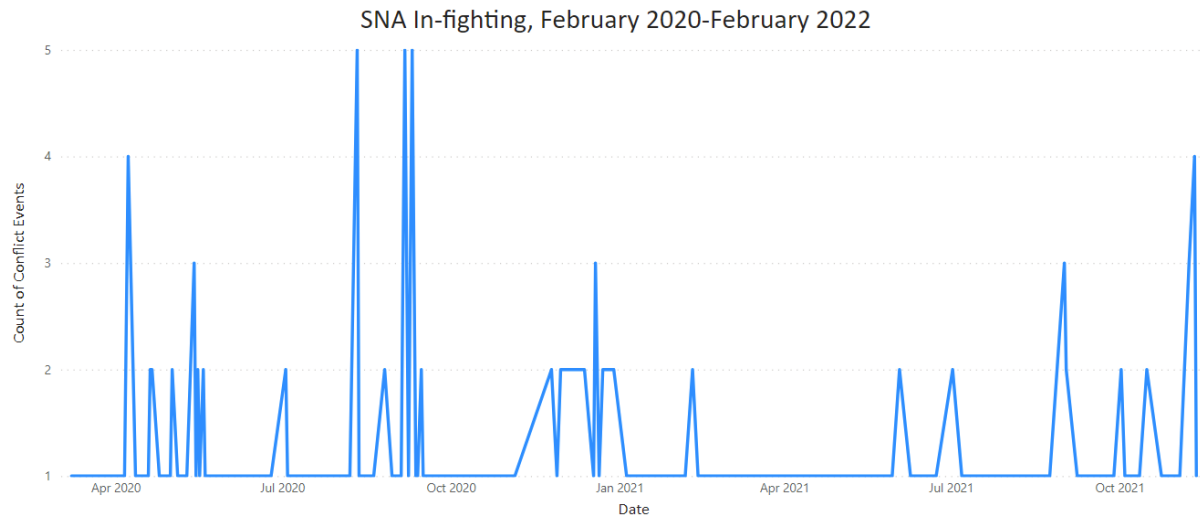


Figure 3 - Timeline of SNA infighting conflict events, February 2020 - February 2022. Derived from data from TCC and ACLED.

Alongside the infighting, frequent accusations and reporting of SNA factions’ engaging in human rights abuses have also hurt its reputation in Syria and abroad.⁵ In Turkish-controlled territory, the SNA has been accused in engaging in pillaging,⁶ summary executions,⁷ various war crimes, and even accused of committing ethnic cleansing. On 28 July 2021, the United States sanctioned the Ahrar al-Sharqiya due to its human rights abuses, especially noting its attacks on Syrian Kurds.⁸ This was the first time that an SNA faction had been sanctioned by the United States. Ahrar al-Sharqiya was particularly notorious for its attacks against civilians and was alleged to have carried out torture and execution of the female Syrian Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf.⁹ Salem al-Meset,

⁵ Elizabeth Tsurkov, “Who Are Turkey’s Proxy Fighters in Syria?,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>

⁶ “Syria: Sultan Murad and Mu’tasim Divisions Pillage the Industrial Zone in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê,” *Syrians for Truth and Justice*, October 6, 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-sultan-murad-and-mutasim-divisions-pillage-the-industrial-zone-in-ras-al-ayn-sere-kaniye/>

⁷ “Syria: Civilians Abused in ‘Safe Zones,’” *Human Rights Watch*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/27/syria-civilians-abused-safe-zones#>

⁸ “US Sanctions Syrian Prisons, Officials for Human Rights Abuses,” *Al-Jazeera*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/7/28/us-sanctions-syrian-prisons-officials-for-human-rights-abuse>

⁹ Nader Ibrahim, et al., “Hevrin Khalaf: Death of a Peacemaker,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-51068522>, Alexander McKeever, “New Evidence in the 2019 Murder of Muhammad Bouzan by Ahrar Al-Sharqiyah Figthers,” *Alexander McKeever Substack*, January 7, 2022, <https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/new-evidence-in-the-2019-murder-of>

head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, claimed that the U.S. sanctions were accepted and played an important role in helping to curb abuses.¹⁰

The general weakness of the SNA command structure and its inability to force internal cohesion has made it vulnerable to external exploitation, particularly to HTS. Disagreements with commanders or internal rivalries led to groups' being broken up or facing large schisms. In December 2020, five subfactions left the group Ahrar al-Sharqiya due to what they described as Abu Hatem's (commander of Ahrar al-Sharqiya) "policy of tyranny."¹¹ The threat posed by these internal divisions was most clear during HTS's interference over Ahrar al-Sham's leadership struggle in October-November 2020 in Idlib Governorate, during which HTS supported a challenger to take over the group.¹²

Yet HTS's own machinations toward Turkish-backed armed opposition groups extend beyond HTS-dominated Idlib Governorate. Alongside supporting competing factions within SNA groups, HTS has attempted to covertly expand its presence within Turkish-controlled territory. HTS in June 2021 reportedly created a front group, Jaysh al-Qa'qa' Bin 'Umru al-Tamimi, to operate within Turkish-held areas.¹³ However, there is little indication that the front group has successfully absorbed SNA fighters or increased HTS's influence in the area. However, HTS's overall strength and possible outreach to individual SNA factions has remained an issue of concern to the SNA leadership.¹⁴ Abu Amsha, leader of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, expressed his desire to reach an "understanding" with HTS, which was interpreted as a potential alliance between the two groups.¹⁵ The power of HTS in nearby Idlib Governorate and its interference shows the need for an SNA strong enough to counter it.¹⁶ This competition with HTS adds more strain to the SNA, beyond the regular bouts of fighting with the GoS armed forces and the SDF.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Hagerdorn, "Syrian Opposition Chief: US Sanctions A Deterrent for Turkish Proxy Fighters," *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 7, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/syrian-opposition-chief-us-sanctions-deterrent-turkish-proxy-fighters>

¹¹ Alexander McKeever, "Who Is Liwa' Al-Qadisiyah Al-Raqqa?," *Alexander McKeever Substack*, January 12, 2022, <https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/who-is-liwa-al-qadisiyah-al-raqqa>

¹² Syria Mapping Project, "Weekly Conflict Summary 12-18 October 2020," *The Carter Center*, October 21, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9abbfdaca76a412894903a79dcb5f922>; Syria Mapping Project, "Weekly Conflict Summary 2-8 November 2020," *The Carter Center*, November 11, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/990499fd41e2440e916e59a305ad0870>

