

# The Syrian economy at war

PART 1

## Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy

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**This is the first in a series of brief papers intended as primers on understudied aspects of Syria’s profound economic deterioration. In nearly a decade of unrest, Syria has been reduced from a liberalizing middle income nation to a failed state in which 90 percent of the population is mired in poverty. In response to this daunting reality, the papers in this series will look beyond conventional econometrics and humanitarian orthodoxies to provide clarity and identify new insights for humanitarian and development actors responding to the changing Syria crisis.**

In many respects, the Syria conflict is slowing down. Large-scale military operations have — for the time being<sup>1</sup> — ground to a halt as international military powers continue to exercise control over large swathes of the country. With the exception of the northwest, virtually no frontlines remain actively contested, and since mid-2018, the Government of Syria has presided over all of ‘useful Syria’, the Aleppo-Damascus-Homs axis, without serious challenge.<sup>2</sup> Despite this slowdown, military mobilization continues across much of Syria, and as fighters continue to enlist voluntarily, new dynamics within armed group mobilization are emerging. Certainly, the Government of Syria and the Self-Administration continue to forcibly conscript large numbers of fighters much as they have throughout the conflict, for regular security operations, to manage internal dissent, and in anticipation of the possibility that hostilities will resume at scale. However, across much of Syrian territory, military mobilization is nominally voluntary and has diminishing connection to active conflict. Particularly in reconciled areas, armed group mobilization is transforming into an income-generating activity that provides fighters relief from threats of arrest, detention, harassment, or forced conscription by authorities. Although military mobilization is a multifaceted process, particularly in protracted and complex crises, it is increasingly clear that in much of Syria, armed group recruitment is continuing not because the war rages on, but because armed groups offer attractive livelihoods and long-term protection.<sup>3</sup>

The implications of this reality are highly consequential for Syria and for the international humanitarian and

development response. Most worrying is the concern that regional military powers are consolidating their power on the ground in Syria and converting this influence into a channel for the recruitment of Syrian combatants as foreign mercenaries. This will impede long-term disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives in Syria and fuel domestic war economy cycles. It will also export instability and armed conflict beyond Syria’s borders, contributing to the further militarization of regional crises. Programming-based concerns are also clear. Programmers and donors contemplating livelihoods and protection activities must bear in mind that despite the return of nominal stability and uniform Government control to much of Syria, conflict actors continue to target high-needs populations as potential military recruits. To a certain extent, these efforts will establish wage and protection baselines that will affect donor-funded initiatives.

The persistence of voluntary mobilization is a signifier of the sobering reality that an end to active hostilities in Syria will not, in itself, stop armed group recruitment. This cycle will likely not be broken until Syria achieves a just and durable peace, a restoration of rule of law, and a lasting economic recovery. In the long term, the international Syria response must contend with the reality that despite the apparent slowdown in active conflict, Syria remains a deeply militarized society. Ultimately, the scale of ongoing voluntary armed recruitment by non-state armed groups in Syria is difficult to quantify, yet such initiatives clearly have expanded throughout 2020 as a result of Syria’s persistent instability and worsening economic deterioration. The prospects for continued eco-

1 At the time of writing, tensions persist along frontlines in southern Idlib governorate, where a resumption of large-scale conflict activities is contingent upon negotiations between Turkey and Russia.

2 The term “useful Syria” has been debated by analysts. For practitioners, its relevance lies primarily in the notion that the Government of Syria’s functional actions on the ground reflect a pragmatism vis-a-vis territorial control. Areas of greater strategic utility can, reasonably, be expected to experience a commensurately restrictive approach by Damascus. See: “Re-interpreting the notion of ‘useful Syria’”, Clingendael (6 September 2018): <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/re-interpreting-notion-useful-syria>.

3 Protection is generally understood as relating to the respect for rights and international law, and the absence of patterns of abuse. See: “Glossary of Humanitarian Terms,” WHO (2008): <https://www.who.int/hac/about/reliefweb-aug2008.pdf?ua=1>

conomic collapse in the long term will ensure this remains the case until the conflict is definitively resolved and a holistic recovery begins.

