

Policy brief

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# Shifting loyalties: understanding fighter motivations in Syria's transitional phase

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## Purpose

This policy brief examines the drivers of mobilisation and the contentious narratives within Syrian armed groups, focusing on the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA was established as an umbrella organisation unifying several opposition factions under Turkish backing, encompassing a diverse array of actors, including three military corps controlling northern Aleppo (see box on page 3). On the 27 January 2025, Ahmad al-Sharaa announced the dissolution of SNA factions, and the integration of their fighters into the Ministry of Defence (MOD), a move framed as a step toward military unification. However, this integration remains fragile and largely symbolic, as many factions continue to operate with significant autonomy. Understanding the motivations of fighters in the SNA up to this point is crucial for predicting and influencing how armed groups may act in Syria's next phase, including whether these fighters will align with national military discipline.

As the country transitions into a new political and military reality, the interplay of ideological, emotional, and material motivations will shape fighters' behaviour, group cohesion, and alignment with broader political goals. This is particularly relevant

given that many factions within the SNA have been accused of atrocities, most recently following an armed insurgency by Assad loyalists (predominantly Alawites) on the 6th of March 2025. These recent developments necessitate a deeper examination of military discipline, factional loyalties, and the risk of fragmented command structures in shaping the future security landscape.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork and qualitative interviews with fighters and central military commanders, security commanders and civil society leaders, this paper sheds light on the complex interplay of these factors and offers considerations for engagement by the international community. The findings and policy implications below are aimed at shaping better security assessments, interventions, and peace-building strategies.<sup>1</sup>

## Key findings

- **Factions within the SNA display a diversity of motivational patterns.** In addition to rivalries over power and influence, tensions and clashes between factions may also arise from divergent and potentially conflicting fighter motivations.

<sup>1</sup> This report is based on 49 interviews conducted between April 2022 and January 2025 with fighters, central military commanders, security commanders, and civil society leaders across multiple locations in northern Syria.

- **Emotional motivations and solidarity** drive some fighters, reflecting a complex interplay of personal experiences and collective identity that supports retention of fighters. These bonds foster cohesion of groups and reinforce loyalty and a commitment to armed struggle.
- **Ideological motivations** are central to groups affiliated with the Third Corps, such as Sham Front, where fighters are driven by convictions and the pursuit of a particular vision of society. This manifests as a commitment to revolutionary ideals and resistance to authoritarian structures.
- **Material incentives** are a primary motivation for some fighters, particularly in the Second Corps. This has been seen, for example, in economic exploitation of the local population and involvement in illicit economies.
- **Tribal affiliations** play a crucial role in fighter motivations, characterised by *asabiyyah* (strong group solidarity rooted in kinship and tribal bonds). These localised power dynamics have implications for how these actors engage with leadership, with these fighters' loyalty and trust in leadership rooted in perceptions of their commanders as protectors of tribal honour and regional interests.
- Among fighters, **fear of accountability for war-time violations, concerns about political marginalisation, and the need for institutional trust-building** are all critical issues which may prevent Syria's unification.
- **Supporting transitional justice:** Addressing fears of accountability among commanders through credible transitional justice mechanisms is essential to promote reconciliation. On the other hand, reconciliation efforts addressing emotional grievances like personal loss and disillusionment can help prevent remobilisation and promote long-term stability without undermining justice.
- **Fostering inclusive governance:** Recognising the diverse motivations within armed groups can inform strategies to build inclusive governance structures that accommodate both ideological and material interests. For example, groups prioritising ideological visions are unlikely to be swayed by material incentives. An alternative for these groups would be to offer symbolic, diplomatic gestures that demonstrate willingness to engage with them. This has been seen, for example, in the 'Revolutionary Military Council' proposed by some SNA commanders. Recognising the diverse motivations within armed groups can inform strategies to build inclusive governance structures that accommodate both ideological and material interests.
- **Building trust in post-conflict governance:** Given the divergent motivations highlighted in this paper, many fighters fear that integration into centralised governance structures, dominated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), will erode their influence. Addressing these concerns through phased, inclusive security sector reform, coupled with confidence-building measures, will be essential to prevent fragmentation and clashes between factions.

