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# Ongoing Violations Without Accountability: Islamic State Members in the Syrian National Army

## **Ongoing Violations Without Accountability: Islamic State Members in the Syrian National Army**

*The present report provides detailed information on 27 IS leaders and fighters who joined the ranks of the SNA*

## Executive Summary

The present report is concerned with the issue of Islamic State (IS) members joining the ranks of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), operating under the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. In this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) cites 27 names of former IS members now positioned in the SNA as 11 first and second-level leaders, 6 security officials, and 10 members of different ranks.

We collected detailed information on these 27 individuals as part of a total of 65 former IS members currently active in the ranks of the SNA which we will share with UN bodies. STJ obtained evidence of violations committed by these individuals while they served in IS, and later in the SNA. Furthermore, we identified which SNA groups the individuals joined — many which recruited Syrian civilians and fighters to fight as mercenaries in Libya and Azerbaijan.

While preparing this report, our team noted that the SNA concealed the identity of multiple leaders and fighters in member lists provided to the Turkish government.

For this paper, STJ conducted 28 interviews with leaders and fighters within the SNA and their families, as well as witnesses acquainted with the individuals discussed. This report is a part of a wider effort to collect information on former IS members who are now active in the Syrian territories among various parties in the conflict.

STJ discovered that the following SNA groups include IS members:

1. The Military Police service, led by Ahmed Ibrahim al-Kurdi and affiliated with the Ministry of Defense of the SIG, headed by Abdulrahman Mustafa and operating under the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, under the presidency of Naser al-Hariri;
2. Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East, led by Abu Hatem Shaqra;
3. The Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, led by Major Hussein Hamadi.
4. Martyrs of Badr Army/Jaysh Shuhada'a Badr, led by Abu al-Hasan Shuhada';
5. The Mu'tasim Division, led by Mu'tasim Abbas;
6. The Sultan Murad Division, led by Fahim Issa;
7. The al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, led by Sayf Abu Bakr;
8. The Malek Shah division, led by Mahmoud al-Baz.

## The Formation of the Syrian National Army

On 17 May 2016, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces elected Jawad Abu Hatab Prime Minister of the SIG.<sup>12</sup> Later, on 30 August 2017, the [Syrian Islamic Council](#) and the SIG called for the formation of a united army which combines most of the Syrian opposition armed groups.<sup>3</sup> The Forces of Martyr Ahmad al-Abdo,<sup>4</sup> which is active in the Syrian Badia, was the first group to welcome the call on 2 September 2017.<sup>5</sup> On 4 September 2017 the SIG appointed Jawad Abu Hatab as the Defense minister.<sup>6</sup> On 18 September 2017, the SIG announced the formation of the general staff and the appointment of Abdul Jabbar al-Oqaidi and Hassan Marei Hamadeh as Deputy Ministers of Defense.

Turkey played a decisive and clear role in the formation of the SNA. On 24 October 2017, *al-Modon* newspaper published a detailed article under the title “Euphrates Shield Armed Groups to a Regular Army” in which it revealed a meeting at the headquarters of the Turkish Special Forces attended by the governor of Gaziantep, the governor of Kilis, the commander of the Turkish Special Forces, representatives of the Turkish intelligence service, members of the SIG, the deputy head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the leaders of SNA groups active in the Euphrates Shield area. The meeting led to

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1 On 12 July 2016, the government formed by Jawad Abu Hatab gained 68 votes out of 98 from the participants in the confidence session held by the General Authority of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. The new ministry made up of 10 ministers: Dr. Jawad Abu Hatab, Prime Minister and Minister of Interior and Defense; 2. Eng. Akram Tohme, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs; 3. Abdullah Hamadeh, Minister of Finance and Economy; 4. Dr. Muhammad Firas Al-Jundi, Minister of Health; 5. Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Daghim, Minister of Higher Education; 6. Eng. Jamal Kalash, Minister of Agriculture; 7. Eng. Abdullah Razzouk, Minister of Services; 8. Dr. Imad Barq, Minister of Education; 9. Dr. Abdel Moneim Al-Halabi, Minister of Finance; 10. Dr. Yaqoub Al-Ammar, Minister of Local Administration. Counselor Hassan Bakri was appointed as the Secretary-General of the Government. The government witnessed several changes in its composition, the most important of which was the resignation of the Minister of Finance and the assignment of Jawad Abu Hatab himself to the position, thus occupying four positions (the Prime Minister, the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Defense and Finance).

2 A man in the news...Abu Hatab a surgeon with the rank of Minister of Defense, Enab Baladi Newspaper, 5 September 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/171238> (Last accessed: 16 June 2021).

3 Calls to form a ‘National Army’ in Syria, Enab Baladi Newspaper, 31 August 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/170544> (Last accessed: 16 June 2021).

4 The Forces of Martyr Ahmad al-Abdo agree to the proposal to establish a National Army, Enab Baladi newspaper, 2 September 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/170871> (Last accessed: 16 June 2021).

5 Other group who welcomed the call and joined the union: The Lions of the East Army/Jaysh Usud al-Sharqiya, the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant/Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, The Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham, al-Naser Union, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Free Idlib Army, the Central Division, the Sultan Murad Division, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division, the 1<sup>st</sup> Coastal Division and Ansar al-Sunnah.

6 "Bayan", the Facebook page of the SIG, 5 September 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/syriaig/photos/a.437508956326466/1397306770346675/?type=3&theater> (Last accessed: 16 June 2021).

multiple agreements,<sup>7</sup> including the conversion of the armed groups from segregated forces to an integrated regular army in two stages.

The first stage was the formation of three corps:

1. The National Army Corps
2. The Sultan Murad Corps
3. The Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya Corps.

The second stage would strip the armed groups of their names and begin addressing them as one regular army with the following structure:

- 1- Legions including three squads each;
- 2- Squads including three brigades each;
- 3- Brigades including three battalions each.

## The Current Structure of the SNA

Today the SNA is led by Lieutenant General Salim Idris, who serves as the Chief of Staff of the Army's Supreme Military Council (SMC) and the Minister of Defense of the SIG, headed by Abdulrahman Mustafa.

