UNITING THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

THE COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL ARMY AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNIFICATION

ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK

SETA | ANALYSIS

OCTOBER 2019 NO.54

UNITING THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

THE COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL ARMY AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNIFICATION

ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK

SETA

COPYRIGHT © 2019 by SETA

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reprinted
or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any
electronic, mechanical or other means, without
permission in writing from the publishers.

SETA Yayınları
ISBN: 978-605-7544-86-5

Layout: Hasan Suat Olgun

Printed in Turkey, İstanbul
by Turkuvaz Haberleşme ve Yayıncılık A.Ş., 2019

SETA | SİYASET, EKONOMİ VE TOPLUM ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI
Nenehatun Cd. No: 66 GOP Çankaya 06700 Ankara TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 312 551 21 00 | Faks: +90 312 551 21 90
www.setav.org | info@setav.org | @setavakfi

SETA | İstanbul
Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı No: 41-43
Eyüpsultan İstanbul TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 212 395 11 00 | Faks: +90 212 395 11 11

SETA | Washington D.C.
1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 1106
Washington D.C., 20036 USA
Tel: 202-223-9885 | Faks: 202-223-6099
www.setadc.org | info@setadc.org | @setadc

SETA | Kahire
21 Fahmi Street Bab al Luq Abdeen Flat No: 19 Cairo EGYPT
Tel: 00202 279 56866 | 00202 279 56985 | @setakahire

SETA | Berlin
Französische Straße 12, 10117 Berlin GERMANY
Tel: +49 30 20188466

CONTENTS

SUMMARY 7
INTRODUCTION 8
THE COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL ARMY 10
IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNIFICATION 12
REMAINING RISKS AND OBSTACLES FOR THE UNIFICATION 14
RECOMMENDATIONS 14

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ömer Özkizilcik
Ömer Özkizilcik works at the Security Department of SETA Foundation. Between August 2017 and September 2018, Özkizilcik worked at the Middle East Foundation. Since 2016, he is the editor-in-chief of Suriye Gündemi. Özkizilcik's main focus is the Syrian conflict in a broader sense, and the intra- and internal dynamics of local non-state actors in Syria.

SUMMARY

> This analysis mainly focuses on the unification of all Syrian opposition under the Syrian Interim Government and gives policy recommendations.

After eight years of war, the Syrian opposition announced that all armed groups united under the command of the Syrian Interim Government's Defense Ministry and joined forces under the banner of the National Army. This announcement marks a milestone in the journey of the Syrian opposition which united ranks and is a product of a 3-year process that commenced with the start of the Operation Euphrates Shield. With the increasing role of Turkey as the sole backer of the Syrian opposition and following Turkish pressure, the remaining factions in Idlib, Afrin, and northern Aleppo came together. However, the announcement in and of itself does not guarantee the unity of the Syrian opposition. Yet and despite the fact that many structural and environmental obstacles remain, the announcement may provide new opportunities for the actors involved in the Syrian War. Most notably, the announcement of the unification also comes with an essential change within the Syrian opposition. For the first time, the Syrian Interim Government formed by the Syrian National Coalition has managed take the armed opposition under its command. With this step, the political opposition for the first time may be able to proclaim itself the representative of the entire Syrian opposition. The declaration of the unification comes ahead of the possible Turkish operation against the YPG/SDF, during the ongoing fragile ceasefire in Idlib, and ahead of the start of the deliberations of the constitutional committee. This analysis is based upon firsthand research and interviews with members of the armed and political opposition.