¹³ Aaron Zelin, "Jaysh Al-Qa'qa': A New HTS Front Group in Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield Territory," *Syrian Jihadism*, June 13, 2021, <https://syrianjihadism.com/2021/06/13/jaysh-al-qaqa-a-new-hts-front-group-in-olive-branch-and-euphrates-shield-territory/>

¹⁴ Sultan al-Kanj, "Turkish-backed Factions Outmaneuver Syrian Jihadist Group in Idlib," *Al-Monitor*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/turkish-backed-factions-outmaneuver-syrian-jihadist-group-idlib>

¹⁵ "أبو عمشة "يغازل" تحرير الشام" .. هم أبناء البلد ومستعدون للتفاهم معهم"" *Enab Baladi*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/511085>

¹⁶ Ali Darwish, "A Counterforce Facing Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's Influence in Aleppo," *Enab Baladi*, August 20, 2021, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/08/a-counterforce-facing-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-influence-in-aleppo/>

The Status of the SNA

Attempts in the past to unify the various factions of the SNA yielded mixed results at best. Turkey's previous attempts at merging the various armed opposition groups occurred alongside its military operations into Syria. The Carter Center's May 2020 [report](#) found that the SNA factions were divided into three legions, with the Idlib-based National Liberation Front (NLF) theoretically being integrated into a future fourth legion. However, this did not stop the infighting, and, in practice, the SNA remained divided among its various factions.

To consolidate a factionalized SNA, mergers were made throughout 2021 which saw most major SNA groups operating under a single formation. The initial set of mergers involved smaller armed groups within the SNA. However, the internal dynamics of the SNA would change with the creation of the Azm Operations Room and the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), which incorporated many of the larger factions. The politics of these new formations shifted throughout 2021, especially as Azm and SLF members would fight each other. By January 2022, Azm incorporated most of the major SNA groups, including the members of the SLF.

The first set of SNA mergers led to the creation of the First Division and Division 13 in May 2021. Division 13 was formed when the Sultan Muhammad Firqa Brigade, the Semerkand Brigade, and the Al-Waqqas Brigade united their groups into a common formation on 28 May 2021. The name came from the fact that three groups were previously part of Division 13 in the First Corps of the SNA.¹⁷ With this merger, the groups agreed to combine into a single armed group. Just a few days later, a merger between the North Brigade, the 112th Brigade, and the 9th Division led to the formation of the First Division.¹⁸ The Second Division was another merger that was formed on 25 June 2021 and was composed of the Elite Army (also known as Jaish al-Nukba (Nakhba), and Liwa 113.¹⁹ These mergers involved the smaller military factions within the SNA and have largely held up amid other unit reshuffles within the SNA.

¹⁷ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Structure of the Syrian National Army," *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi*, November 21, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-structure-of-the-syrian-national-army>

¹⁸ Khaled Al-Khateb, "Turkish-backed Syrian Armed Groups Unify Forces," *Al-Monitor*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-groups-unify-forces>

¹⁹ First Legion, "Statement of Formation of the Second Division," *Twitter*, June 25, 2021, <https://twitter.com/First1Legion/status/1408485611292577792>

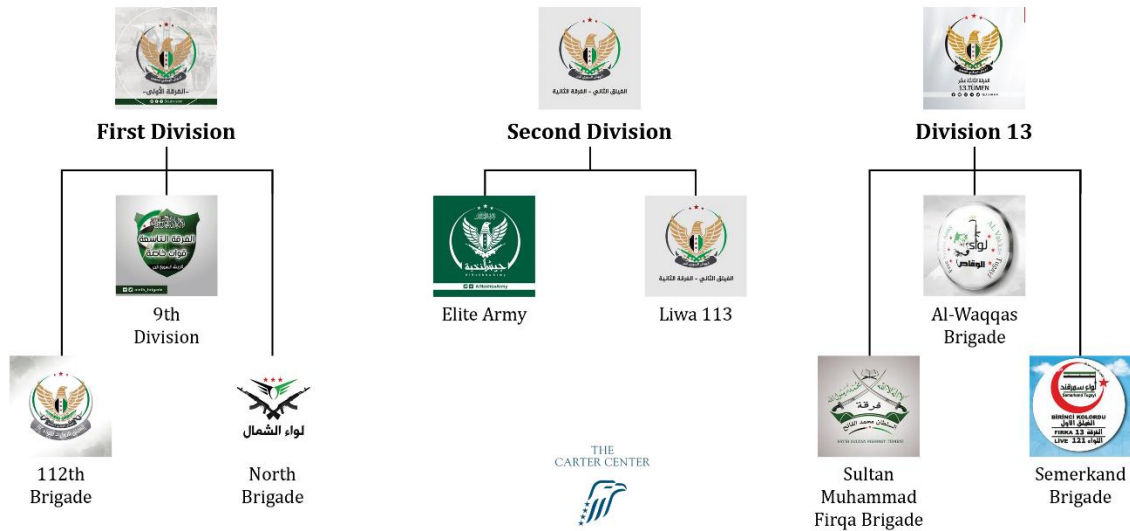


Figure 4: The first set of SNA mergers in May-June 2021. Data from The Carter Center.

The largest set of mergers and breakups among the SNA occurred in the latter half of 2021. In July 2021, opposition units formed the “Unified Operations Room – Azm” (غرفة القيادة الموحدة “عزم”). The Azm Operations Room, as it would come to be called, initially consisted of Sultan Murad and the Levant Front. It then expanded to include Jaish al-Islam, Ahrar Al-Sharqiya, Jaish al-Sharqiya, Hamza Division, Sultan Malek Shah, Suqur al-Shamal, and the Suleiman Shah Division (initial formation of the Azm Operations Room detailed in Fig. 5 below).²⁰ Commanders associated with Azm argued that it was not an operations room similar to the rooms of the past (which served to coordinate various factions), but rather a single command room meant to both administratively and militarily integrate its member factions.²¹ To achieve this, Azm ordered all the affiliated factions to resolve any outstanding judicial disputes.²²

²⁰ “ريف حلب.. خمسة فصائل تنضم إلى غرفة عمليات “عزم””, *Enab Baladi*, August, 21, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/506686>

²¹ “عزم” مشروع وطني وليست غرفة عمليات، وهي مستمرة في تحقيق أهدافها، حبر تلتقي قائد الفيلق الثالث “أبو”، *Hibr Press*, September 25, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4byj6exf>

²² “فصائل في الجيش الوطني” تنتقد “عزم” وتعلن جاهزيتها للوساطة بين الفصائل”, *Enab Baladi*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507722>



Figure 5: The formation of the Azm Operations Room. Data from The Carter Center.