It is known that Salim Idris was an officer in the Syrian regular army, from which he defected in 2012. Idris held various assignments in the Syrian armed opposition groups of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and later in the SNA.

Salim Idris' deputies are Colonel Fadlallah al-Haji, who serves as Deputy Chief of Staff in Idlib, and Brigadier General Adnan al-Ahmed who is running for the Deputy Chief of Staff in Aleppo. Formerly, Fadlallah al-Haji was the commander-in-chief of the National Front for Liberation from its formation in 2018 and until its integration with the SNA. It was locally reported that he resigned after he was accused of falsifying the number of his fighters in Idlib in order to be granted greater support.<sup>8</sup> Adnan al-Ahmed defected from the Syrian Regular Army and was among the commanders who led Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch.

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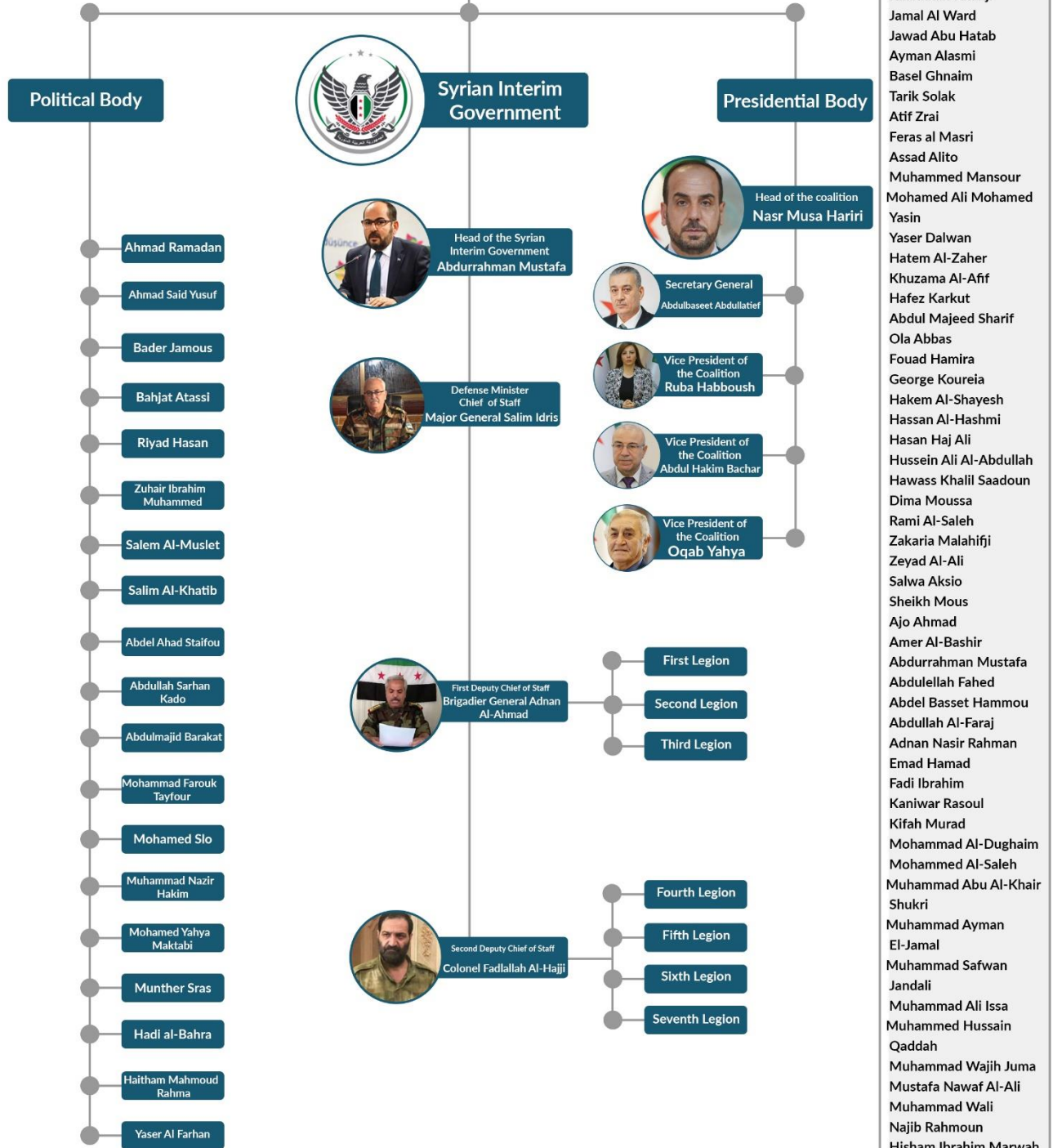
7 Euphrates Shield groups to a regular army, al-Modon, 24 October 2017, <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2017/10/24/%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A?fbclid=IwAR1S8CYkM3Rg0KoXkWIhIgoQNrkswnCZIT8e6daY4SXVeZjZJmKDW8Xuafk> (Last accessed: 16 June 2021).

