# Syria's troubled military status quo

Thomas Pierret, Iemed Mediterranean Yearbook

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**Thomas Pierret**
Senior Researcher,
Aix Marseille Université,
CNRS, IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence, France

As of early July 2021, Syria had witnessed its longest period of time without major military developments since the start of the civil war in 2011. Indeed, frontlines did not significantly change during the sixteen months that followed the 5 March 2020 ceasefire negotiated by Russia and Turkey to put an end to a loyalist offensive against the rebel-held province of Idlib. This situation of frozen conflict was the ultimate consequence of successive foreign interventions on behalf of each of the main surviving warring parties. From 2014 onwards, the United States helped the Kurdish YPG (later turned into the backbone of the multiethnic Syrian Democratic Forces, hereafter SDF) to seize the eastern bank of the Euphrates from the Islamic State (IS) organization; the Trump Administration further shielded the SDF from regime encroachments while allowing Turkey to invade the regions of Afrin in January 2018, and Tell Abyad-Ras al-'Ayn in October 2019. After 2015, Russian and Iranian support enabled the Assad regime to re-establish its authority over most of western and central Syria, including, in 2018, the suburbs of Damascus and southern provinces. Finally, between 2016 and 2020, Turkish troops gradually secured a northwestern crescent including regions held by the rebel Syrian National Army, north of Aleppo, and the Islamist Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham (hereafter HTS, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra), around Idlib. The recent absence of major military developments should not be construed as stability, however. Over the last year and a half, indeed, each of the abovementioned regions has been subject to endemic violence stemming from external and internal military actors.

## Regime-held Areas: Ending "Reconciliation"?

Besides regular Israeli (and occasional US) missile strikes (500 in 2020 alone) against Iranian forces and their Syrian support infrastructure, the loyalist camp has been faced with two mounting insurgencies. In the Badiya (central desert), IS attacks resulted in about 500 casualties in 2020, that is, twice as many as in 2019; in the first half of 2021, a loyalist military surge succeeded in reducing, though not eliminating, IS activities in the area. In the southern provinces of Der'a and Qunaytra, meanwhile, chronic instability has been the result of the exceedingly complex security landscape, which resulted from the restoration of regime control over the area in 2018. Instead of evacuating their strongholds or disarming, many rebels simply "reconciled" with Damascus as part of Russian-brokered agreements that allowed them to keep their light weapons and prevented regime forces from entering certain towns and neighbourhoods. Since early 2020, violent clashes erupted on several occasions between "reconciled" former rebels and regime forces following the latter's attempts at storming towns in search of the alleged perpetrators of anti-regime attacks. In Sanamayn and Umm Batina, clashes were ended by new settlement agreements that provided for the departure of recalcitrant armed elements towards rebel-held areas in the north, in June 2021. In addition, regime forces besieged the "reconciled" neighbourhoods of Der'a city to force former rebels to hand over their light weapons.

It is extremely difficult, in such a context, to attribute responsibilities for the daily assassinations and other small-scale operations that have occurred in the region in recent years. While loyalist fighters were kidnapped by locals as bargaining chips to secure the release of detainees held by the regime, army officers and former rebels-turned-regime collaborators were

targeted by remnants of the Free Syrian Army and IS cells. Meanwhile, former rebel leaders may have been killed by loyalist elements because they stand in the way of Damascus' ambitions to overturn the 2018 arrangements and restore direct control over the region. Some assassinations may also have been related to rivalries between the different pro-regime forces that have competed for the allegiance of the region's former insurgents, namely, the regime's army and air force intelligence apparatuses, the pro-Iranian Lebanese Hezbollah and 4th Armoured Division, and the Russian-commanded 5th Corps. While such rivalries are most pronounced in southern Syria, given Moscow's 2018 promise to Israel and the United States that it would check Iran's influence in the area, they also play out on the western bank of the Euphrates, where Russia has co-opted units from the paramilitary National Defense Forces and Palestinian-led Quds Brigade, while Tehran exerts its influence through affiliates of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps such as the Afghan Hazara-led Fatimid Brigade and its local recruits.