INTRODUCTION

After eight years of war, the Syrian opposition finally managed to announce the full merger of all armed factions in Syria except for radical groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Huras al-Din, and the Turkestan Islamic Party. On October 4, 2019, the president of the Syrian Interim Government Abdurrahman Mustafa and the Minister of Defense of the government Salim Idriss announced the unification in the Turkish city of Şanlıurfa in front of representatives of opposition commanders and media.[1] The announcement marks an important milestone in the political and armed opposition. For the first time, the armed opposition formally accepted to be under the command of the political opposition, which was long criticized for a lack of influence on the ground in Syria. With this announcement, the National Army composes of 7 corps: the first three are the ones that existed previously and the new four corps will comprise of the factions in Idlib.[2] The deputy chief of staff in Idlib will be Fadlullah Hajji, the former commander of the National Front for Liberation in Idlib and Adnan al-Ahmad will be the deputy chief of staff in northern Aleppo and Afrin.[3] After the announcement, the Syrian Interim Government will take the necessary steps and measures to implement the unification incrementally on the ground.[4]

However, before this announcement, the process was ongoing. The turning point for the Syrian opposition may have been the Euphrates Shield Operation, undertaken in cooperation with Turkey against DAESH in 2016. For the first time since 2011, the Syrian opposition was actively backed by a foreign actor who embedded its ground and air forces with the armed groups. At that time, Turkey coordinated its efforts via the Hawar Kilis Operation Room, which enabled all the armed groups together to coordinate the operation.[5] Later, on December 31, 2017, with the active mediation and support of Turkey, the Syrian opposition merged under the Syrian Interim Government's banner and formed the National Army.[6] This move came after the Islamic Council of Syria called upon the factions to unite towards a National Army - the unification, however, only included the factions in northern Aleppo, not Idlib.

1. Ragip Soylu and Harun al-Aswad, "Syrian Rebel Groups Merge as Turkish Offensive Looms", Middle East Eye, October 4, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-opposition-armed-groups-merge-amid-looming-turkish-offensive-syria (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

2. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Syrian Interim Government's Defense Ministry, WhatsApp, October 4.

3. Nedaa Syria, "التأثير السياسي "سوريا نداء" خبير عسكري يوضح لـ "بوزارة الدفاع "الجبهة الوطنية للتحرير" لالتحاق", October 4, 2019, http://nedaa-sy.com/news/16151 (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

4. Interview with Naji Mustafa, the spokesman of the former National Front for Liberation, WhatsApp, October 5, 2019.

5. Smart News, „ تسيطر على قرية تل "حوار كلس" فصائل غرفة عمليات "شعير بريف حلب الشمالي", April 5, 2016, https://bit.ly/30PUHqr (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

6. https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/31991

ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE UNIFICATION OF THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION

Anadolu Agency

A second course began with the Turkish mediation in Idlib and on May 28, 2018, all Free Syrian Army factions merged under the National Front for Liberation (NLF).[7] On August 3, 2018, the NLF was joined by Ahrar al-Sham, the Nureddin Zengi Movement, Suqour al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Ahrar in Idlib.[8] During the clashes between the National Front for Liberation and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Nureddin Zengi Movement was disbanded by the latter.[9]

For a long time both mergers remained independent of each other and at the beginning of 2019, the Turkish mediation negotiations started.[10] A second problem was the lack of control of the Syrian Interim Government's Defense Ministry over the National Army. On August 31, the Syrian National Coalition came together and elected the president and the cabinet of the Syrian Interim Government in which Abdurrahman Mustafa was elected president and Salim Idriss was elected defense minister.[11] With the new cabinet, the Syrian Interim Government became more active on the ground, started visiting each faction of the National Army,[12] and accelerated the stalled negotiations to unite the National Army and the

7. Suriye Gündemi, "National Liberation Front", May 31, 2019, http://en.suriyegundemi.com/2018/05/31/national-liberation-front/ (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

8. Kutluhan Görücü, "Ulusal Özgürleştirme Cephesi'ne Katılan Gruplar", Suriye Gündemi, September 13, 2018, http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/09/13/ulusal-ozgurlestirme-cephesine-katilan-gruplar/ (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

9. Murat Yeşiltaş and Ömer Özkizilcik, "Interfactional Dynamics and the Future of Idlib", SETA, January 28, 2019, https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/01/48.-ANALYSIS.pdf (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

10. Interview with an anonymous member of the National Army, WhatsApp, September 28, 2019

11. Syrian National Coalition, " Final Statement of General Assembly' 47th Session Dedicated to Victims in Idlib & Hama", September 1, 2019, http://en.etilaf.org/press/final-statement-of-general-assembly-47th-session-dedicated-to-victims-in-idlib-hama.html (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