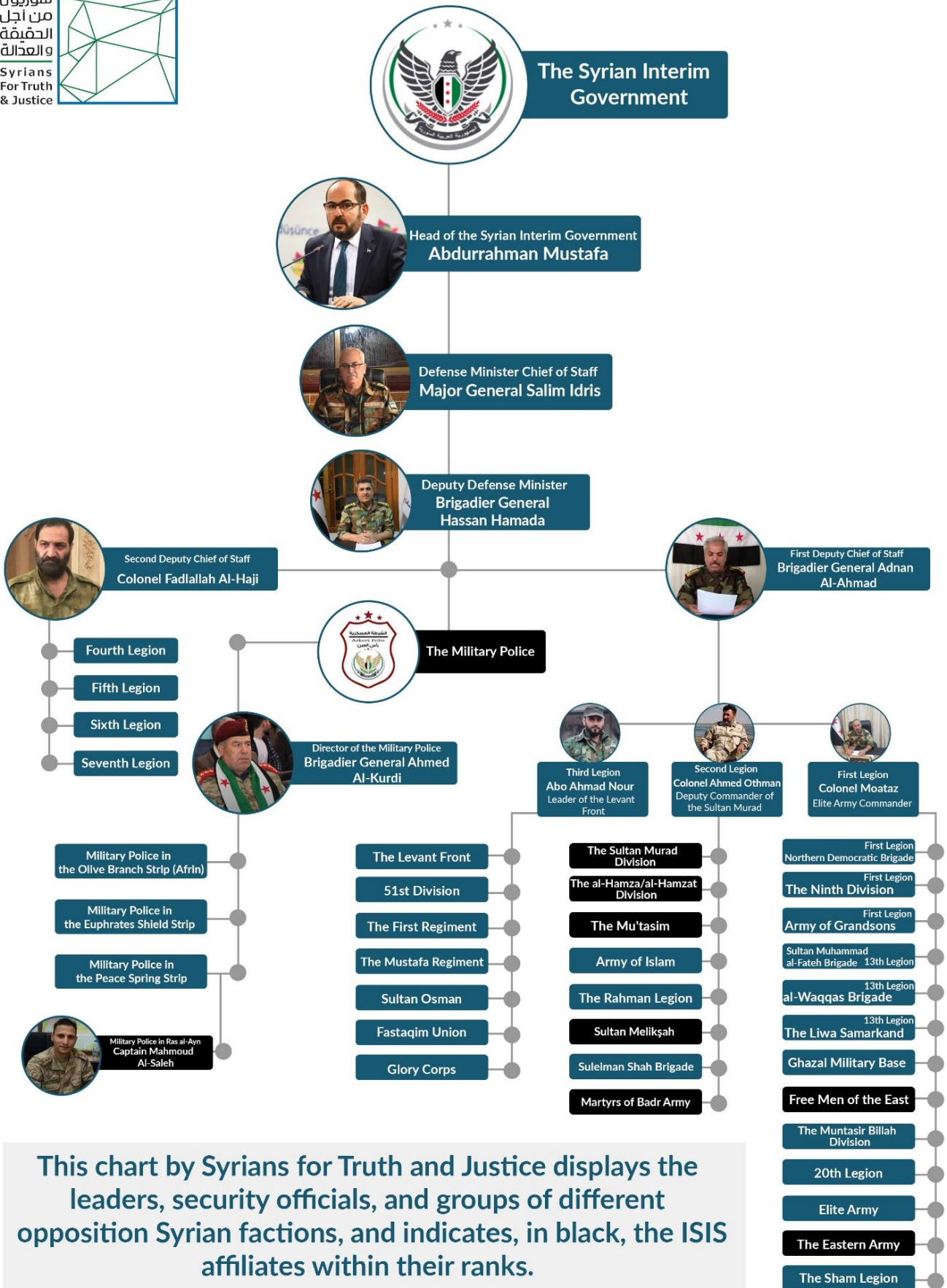
8 How true is Fadlallah al-Hajji's resignation from the leadership of the National Front in Idlib, Enab Baladi, 18 March 2020, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/370774> (Last accessed: 15 June 2021).



The National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces

62 Members





This chart by Syrians for Truth and Justice displays the leaders, security officials, and groups of different opposition Syrian factions, and indicates, in black, the ISIS affiliates within their ranks.

The SNA is active in two main sectors:

1. Rural Aleppo, in which the following corps are located:
  - a. The 1<sup>st</sup> Corps: commanded by Colonel Moataz Raslan and has a number of groups of an approximately equal number of fighters, who were mostly trained by Turkish forces.
  - b. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps: commanded by Fahim Issa and his deputy Colonel Ahmed Othman and operates under the Sultan Murad Division.
  - c. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps: commanded by Abu Ahmed Nour, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps operates under the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, which is the largest group in the first three corps.
2. Idlib contains the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Corpses of the SNA as well as the National Front for Liberation.

## The IS members Serving in the Ranks of the SNA

When the international coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) began attacking IS in Raqqa, IS fighters hastened to escape the fighting. Information obtained by STJ confirms that specific clans played a significant part in aiding the escape of IS fighters. These clans mediated between the fighters, especially those who hail from areas in eastern Syria, and SNA leaders in the east, including Abu Hatem Shaqra and Major Hussein Hamadi, leader of the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, who allowed fighters and their families to enter the areas under their control.

On this, a second-level leader in the SNA stated to STJ exclusively:

“Abu Hatem Shaqra and Hussein Hamadi responded to the fighters’ appeals and the mediation of clan elders. The two leaders received fighters and placed them under the protection of their groups.”

For more detailed information, STJ met a former IS member in the area where Operation Euphrates Shield took place. He recounted to STJ that he paid a large sum of money in exchange for traveling from SNA areas to Euphrates Shield areas. The member confirmed that he was handed a senior managerial position in the Ahrar al-Sharqiya group/Free Men of the East in al-Bab sector, on the basis of the administrative and managerial experience he had from serving in the ranks of IS.

The SNA also benefited from the military experience IS members have by using them in various missions. These missions include sniping operations, assassinations, and suicide attacks, in addition to regularly attacking other armed groups in the SNA. For example, Ahrar al-Sharqiya group/Free Men of the East used IS fighters, among them Iraqis, in its attack on the 20<sup>th</sup> Division in the city of al-Bab in northern rural Aleppo in April 2020. The fighters were divided into two groups; an Iraqi fighters group led by an IS member called Abu Dujana al-Iraqi and a group of IS fighters from Deir ez-Zor.

## First and Second-Level Officers

### 1. Muhammad al-Daher: A Commander in the Military Police

Colonel Muhammad al-Daher, nicknamed as Asfour al-Feil (the Elephant Bird), as well as by the name of “Abu Husam”, served as head of the Directorate of Security of A'zaz until July 18, 2020, succeeding Brigadier General Ahmed Zeidan, known as Hajji Hraytan. In 2012 Muhammad al-Daher joined Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant/Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham, which was then affiliated with Al-Qaeda, in northern rural Aleppo. In 2013 al-Daher joined IS and trained men in the Shamarikh in northern rural Aleppo. Under the leadership of a person named Abu Obaida al-Masri, he fled IS and joined the SNA in 2017.