With respect to methodology, this report was compiled over the course of two months on the basis of key informant interviews, open source records, previous COAR assessments, the work of peer Syria analysts, and informal feedback provided during a closed-door academic conference. This assessment is based on case

studies drawn from across Syria. Due to its focus on the needs-based drivers of voluntary military mobilization, this report does not consider the patterns of recruitment among the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) or the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), both of which use territorial supremacy to enforce mandatory conscription requirements. Within this report, a brief assessment of the two main drivers of armed group mobilization is followed by case studies of recruitment for domestic armed groups and for foreign mercenary service.

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## Key takeaways

- Syria has been at war for nearly 10 years, and despite the fact that hostilities have significantly diminished across much of the country, a return to pre-war normalcy is far off. It is incumbent upon the international community to prepare for a future in which many Syrians remain actively engaged in military activities on a permanent basis — inside Syria and abroad.
- The relative value of armed group salaries compared to the public sector has skyrocketed since 2018. Inside Syria, starting salaries with armed groups assessed in this report range from 1.7 times to nearly 10 times greater than public sector base pay. For mercenary recruits, the worst salary on offer is 24 times greater than the public sector base salary.
- The prolonged militarization of Syria fuels the war economy and increases the number of individuals directly involved in — and dependent upon — foreign military intervention or local war and checkpoint economies, smuggling, and extortion, activities that often supplement military incomes.
- In the long term, Syria risks becoming a recruiting pool for mercenaries and a source of regional and international instability. Turkey and Russia have already deployed Syrian fighters to Libya, and both are beginning to apply this template to other national contexts.
- Military recruitment consolidates foreign powers' influence in Syria. Although this may be part and parcel of a deliberate strategy to pacify restive former opposition areas, it signals the creation of long-term spheres of influence that will destabilize Syria and likely impede the restoration of rule of law on a uniform basis.

## Livelihoods: In Syria, it pays to fight

Almost universally, the relative value of military salaries in Syria has grown enormously in the period since the collapse of the southern opposition in mid-2018. Since then, zones of control have shifted only slightly — at frontlines between the remaining opposition forces in the northwest and along the Syria-Turkey border in the northeast. However, conflict conditions have been largely static throughout much of Syria. Since then, two factors have driven the significant relative rise in armed group salaries: the depreciation of the Syrian pound and the recruitment of Syrians as foreign mercenaries.

### Depreciation

The depreciation of the pound has consistently eroded the real value of salaries in the public sector, which remains the backbone of Syria's labor market. Although the value of the Syrian pound has depreciated throughout the conflict, losing 97 percent of its value since the onset of the uprising in 2011, the most rapid depreciation coincided with pronounced volatility in mid-2019 (see: **Cash crash: Syria's economic collapse and the fragmentation of the state**). In November 2019, the Government of Syria increased wages by a uniform 20,000 pounds across the public sector scale.<sup>4</sup> After the bump, wages at the bottom (i.e. the "fifth bracket") of the salary scale 'rose' to 47,675 pounds,<sup>5</sup> yet depreciation meant that the real value of salaries in the bracket — approximately \$52 — was virtually unchanged from the beginning of the year. Since then, the pound's depreciation has continued, and a public sector worker earning 47,675 pounds now takes home the equivalent of \$22 per month.

By contrast, armed group salaries have grown, and in many cases are still paid in comparatively stable foreign currencies. Among non-state armed groups that

do pay in Syrian pounds, salaries have been increased to keep pace with inflation. For instance, in Dar'a the 5th Corps recently converted its salary payments from dollars to pounds, but at a stepped-up rate that brings the total base salary to approximately 475,000 pounds, roughly \$220.<sup>6</sup> In northwest Syria, Faylaq Al-Sham pays fighters in Turkish lira, a tendency that long predates the recent trend toward the total (Turkish) lira-fication of the region. Nominal salaries for Faylaq Al-Sham fighters have increased substantially since 2018, and now amount to 500 Turkish lira per month, roughly \$67. Currently, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham pays fighters monthly salaries of \$80. Respectively, these wages are approximately 10, 3, and 3.6 times greater than the base wage in the public sector, and that gap has widened since 2018 (see: figure 1 below).