12. Ömer Özkizilcik, This move comes after a long period of negotiations and on the ground visits of the Syrian Interim Government. The Defense Minister Salim Idriss (a US-supported person) visited the factions in Syria and laid down the groundwork for this unification and command control.", Twitter, October 4, 2019, https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1180080875733692417 (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

NLF under one command.[13] However, the process could not come to an end until Turkey pressured the leaders of the National Army and NLF to announce a merger.[14] Ahead of the press conference, only the leaders of the factions were aware of the announcement.[15] For years, the Syrian opposition had a bottom-up approach and all of the attempts to unite the ranks failed due to popular demand. Now, the opposition managed to announce a merger with an top-down approach.

In terms of military strength, the newly formed National Army's efficiency has significantly increased due to the Turkish training of the factions in northern Aleppo and Afrin, and the ongoing clashes against the Assad regime in Idlib.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL ARMY

In general, the factions that united and became the National Army can be summarized as all the factions in Idlib, Latakia, Hama, western Aleppo, Afrin, and northern Aleppo. However, a deeper look into the factions offers important insight into the National Army's constituent components.

Among the 41 factions that joined the merger, 15 are from the NLF and 26 from the National Army. Thirteen of these factions were formed after the United States cut its support to the armed Syrian opposition. Out of the 28 factions, 21 were previously supported by the United States, three of them via the Pentagon's program to combat DAESH. Eighteen of these factions were supplied by the CIA via the MOM Operations Room in Turkey, a joint intelligence operation room of the 'Friends of Syria' to support the armed opposition. Fourteen factions of the 28 were also recipients of the U.S.-supplied[16] TOW anti-tank guided missiles.

A look at the enemies of these factions shows that they were fighting the Assad regime, DAESH, the YPG/SDF, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or its predecessor, the Al-Nusra Front. Twenty-seven of the 41 factions were previously engaged in fighting DAESH; 30 factions fought the Assad regime; 31 fought the YPG/SDF; and eleven factions fought battles with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or the Al-Nusra Front.

The geographical and ethnic composition of the National Army is very interesting as well. Forty of the 41 factions have Arab fighters, twelve factions have Turkmen fighters, and nine factions have Kurdish fighters among their ranks. Eight of the 41 factions have fighters from eastern Syria, four factions have fighters from southern Syria, and all factions have fighters from northern Syria.

In terms of numbers, the National Army comprises of approximately 70,000-90,000 fighters.[17] The biggest factions in numbers in the National Army are Ahrar al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, Faylaq al-Sham, Firka Hamza, Firka Sultan Murad, Free Idlib Army, Jabhat Shamiyah, Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Ahrar, Jaysh a- Nasr, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, and Jaysh al-Nukhba.

13. Interview with an anonymous commander of a Liwa Shilam commander, WhatsApp, September 25, 2019; interview with an anonymous commander of a Ahrar al-Sham commander, WhatsApp, September 25, 2019

14. Interview with senior member of the Syrian Interim Government's Defense Ministry, WhatsApp, October 3, 2019.

15. Interview with an anonymous fighter of Faylaq al-Sham, WhatsApp, October 3, 2019; interview with an anonymous member of the National Army, WhatsApp, October 3, 2019.

16. Fabrice Balanche, "The End of the CIA Program in Syria", Foreign Affair, August 2, 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-08-02/end-cia-program-syria (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