The appointment of al-Daher was under the direct orders of Turkey’s government because his predecessor, Zeidan, was arrested by Syrian and Turkish officials on 4 September 2018 on charges of committing sexual violence and rapes against female prisoners in A'zaz and Afrin.



Image 3 – Various pictures of Commander Muhammad al-Daher

### 2. Muhammad al-Rasho: A Leader in the Sultan Murad Division

Muhammad Jasem al-Khalaf al-Rasho is a commander of a group in the Sultan Murad Division in Tell Abyad.

In 2012, al-Rasho joined al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant/Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham which was then allied with al-Qaeda. At the time, al-Rasho was serving as an armed

group leader in Mabrouka town and in 2013 he joined the then newly formed IS. In 2016 he fled Ash Shaddadi in rural al-Hasakah to Raqqa. In 2018 he joined the Sultan Murad Division, led by Fahim Issa.



Image 4 – Various pictures of Muhammad al-Rasho

### **3. Abu Shehab Tayyana: A Commander in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya**

Ahmed Mahmoud al-Aboud was born in al-Tayyana, Deir ez-Zor. He joined IS after it took control over Deir ez-Zor in 2014. He served as a security official in IS for more than a year and a half. Later, al-Aboud fled IS and joined the ranks of the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, led by Major Hussein Hamadi, and took part in the Turkish military operations in Syria, including Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring.

Notably, al-Aboud headed Operation Peace Spring sector in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Reliable sources confirmed that al-Aboud was a member of the joint operations room between officials of the Turkish Army and the SNA, set during Operation Peace Spring in October 2019.

Additionally, Al-Aboud is a prominent drug dealer operating in the area occupied by Operation Peace Spring now controlled by Turkey, and he enjoys freedom of movement between Syria and Turkey.



Image 5 – Various images of Abu Shehab Tayyana

#### **4. Mahmoud al-Saleh: Chief of the Military Police**

Known as Captain Mahmoud al-Saleh, al-Saleh has been nicknamed Abu Saddam. He currently heads the Military Police in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, which was established by Turkey.

In 2012 al-Saleh joined the Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant/Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham, which was then affiliated with Al-Qaeda, in Deir ez-Zor. In 2013, al-Saleh joined the then newly established IS and served as head of its al-Ababil Brigade. Afterwards, no one heard of him for years, and it was said that he left IS, until he reappeared in the ranks of the SNA in 2016.



Image 6 – Various images of Mahmoud al-Saleh

Several judges in the Justice Directorate of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê suspended their work on 6 June 2021, in protest over what they called “grave legal transgressions” committed by al-Saleh. The judges cited the most significant transgressions in their statement:

- A. Issuing and implementing laws and circulars that provide for the confiscation of citizens’ funds and imposing penalties and fines on them without reference to the appropriate judicial authority.
- B. Arresting citizens and releasing them without court authorization.
- C. Failing to observe the cases’ dates of presentation before the court and their extensions written on related police reports, if drafted.
- D. Breaking into citizens' homes without judicial permission and confiscating their money without legal documents.
- E. Showing no respect to judicial authority.



Image 7 - The statement issued by the Judges in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.

## 5. Abdel Moneim al-Moulhim: A Commander in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya

Abdel Moneim al-Moulhim, 35, nicknamed as Abu Muhammad, hails from al-Mayadin town in Deir ez-Zor. Al-Moulhim is married and currently resides in the al-Villat neighborhood in the city of Afrin, specifically in the sector under the military command of Abu Khawla Muhasan, who was once arrested by the SNA.

Al-Moulhim joined IS after it took control over Deir ez-Zor in 2014 and held a security position in its ranks in al-Mayadin. It was reported that al-Moulhim used his position to seize the real estates of individuals fighting against IS, considering them apostates and infidels. He also supervised the looting of the real estates' contents in favor of IS.

Al-Moulhim fled Deir ez-Zor after it was attacked by the SDF and traveled to SNA-controlled areas. When there, he joined the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya led by Hussein Hamadi, in early 2018 to serve as a military group commander.

## **6. Abu Udai Mudatat: Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East**

Abu Udai Mudatat, an alias, was born in Deir ez-Zor and is married. He joined IS after it took over Deir ez-Zor and served as a fighter tasked with firing anti-aircraft guns. In early 2018, he fled to the city of al-Bab and joined Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East led by Abu Hatem Shaqra, specifically the Abu Malek al-Dairi battalion.

## **7. Abu Talout: a Military Commander in the Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East**

Abu Talout, an alias, was born in al-Mayadin and is married. He pledged allegiance to IS after it took over Raqqa and served as a commander in its ranks. However, he fled Raqqa in with the help of a commander in Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East, Abu Jammo, after the SDF and the international coalition launched an attack on Raqqa. Sources confirmed to STJ exclusively that Abu Jammo has sleeper cells in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration and that those cells have carried out several assassination operations.

Abu Talout joined the ranks of Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East in 2018 and currently he serves as a commander of a military group in Mabrouka town under the leadership of Abu Jammo.

## **8. Abu al-Baz: a Military Commander in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya**

Osama al-Khalaf, nicknamed as Abu al-Baz, hails from Deir ez-Zor. He served as a leader in the FSA in al-Asharah town, Deir ez-Zor, before he swore allegiance to IS in 2014 and joined it with all his members and weapons (heavy and light).

Reliable sources told STJ that Abu al-Baz worked for IS and facilitated its control over Deir ez-Zor even before he declared allegiance to it. Abu al-Baz served as a security official in IS for a year and a half. Afterwards, he joined the SNA and took part in Turkey's Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring. Currently, Abu al-Baz is the deputy commander of the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, led by Major Hussein Hamadi. A reliable source confirmed to STJ that Abu al-Baz pledged allegiance to Abu Mohammad al-Julani, leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and has close links with its commander Abu Maria al-Qahtani. The same source said that Abu al-Baz frequents Idlib, the stronghold of HTS, and is considered one of HTS' most notable members in the SNA.