## Policy implications

- **Factions within the SNA have different motivations that have driven them to fight;** in the current context of reconstruction, policy and governance decisions not recognising this diversity may risk increasing tensions between groups and reigniting greater instability.
- **Managing spoiler risks:** Factions reliant on illicit economies may resist meaningful integration into a centralised state structure, posing risks to stability. Targeted interventions to provide alternative livelihoods could mitigate this threat. Understanding local dynamics and economic factors and opportunities will be key in this process.

## Introduction

The Syrian conflict, which quickly saw the emergence of hundreds of rival rebel groups, has gradually narrowed to include only a few major factions. The largest cohesive groups now include Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which used to control Idlib province; the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control northeast Syria; and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), which controls northern Syria. The SNA encompasses a diverse array of factions, including three military corps controlling northern Aleppo, with major factions such as Sham Front, Sultan Murad Division, Hamza Division, and Suleiman Shah Brigade.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that during the early phase of fieldwork (2023 to January 2025), Sham Front was an SNA faction. However, it later participated alongside HTS in the offensive that overthrew Assad. Additionally, SNA factions have expressed their willingness to integrate into the new Syrian army, though their salaries continue to be managed by the Syrian Interim Government in northern Syria, backed by Turkey. As of this date, these factions still receive financial support from Qatar and Turkey.

With the collapse of the Assad regime, a key challenge for Syria's transition government will be to create new governance structures and unify armed factions under a centralised authority. Understanding fighter motivations in groups such as the SNA can inform strategies to manage them, addressing grievances and influencing the roles they play in governance, reconciliation, and reconstruction. To this end, it will be important to consider individual experiences and motivations alongside broader group dynamics. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, this report explores the personal experiences of fighters within non-state military factions, examining SNA factions to provide deeper insights into their motivations and trajectories.

## SNA organisational structure

The SNA is divided into three corps, each of which has several divisions and armed factions. Below is an outline of the main structure.

- First Corps: Initially included various divisions such as:
  - 11th Division: North Brigade and Grandchildren Army
  - 12th Division: Samarkand Brigade and Eastern Free Men
  - 13th Division: Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih Brigade and others
  - 14th Division: Sham Legion and multiple other units. The Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade (Amshat) later joined but transitioned to the Second Corps
- Second Corps: Comprised factions like the Sultan Murad Division, Hamza Division, and Army of Islam
- Third Corps: Led by Mudar Najjar (as of February 23, 2023), includes:
  - Sham Front (largest bloc), Army of Islam, Majd Corps, 51st Division, Sultan Malikshah Division, and Peace Brigade
  - Divided into seven divisions, such as the 31st Division (North Storm Brigade) and 32nd Division (Ahrar al-Sham/Eastern Sector)

## Misconceptions about fighter motivations

Prevailing narratives about fighter motivations often shape both academic discourse and policy responses. These misconceptions are frequently found in media analyses, policy reports, and even scholarly debates, where oversimplified views risk leading to misguided interventions, flawed security assessments, and ineffective peacebuilding strategies. This section challenges three common misconceptions, drawing on both field observations and existing literature.<sup>3</sup>