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Wartime proliferation of paramilitary groups has also fed chronic violence in the Druze-majority province of Suwayda, which never fell to the rebels, but secured some level of autonomy during the conflict. Dwindling regime patronage pushed some local militias to fund themselves by ransoming Sunnis from the nearby province of Der'a, which has contributed to reigniting a decades-old communal conflict over land ownership. Dozens were killed in 2020 during clashes between Druze militias and former rebels now affiliated with the Russian-backed 5th Corps. In parallel, independent Druze fighters from the Men of Dignity militia have kidnapped loyalist soldiers and set up checkpoints to secure concessions from Damascus such as the release of prisoners.

### SDF: Between Turkey's Hammer, the Regime's Anvil, and IS's Dagger

In the east and north of the country, the SDF have been fighting on three fronts. Occasional shelling and skirmishes have occurred regularly along the frontlines that separate Kurdish-led forces from the Turkish and Syrian National Army units operating north of Aleppo and Raqqa. Threats of escalation, which peaked at the end of 2020, have served Ankara's (so far unsuccessful) attempt to impose a partial replacement of SDF elements stationed along the border and frontline with regime and/or more palatable Kurdish fighters affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria.
Relations between the SDF and the regime also markedly deteriorated following the failure of early 2020 negotiations between Damascus and the SDF's political arm, the Syrian Democratic Council. Tensions peaked in April 2021 when the SDF expelled Arab tribesmen affiliated with the National Defense Forces from Qamishli, thereby seizing most of the city from the regime. Finally, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (the governance structure established in SDF-controlled areas) has been faced with a low-intensity insurgency aimed to weaken its grip over the Arab-majority region of Deir ez-Zor, notably through the assassination of pro-SDF tribal leaders. Although most of these attacks have been carried out by IS cells, which have regularly been targeted by joint SDF-US operations, Kurdish leaders have also accused the regime of fostering ethnic tensions east of the Euphrates through covert operations.

### Security Breakdown in Northern Aleppo, and a Shaky Ceasefire in Idlib

The Turkish military presence has generally shielded northern areas held by the Syrian National Army (SNA) from direct loyalist attacks, except for occasional missile strikes against infrastructure processing oil imported from SDF-held areas. Meanwhile,

Turkish soldiers and the Syrian National Army have been faced with a twin insurgency. The Afrin Liberation Movement (a YPG front) has been waging increasingly sophisticated rural guerilla warfare in the hilly northwestern corner of the country, probably with logistical support from the regime. In other Turkish-held areas further east, weekly bomb attacks and drive-by shootings have been blamed on the YPG and IS cells. Violence in the Turkish-controlled north has also stemmed from chronic infighting between SNA components. Such fratricide conflicts have usually been caused by disputes over economic resources such as the control of smuggling routes and booty. They have typically played along regional lines (e.g. local factions vs groups originating from Deir ez-Zor or Damascus) or ethnic ones (e.g. Turkmens vs Arabs).

In spite of the 5 March 2020 ceasefire negotiated by Russia and Turkey, Idlib has witnessed frequent armed incidents between local rebels and pro-regime forces. Most serious to date were a Russian airstrike that killed dozens of fighters from the Turkish-backed Sham Legion in November 2020 (possibly in response to Ankara's support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh war), and an escalation in loyalist bombardments that killed dozens of civilians and deliberately burnt crops throughout the spring of 2021. Rather than as a preparation for a major ground assault, the latter escalation was apparently designed as a means to pressure Turkey and its Western allies into accepting Russian demands regarding the provision of humanitarian aid to Idlib. While threatening to veto the extension by the UN Security Council of cross-border aid from Turkey (which would expose the three million people living in Idlib to deadly food shortages), Moscow proposed to replace it with humanitarian corridors stemming from regime-held territories – this would be a first step, the Kremlin hoped, in a gradual reassertion of Damascus' sovereignty over the rebel enclave.