## **9. Abu Rabea al-Ansari: A Commander in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division**

Rifaat Ibrahim al-Akal, nicknamed as Abu Rabea al-Ansari, was born in Damascus in 1990. He joined IS in Homs in 2014 and served as a leader of a group of 50 fighters. In 2015, he was positioned as a security official and took part in the Battle of the Shaer gas field in Homs and Battle of Tabqa Airbase in Raqqa. In 2016, he joined the SNA, specifically al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, led by Sayf Abu Bakr. The Division provided him three military and intellectual training courses and then gave him the leadership of a group of fighters.

A person close to al-Akal confirmed that the latter was responsible of the execution of two young men from the al-Dho family in 2015 and that he participated in a mass execution of Syrian Army fighters in Tabqa Airbase. The source added that al-Akal bragged several times that he hung the heads of Syrian Army fighters in al-Naeem roundabout in Raqqa.

#### **10. Qais al-Sheikh: A Commander in the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant/Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya**

Qais Muhammad al-Sheikh, also known by the alias Abu Muhammad al-Tabqawi, was born in 1995 in al-Tabqah, Raqqa and is married. He joined IS in 2013 and served as a leader (Emir) of a battle group. Al-Tabqawi participated in the battle for control of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê in 2013. In 2016 al-Tabqawi moved to Hama and later he left for Idlib and joined the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant/Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya of the SNA.<sup>9</sup> Al-Tabqawi took part in Turkey's Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring. Currently, he heads a military group in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê under the direct supervision of Abu Saleh al-Juhmani.

#### **11. Mounir Khalil: A Commander in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division**

Mounir Khalil was born in Damascus in 1997. He pledged allegiance to IS in 2015 and served as a leader (Emir) of a battle group among its ranks. Khalil participated in IS battles in Damascus, notably the T4 Airbase and Eastern Ghouta battles.

Reliable sources testified that Khalil took part in several massacres carried out by the IS in Homs in 2015, including the Al-A'miriya massacre, and the Palmyra massacre which killed over 400 civilians, including women and children,

In 2016, Khalil moved to Hama and withdrew with his battle group to Idlib in December the same year. In 2017 he joined the SNA, specifically the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, led by Sayf Abu Bakr. Khalil fought alongside the SNA in Turkey's Operation Peace Spring and currently commands a battle group in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division.

### **IS Members in Security and Administrative Positions**

#### **12. Abu Omar al-Dairi: A Security Official in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya**

Abu Omar al-Dairi, an alias, hails from the city of Hajin, Deir ez-Zor and is married. He pledged allegiance to IS after it captured Deir ez-Zor in 2014 and he was then one of the notable security officials of IS in Hajin. Al-Dairi fled Deir ez-Zor after it was attacked by the SDF and the international alliance and escaped to SNA-controlled areas, where he joined the Eastern

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<sup>9</sup> The Euphrates Shield Staff Committee includes a sector to Ahrar al-Sham... the largest group on the list. Enab Baladi, 5 November 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/182297> (Last accessed: 15 June 2021).

Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya led by Major Hussein Hamadi. Currently, he serves as a personal security official for Major Hussein Hamadi.

Information obtained by STJ confirms that al-Dairi was involved in multiple human rights violations, including the arrest of civilians as well as the torture and mistreatment of detainees in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya detention centers.

### **13. Abu Abdullah Darnash: A Security Official in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya**

Abu Abdullah Darnash, an alias, born in Deir ez-Zor, is married. He pledged allegiance to IS in 2014 and served as an assassination official in Deir ez-Zor and suburbs. However, he fled Deir ez-Zor after it was captured by the SDF and the international coalition and escaped to SNA-controlled areas and joined the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, led by Major Hussein Hamadi. He currently serves as a security official in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya in Jarabulus. His main task is to spy on other SNA groups and monitor their movements, trades, numbers, and headquarters for Major Hussein Hamadi.

### **14. Abu Jaber: The Arming Official in Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East**

Maher al-Ali is known by the alias Abu Jaber. He was born in al-Asharah town, Deir ez-Zor, and is married. Abu Jaber joined IS after took control over Deir ez-Zor and served as a military commander in its Caliphate Army/Jaysh al-Khilafa. He fought alongside IS in nearly all of its battles. When the SDF and the international coalition began attacking Deir ez-Zor, Abu Jaber escaped to SNA-controlled areas. Today, he resides in the village of Ghuzeil. Currently, Abu Jaber is responsible, along with five of his relatives, in arms trades in favor of Major Hussein Hamadi and is a powerful member in the SNA.

### **15. Abu Mariam Aqarat: An Administrative Official in the Personnel Department in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya**

Abu Mariam, an alias, was born in al-Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor, and is married. He has a visible lameness in his leg. Abu Mariam joined IS after it captured his city al-Mayadin and served as an administrative official in its real estate office. However, he fled Deir ez-Zor during the SDF and international coalition attacks on Deir ez-Zor and fled to SNA-controlled areas. In 2018 he joined the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya and has worked under the leadership of Abu Shehab Tayyana (Ahmed Mahamoud al-Aboud) as an administrative leader since.

### **16. Ammar al-Sufan: An Administrative Officer in the Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East**

Ammar Fadel Ibrahim al-Sufan was born in Deir ez-Zor in 1988. He joined IS in mid-2014 and served in the Islamic Police service (Hisbah department). He was known for the frequent torture of civilians in IS prisons and detention centers.

He escaped SDF-controlled areas after the Russian-Syrian attack on Deir ez-Zor and later moved to the SNA-controlled areas through Manbij. Al-Sufan joined the SNA in 2018 and

currently serves as the heavy weapons official in Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East under the leadership of Abu Ja'far Shaqra, cousin of Abu Hatem Shaqra, the Ahrar al-Sharqiya's commander in chief.