- **Misconception 1: Fighter motivations are inherently given:** This misconception assumes that all motives arise from primordial characteristics, such as ethnicity, sect, tribe, or gender. Such reductionist thinking ignores the fluid and multi-layered nature of individual choices, oversimplifying fighters' decisions as predetermined by identity markers, rather than influenced by a range of personal, political, and situational factors.
- **Misconception 2: Fighter motivations are fixed:** Motivations are not static; they evolve with the shifting dynamics of conflict. For instance, conflicts may start with sociopolitical grievances against authoritarian regimes or peaceful uprisings for political change, but can later morph due to violence from state actors, foreign interventions, or extremist groups. In the Syrian context, SNA groups have faced violence from the regime, its allies (Iran and Russia), and ISIS, leading to structural transformations in their organisation and leadership and a greater militarisation. This shift from nonviolent to armed movements fundamentally alters the nature of motivation.
- **Misconception 3: Fighter motivations are solely determined by the group's structure:** This view conflates individual agency with group dynamics, assuming that all members of an armed group share uniform ideological or material motivations. In reality, individuals may join rebellions for political ideals, social causes, or community defence. Over time, however, disillusionment with leadership due to corruption or a divergence from the group's original mission may occur. Despite this, the lived experience of a fighter—shaped

3 Gade E.K, Hafez M.N., and Gabbay M. "Fratricide in Rebel Movements: A Network Analysis of Syrian Militant Infighting." *Journal of Peace Research* 56 (3). 2019. p. 321–335; Kalyvas S.N. and Kocher M.A., "Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War: Iraq and Vietnam." *Politics & Society* 35 (2). p.183–223; Malešević S. *Why Humans Fight: The Social Dynamics of Close-Range Violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

by camaraderie, identity formation, and personal transformation—can sustain continued participation even when initial motivations no longer apply.

## Fighter motivations driving mobilisation

The mobilisation strategies of Syrian armed groups are driven by a complex interplay of political, ethnic, and material factors. This section delves into the various paths of mobilisation within the SNA, highlighting distinct motivations and influences and closely examining the unique characteristics defining each faction within SNA groups.

## The interplay of emotion, solidarity, and ideology

Fighter motivations within the Third Corps in particular are shaped by a dynamic interplay of emotional solidarity and ideological convictions, both of which reinforce group cohesion, loyalty, and sustained commitment to the revolutionary cause. This dual framework highlights how personal experiences of loss and collective identity formation intersect with deeply rooted ideological aspirations for political change.

### Emotional solidarity and collective identity

Solidarity and a profound sense of belonging play a pivotal role in influencing fighters' decisions to join and remain within the Third Corps. Emotional bonds formed through shared experiences in combat, exposure to trauma, and collective suffering all foster strong interpersonal connections among fighters. These bonds are often described in familial terms, reflecting a deep-rooted sense of mutual support and camaraderie. The construction of collective memories, such as commemorating massacres and honouring fallen comrades, reinforces fighters' loyalty and their emotional attachment to both the group and the revolutionary cause.

The process of identity transformation is equally significant. Fighters undergo a shift from perceiving themselves as isolated individuals to becoming part of a collective revolutionary identity. This transformation is driven by mechanisms of socialisation, ritualistic memorisation, and the internalisation of the group's values and goals. Such practices cultivate a

strong sense of purpose, where fighters see themselves not just as participants in armed struggle but as active agents of radical societal change.

## Grievances, personal loss, and resistance to external manipulation

For many fighters, personal grievances and traumatic experiences serve as powerful motivators. The loss of family members, experiences of imprisonment, displacement, and the destruction of their communities create a profound emotional drive to continue fighting. For example, fighters from displaced communities in Eastern Syria often join the First Corps seeking retribution and a sense of belonging after losing their homes and families. These grievances are not merely individual traumas but are often woven into the collective memory of the group, reinforcing a shared sense of injustice and the desire for reprisal.

Additionally, fighters exhibit loyalty through their opposition to external manipulation, particularly from actors such as Turkey. Some armed groups within the SNA have reported Turkish pressure to deploy fighters to foreign conflicts in Libya and Africa. In response, Third Corps fighters have expressed resistance to such external influence, emphasising their commitment to revolutionary principles over serving external geopolitical interests. This stance reflects their desire to maintain autonomy and protect the integrity of their professed revolutionary struggle.