17. Interview with Yusouf Hamoud, the spokesman of the National Army, WhatsApp, October 4, 2019.

FACTIONS OF THE NATIONAL ARMY

	Active Before Euphrates Shield	Received Turkish Support	Received US support via MOM	Received US support via Pentagon	Received TOW missiles	Fought against Daesh	Fought against regime	Fought against YPG/PKK	Fought against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/Nusra	Arab	Turkmen	Kurd	Fighters from eastern Syria	Fighters from southern Syria	Fighters from northern Syria	Current Location in Idlib	Current Location in northern Aleppo and Afrin
1st Coastal Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
1st Infantery Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
20th Brigade	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
2nd Coastal Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
51. Brigade	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
5th Regiment	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
9th Brigade	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Ahrar al Sham	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ahrar al Sharqiyyah	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Central Division	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Fawc al Mustafa	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Faylaq al Sham	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Firka 23	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Firka Hamza	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Firka Muattasim	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Firka Shimal	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Firka Sultan Murad	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Free Idlib Army	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Jabhat Shamiyah	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Jaysh al Ahfad	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Jaysh al Ahrar	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Jaysh al Islam	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
Jaysh al Nasr	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Jaysh al Nukhba	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Jaysh al Sharqiyyah	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Jaysh al Thani	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
Liwa al Fatih	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa al Hurriyah	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Liwa al Shimal	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa al Shimal al Maghawer	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa al Vakkas	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Muntassir Billah	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Salam	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Samarkand	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Liwa Sultan Mehmed Fatih	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Sultan Osman	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Sultan Suleyman Shah	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Liwa Suqour al Shimal	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Rijal al Harb	✗	✓	—	—	—	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Shuhada al Islam Darayya	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Suqour al Sham	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Thuwwar al Jazira	✗	✓	—	—	—	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓

Components of the National Army, SETA

In terms of military strength, the newly formed National Army's efficiency has significantly increased due to the Turkish training of the factions in northern Aleppo and Afrin, and the ongoing clashes against the Assad regime in Idlib. The first three corps of the National Army have established a strong operational cohesion with the Turkish Armed Forces. This was reportedly seen in the Operation Olive Branch, which cleansed Afrin from YPG terrorists.[18]

18. Can Kasapoglu and Sinan Ülgen, Turkeys Operation Olive Branch Enters a New Phase", EDAM, March 2018, https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Operation-Olive-Branch-Update2.pdf (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

The fighters have also undergone military training which includes airdrop operations with Turkish helicopters.[19] Additionally, the Turkish backing guarantees the National Army sufficient supplies, including heavy armory and armored combat vehicles. The new National Army will also benefit from the first-time use of anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM). The factions in Idlib may have the best operators of ATGMs in the world as they have used hundreds of ATGMs over the years against the Assad regime.[20] With the full integration of Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Ahrar, Suqour al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham, the National Army also gained the use of an *Inghimasi* unit, shock troops that infiltrate the enemy line to die in combat, without a withdrawal strategy. However, the National Army, under its new structure, has to prove its capacity to coordinate efficiently across the seven corps in a potential joint operation.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNIFICATION

The announcement of the unification of all Syrian opposition factions was primarily the outcome of a Turkish initiative[21] to boost the positions of the Syrian opposition and Turkey in three different aspects. Foremost, the announcement was made in Şanlıurfa, not Gaziantep where the Syrian opposition usually meet in Turkey. Şanlıurfa is important for two reasons. First, it is located at the other side of the border of Tal Abyad, a strategic town of the Euphrates. Secondly, the city is hosting the Tribal and Clan Council in which many tribal elders from eastern Syria are being represented.[22] On the sidelines of the announcement the leaders of the factions and the Syrian Interim Government met representatives of the Tribal and Clan Council.[23] This new unification and control of the Syrian Interim Government aims to weaken the hand of the United States ahead of a potential Turkish-led military operation in east of the Euphrates. The Syrian National Coalition and the Syrian Interim Government are still the real representatives of the Syrian people for the U.S. and James Jeffrey only recently met with them to discuss the situation in Idlib.[24] With the unification of all factions under the Syrian Interim Government, the U.S. faces a dilemma of having to choose between its partners in the fight against DAESH and the representative of the Syrian people. Additionally, by uniting the ranks, the manpower of Turkey's partners in a potential operation will increase. If the press conference is seen alongside the statements of Turkish President Erdoğan on October 5, 2019, who criticized the joint air and ground patrols with the U.S. and stated that a Turkish military operation is imminent,[25] then the an-

19. Khaled al-Khateb, "Syria Opposition Receives Military Training from Turkey Ahead of Potential Battle against SDF", Al Monitor, April 28, 2018, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/syria-fsa-turkey-army-training-battle-kurds-sdf.html (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

20. Jakub Janovský, Seven Years of War Documenting Syrian Rebel Use of Anti-Tank Guided Missiles, Bellingcat, May 4, 2018, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/05/04/seven-years-war-documenting-syrian-rebel-use-anti-tank-guided-missiles/ (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

21. Interview with an anonymous fighter of Faylaq al-Sham, WhatsApp, October 3, 2019; interview with an anonymous member of the National Army, WhatsApp, October 3, 2019.