On 20 August 2021, five additional SNA factions announced their desire to join the Azm Operations Room. This included the Liwa al-Salam, The Sham Legion – North Sector, the factions of the Second Division (Elite Army and 113th Brigade), Faylaq al-Majd, and Division 13 (see Fig. 6 below).²³ However, Azm would soon find that its own internal dynamics were incredibly fragile.

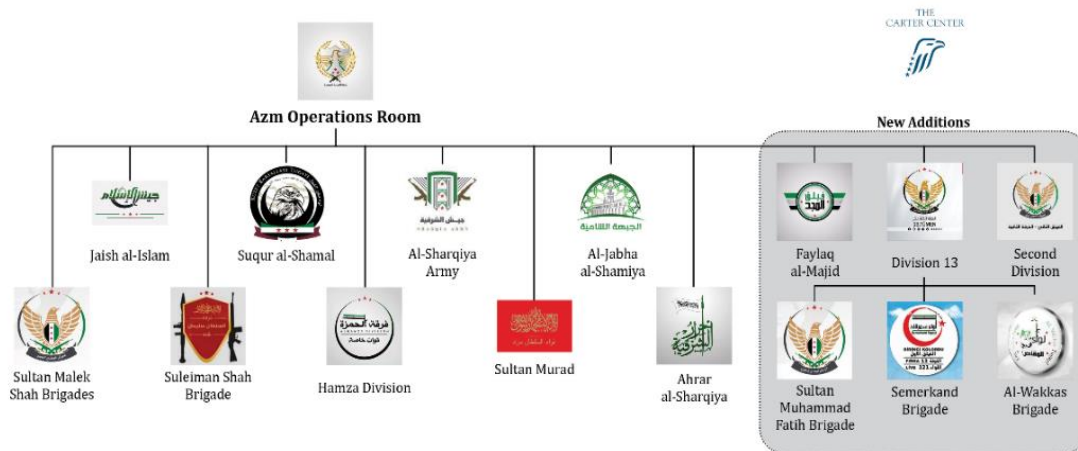


Figure 6: The composition of the Azm Operations Room of the Turkish-backed opposition’s Syrian National Army as of 20 August 2021. Data from The Carter Center.

²³ “ريف حلب.. خمسة فصائل تنضم إلى غرفة عمليات “عزم””, *Enab Baladi*, August, 21, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/506686>

On 24 August 2021, the Hamza Division, Suqur al-Shamal, and Suleiman Shah Division withdrew from Azm.²⁴ The groups were reportedly unsatisfied with the integration process, arguing that they were not receiving equitable representation within the operations room.²⁵ Other non-Azm SNA factions, namely Al-Rahman Division, Al-Mutasim, and 20th Division, offered to mediate the dispute,²⁶ but the mediation failed. Developments by the end of August 2021 are shown in Fig. 7 below:

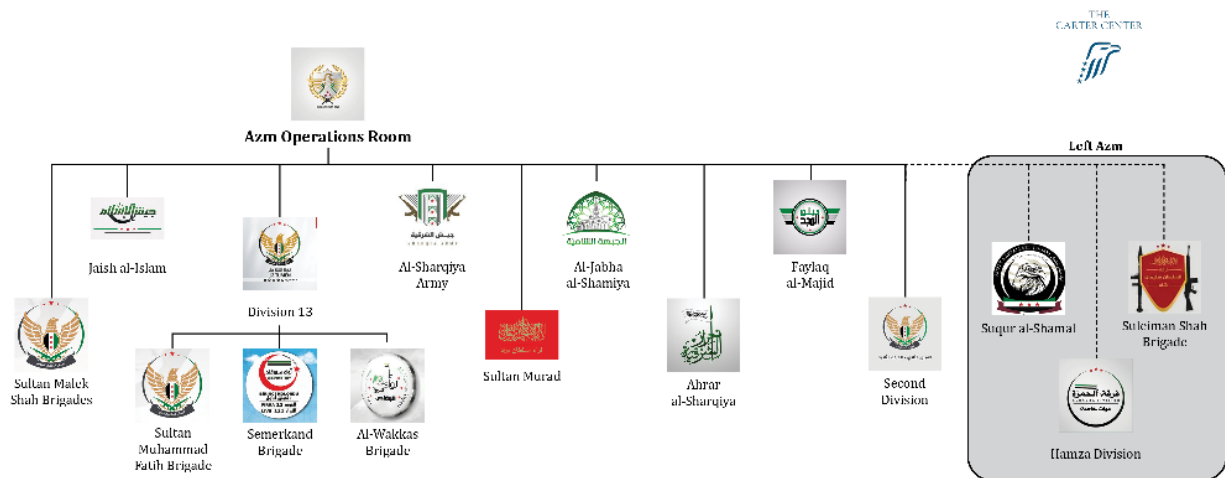


Figure 7: The composition of the Azm Operations Room of the Turkish-backed opposition’s Syrian National Army as of 31 August 2021. Data from The Carter Center.

On 10 September 2021, a new SNA coalition was formed called the Syrian Liberation Front (الجبهة السورية للتحرير).²⁷ The SLF saw the 20th Division, Al-Mutasim Brigade, and three former Azm factions coming together to form a new military bloc.²⁸ The SLF’s objectives were similar to those of Azm

²⁴ Abdul Aziz Shwsh, “Three Factions Withdraw From the ‘Azm’ Operations Room, What Did They Justify Their Decision”, Shwiesh.com, August 24, 2021, <https://1wwwshwiesh.wordpress.com/2021/08/24/three-factions-withdraw-from-the-azm-operations-room-what-did-they-justify-their-decision/>

²⁵ “فصائل في الجيش الوطني ” تنتقد “عزم” وتعلن جاهزيتها للوساطة بين الفصائل “ , *Enab Baladi*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507722>

²⁶ “فصائل في الجيش الوطني ” تنتقد “عزم” وتعلن جاهزيتها للوساطة بين الفصائل “ , *Enab Baladi*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/507722>

²⁷ Sultan Al-Kanj, “Turkey-Backed Syrian Opposition Groups Merge Under New Banner,” *Al-Monitor*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/turkey-backed-syrian-opposition-groups-merge-under-new-banner>; Amin Al-Assi, “الجبهة السورية للتحرير”: عضو جديد يعمق الفوضى في الشمال “ , *Al-Araby Al-Jadid*, September 10, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yx9wwjat>; Bara Abdul Rahman, “الأهداف .. الجيش الوطني في الجبهة السورية للتحرير تشكيل جديد في الجيش الوطني.. الأهداف “ , *Syria.TV*, September 11, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yy2zd9md>