## Ideological convictions and revolutionary commitment

Beyond emotional and personal grievances, ideological motivations are central to the Third Corps, especially within factions like the Sham Front. Fighters often identify themselves as 'revolutionaries' rather than as soldiers or mujahideen, framing their struggle within the broader context of a revolution against injustice and authoritarianism. This revolutionary identity is fundamental to their self-perception, reinforcing a shared commitment to overthrowing the Assad regime and establishing a just political order.

A key driver of this ideological fervour is the opposition to sectarian bias and authoritarian practices. Fighters harbour deep resentment towards the Assad regime's systemic sectarian discrimination and repression, which many have experienced firsthand through persecution, violence, and

marginalisation. These experiences fuel their revolutionary zeal and shape their long-term commitment to dismantling authoritarian structures.

Despite the political stalemate and the absence of tangible progress toward regime change until recently, Third Corps fighters maintain a strong belief in the revolutionary project. Their commitment persists as long as their groups remain aligned with the revolutionary ideals of justice, freedom, and political transformation. This enduring ideological drive underscores their resilience and explains their continued engagement in the conflict, even in the face of shifting military and political dynamics.

## Material gains

Among the fighters interviewed, material gains emerged as a significant driver of loyalty, particularly within the Second Corps (this also serves as a secondary motivation for other factions like the First Corps). These motivations include not only substantial financial incentives provided by the groups, but also opportunities to engage in illicit economic activities, attracting individuals seeking to improve their socio-economic status.

## Seizing economic opportunities

These factions are heavily involved in economic exploitation, including through imposing arbitrary levies on remaining Kurdish residents, manipulating control over local markets, and dominating key sectors such as the olive trade in areas under their control. Such activities provide lucrative revenue streams, further incentivising fighters' allegiance.

## Illicit gains and financial necessity

Some fighters and commanders participate in illegal activities, including looting and drug smuggling. For example, military leaders in the Sultan Murad Division conducted extensive search operations in Libyan camps, seizing and selling valuable items such as electrical cables. Fighters often perceive their involvement in foreign conflicts as a pragmatic decision driven by financial necessity, viewing it as a means to secure their survival and support their families amidst dire economic conditions. Additionally, military leaders frequently reinvest their profits in Turkey and other regions to bolster the group's financial standing.

## Personal gains for commanders

Despite the collective nature of these economic ventures, individual fighters expressed frustration over the disproportionate personal gains accrued by their direct commanders. This discontent highlights a growing divide between leadership and rank-and-file fighters.

## Tribal loyalty and trust in leadership

Unlike other factions within the SNA that may be driven by ideological or material incentives, the First Corps demonstrates a distinct interplay between tribal solidarity, leadership-centred allegiances, and localised power dynamics.

### Tribal loyalty and *asabiyyah*:

The First Corps exhibit fighter motivations that are deeply entrenched in tribal loyalty, characterised by *asabiyyah* (أسابيية), a form of group solidarity rooted in kinship bonds that reinforces both identity and cohesion within the corps. This is also true of the Second Corps.

### Leadership-centric allegiances:

Loyalty to charismatic leaders plays a central role in fighter motivations. Fighters often perceive their commanders as protectors of tribal honour and regional interests, with allegiance tied more to personal relationships than to broader ideological commitments. This dynamic is evident in the concentration of power within a narrow leadership circle, with decision-making authority centralised around key figures.

## Recent developments and challenges in uniting Syria's fighters

On 29 January 2025, a pivotal moment unfolded in Syria's post-conflict landscape, when Ahmad al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani), leader of HTS, delivered his 'Victory Speech' in Damascus, marking the official collapse of the Assad regime. During this event, al-Sharaa was announced as the President of Syria under the newly established 'Salvation Government'. The speech, delivered in the presence of key military factions and revolutionary forces, outlined Syria's transition priorities, including the

dissolution of former regime institutions, the creation of new governance structures, and the unification of armed factions under a centralised authority.