Trusted sources confirmed to STJ that al-Sufan was responsible for the repeated bombing of areas outside the control of the SNA in northeast Syria (the front lines between the Syrian government and Russian forces on the one hand and the Turkish and Syrian opposition forces on the other). Al-Sufan also provided the Turkish base with coordinates to be bombed.

#### **17. Al-Qersh: A Security Official in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, a Relative of Abu Shehab Tayyana**

Al-Qersh, an alias, hails from al-Tayyana, Deir ez-Zor, and is married. He pledged allegiance to IS in 2014 and served in it as a security official in Deir ez-Zor and suburbs. In early 2018, al-Qersh fled the hostilities in Deir ez-Zor to SNA-controlled areas and joined the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, led by Major Hussein Hamadi. He currently serves as a personal security official for Abu Shehab Tayyana, the IS leader in the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya.

### **IS Fighters in the SNA**

#### **18. Abu Saraqa: A Fighter in the Sultan Murad Division**

Walid Ayed Al-Hamoud, known as Abu Saraqa, was born in the town of Uqayribat, Hama in 1994, and is married with five children. He joined IS in Uqayribat in February 2014 and served as a member of the Hisbah department (Diwan al-Hisbah).

Abu Saraqa executed two civilians in Uqayribat on charges of working for the Syrian government. He also arrested dozens of civilians on charges of openly committing sins, like smoking and not wearing full Sharia clothes. He tortured others on the charge of "disbelief".

Abu Saraqa participated in IS' battle of the Shaer gas field and Palmyra offensive in 2016. He then fled to the SNA areas with the help of a relative and joined the Sultan Murad Division and took part in its military operations on Afrin in the context of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring.

#### **19. Shaysh al-Khalaf: A Fighter in the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham**

Shaysh Raheel al-Haneef, nicknamed as Abu Qutada al-Homsi, was born in Palmyra, Homs in 1990 and is married. He joined IS in September 2013 in the village of Jabab Hamad, eastern Homs. Al-Homsi served as a commander of an artillery missile battalion in IS and participated in the battle of the Shaer gas field and Palmyra offensive. In 2016 he moved to Idlib through eastern rural Hama with the help of a man called A.J. al-Tirkawi. Al-Homsi joined the SNA, specifically the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham in A'zaz in late 2016. He attended military trainings in A'zaz under the supervision of a notable leader in the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham, called al-Khal Salil al-Khalidi.

Al-Homs is accused of carrying out field executions against civilians as well as seizing private property. He participated in Turkey's military operations in Syria, Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring, and is responsible for bombing coordinates.

#### **20. Muhammad al-Fardouni: A Fighter in the Martyrs of Badr Army/Jaysh Shuhada'a Badr**

Mahmoud Issa al-Mhmoud al-Fardouni, nicknamed as Abu Awsh, hails from the village of al-Jabiriah near Kuweires Airbase in Aleppo and is married. Abu Awsh joined IS following its control over the village of al-Jabiriah in 2013. However, he defected from IS when Turkey and the SNA attacked its areas. Abu Awsh fled to the areas of the SDF in Manbij and joined its ranks. Then he joined the Elite Army/Jaysh al-Nukhba, led by Abu Matar al-Breij. Eventually, Abu Awsh joined the Martyrs of Badr Army/Jaysh Shuhada'a Badr with Abu Hameed al-Harbi al-Fardoni.

#### **21. Abu Ali Sarhan: A Fighter in the Malek Shah Division**

Abu Ali Sarhan, an alias, was born in Tay neighborhood in Qamishli. He served as a prosecutor in the IS' shariah court in Tel Hamees town. Sarhan was responsible for arresting many civilians and forcing them to pledge allegiance to IS by intimidation. He supervised the confiscation of land and served in the IS' security office in Ash Shaddadi in al-Barakah, the IS administrative district. Sarhan also worked with Abu Walid Qahtaniyah, the General Security in the Levant, who is confirmed to be his relative.

In late 2017, Abu Ali fled to areas under the control of Euphrates Shield in coordination with the IS leader Abu Thuraya, who has good relations with the Syrian armed opposition. Sarhan hid in Al-Rai suburbs then joined the Malek Shah division of the SNA.

From his position, Sarhan supervised the resettling of IS fighters and their families in civilian seized homes. Among those fighters were his brothers, Abu Hajar, Abu al-Abbas Tel Hamees, and Abu Hamza Tell Abyad.



Image 8 – A picture of Abu Ali Sarhan

## **22. Abu Aisha al-Sharabi: A Fighter in the Malek Shah Division**

Abu Aisha al-Sharabi, an alias, was born in Tel Hamees, al-Hasakah, in 1991. He joined IS after it took over Deir ez-Zor and took sensitive security positions in it, including becoming an official responsible for the arrest and execution of those wanted by IS.

Al-Sharabi fled to Turkey in 2017 and later participated in Operation Peace Spring within the ranks of the Sultan Murad Division. After Operation Peace Spring, Al-Sharabi defected with a battalion, named by Turkey as the Malek Shah Division/ Bayazid Brigade. This division contains fighters mainly from Homs and is led by Mahmoud al-Baz/Turkmani. The division's name became infamous in Tell Halaf after it conducted several arrests against civilians for ransoms. The Division participated intensively in enlisting Syrians (military and civilians) to fight as mercenaries in Libya and Azerbaijan. However, al-Baz was dismissed by Turkey in November 2020.

## **23. Abu Islam al-Ansari: A Fighter in the Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East**

Muhammad Kheder al-Alwani, born in Deir ez-Zor in 1986, is married. Al-Alwani pledged allegiance to IS in 2013 in Jadeed Ekedat in Deir ez-Zor and served as an Emir of Arming for more than a year. Later, al-Alwani moved to Raqqa, where he was also appointed as the Emir of Arming in Al-Kasrah. He participated in many IS battles in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.

In 2017, he joined the Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East, led by Abu Hatem Shaqra, in Al-Rai in northern rural Aleppo. Al-Alwani participated alongside the SNA in Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring and it was reported that he is the responsible for the seizure of civilian homes in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and for the arrest of Syrian Kurdish citizens (many of whom were later transferred to Turkey).