²⁸ “بعد انسحابها من “عزم” .. فصائل تعلن عن تكتل عسكري تابع لـ “الجيش الوطني “ , *Enab Baladi*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/511583>

Operations Room: They called for better integrating the various SNA factions with the hopes of setting up a single command center.²⁹ The SLF also experienced some initial expansion, with the Idlib-based Special Forces Division joining the group on 28 September.³⁰ These September changes are shown in Fig. 8 the graphic below:

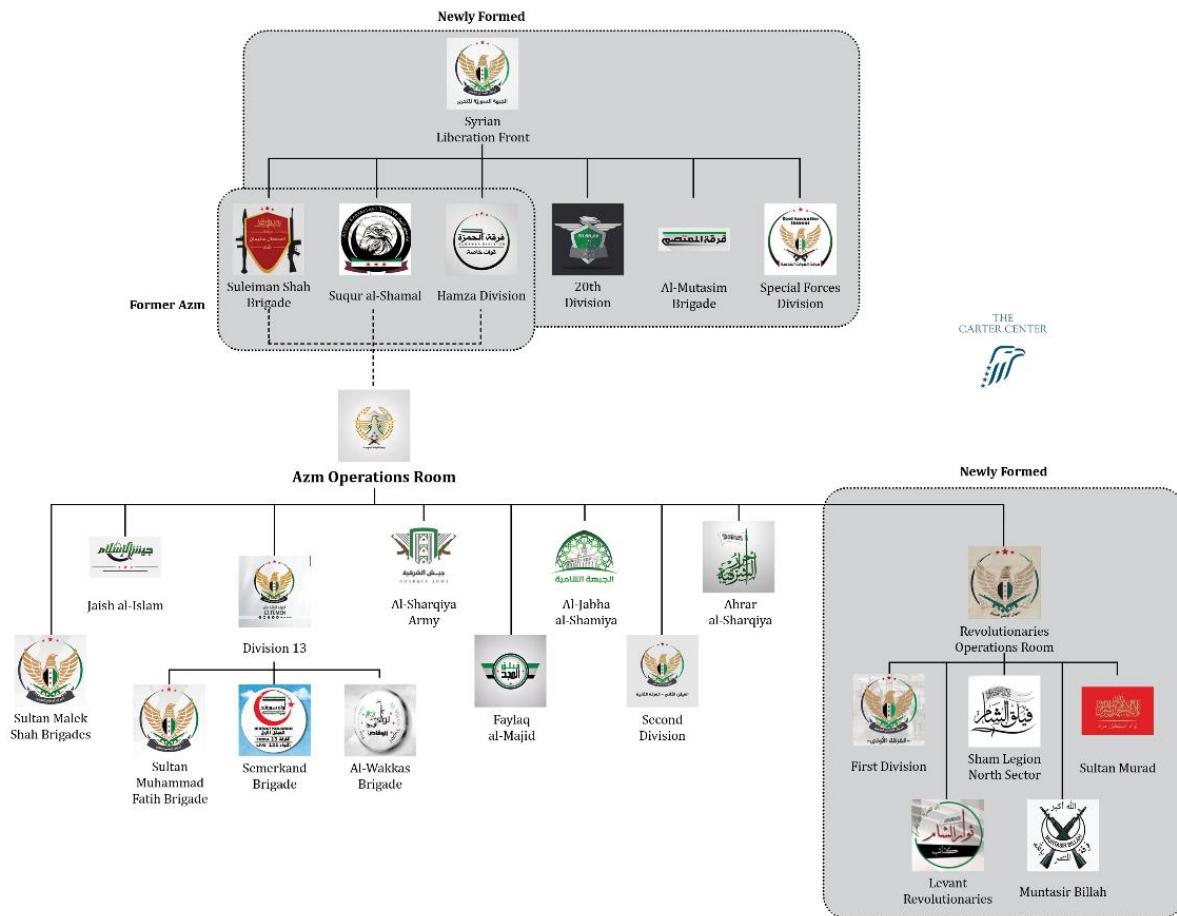


Figure 8: The composition of the Azm Operations Room and Syrian Liberation Front of the Turkish-backed opposition’s Syrian National Army as of 1 October 2021. Data from The Carter Center.

In their official rhetoric, neither Azm nor the SLF takes a hostile stance toward the other. Rather, both groups issue statements suggesting that any move toward integrating the SNA’s various factions, including those taken by other command centers, would be a positive one.³¹ In practice, this did not stop infighting within or between the groups. Take for example the 22-23 September

²⁹ Abdul Qadir Muhammad, “قيادة ”الجبهة السورية للتحرير“ تكشف لبلدي نيوز أهداف التشكيل الجديد”, *Syria.TV*, September 10, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/8kpsyzah>

³⁰ “معظم وجودها في إدلب.. القوات الخاصة” تنضم ل”الجبهة السورية””, *Enab Baladi*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/515983>

³¹ Ahmed Wadih Al-Absi, “عزم ” مشروع وطني وليست غرفة عمليات، وهي مستمرة في تحقيق أهدافها، حبر تلتقي قائد الفيلق الثالث ” أبو ””, *Hibr Press*, September 25, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4byj6exf>; Abdul Qadir Muhammad, “قيادة ”الجبهة“ ”, *Baladi News*, September 10, 2021 <https://tinyurl.com/8kpsyzah>

2021, clashes between the Elite Army of Azm and Suqour al-Shamal of the SLF over civilian property seizures in Sheikh Rose and Abudan, Aleppo Governorate.³² Representatives from the SLF and Azm eventually stepped in to help mediate the conflict, but this was hardly a new phenomenon regarding infighting in Turkish-held territory.

Despite losing some of its members, Azm began to consolidate its groups. On 1 October, Azm formed a new subgroup called the Revolutionaries Movement (ثائرون).³³ This subgroup would be led by Sultan Murad commanders, and included the Levant Revolutionaries, First Division, Muntasir Billah, and the Sham Legion – North Sector as its members. This was followed by the creation of an additional subgroup called the Third Legion (الفيلق الثالث) on 18 October 2021.³⁴ The Third Legion consisted of six additional Azm factions: Faylaq al-Majid, Sultan Malek Shah Brigades, Jaish al-Islam, Liwa 51, Levant Front, and Liwa Salam.