While the speech symbolised an attempt to consolidate power and project national unity, in-depth interviews with leaders of SNA factions revealed deep-seated challenges that undermine this narrative of cohesion. Despite the official declaration to dissolve all armed factions, three critical issues continue to obstruct genuine unification:

- **Fear of accountability for war-time violations**

Many faction leaders expressed apprehension regarding potential legal repercussions for human rights violations committed during the conflict. This fear underscores the urgent need for the new administration to establish a credible framework for transitional justice, balancing the demands for accountability with the necessity of reconciliation to prevent renewed violence.

- **Concerns about political marginalisation**

The rivalry between HTS and SNA factions persists as a significant concern. Faction commanders voiced fears of being sidelined in the new political order, particularly with the integration of their fighters into the Ministry of Defense without guaranteeing their influence or autonomy. This anxiety highlights the importance of international oversight to ensure a transparent, inclusive integration process that mitigates the risks of exclusion and fragmentation.

- **The need for institutional trust-building**

The dominance of HTS could lead to increased centralisation of military efforts, but also risks further alienation of fighters who are disillusioned with HTS's ideological rigidity and authoritarian tendencies. In an effort to build trust with HTS and promote genuine military integration, central commanders within the SNA have proposed the establishment of a 'Revolutionary Military Council'. This council would consist of eight to 12 revolutionary military leaders, representing diverse components of Syria's military landscape. The proposed council aims to foster inclusive leadership, provide a platform for balanced representation, and ensure that no single faction dominates Syria's military future. By creating such an institution, SNA commanders hope to address fears of marginalisation, enhance mutual trust, and establish a foundation for coordinated decision-making in Syria's transitional phase.

## Conclusions

The fall of the Assad regime represents a pivotal moment in Syria's conflict, but the underlying drivers of fighter motivations—rooted in emotional, ideological, and material factors—remain deeply entrenched. Understanding these motivations is not just an academic exercise; it has profound implications for Syria's political stability, security dynamics, and prospects for sustainable peace.

The diversity of fighter motivations across different factions suggests that future dynamics will be shaped by how these groups adapt to the evolving political landscape. For instance, fighters driven by ideological convictions may resist integration into centralised state structures if they perceive such moves as a threatening their revolutionary ideals. Conversely, factions motivated by material gains could face increased pressures as revenue streams become contested in the post-conflict environment. This raises critical questions: could these economically driven groups become spoilers, resorting to violence to protect or expand their financial interests? How might this affect the fragile alliances currently holding opposition factions together?

To ensure long-term stability in Syria, these diverse motivations must be addressed. Economic incentives alone may be ineffective for ideologically driven fighters, who may view them as compromising their revolutionary ideals. Instead, symbolic diplomatic gestures should be prioritised to foster engagement from these actors. For factions driven by material gains, targeted economic interventions, such as sustainable livelihood programs, can reduce the appeal of illicit economies and mitigate the risk of renewed violence.

The charismatic leadership of Ahmad al-Sharaa has been widely acknowledged by SNA commanders interviewed for this research, signalling a potential unifying force in Syria's transitional phase. However, trust-building remains a central challenge. The lingering mistrust between factions, despite formal declarations of unity, suggests that without deliberate efforts to foster inclusion and address grievances, the risk of fragmentation persists.

Moreover, the fear of accountability for war-time violations remains a major barrier to unification. Without credible transitional justice mechanisms that balance accountability with pathways for reconciliation, fighters may resist disarmament and reintegration efforts. Constructing a framework that addresses these concerns while ensuring justice for victims is critical for long-term stability.

Ultimately, understanding fighter motivations is crucial for designing effective interventions. These motivations matter, as they shape not only how groups behave in the present, but also how they will respond to future political shifts. Understanding these dynamics and aligning strategies to these, is crucial for anticipating potential flashpoints, designing effective peacebuilding interventions, and supporting Syria's path toward a more stable and inclusive future.

## About the author

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## About XCEPT

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