It is important to note that neither armed actors nor public sector employees rely solely on base salaries for livelihoods. For the former, access to war economy activities through control over checkpoints, smuggling routes, or narcotics networks are presumed to be additional income sources, and bonuses are often paid for combat missions. For public employees, bribes and secondary income-generating activity are also common. Neither supplemental income stream is easily quantified. What is clear is that the growing relative value of armed group salaries in Syria has coincided with a step change brought about by a collapse in Syrian public sector wages. The magnitude of this change has also been amplified by the introduction of foreign mercenary service. In late 2019, Turkey began what is believed to be the first large-scale, organized recruitment of Syrian fighters for overseas deployment to Libya. Russia quickly followed suit. Reported base salaries of Syrians recruited for Libya start at 4,000 Turkish lira (\$530), and may range as high as \$4,000, depending upon experience, rank, and whether the fighter sees active combat. As a result, the value of the Russian salaries for mercenary forces in Libya is a staggering 36 times greater than the public-sector minimum wage, while the salaries offered by Turkey are 24 times higher.

<sup>4</sup> "Size and timing of huge pay hike raise questions about government policy," Syria Report (27 November 2019): <https://www.syria-report.com/news/economy/size-and-timing-huge-pay-hike-raise-questions-about-government-policy>.

<sup>5</sup> "Workers in Syria," Syrian Industry of Ministry and Trade (no date). (AR)

<sup>6</sup> Of note, the conjectural take home salary of a 5th Corps fighter, in dollar terms, has shrunk due to the depreciation of the SYP-denominated portion of the salary paid by the National Security Office.

Figure 1. The widening gap between military and civilian salaries

	Public Sector	HTS	5th Corps	4th Division	Turkey (Libya)	Turkey (Azerbaijan)	Russia (Libya)	Faylaq Al-Sham	
2018	Total salary (USD)*	59.77	107.99	253.99	129.59	NA	NA	16.67	
	SYP equivalent	27,675	50,000.00	117,597.37	60,000.00	NA	NA	7,718.21	
	<b>Percentage of public sector baseline</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>181%</b>	<b>425%</b>	<b>217%</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>28%</b>	
2020	Total salary (USD)	22.07	80.00	220.00	37.04	530.50	1,800.00	800.00	66.31
	SYP equivalent	47,675.00	172,800.00	475,200.00	80,000.00	1,145,888.59	3,888,000.00	1,728,000.00	143,236.07
	<b>Percentage of public sector baseline</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>362%</b>	<b>997%</b>	<b>168%</b>	<b>2404%</b>	<b>8155%</b>	<b>3625%</b>	<b>300%</b>

\*Public sector salary brackets scale with education level. Within tiers, salaries rise according to capacities, bonuses, and experience.

\*\*Where ranges or conflicting data exist, salaries have been calculated at the lower bracket. Salary data reflect base pay plus security branch salaries, where applicable. Additional, unquantifiable sources of income are assumed, but are not factored into these calculations.

Conversion Rates		
SYP/USD	<b>9/30/18</b>	463.00
SYP/USD	<b>9/15/20</b>	2,160.00
Sources: Local sources, Eqtsad, Enab Baladi, Modon, Jusoor, Snack Syrian, and Syria Report		

## What does it mean?

The emergence of a foreign mercenary class in Syria hints at the new stratification of the military service economy in Syria. A Syrian mercenary deployed by Turkey as an officer in Libya can earn \$4,000 per month, 37 times more than the real value of the salary for the Syrian Vice President, which was reportedly recently revised upward to 233,000 pounds (approximately \$107).<sup>7</sup> Depreciation of the pound has also vaulted locally deployed fighters who serve in well-funded armed factions such as the 5th Corps well ahead of the public sector. Although they are the worst-paid among armed group combatants assessed

in this report, fighters in the northwest also earn considerably more than their counterparts in the Damascus-based public sector.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, throughout the conflict, volunteers and forced conscripts alike have complained of starvation wages, and dismal compensation has frequently been a driver of defections.<sup>9</sup> Now, wage depreciation across Syria's civilian sphere has largely nullified the realistic option for combatants to demobilize to seek work in sectors such as construction, agriculture, or services.