In the same month, the SLF saw additional defections from its ranks. On 15 October, Suqour al-Shamal and the 20th Division both left the SLF. Ironically, Suqour al-Shamal instead decided to return to the Azm Operations Room.³⁵ The next month on 11 November, Suleiman Shah Brigade returned to Azm, operating under the Revolutionaries subgroup.³⁶ The changes throughout October 2021 are shown in the formation of the SLF, SNA, and Azm Operations Room in Fig. 9 below:

³² "عفرين.. الوصول إلى اتفاق مبدئي بين "جيش النخبة" و"صقور الشمال" , *Enab Baladi*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/514974>

³³ Abdul Qadir Muhammad, "حركة ثائرون.. اندماج جديد لفصائل جديدة شمال سوريا" , *Baladi News*, October 1, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/c9yjmne>; Bara Abdul Rahman, "ومباركة من الجبهة "عزم" اندماج 5 فصائل داخل غرفة "عزم" اندماج 6 فصائل من المعارضة السورية المسلحة تحت اسم "الفيلق الثالث" , *Syria.TV*, October 2, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4zhper9r>

³⁴ "اندماج 6 فصائل من المعارضة السورية المسلحة تحت اسم "الفيلق الثالث" , *Al-Mayadeen*, October 18, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/ykks7nr6>; Sultan Al-Kanj, "Turkish-Backed Factions Outmaneuver Syrian Jihadist Group in Idlib" , *Al-Monitor*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/turkish-backed-factions-outmaneuver-syrian-jihadist-group-idlib>

³⁵ Khalid al-Khateb, "شمال سوريا: فصائل المعارضة تنشق وتندمج..إستعدادا للمعركة" , *Al-Modon*, October 15, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/3waw9cu5>

³⁶ "فرقة السلطان سليمان شاه تعود لفرقة القيادة الموحدة (عزم)" , *Al-Mohrar Media*, November 11, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4uv64x67>; Thaar Al-Mohammad, "عزم" تقطف ثمار التنظيم والحزم.. مبادرة لإنهاء الاصطفافات في الجيش "" , *Syria.TV*, November 13, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/46zdnujv>

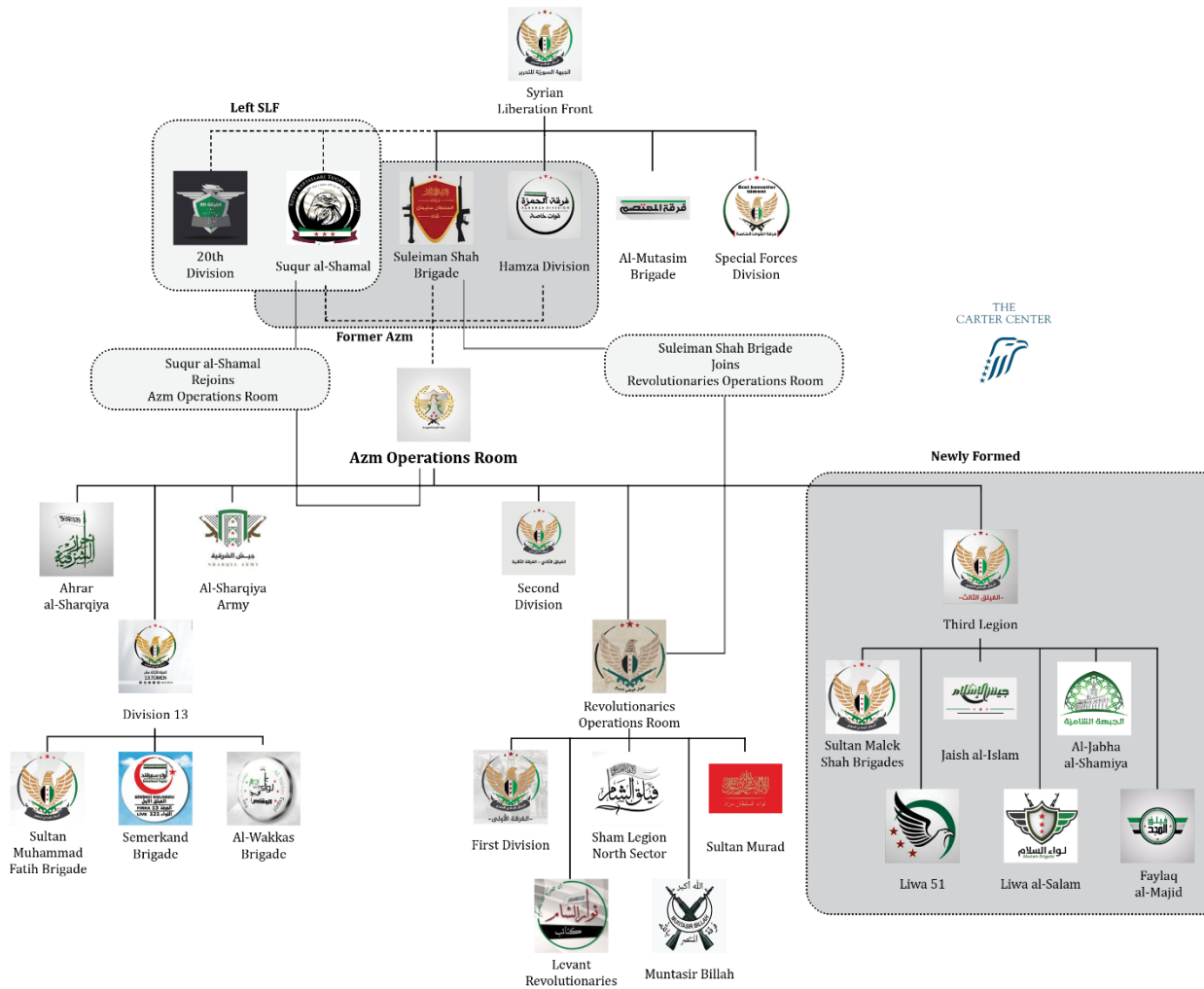


Figure 9: The composition of the Azm Operations Room and Syrian Liberation Front of the Turkish-backed opposition's Syrian National Army as of 15 November 2021. Data from The Carter Center.