22. Memleket, "Suriyeli Aşiretler ve Kabileler Olarak Terör Örgütünün Karşısındayız", May 15, 2019, http://www.memleket.com.tr/suriyeli-asiretler-ve-kabileler-olarak-teror-orgutunun-karsisindayiz-1751020h.htm (Accessed on August 6, 2019).

23. Interview with an anonymous member of the Tribal and Clan Council, WhatsApp, October 4, 2019.

24. Syrian Nation Coalition, "Syrian Negotiations Commission Presses for End to Onslaught on Idlib & Political Transition", September 25, 2019, http://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/syrian-negotiations-commission-presses-for-end-to-onslaught-on-idlib-political-transition.html (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

25. Reuters, "Erdogan Says Turkey to Launch Military Operation in Northeast Syria", October 5, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-usa/erdogan-says-turkey-plans-military-operation-east-of-euphrates-in-syria-idUSKCN1WK053 (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

nouncement fits this line. Salim Idriss made the ambitions of the Syrian Interim Government clear when during the press conference, he stated, "We will fight all terrorist organizations, especially the PYD/PKK terrorist organization."[26]

The second main goal is to balance Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other extremists in Idlib and to strengthen the position of Turkey against the Russian pressure. In this manner, Charles Lister argued that the unification is

> …Turkey's final gambit - its last gasp attempt to demonstrate HTS's isolation from the Syrian mainstream, thereby revealing its potential vulnerabilities. However, neither Turkey nor the NLF/SNA are likely to turn on HTS anytime soon. What is more realistic is that this latest Turkish maneuver may help to induce HTS to cooperate - openly or covertly - in a shadow campaign targeting al-Qaeda loyalists, in particular al-Qaeda's new affiliate in Syria, Tanzim Huras al-Din (HaD). That would go some way to assuage Russian concerns, while also playing to newfound American worries about HaD's intentions regarding external attacks.[27]

On the other side, Huras al-Din and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham were involved in many negotiations to unite the ranks against a possible Turkish-initiated operation to clean Idlib of extremists.[28] Therefore and as the east of the Euphrates is a priority at the moment, any kind of military operation in Idlib is unlikely. It is more likely that this step aims to win more time against a possible Russian-led military campaign, promising to be able to deal with the extremists after the dust in the east of the Euphrates settles down. Brigadier General Fatih Hassoun told the Nedaa Syria network that this step aims to win the humanitarian support of the international community as many countries have stopped offering their support; a support that is essential for civilians as a result of the increased control of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-backed Salvation Government that controls the administration in most areas of Idlib.[29]

> The internal rivalries and internal clashes between the factions of the National Army are a main problem and a source of friction.

Lastly, the unification under the Syrian Interim Government aims to strengthen the constitutional committee.[30] The United Nations announced that the names of the committee were decided and that the committee may start working on Syria's constitution soon.[31] The new unification is a twofold strategic gain. It is a step forward to guarantee that the constitution will be accepted by the armed groups on the ground with the increasing control of the Syrian Interim Government over them, and a vehicle to boost the position of the representatives of the Syrian opposition in the committee by clearing internal differences ahead of the negotiations, and permitting them to speak with one voice.

