




Syria's Unruly Guns: Forging a Single Army from a Fractured State

HAID HAID



Graduates of Syria's General Security forces under the country's new administration attend a ceremony in the northern city of Aleppo on February 12, 2025. (Photo by Aaref WATAD / AFP)

More than 13 years of armed conflict have left Syria a fractured patchwork of isolated regions controlled by rival factions. Yet the dramatic collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 opened a rare window of opportunity to reunify the state under a single authority.



Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant force behind Assad's fall, quickly positioned itself as the architect of military unification. Capitalizing on the political momentum of the moment, HTS negotiated agreements to merge various armed factions, including former opposition groups, Kurdish-led forces, and Druze factions into a unified national army.¹ For the first time in over a decade, restoring the state's monopoly on the use of force seemed within reach.

Yet subsequent outbreaks of violence, whether triggered by remnants of the former regime, as in Latakia, or by rivalries between security forces, as in Rural Damascus and Sweida, have revealed just how far that vision remains from reality.² They have exposed the transitional government's limited authority over many of the armed factions it claims to control.

While the unification process has produced symbolic milestones, such as establishing structures, formal divisions, and a chain of command, its implementation remains fragile. It continues to be undermined by four key factors: 1) entrenched mistrust, 2) financial shortfalls, 3) ideological rifts, and 4) persistent external interference.³ Without a genuinely unified and accountable military, Syria's already fragile transition risks collapsing.

The Fragile Push for a Unified Military

In the wake of the Assad regime's collapse, interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa moved quickly to dismantle Syria's long-entrenched patchwork of armed factions. Unifying the country's various militias, collecting weapons, and laying the groundwork for a centralized national army were key early priorities for the transitional government. Yet despite high-profile announcements, progress has been slow and largely superficial, hampered by longstanding rivalries, mutual distrust, and deep-rooted ideological differences.

To kickstart the process, al-Sharaa launched a flurry of meetings with commanders from across the country. While the substance of these negotiations has not been made public, the administration

announced on December 24, 2024, that all revolutionary factions had agreed to dissolve and integrate under the Ministry of Defense.⁴

Breakthroughs followed in Sweida and northeastern Syria, two regions that had initially resisted. The dominant forces in each agreed in principle to join the unified military, although talks over the details of integration were ongoing at the time of writing.⁵

Al-Sharaa has also moved to consolidate Syria's military leadership. He appointed Murhaf Abu Qasra as defense minister and Ali al-Naasan as chief of staff; both were HTS military commanders who played prominent roles in the offensive that led to Assad's defeat.⁶ Under this leadership, the transitional authorities established military divisions and tasked newly appointed commanders with organizing the country's fragmented armed units.⁷

Yet beneath the surface, genuine unification remains elusive. Conversations with sources familiar with the process reveal that most armed factions continue to operate independently, retaining their original leadership structures and territorial control.⁸ Most notably, elements of the Syrian National Army (SNA), a Turkish-backed armed coalition, still function autonomously in the northwest.⁹ The picture is similarly complex in the northeast and the south, where Kurdish-led forces and Druze armed groups respectively remain beyond the authority of Damascus—despite previously expressing a willingness to join the unified military.¹⁰

Entrenched Mistrust

The first major obstacle to unifying Syria's armed factions is the deep-seated mistrust among these groups—particularly toward HTS. Years of internal conflict, ideological rifts, and HTS's history of coercion when subjugating rival groups have left a legacy of resentment and suspicion. The idea that formerly hostile factions should now serve under a unified chain of command, especially one constructed by HTS, remains a hard sell in the absence of genuine reconciliation or inclusive institutional reform.¹¹

Since the start of the transition, the appointment of HTS commanders to senior military posts has only deepened these concerns.¹² Although recent efforts have introduced more diverse leadership at the divisional level, many commanders outside the group's orbit remain skeptical, fearing that full integration may lead to their marginalization, loss of leverage, and ultimately, irrelevance.¹³

These fears have translated into concrete actions. Many factions have refused to dismantle their internal structures or surrender heavy weaponry. Fighters often continue to answer to their original leaders rather than the Ministry of Defense, and groups have frequently concealed or stockpiled arms as a hedge against future betrayal or forced disarmament.¹⁴

In southern Syria, some groups have insisted on joining the national army as intact units rather than being dispersed into new formations. Others, like the 8th Brigade, have refrained from full cooperation pending formal guarantees about the army's chain of command, operational autonomy, and decision-making authority.¹⁵