On 23 January 2022, a new merger was announced in which the Syrian Front for Liberation would merge with the Revolutionaries subgroup, forming the Thareoun Front for Liberation (هيئة ثائرون) (للتحرير).³⁷ Ostensibly, this new alliance would fall within the Azm umbrella, consolidating most of the largest SNA factions under the Azm alliance. At the time of this writing, the merging of SLF and parts of Azm could mark an important move toward bringing the various SNA factions under a unified leadership. The changes from January 2022 are represented in Fig. 10 below:

³⁷ Orwa Ajjoub, "Thaeroun Movement," *Twitter*, January 23, 2022, accessed January 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/OAjjoub/status/1485305131075870721>, "تشكيل جديد باندماج "حركة ثائرون" و"الجبهة السورية"، *Syria.TV*, January 23, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yjrvntbn>

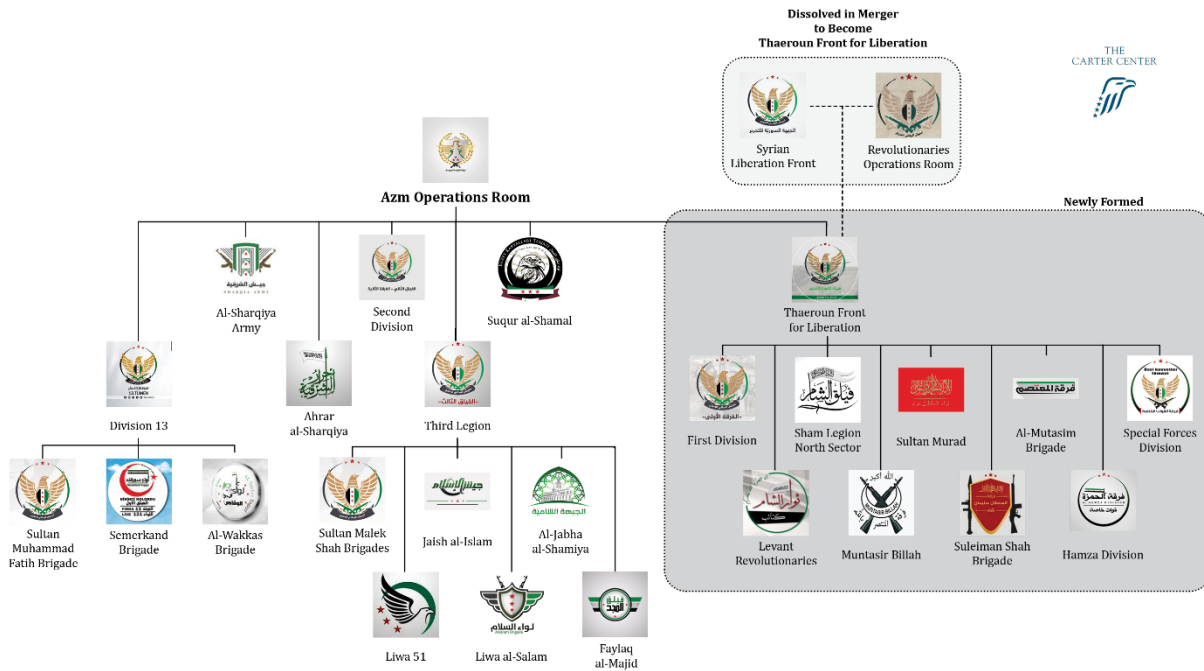


Figure 10: The composition of the Azm Operations Room of the Turkish-backed opposition’s Syrian National Army as of 24 January 2022. Data from The Carter Center.

On 15 February 2022, a new SNA merger was announced in Suluk, Ar-Raqqa Governorate. Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Sharqiya Army, Suqur al-Sham, and 20th Division announced that they had merged to form the Liberation and Construction Movement (حركة التحرير والبناء).³⁸ The merger consisted of SNA groups originating from northeastern Syria (see figure 11). Houshen Al-Hammadi, commander of Sharqiya Army, became the commander of this new movement.³⁹ The Liberation and Construction Movement has begun to expand, incorporating the Operation Peace Spring-based Al-Ghab Brigade and Ahrar Al-Qaqaa on 1 March 2022.⁴⁰ Reportedly the new merger would fall under the Azm Operations Room,⁴¹ but other reports indicate fault lines in the alliance. Both the Thaeroun and the new Liberation Movement reportedly are unhappy with the uneven power and influence of groups within the Azm Operation Room.⁴² How Azm and SNA will handle these

³⁸ “ حركة التحرير والبناء .. اندماج جديد تحت مظلة “الجيش الوطني” “ , *Enab Baladi*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/547940>; Houshen Hammadi, “إعلان تشكيل حركة التحرير والبناء” *Twitter*, February 15, 2022, accessed February 15, 2022, https://twitter.com/Houshen_Hammadi/status/149354333532155904

³⁹ “ حركة التحرير والبناء .. فصائل في الجيش الوطني السوري تندمج في تشكيل عسكري جديد “ , *Halab Today*, February 15, 2022, <https://halabtodaytv.net/archives/211881>

⁴⁰ “ انضمام جديد لفصائل تحت مظلة “الجيش الوطني” في مناطق “تبع السلام “ , *Enab Baladi*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/553087>.

⁴¹ Ahmed Ibrahim, “ التحرير والبناء ... نكتل عسكري بغطاء من الجيش السوري المعارض “ , *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, February 16, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/45mxhk3x>.

⁴² Khaled Al-Khatib, “ شمال سوريا: حركة “التحرير والبناء”.. اندماج جديد يشرد المعارضة “ , *Al-Modon*, February 16, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3ute8ur2>.

grievances remains to be seen. But if history is any indication, a similar pattern of mergers and infighting will continue.