26. Jared Szuba, "Turkey-Backed Rebels Announce Unification under 'Syrian National Army'", The Defense Post, October 4, 2019, https://thedefensepost.com/2019/10/04/syrian-national-army-turkey-rebels/ (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

27. Charles Lister, "Turkish-Backed Syrian Armed Opposition Groups to Unite under One Banner", Middle East Institute, https://www.mei.edu/blog/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-opposition-groups-unite-under-one-banner (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

28. Interview with anonymous senior member of Ahrar al-Sham, WhatsApp, October 5, 2019.

29. Nedaa Syria, "التأثير السياسي "سوريا نداء" لـ يوضح عسكري خبير الدفاع بوزارة "لالتحاق "الجبهة الوطنية للتحرير", October 4, 2019, http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/16151 (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

30. Interview with an anonymous member of the Syrian National Coalition, WhatsApp, October 4, 2019.

31. Sarah Dadouch and Asser Khattab, "U.N. Announces Formation of Syrian Constitutional Committee", The Washington Journal, September 23, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/un-announces-formation-of-syrian-constitutional-committee/2019/09/23/73c1b5c0-de0d-11e9-be7f-4cc85017c36f_story.html (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

REMAINING RISKS AND OBSTACLES FOR THE UNIFICATION

The announced unification faces important risks and many obstacles remain in place threatening its ultimate success. First, the announcement took place and the leaders of the factions came to an agreement under Turkish pressure.[32] Therefore, it will take time to become a reality in the already established structures in Idlib, Afrin, and northern Aleppo. Additionally, it remains unclear how the Syrian Interim Government will assert its control over the armed groups. In order to have a real command control, Salim Idriss needs to control the flow of weapons, ammunition, and salaries to the factions, and needs a centralized force in order to maintain hierarchy when necessary. In regards to a centralized force, the already established military police of the National Army can be expanded in numbers and equipment. However, it remains unclear how the Syrian Interim Government will gain control over the factions in Idlib where Hayat Tahrir al-Sham dominates. In this regard, what will happen if Hayat Tahrir al-Sham decides to conduct a preemptive attack and goes after a faction of the National Army in Idlib? In the fighting in January 2019, the NLF proved incapable of confronting the united radicals. How will this be different this time when Turkey and the National Army focus on eastern Syria? The answers to these questions will prove to be essential regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of the new unification. Nevertheless, in case of an operation east of the Euphrates where the armed Syrian opposition doesn't have any pre-established structures on the ground, the Syrian Interim Government will find it easier to control the National Army.

The internal rivalries and internal clashes between the factions of the National Army are a main problem and a source of friction. Personal issues exist between certain factions and commanders, and occasionally fighting can break out.[33] This was illustrated by the fighting between Ahrar al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sharqiyah in Jinderes on the night of the announcement.[34] In line with the occasional infighting between different factions of the National Army, over the years of the war, the Free Syrian Army factions and the Syrian opposition in general have lost a lot of sympathy across the world.[35] It will be very hard for the National Army to overcome their "PR problem."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The announcement of uniting the Syrian opposition under the Syrian Interim Government is a major step forward. In order for this unification to reach its real potential, it needs a multilevel strategy and to be ready to engage with every actor in the Syrian context. While the Syrian opposition and Turkey need to implement critical steps to move forward, the former backers of the Free Syrian Army need to re-engage with the Syrian opposition which they often criticized for being divided and independent from the political opposition. Also Russia needs to adopt a new perspective in regards to the new situation.

32. Interview with an anonymous fighter of Faylaq al-Sham, WhatsApp, October 3, 2019; interview with an anonymous member of the National Army, WhatsApp, October 3, 2019.

33. Interview with an anonymous fighter of Liwa Samarkand, WhatsApp, October 4, 2019.

34. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Calm Returns to Jandairis Town in Afrin Countryside after Heavy Armed Clashes between the Turkey-Loyal Factions Last Night", October 5, 2019, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=142701 (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

35. Murat Yeşiltaş and Ömer Özkizilcik, "Why Is Turkey Alone in Idlib?", Middle East Eye, June 28, 2019, https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/why-turkey-alone-idlib (Accessed on October 5, 2019).