Fear of future accountability also plays a role. Many fighters worry they could face prosecution for wartime abuses if they surrender their arms and positions. Transitional justice remains undefined, and the specter of retribution—especially for factions accused of serious violations—hangs over the integration process.¹⁶

Financial Shortfalls

The second major factor standing in the way of unifying Syria's armed factions is the stark lack of financial and logistical capacity. Building a professional, cohesive military requires substantial investment in recruitment, training, logistics, equipment, and salaries—resources the transitional government simply does not have.¹⁷

The military infrastructure inherited from the Assad regime is fractured and depleted, ravaged by more than a decade of war. At the same time, Syria faces a severe economic crisis and overwhelming humanitarian needs.¹⁸ In light of these competing priorities, the transitional authorities must balance the pressing plight of civilians with the cost of constructing and maintaining a credible national defense force.

So far, foreign assistance has fallen short. Although countries like Jordan and Türkiye have voiced support for Syria's military unification, this has not translated into meaningful financial support. International donors remain wary of funding defense efforts that include groups with records of human rights abuses or ties to extremists.¹⁹

The funding gap is already having consequences. Many factions continue to receive salaries through unofficial channels or from foreign patrons such as Türkiye, effectively bypassing the Ministry of Defense.²⁰ This undermines the central government's authority, delays real integration, and preserves rival power centers.

Economic incentives also work against unification. Years of war have allowed armed groups to establish revenue streams like those of states, by levying tolls at checkpoints, controlling smuggling routes, and taxing local markets. Merging into a centralized army would mean giving up these income sources and submitting to oversight, a cost many commanders are unwilling to pay.²¹ As a result, some are engaging in the integration process only superficially, seeking legitimacy without losing autonomy.

While recent decisions by the United States and the European Union to fully lift sanctions on Syria could help facilitate greater financial support for the transitional government, they are unlikely to meet its military and financial needs, due to the continued designation of HTS as a terrorist organization and ongoing concerns over future human rights violations.²²

Ideological Rifts

The third major hurdle to unifying Syria's armed factions takes the form of deep political and ideological disagreements, especially those pitting Damascus against groups in Sweida and the Kurdish-led northeast. These groups' reluctance to integrate into a national army reflects not just skepticism about the transitional government's intentions, but a clash of competing visions for Syria's future.²³

At the core of these tensions is a fundamental ideological divide. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Druze militias advocate for a secular, decentralized political system that ensures local autonomy in governance, security, and military affairs. The SDF, in particular, envisions a multi-ethnic federal structure with robust Kurdish self-rule in the northeast. This model sharply contrasts with the centralized, Islamist-leaning vision promoted by HTS.²⁴

Both the SDF and Druze factions fear being absorbed into a Sunni-majority political order, resembling predecessors that have historically marginalized minority communities. Such concerns have been compounded by these factions' exclusion from early military appointments, political processes, and key government positions. The transitional authorities' failure to protect communities adequately and respond to recent episodes of sectarian violence—particularly against Alawite and Druze populations—has further deepened their mistrust.²⁵

In response, both groups have insisted on retaining control over their local security forces and maintaining access to heavy weaponry, at least until credible guarantees of political representation and community protection are established.²⁶ Their members' refusal to integrate as individuals into centrally commanded units reflects a broader concern with preserving internal cohesion and deterrence capabilities, while negotiating leverage in the evolving political landscape.

The SDF and Druze factions have also criticized the Ministry of Defense's personnel decisions, particularly the dominance of officials from a single sect and the appointment of foreign nationals to leadership roles. Additionally, they have condemned the promotion of controversial commanders from armed factions implicated in abuses against civilians, including Kurdish ones.²⁷

Persistent External Interference

The fourth major obstacle to unifying Syria's armed factions is continued interference by regional powers. Unresolved rivalries and competing agendas among outside powers have consistently obstructed efforts by Damascus to build a cohesive and inclusive national military, deepening mistrust and perpetuating fragmentation.