## **24. Muhammad al-Arandas: A Fighter in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division**

Muhammad Muhyi Al-Din al-Arandas, nicknamed as Abu al-Reem, was born in Homs in 1993 and is married. He pledged allegiance to IS in 2014 and served as the Emir of the Anti-Aircraft Workshop in Damascus. Al-Arandas took part in the IS battles in rural Damascus and the Syrian desert and served as a security official in its ranks in 2016.

He joined the SNA's the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, led by Sayf Abu Bakr, and attended a military training course in Turkey and then participated in Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring. Currently, al-Arandas serves the group of Ahmed Boulat, brother of Sayf Abu Bakr. Ahmed Boulat is a leader in the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and is responsible for its financial affairs. He served as head of the Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê crossing at the Syrian-Turkish border and his name is affiliated with many cases of seized civilian homes in Tell Abyad.

## **25. Khabab al-Iraqi: A Fighter in the Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East**

Thamer Naser al-Iraqi, born in Mosul, is married. He has a visible tattoo on his right hand. Al-Iraqi joined IS in March 2013 in Homs and served as the Emir of Military Fortifications in Ash

Shaddadi until 2015. In 2016 he was appointed as the Emir of Arming in Raqqa and later served as an advisor to the Security Office No. 011 in Raqqa. Al-Iraqi participated alongside IS in the Battle of Mosul in 2014. However, in 2017 he defected from IS and fled to Jarabulus, eastern Aleppo. In November the same year, he joined Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East, led by Hatem Abu Shaqra. Al-Iraqi fought alongside Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East in Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring.

Witnesses confirmed to STJ that al-Iraqi carried out bombardments and field executions against civilians in Jindires District, Afrin. He currently resides in the city of Tell Abyad.

#### **26. Abdelkader al-Suaej: Assistant Commander in the al-Hasakah Shield Brigade**

Abdelkader al-Suaej hails from the Al Sab'a Wa Arba'ien town of the Nahiya al-Shaddadah in southern al-Hasakah. Al-Suaej belongs to Albu Rahma Clan of the Bakara tribe. He was a fighter in IS and was later known to be an assistant to one of the military commanders in the al-Hasakah Shield brigade.

#### **27. Abu Abbas: A Fighter in the Ajnad al-Hasakah Group**

Thamer Nawaf Al-Khaloufi, nicknamed as Abu Abbas, was born in the village of Um Kahifa in Tel Hamees. Al-Khaloufi was a fighter in the FSA in Tel Hamees under the leadership of a person named Abu Humam. Al-Khaloufi pledged allegiance to IS after it took over Tel Hamees and he fought alongside it in the Til Ma'roof, Jaza, and Rahya battles.

Al-Khaloufi and other IS members fled Tel Hamees after it was captured by the People's Protection Units (YPG) towards Ash Shaddadi town in the south and then moved to Turkey. Afterwards, Abu Abbas joined the Ajnad al-Hasakah group and served as a leader responsible for recruiting people from the eastern area to the group.

## **The SNA Groups Recruiting IS Fighters and Leaders**

### **1. Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East (commonly referred to as Ahrar al-Sharqiya)**

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is an active armed Syrian rebel group founded in 2016 and is currently led by Abu Hatem Shaqra, whose full real name is Amed Ehsan Fayad al-Hayes, born in 1987 to a mother called Souria. Abu Hatem hails from the village of Shaqra in western rural Deir-ez-Zor. The statements issued by Ahrar al-Sharqiya acknowledge its affiliation with the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps, 12<sup>th</sup> Division, 123<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, of the General Staff of the Ministry of Defense in the SIG, operating under the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. Abu Hatem Shaqra entered Syria in July 2011 from Jordan, where he was working. His first military operation was bombing a checkpoint of the Syrian Army in the town of Harran al 'Awamid in rural Damascus in late 2011. He left the Eastern Ghouta in 2013 and joined the Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant/Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya before he moved to Deir ez-Zor in 2014.

Fighters of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya operated in Syria's Idlib, specifically in the Sarmadā region, before they stationed themselves in the city of al-Bab in northern rural Aleppo and became fully supported and financed by Turkey. The Ahrar al-Sharqiya's current headquarters is located in the town of al-Rai and they have one of the largest military headquarters in the city of al-Bab in northern rural Aleppo. One of the effective leaders in Ahrar al-Sharqiya is Abu Ja'far Shaqra, deputy of Abu Hatem Shaqra, who is responsible for the security and economic affairs of the group.

Ahrar al-Sharqiya took part in Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield, launched on 24 August 2016 on the cities of Jarabulus and al-Bab, among others. On 20 January 2018, the group engaged, under the command of Turkey, in the Turkish offensive, Operation Olive Branch, against the Kurdish-majority city of Afrin. Ahrar al-Sharqiya also participated in Operation Peace Spring, which was launched on 9 October 2019 to control the areas of Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê in the province of al-Hasakah.

Evidence and information collected by STJ confirmed that the Ahrar al-Sharqiya group was responsible for the murder of the Kurdish Politician Hevrin Khalaf on 13 October 2019.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Amnesty International has verified that the organization is also responsible for field executions.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. The Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya**

The formation of the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya was announced in 2016 under the leadership of Major Hussein Hamad and currently contains nearly a thousand fighters. The Eastern Army took part in Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring and fought against several SNA groups, including the Military Police and the Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam, which led Turkey to suspend its financial support for it for a temporary period.

Fighters of the Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, who include large number of IS members, have committed multiple violations against civilians throughout the group's areas of influence.

## **3. Martyrs of Badr Army/Jaysh Shuhada'a Badr**

The Martyrs of Badr Army was formed on 11 February 2019 under the leadership of Abu al-Hasan Shuhada'. Formerly, the Martyrs of Badr Army/Jaysh Shuhada'a Badr was a battalion

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<sup>10</sup> "New Evidence Supporting the National Army's Accusations in the Murder of the Kurdish Politician Hevrin Khalaf", STJ, 10 September 2019, <https://stj-sy.org/en/new-evidence-supporting-the-national-armys-accusations-in-the-murder-of-the-kurdish-politician-hevrin-khalaf/> (Last accessed: 17 June 2021).