7 "Al-Assad approves a salary increase, but disappoints expectations," Hibr (22 September 2020): <https://bit.ly/2G2170M>. This report has yet to be verified through an official pronouncement.

8 Throughout this report, public sector refers to the Government of Syria administrative state, which serves as a comparative reference point for all of Syria. Administrative entities in northwest have achieved greater stability and wage strength by converting salaries to Turkish lira.

9 "Northern Syria: Why have opposition fighter salaries decreased?" Modon (28 September 2018): <https://bit.ly/3kKlnDc> and "Idleb: Most of the fighters joining opposition factions are below the poverty line," Eqtsad (13 September 2018): <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/21601>. (AR)

## Protection: Fear and loathing in Lajat

Protection concerns are equally complex, and they remain an under-studied aspect of the Syria conflict, particularly in reconciled areas. However, in general, two key protection-related drivers of voluntary military mobilization have emerged. The first is the threat of arrest, detention, or forced military conscription by the Government of Syria, particularly in Dar'a governorate, where reconciliation delayed but did not definitively resolve the status of former opposition fighters. There is a certain irony to the fact that fear of forced conscription to the Syrian Arab Army is among the most salient protection-related drivers of voluntary mobilization with groups such as the 5th Corps and 4th Division, both of which are nominally aligned with the Syrian government itself. The second major protection-related driver of mobilization is intercommunal violence. Despite the Syrian government's nominal control throughout southern Syria, local tensions persist, including between local armed factions backed by Russian and Iran. Moreover, conflicts over access, scarce resources, or the war economy itself fuel the need for marginal or insular communities, such as the Druze of western As-Sweida, to seek protection with armed factions.

## Case studies

The following case studies are broken into two sections: examples of local armed groups and those for foreign mercenary recruitment. Local armed group case studies focus on multiple groups across southern Syria and the northwest, while those concerning international mercenary recruitment are split on the basis of recruiting powers, Russia and Turkey. On the whole, the case studies that follow illustrate that economic concerns are a universal driver of recruitment

throughout Syria, while unique protection concerns are especially apparent in southern Syria, particularly Dar'a governorate, where the ambiguities of a post-reconciliation environment remain unresolved. Among foreign mercenary recruits, the promise of enormous salaries is the chief motivation for enrollment, yet potential for reconciliation in northeast Syria are also a valuable inducement. Collectively, these factors offer a partial explanation for the armed group mobilizations that continue in Syria despite a slowdown in conflict conditions and the absence of large-scale hostilities across much of the country. These case studies have been chosen on the basis of research network access and their broad representative quality, but they are by no means exhaustive of the dynamics of armed group mobilization in Syria today.

## Local recruitment: Fighting on the homefront

### As-Sweida: Independence at all costs?

Throughout the conflict, the Druze religious and political leadership have successfully resisted pressure from external actors to recruit Druze fighters. The most notable such pressure came via the strong-arm tactics of Damascus itself, which maintained that Syria's mandatory service requirement — a "sacred duty" according to the Syrian constitution — extends to the Druze community. Nonetheless, the Druze have not mobilized in significant numbers in Syria's national military force, the SAA, nor in any other faction. Instead, the community has maintained well-organized neighborhood protection groups and National Defense Forces (NDF) units. As a result of its strategic removal, As-Sweida has largely been spared the intense violence seen elsewhere in southern Syria.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The most notable demonstration of the Druze community's hands-off approach came in its response to ISIS attacks that resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and dozens of kidnappings in Sweida city and in Druze villages in the governorate's eastern countryside in 2018. Although Druze armed groups supported the SAA and fought alongside Arab tribes against ISIS cells in the Badiya region in the wake of the attack, when their cooperation ended the community largely withdrew after ISIS was neutralized in the area.



### Enter the NDF

Recently, however, the Druze community's hard-fought independence and insular tendencies have begun to change. Throughout 2020, Druze fighters have been mobilizing in unprecedented numbers for Iran-linked NDF units and Russian military campaigns in Libya (concerning the latter, see below). Local sources indicate that the Qarayya-based NDF has recruited 450 primarily Druze fighters from towns in southwestern As-Sweida governorate in response to a flare-up in tensions between local Druze and the 5th Corps's 8th Brigade. The 8th Brigade has reportedly sought to deny the Druze population access to their agricultural lands, likely in a bid to expand its own power base. Also important are growing financial incentives. Hezbollah has reportedly offered local NDF factions in Qarayya unspecified financial support and small arms. Of note, this collaboration directly violates the wishes of the Druze leadership, which warned the NDF commanders against collaboration, fearing the move would aggravate political and sectarian rifts and compromise the area's independence.