The Syrian Interim Government needs to gain full control over the National Army. In this regard, some concrete steps should be taken such as:

- To form a centralized financial resource from which the salaries of all fighters should be paid.
- To evolve the military police of the National Army towards a centralized armed force under the exclusive command of the Defense Ministry.
- To establish a permanent residence for themselves in Syria. The headquarters of the interim government should be in Syria. The Defense Ministry should have its own headquarters as well.
- To work on closing the ranks between the factions in Idlib and allocating their strongholds towards strategic locations in Idlib.
- To ensure the ideological and material readiness of the National Army corps in Idlib to confront any aggression by radical groups.
- To form visual unity by prohibiting any other flags and logos of the factions, and to move ahead with the renaming all of the factions as units of the National Army.

Turkey needs to support the efforts of the Syrian Interim Government and to communicate these efforts to the actors involved in the Syrian conflict. The following actions are recommended:

- Supporting the control of the Syrian Interim Government over the National Army.
- Only supplying the factions via the Syrian Interim Government and should propagate the Syrian Interim Government as partners in Syria.
- Working on preventing a preemptive attack by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib.
- Boosting the manpower and territorial control of the National Army by launching a joint military operation east of the Euphrates to the former opposition strongholds.
- Helping the Syrian Interim Government to reach out to the international media and facilitating their contacts with foreign states.

Over the course of time, the United States has changed horses in midstream by supporting the YPG. However, it still has not completely cut its ties to the Syrian opposition. In this manner, the U.S. might revisit its Syrian policy by:

- Establishing direct contact and official meetings with the Syrian Interim Government and the National Army.
- Restarting the material aid to the Syrian opposition.
- Refocusing on the broader issues of the Syrian conflict rather than the fight against DAESH alone.
- Accepting that the National Army is a more efficient force to prevent the resurgence of DAESH as it isn't seen as an occupation force by the Arab tribes in eastern Syria.

The European and Gulf states have little interest in investing in the Syrian conflict and taking strategic actions. Notwithstanding, they can get involved by:

- Declaring their verbal support.
- Providing financial support to the areas controlled by the National Army,
- Supporting the Syrian opposition at the diplomatic level in the constitutional committee.

Russia has intervened on the side of the Assad regime and alienated the Syrian opposition. If Russia is really interested in peace in Syria, it has to revisit its view on the Syrian opposition by:

- Differentiating between radicals and the Syrian opposition whose representatives are involved in the Astana Process and the constitutional committee.
- Starting direct talks with the Syrian Interim Government and the National Army.
- Accepting that the Syrian opposition can be more easily integrated into a post-war Syria if they are united in a hierarchic structure rather than several dozen different factions.
- Communicating with the Assad regime that a resettlement including the National Army is essential for a durable solution to the Syrian crisis.

UNITING THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION:
THE COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL ARMY AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNIFICATION

ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK

SETA | ANALYSIS

After eight years of war, the Syrian opposition announced that all armed groups united under the command of the Syrian Interim Government's Defense Ministry and joined forces under the banner of the National Army. This announcement marks a milestone in the journey of the Syrian opposition which united ranks and is a product of a 3-year process that commenced with the start of the Operation Euphrates Shield. With the increasing role of Turkey as the sole backer of the Syrian opposition and following Turkish pressure, the remaining factions in Idlib, Afrin, and northern Aleppo came together. However, the announcement in and of itself does not guarantee the unity of the Syrian opposition. Yet and despite the fact that many structural and environmental obstacles remain, the announcement may provide new opportunities for the actors involved in the Syrian War. Most notably, the announcement of the unification also comes with an essential change within the Syrian opposition. For the first time, the Syrian Interim Government formed by the Syrian National Coalition has managed take the armed opposition under its command.. With this step, the political opposition for the first time may be able to proclaim itself the representative of the entire Syrian opposition. The declaration of the unification comes ahead of the possible Turkish operation against the YPG/SDF, during the ongoing fragile ceasefire in Idlib, and ahead of the start of the deliberations of the constitutional committee. This analysis is based upon firsthand research and interviews with members of the armed and political opposition.

www.setav.org

ANKARA • İSTANBUL • WASHINGTON D.C. • CAIRO • BERLİN