<sup>11</sup> "Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies", Amnesty, 18 October 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/> (Last accessed: 17 June 2021).

affiliated with Ahrar al-Sharqiya, led by Abu Hatem Shaqra. Later the Martyrs of Badr Army/Jaysh Shuhada'a Badr joined the 20th Division, led by Abu Barazan al-Sultani. Afterwards, Martyrs of Badr Army/Jaysh Shuhada'a Badr separated from the SNA for a year, but it was reported recently that it joined the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and took part in Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring.

#### **4. The Sultan Murad Division**

The formation of the Sultan Murad Battalion was announced in mid-2012 near the city of Aleppo, under the leadership of Youssef al-Saleh, who hails from the village of Qarah Kubri, 25 km east of A'zaz at the Turkish border. The division is led by three people: the general official, Youssef al-Saleh, the field commander, Fahim Issa and the military official, Colonel Ahmed Othman. In 2015, the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade/Liwa Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh, the Martyr Zaki Turkmani Brigade and the Ashbal al-Aqeeda brigade joined the division. The division enjoys great support from Turkey and is the largest gathering of Turkmen fighters in Aleppo and its northern countryside, and participated in Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Euphrates Shield.

The Sultan Murad Division has committed multiple violations, notably the recruitment of children and the enlistment of Syrian mercenaries in Libya and Azerbaijan, in addition to carrying out arbitrary arrests, torturing civilian detainees, and looting public and private property in the areas it controls.

#### **5. The al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division**

On 23 April 2016, five FSA groups based in the northern rural Aleppo, the Hamza Brigade, the Dhi Qar Brigade, the Northern Thunder Brigade, the Mare Resistance Brigade, and the Special Operations Brigade merged into the Hamza Division under the leadership of the First-Lieutenant Sayf Abu Bakr. In June 2016, the Samarkand Brigade joined the al-Hamza Division but later defected from it. The division was trained and funded by the United States and Turkey as part of a training program by the U.S. Department of Defense. The al-Hamza Division took part in Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring.

The al-Hamzah Division has committed several violations in its areas of influence, ranging from looting, sabotaging public and private facilities, and arbitrary arrests, the most prominent of which was the arrest of Kurdish women and their enforced disappearance for more than a year<sup>12</sup>.

#### **6. The Malek Shah Division**

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<sup>12</sup> "Afrin: How Eight Women were Forcibly Disappeared by the Hamza Division?", STJ, 3 August 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-how-eight-women-were-forcibly-disappeared-by-the-hamza-division/> (Last accessed: 17 June 2021).

The Malek Shah Division was formed on 9 August 2020 on the basis of a decision by the Minister of Defense of the ISG. In an official statement, the SNA classified the division to be the 27<sup>th</sup> of its 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps. The division has about 2000 fighters, and is led by Mahmoud al-Baz, who is the former deputy commander of the Sultan Murad Division and also the former commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps in the SNA. The division is active in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. It previously dismissed the al-Izza Brigade entirely from its ranks and fought against the Sultan Murad Division in Tell Halaf in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê in 2021, which resulted in casualties from both sides.

Members of the division committed many violations against civilians in Operation Peace Spring areas, the most prominent of which was the seizure of private property and the looting of homes and shops. The division also sent a number of its members to fight as mercenaries in Libya and Azerbaijan. Sources confirmed to STJ exclusively that the Turkish government agreed to make the division independent from the Sultan Murad Division in exchange for sending its fighters to fight as mercenaries in Libya and Azerbaijan and recruiting civilians, especially from Homs, for the same purpose.

### **7. The Mu'tasim Division**

The Mu'tasim Division, formerly the Mutasim Brigade, was formed in August 2015 by the merger of military groups active in Marea in Aleppo countryside with the Mutasim Brigade. The Mu'tasim Division contains about a thousand fighters led by Mu'tasim Abbas and is a part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps of the SNA. It fought many battles against the Syrian government forces and others alongside Turkey.

The Mu'tasim Division committed many violations against the civilians in Afrin and other areas. These violations ranged from arbitrary arrests, the seizure of private property and looting operations. The Mu'tasim Division fought other SNA groups with the aim of expanding its areas of influence. The division was also involved in sending Syrian fighters to fight as mercenaries in Libya and Azerbaijan.

The Mu'tasim Division was cited in a May 2021 United Nations Security General report concerning the use of children in armed conflict for recruiting and deploying young Syrian boys as mercenaries in Libya<sup>13</sup>.

### **8. The Military Police**

On 20 February 2018, the Ministry of Defense of the SIG announced the formation of the Military Police in the Euphrates Shield area with the aim of putting an end to the violations committed by the SNA. Initially, the entire Military Police service was led by Rami Tlass, who also headed the Military Police in Afrin. Currently, Brigadier General Ahmed Ibrahim Al-Kurdi is the director of the SNA's Military Police Department, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Defense and the Chief of Staff. The Military Police has about 10,000 members throughout the

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<sup>13</sup> "Children and Armed Conflict – Report of the Secretary-General," United Nations General Assembly/Security Council, 6 May 2021, p.14.

areas of Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring. A senior source in the SNA told STJ that those members were chosen by the Turkish intelligence service. Each of the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring areas has a Military Police Branch. These branches are linked to each other within a central apparatus and one administration under the name 'Military Police Department', which is directly affiliated with the Turkish General Security Directorate and Turkish Intelligence in Ankara.

A high-ranking officer in the SNA told STJ that the Turkish security services is the responsible for appointing the SNA's commanders and determining their tasks:

"The Turkish intelligence service directly studies the files of officers who are nominated to assume leadership positions in the region, and appoints the leaders directly. All current commanders in the SNA and its affiliated agencies, including civil police, military police and others, have been approved by the same service".



## History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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