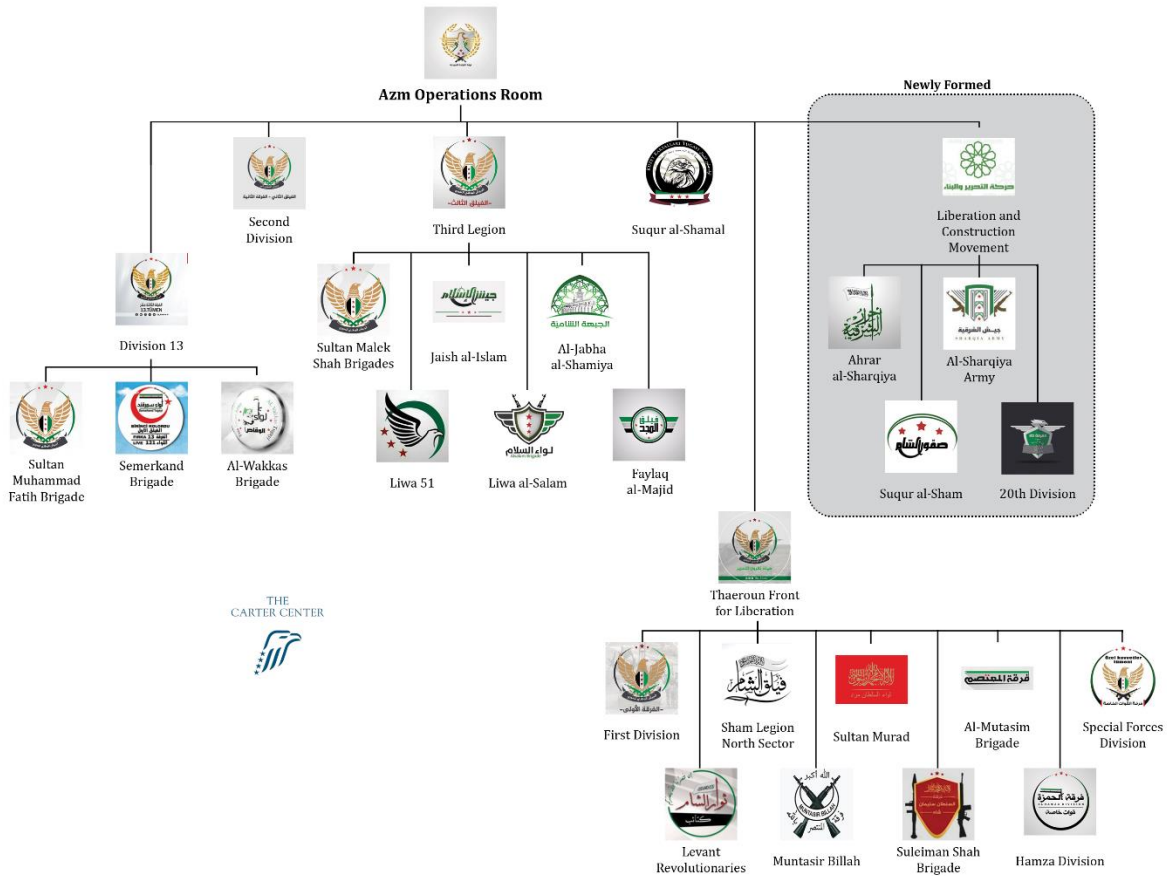


Figure 11: The composition of the Azm Operations Room of the Turkish-backed opposition’s Syrian National Army as of 1 March 2022. Data from The Carter Center.

However, Azm intends to impose strict sanctions on factions and commanders for infighting or harming the stability of its coalition. Prior to rejoining Azm, Abu Amsha had to agree that his Suleiman Shah Division would cooperate with any investigation regarding alleged violations by the group.⁴³ As a result of these investigations, Abu Amsha was forced to dismiss two of his brothers from the faction.⁴⁴ However, as the investigation progressed, Abu Amsha became the subject of

⁴³ “عزم” تفتح ملف “أبو عمشة”.. فرصة أخيرة قبل خيار الاستئصال” , Syria.TV, December 25, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9xu6hb>

⁴⁴ “عفرين”.. “أبو عمشة” يقلل شقيقه من مناصبهما تحت ضغط المحاسبة” , Enab Baladi, December 26, 2021, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/535063>

investigations himself. This led to his denouncing the proceedings and attempting to mobilize his supporters in Sheikh Hadid.⁴⁵ On 16 February 2022, the committee investigating Abu Amsha called for his dismissal,⁴⁶ a decision that was accepted by Azm and other SNA groups.⁴⁷ Although there is an effort to isolate Abu Amsha and his advisors from Sultan Suleiman Shah, this will be difficult. Sultan Suleiman Shah remains one of the largest factions within the SNA, making any effort to militarily confront him risky.⁴⁸ Despite statements that Abu Amsha would be isolated and possibly exiled, early signs indicate otherwise.⁴⁹ On 8 March 2022, Abu Amsha appeared alongside other SNA leaders to meet with members of the Syrian Interim Government.⁵⁰ Especially considering Abu Amsha's earlier outreach to HTS - HTS could possibly use additional intra-SNA splintering to increase its influence.

Why Azm and SLF were created remains contested. It could be attributed to haphazard rivalries and infighting among the groups or to a rift in ideology. According to an informed analyst, one of the rooms was ideologically closer to HTS than other SNA groups. Using one of these groups could facilitate cooperation with HTS. Some rumors point to the SNA aspiring to absorb HTS, and this would help push matters in the direction of unifying all the armed opposition under a single banner.⁵¹ Despite the rumors of an HTS-SNA merger, this has yet to occur.

Engagement Beyond Syria

In 2020, the SNA's operations shifted to include an international component. Turkey was flying Syrian SNA fighters to Libya to support the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA).⁵² Beyond Libya, Turkey was deploying Syrian combatants to fight alongside Azerbaijani forces against Armenian forces in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. These deployments led to a drastic re-

⁴⁵ "عزم" تفتح ملف "أبو عمشة" .. فرصة أخيرة قبل خيار الاستئصال"" *Syria.TV*, December 25, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9xu6hb>

⁴⁶ "عزل أبو عمشة من "جميع مهامه" ومنعه من تسلّم "مناصب الثورة" لاحقًا" *Enab Baladi*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/548580>.

⁴⁷ "عزم" تتبنى قرار عزل "أبو عمشة" وقيادات فصيله وتتعهد بالتنفيذ" *Enab Baladi*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/548855>

⁴⁸ "العمشات" .. فصيل عسكري يملك "مقاطعة" شمالي حلب" *Enab Baladi*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/548649>.

⁴⁹ Abdul Qadir Muhammad, "هل يلتزم "أبو عمشة" بقرار عزله؟" *Baladi News*, February 17, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mwfvvrfn>.

⁵⁰ "عزل وهمي" لـ"أبو عمشة" .. "المؤقتة" صامتة والقضاء عاجز" *Enab Baladi*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/556339>. "عبد الرحمن مصطفى رئيس الحكومة المؤقتة يعقد اجتماعاً مع القادة العسكريين في" *Syrian Interim Government*, March 8, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2s3nc6w4>.

⁵¹ Sultan Al-Kanj, "Syrian Jihadist Group, Turkish-backed Opposition Reportedly Consider Merger," *Al-Monitor*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/syrian-jihadist-group-turkish-backed-opposition-reportedly-consider-merger>

⁵² The Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, "Turkey's Recruitment of Syrian Mercenaries to Fight in Libya: Process and Legal Consequences," *Syrians For Truth and Justice*, May 11, 2020, accessed October 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Public-version-Turkey%E2%80%99s-Recruitment-of-Syrian-Mercenaries-to-Fight-in-Libya-Process-and-Legal-Consequences.pdf>

evaluation of the impact of the Syrian conflict in other countries. The SNA turned into not just a Syrian proxy for Turkey but also a mercenary corps that could be deployed overseas.