Türkiye, a major player in northern Syria, remains wary of any arrangement that legitimizes the Kurdish-led SDF or grants it formal autonomy.²⁸ This has likely contributed to Ankara's reluctance to pressure its allied Turkmen factions, such as Sultan Murad, al-Hamzat, and the Amshat (operating under the anti-Assad SNA mentioned above), to integrate fully into the new Syrian military structure. Turkish decision-makers appear to be waiting for clarity on the SDF's future status before endorsing full unification of their proxies.²⁹

Meanwhile, Israel's escalating military campaign in southern Syria has further undermined unification efforts. Since the fall of Assad, Israel has carried out more than 600 airstrikes targeting sites in Damascus, Daraa, and Sweida. These operations are largely driven by strategic aims—chief among them the creation of a demilitarized buffer zone adjacent to the occupied Golan Heights, potentially administered by non-state actors like Druze armed groups, whom it perceives as less hostile than other actors to Israeli interests.³⁰ As a result, Druze factions have been emboldened to negotiate from a position of strength, further straining relations with the transitional government.

The Consequences of Continued Fragmentation

The ongoing fragmentation of Syria's armed factions presents profound and multifaceted risks to the success of the country's transitional process. A key consequence is the erosion of the transitional government's authority. While Damascus may formally claim control over much of the country, in reality it governs through a loose mosaic of semi-autonomous armed groups with varying degrees of loyalty. This fragmented landscape erodes the state's monopoly over the use of force—a cornerstone of legitimate governance—and fosters parallel power structures that undermine national cohesion and the credibility of state institutions.

This places Syria's stability at risk. Armed factions operating without unified command structures are more susceptible to infighting, power struggles, and arbitrary violence. Clashes over territory, resources, or influence frequently harm civilians, either directly through armed conflict or indirectly through abuses by undisciplined fighters. This persistent volatility damages public trust in the transitional authorities and deepens social fractures, increasing the likelihood of renewed conflict.³¹

Fragmentation also obstructs transitional justice. If factions maintain internal chains of command and loyalty networks, efforts to investigate wartime abuses or prosecute violations face resistance or outright defiance. Commanders can shield subordinates from legal accountability, perpetuating a culture of impunity. This not only impedes reconciliation efforts but also alienates communities that have suffered abuses, particularly when perpetrators remain in positions of power.³²

The lack of security integration also threatens to derail Syria's economic recovery. Investors and international donors view ongoing military fragmentation as a key indicator of political instability and conflict risk. Without a credible, unified security architecture, long-

term investments in infrastructure, reconstruction, and development remain unlikely. Donor states are reluctant to channel funds into a system where their contributions could be co-opted by unaccountable factions or inadvertently fuel renewed violence.³³

Conclusion

To move Syria toward lasting stability, the transitional government must urgently tackle the root challenges obstructing military unification. This requires building clear institutional frameworks for integration, ensuring genuine inclusion, prioritizing merit over loyalty in military leadership, and engaging in honest, sustained dialogue—especially with historically marginalized groups.

Trust cannot be imposed; it must be built, through transparency, accountability, rule of law, and a credible process of transitional justice. Financial and logistical backing should be tied to clear oversight and reform milestones. At the same time, curbing foreign interference is vital to reclaim national sovereignty.

Syria's military must reflect the nation's diversity—not just in structure, but in purpose, serving a unified vision rather than factional agendas. A cohesive, inclusive, and accountable national army is more than a security goal; it is the basis of political recovery and long-term peace.

What is at stake is not just military reform, but the foundation for a unified, sovereign, and representative Syrian state.