Russian and Syrian troops during a demonstration.  
Image courtesy of Jumhuriyah.

### Dar'a: A Russian-Iranian duopoly on violence

Military recruitment in Dar'a is primarily conducted through the Russian-backed 5th Corps and the Iranian-backed 4th Division. While both factions are formally under the command of the SAA, in practice they serve as proxies for Iran and Russia. Security branches including Air Force Intelligence and Military Security also recruit combatants in Dar'a, but these often overlap with recruit-

ment to the 5th Corps and 4th Division. In addition to securing protection against criminal charges or outstanding security threats by the Syrian state, service with these factions is also compensated by relatively high salaries and valuable military training.

In practical terms, each group functions as an internationally sponsored proxy force that deploys local influence to enforce the Russian-Iranian duopoly on violence in southern Syria. This manifests itself as competing spheres of security influence in which remobilized fighters, including many former opposition combatants, manage checkpoints, conduct security operations against ISIS sleeper cells, clamp down on overt anti-government activities, and — on occasion — clash with each other. However, it is important to note that control over checkpoints and high-value transit routes in southern Syria brings with it a significant financial windfall through regional war economy activities, including smuggling, human trafficking, and the illegal narcotics trade. This parallel set of war economy activities is likely a large source of revenue for the groups, and it is believed to supplement combatants' salaries.

### 5th Corps

The 5th Corps has been a dominant player in Dar'a since the disarmament and remobilization of the southern Syria armed opposition in mid-2018.<sup>11</sup> The group has dramatically ramped up recruitment in the eastern Dar'a countryside throughout the latter half of 2020 (see: **Syria Update 29 June**). For the Russian forces who stand behind it, the increasing robustness of the 5th Corps provides a bulwark against Iran-linked groups, unifies a chronically restive area under the aegis of a single military command, and assists Russia in fulfilling its tacit promise security guarantees to Israel and Jordan in southern Syria.

For military recruits, the benefits of joining the force are even more substantial. Local sources indicate that in June, several thousands of men applied to join the 5th Corps's 8th Brigade, led by Ahmad Oudeh. Incentives to join are considerable. Members of the 5th Corps receive valuable long-term contracts and a monthly 45,000 SYP (approximately \$21) payment from the National Security Office, in addition to a regular 5th Corps salary of \$200-\$300. However, local sources indicate that the 5th Corps salary has recently been converted and is now paid in Syrian pounds, for a net base salary of 477,000 SYP. How-

11 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From insurgents to soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, southern Syria," European University Institute (2019): [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/62964/RR\\_2019\\_09\\_EN.pdf](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/62964/RR_2019_09_EN.pdf).



ever, it has also been reported that salary payments for the newest recruits have been sporadic, if they have been paid at all. The cause of this interruption is unclear, but it will intensify the pressure on affected fighters to resort to further war economy activities to compensate for lost income. Nonetheless, combatants do continue to benefit from combat training by Russian military personnel, and most crucially, they are granted IDs that guarantee their movements and protect them from future legal and security proceedings by the Syrian authorities.

#### 4th Division

On both the geopolitical and local levels, the 4th Division can be seen as a miserly parallel to the 5th Corps. In July, reports from western Dar'a governorate indicated that the 4th Division had opened several recruitment centers in Mzeireb and Zayzun towns, where 2,700 new recruits enrolled, primarily deserters from the SAA and former members of armed opposition groups. Salaries reportedly begin at 80,000 SYP (\$37), a real value decrease from salaries beginning at 60,000 SYP (then equivalent to roughly \$129) in 2018, when the southern Syria opposition fell and the current paradigm of Russian and Iranian recruitment in the south coalesced. Like their 5th Corps counterparts, new recruits are given three- to six-month renewable contracts and temporary ID cards that clear them of legal and security proceedings initiated by the Government of Syria. However, it is notable that short-term labor contracts have been a sticking point for labor advocates throughout Syria, and the contracting terms offered by the 4th Division risk creating a vicious circle of renewals and uncertainty for fighters. The ambiguous nature of the guarantees afforded by the 4th Division's contracts exposes fighters to double jeopardy: financial peril and the protection risk posed by the potential for arrest by Syrian authorities. In the absence of alternate employment opportunities, this dynamic perpetuates a war economy cycle in Dar'a governorate and encourages continuing re-mobilization.