A thorough investigation by Syrians for Truth and Justice detailed how Turkey processed and organized its recruitment effort, as well as which SNA factions were involved in Libya and Azerbaijan. A few SNA factions handled the recruitment within their respective SNA corps. The Suleiman Shah Brigade primarily controlled recruitment in the First Corps. Responsibility for recruitment in the Second and Third Corps was shared by Sultan Murad Division, Al-Mu'tasim, and the Hamza Division. Faylaq al-Sham and Faylaq al-Majd played important roles in recruiting fighters for both Libya and Azerbaijan.⁵³ Other groups such as the Levant Front, Faylaq al-Majd, the Free Police of Afrin, and Jaysh al-Islam reportedly sent some fighters supervised by Al-Mu'tasim in Libya.⁵⁴ A few other smaller groups such as al-Waqqas reportedly sent fighters to Azerbaijan.⁵⁵

While the exact incentives and methods used for recruitment are outside the scope of this brief, it is worth noting that desperation among SNA fighters is a major driver of this dynamic.⁵⁶ In both Libya and Azerbaijan, SNA fighters were offered a higher salary as well as numerous benefits for their families. Alongside the obvious financial incentives, SNA fighters who volunteered to fight in Libya could be granted Libyan citizenship by the GNA.⁵⁷ Syrians who fought in Libya described the conditions there as much more favorable and safer than what they had experienced in Syria. This exploitation and use of mercenaries has been condemned by the international community and human rights organizations.⁵⁸

⁵³ The Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, "Mercenarism in Syria: Predatory Recruitment and the Enrichment of Criminal Militias," *Syrians For Truth and Justice*, May 2021, accessed October 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ENG-Mercenaries.pdf>

⁵⁴ The Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, "Turkey's Recruitment of Syrian Mercenaries to Fight in Libya: Process and Legal Consequences," *Syrians For Truth and Justice*, May 11, 2020, accessed October 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Public-version-Turkey%E2%80%99s-Recruitment-of-Syrian-Mercenaries-to-Fight-in-Libya-Process-and-Legal-Consequences.pdf>

⁵⁵ The Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, "Mercenarism in Syria: Predatory Recruitment and the Enrichment of Criminal Militias," *Syrians For Truth and Justice*, May 2021, accessed October 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ENG-Mercenaries.pdf>

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Tsurkov, "The Syrian Mercenaries Fighting Foreign Wars for Russia and Turkey," *New York Review of Books*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/10/16/the-syrian-mercenaries-fighting-foreign-wars-for-russia-and-turkey/>

⁵⁷ The Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre, "An Uncertain Fate Awaits Thousands of Syrian Mercenaries in Libya," *Syrians for Truth and Justice*, March 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/An-Uncertain-Fate-Awaits-Thousands-of-Syrian-Mercenaries-in-Libya.pdf>

⁵⁸ Campbell MacDiarmid and David Chazan, "France's Macron Condemns Turkey For Backing Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh," *The Telegraph*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/09/30/frances-macron-condemns-turkey-backing-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh/>; "Libya: Violations Related to Mercenary Activities Must Be Investigated," *United Nations*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25970>, "European Parliament Resolution of 11 March 2021 on the Syrian Conflict – 10 Years After the Uprising," *European Parliament*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0088_EN.html?fbclid=IwAR0KEtN_mcxSog6vQWmZodgXwj15NZKpaFCb50cAWCDZThi9ARoQM7-y17w

It is unlikely that Turkey will stop using SNA fighters abroad. Although Turkish-backed Syrian fighters have returned from Azerbaijan, the conflict in Libya remains frozen. Even in 2021, there were reports of Turkey funneling additional SNA fighters to Libya to reinforce the GNA.⁵⁹ Further, Turkey reportedly recruited SNA fighters to be sent to Kabul to manage the international airport as the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Through its engagements with the SNA, Turkey has access to a relatively cheap and reliable source of combatants who can be deployed to further its interests in other zones of contestation outside of Syria. To a certain extent, Turkey is adopting a model that has been used by its Middle Eastern rivals, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Both have used proxies to great effect for their own interests.⁶¹ Similar strategies have been adopted by Russia, which also sent Syrian fighters to Armenia and Libya. This has contributed to tensions between Turkey and Russia. Escalation in one theater can impact other arenas of Turkish-Russian competition.

Implications

Infighting has been a common problem for the Syrian opposition since the start of the conflict, and the SNA is not exempt. It is unclear whether Azm can better integrate the various SNA factions or if they will remain fractured. Early developments suggest that infighting will persist.

It is unlikely that the SNA will be able to form into a unified entity without substantial compromises or major Turkish pressure. Infighting causes uncertainty among opposition groups but does not affect their overall control over Turkish-held territories. Indeed, ultimate control and protection from further GoS invasion is due to the presence of Turkish armed forces, not the SNA. This effectively negates some of the most pressing external threats the SNA would have to face.

While Turkey might benefit from integration and the stability it could bring, it is not pressuring Syrian groups to unify. In Turkish-held territory, the level of infighting has not changed Turkey's approach. The SNA is eager to fight alongside Turkey and its fighters are willing to be sent elsewhere. GoS forces and the SDF are unwilling and incapable of forcing Turkey to withdraw from Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, and Al-Hassakah Governorates. Any attempt would incur great costs and escalate the potential for a direct war between the various regional powers.

There is a popular sentiment that the SNA is no longer relevant, being described simply as a Turkish proxy. While Turkey's influence is real, the SNA remains relevant in the conflict. Whether for delivering humanitarian aid in the region or for conflict resolution purposes, it is vital to continue

⁵⁹ Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey Sends Mixed Signals Over Syrian Mercenaries in Libya", *Al-Monitor*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/turkey-sends-mixed-signals-over-syrian-mercenaries-libya>

⁶⁰ Fehim Tastekin, "Will Turkey Use Syrian Mercenaries in Kabul?", *Al-Monitor*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/turkey-likely-use-syrian-mercenaries-kabul>; Umer Karim, "Turkey's Transforming Political and Security Relationship with Afghanistan", *Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, August 12, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/turkey/turkeys-transforming-political-and-security-relationship-with-afghanistan/>.

⁶¹ Matthew Petti and Trita Parsi, "No Clean Hands: The Interventions of Middle Eastern Powers, 2010-2020" *Quincy Institute*, July 19, 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/no-clean-hands-the-interventions-of-middle-eastern-powers/#different-countries-similar-methods>

engagement with the SNA and Turkey. Despite the disorganized nature of the SNA, it still controls territory and plays an active role in conflict. Any attempt at brokering peace in Syria must involve discussions with Turkey and the SNA and work to make sure all factions adhere to any peace agreement. A unified SNA could lead to more independence from Turkey, a stronger bargaining position in peace talks, and better conditions to fight off rivals and opponents. However, at the moment, disunity will continue.