ENDNOTES

1. "Al-Shar' yatafaqq ma' qadat al-fasha'il al-Suriyah 'ala al-andimaj fi Wizarat al-Difa'" [Al-Sharaa Agrees with Syrian Faction Leaders on Integration into Defense Ministry], *Al Jazeera*, December 24, 2024, <https://aja.ws/01wqb>.
2. Haid Haid, "Syria's sectarian violence is a ticking time bomb," *Al-Majalla*, May 3, 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/325422/politics/syrias-sectarian-violence-ticking-time-bomb>.
3. Syrian researcher, interview by author, Damascus, Syria, February 4, 2025.
4. Al Jazeera, "Al-Shar' yatafaqq."
5. Jaidaa Taha and Menna AlaaElDin, "Syria's interim president signs deal with Kurdish-led SDF to merge forces," *Reuters*, March 11, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/VTqMD>.
6. "Murhaf Abū Qasrah.. Wazir al-Difa' al-Suri ba'd khal' al-Asad" [Murhaf Abu Qasra: Syria's Minister of Defense after Assad's ouster], *Al Jazeera*, December 31, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4mJmrrE>; "Ali Nur al-Din al-Nu'san Ra'is Hay'at al-Arkān al-Suriyah al-Jadidah" [Ali Nour al-Din al-Naasan, the new Syrian Chief of Staff], *Al Jazeera*, January 11, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/CdxKR>.
7. Mohammed al-Sheikh, "Tashkil Jaysh Suriya al-Jadid sayatimm 'abr mara'ihil.. wa lil-munshaqqin dawr bariz" [The Formation of Syria's New Army Will Take Place in Stages... Defectors to Play a Key Role], *Al-Modon*, January 19, 2025, <https://bit.ly/3T5QOLm>.
8. Syrian military commander (Major), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 12, 2025.
9. Syrian military commander, interview.
10. Juan Souz, "Raghm al-tafawuḍ ma' al-Shar'.. Qasad tarfuḍ ḥall quwwatihā wa taslim al-silāḥ" [Despite Negotiations with al-Sharaa, the SDF Refuses to Disband Its Forces or Surrender Weapons], *Al-Arabiya*, January 22, 2025, <https://ara.tv/gazvu>.
11. Defected military officer (Colonel), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, February 5, 2025.
12. Omar Zaquq, "Taraqiya al-qubbāṭ tuthir jadalān bayn al-Suriyyin" [Officer Promotions Spark Controversy Among Syrians], *Al Jazeera*, December 30, 2024, <https://aja.ws/3yu7c3>.
13. Military commander (Captain), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 14, 2025.
14. Defected military officer (Colonel), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, February 5, 2025.
15. Mohammed Amin, "Jam' al-silāḥ fi Suriya... faṣā'il al-shamāl al-sharqī wa al-janūb tu' aqqid mihnāt al-idārah al-jadidah" [Weapons Collection in Syria... Factions in the Northeast and South Complicate the New Administration's Mission], *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, January 10, 2025, <https://edgs.co/b2idu>.
16. Military commander (Major), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 12, 2025.
17. Military commander (Major), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 12, 2025.
18. Syrian researcher, Damascus, interview by author, Syria, April 14, 2025.
19. Military commander (Captain), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 14, 2025.
20. Military commander (Major), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 12, 2025.
21. Syrian researcher, interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 13, 2025.
22. "EU lifts economic sanctions on Syria, following US move last week," *Al Jazeera*, May 20, 2025, <https://aje.io/so4het>; Syrian researcher, interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 13, 2025.
23. Haid Haid, "Unity or conflict: Where are fragile HTS-SDF talks headed?," *Al-Majalla*, February 3, 2025, <https://rb.gy/xls2gt>.
24. Haid, "Unity or Conflict."
25. Military commander (Captain), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 14, 2025.
26. Syrian researcher, interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 13, 2025.
27. Zaquq, "Taraqiya al-qubbāṭ"; Ali al-Karmali, "'Abū Ḥatim Shaqrā' 'Amidan fi al-Jaysh al-Suri: tarqiyah mulaṭṭakhah bi-l-dam taftaḥ jirāḥ al-Kurd!" [Abu Hatim Shaqra Named Major General: A Controversial Move That Reopens Kurdish Wounds], *Al-Hal*, May 13, 2025, <https://7al.net/?p=370953>.
28. Haid, "Unity or conflict."
29. Military commander (Captain), interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 14, 2025.
30. Rob Geist Pinfold, "Why is Israel Escalating its Strikes Against Syria?" *RUSI*, May 9, 2025, <https://rb.gy/3sccf7>.
31. Syrian researcher, interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 14, 2025.
32. Syrian researcher, interview.
33. Syrian researcher, interview by author, Damascus, Syria, April 13, 2025.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haid Haid is a non-resident senior fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs. He is also a senior non-resident fellow at the Arab Reform Initiative and a consulting research fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme. Previously, Haid was a programme manager focusing on Syria and Iraq at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East Office in Beirut. He has also worked as a senior protection assistant at UNHCR's Damascus office.

ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The ME Council produces policy-relevant research, convenes meetings and dialogues, and engages policy actors on geopolitical and socioeconomic issues facing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The ME Council serves as a bridge between the MENA region and the rest of the world, providing a regional perspective on global policy issues and establishing partnerships with other leading research centers and development organizations across the MENA region and the world.

MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Burj Al Mana 3rd floor, Street 850, Zone 60, Doha, Qatar

www.mecouncil.org

Copyright © 2025 The Middle East Council on Global Affairs

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The Council gratefully acknowledges the financial support of its donors, who value the independence of its scholarship. The analysis and policy recommendations presented in this and other Council publications are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the organization, its management, its donors, or its other scholars and affiliates.