Inside Idlib, the last year has been marked by the emergence of shadowy Jihadi groups that have concentrated their attacks on Turkish forces inside the province; in August 2020, one such attack against a patrol jointly carried out by Turkish and Russian vehicles as per the 5 March ceasefire agreement led Moscow to freeze its participation in this mechanism. It is assumed that the new groups operate as front organizations for hardline Jihadi factions that oppose Turkey's deployment in the province, like the al-Qaeda-loyalist Hurras al-Din. Following armed clashes with the latter in June 2020, HTS carried out several arrest campaigns against Idlib's remaining independent Jihadi groups. The crackdown was part of HTS' pragmatic policy of acquiescence to Ankara's *de facto* protectorate over the province, while it served the organization's efforts to be perceived as a lesser evil by Western governments.

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### Economic Collapse and Legitimacy Crises

Aside from the violence, Syria's multiple governing structures have strived to address legitimacy crises that have been heightened by growing economic difficulties. This nationwide trend was most spectacularly illustrated by the collapse of the Syrian pound, whose exchange rate temporarily fell to 1% of its prewar value in March 2021, and by the fuel crises, both of which have hit regime-held areas and the Autonomous Administration (due, in the latter case, to the extensive smuggling out of locally-produced oil). The most unanticipated (albeit so far innocuous) challenge to Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy came from his cousin Rami Makhluf, who in 2020 released a series of videos in which he indignantly denounced the seizure of his (enormous) economic assets. The move was reportedly instigated as a means to favour rival businessmen aligned with Assad's spouse Asma al-Akhras, whose political profile has risen in the meantime thanks to charitable operations among pro-regime (i.e., Alawite) constituencies and public displays of giant posters.

More expectedly, popular dissent has found its main venues of expression in regions that escape the full control of the regime, that is, southern "reconciled" towns and Suweida. Protests peaked in June 2020, over deteriorating economic conditions, and in May 2021, as demonstrators rejected the façade presiden-

tial election held that month, which saw Assad win a fourth seven-year term with 95% of the votes. Yet, although discontent has spread among pro-regime communities due to falling living standards, there has been no sign that it could coalesce into a nationwide movement able to overcome sectarian polarization and the fear of another merciless regime response.

Economic difficulties, poor public services and conscription into the SDF have also sparked several rounds of popular protests in the Arab-majority regions of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. In June 2021, the Asayish (security forces) killed eight demonstrators in Manbij, a volatile situation that led the local authorities to stop the forced recruitment of locals into the SDF.

The absence of such major instances of popular protests in Turkish-administered areas should not obscure the fact that local authorities have also been going through a serious legitimacy crisis. This was first due to the SNA's inability to put an end to the security chaos in the area, and to the abuses of its own units. Second, local governance has suffered from a duality of power: while civilian and military affairs are supposedly in the hands of the Syrian opposition's Interim Government, in reality, most matters are dealt with by local councils that liaise directly with Turkish authorities. As for the Syrian National Coalition and Higher Negotiations Committee, the opposition's main representative bodies, they have increasingly been criticized as the preserve of a narrow group of politicians, a sentiment exacerbated by the June 2020 job swap between the respective heads of the two bodies, Anas al-Abdah and Nasr Hariri.

In Idlib, finally, protests against HTS and its de facto civilian arm, the Syrian Salvation Government, have remained limited and focused on specific issues such as taxation policies. In spite of their modest scale, however, protests have demonstrated the determination of local communities to resist HTS' hegemony, and forced the ruling faction to tone down the most controversial aspects of Islamist governance, notably by restraining the operations of its religious police.

By mid-2021, therefore, foreign military protection continued to shield Syria's fragmented governance structures from the most immediate military and political threats. Neither armed violence, nor civilian protests seemed likely to induce major transformations in the short run. By contrast, a more pressing problem faced by all warring parties was the risk of economic implosion, be it related to a multiplicity of structural factors, as in regime-held areas, or to a single fatal decision, i.e., if cross-border aid towards Idlib was to be vetoed by Russia.

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