#### Northwest Syria

Northwest Syria is the most active frontline in Syria today. Regular bombardment of frontline communities

by Russia and the Government of Syria jeopardizes the tenuous ceasefire that has preserved current frontlines in southern Idlib governorate since early March (see: **Syria Update 5 March**). Several military dynamics define the rebel-held enclave: the growing direct military presence of Turkish forces, ongoing attacks designed to sabotage Russian-Turkish joint patrols of the M4, and the continuing uncertainty over the future of extremist groups, including HTS, which has consolidated physical control throughout much of northern Idlib since early 2019 (see: **Syria Update 10 January 2019**).

#### HTS and Faylaq Al-Sham

Patterns of military recruitment in northwest Syria differ considerably from those observed in the south. Whereas in Dar'a, former opposition fighters and military defectors are now mobilizing with armed groups that are overtly affiliated to the Government of Syria, ideological and political drivers of mobilization remain highly salient in the northwest.<sup>12</sup> Although the northwest is free of a Government of Syria presence, recruitment by various armed groups remains openly antagonistic. For instance, despite pledges to coordinate recruitment, HTS and Faylaq Al-Sham, a member of the Turkish-backed National Front for Liberation, have failed to unify behind their common purpose of resisting Government of Syria infiltration and attack, and their respective mobilization efforts continue independently, and sometimes in conflict with each other.

All told, it is considerably more difficult to identify narrow livelihoods or protection concerns as the unambiguous leading drivers of recruitment to armed groups in the northwest. Nonetheless, financial drivers certainly are important. Indeed, livelihoods needs are as high in opposition-held northwest Syria as anywhere in the country, according to comprehensive needs assessments by the UN and local implementing partners. As has long been the case, salaries offered to armed group fighters in rebel-held Idlib are more modest than in other areas. HTS pays recruits \$80, per month while Faylaq Al-Sham pays 500 Turkish lira (approximately \$67).

<sup>12</sup> "HTS' [sic] military recruitment campaigns: New batch of fighters graduate in Idlib," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (18 May 2020): <https://www.syriahr.com/en/165422/>.

## Foreign mercenary recruitment: An offer they can't refuse

Perhaps the most significant shift within patterns of military mobilization in Syria is the rise of mercenary recruitment by Turkey and Russia. These regional powers have deliberately knitted together dense networks of localized influence in Syria to support their direct military interventions in 2015 and 2016. Beginning in late 2019, this approach entered a definitive new phase as both Russia and Turkey began to use Syria as a recruiting pool for mercenaries to be deployed to Libya. To date, Libya has been the most significant foreign destination for such recruits, although media reports and local sources indicate that Russia and Turkey have also pledged to deploy Syrian fighters to Venezuela and Azerbaijan, respectively. While hard figures are difficult to obtain, several thousand Syrian fighters have likely been deployed to Libya, and several thousand more have reportedly been recruited.

Much like local military mobilization in Syria, mercenary recruitment promises significant payout for both the recruiting power and the fighters themselves. For Russia and Turkey, deploying Syrian fighters rather than national armies mitigates domestic and international political risk, reduces the cost of sustaining foreign interventions, and capitalizes on significant investments in equipping, training, or supporting fighters inside Syria. It also achieves their aims inside Syria by neutralizing (and physically removing) armed actors in restive areas, particularly southern Syria. While this approach has been most visible in Dar'a governorate, Russia is now seemingly attempting to export the model to As-Sweida.

For the recruits, the financial incentives are considerable. The salaries on offer range from 4,000 Turkish lira (\$530) to \$4,000. On the low end, this gives purchasing power 24 times greater than an entry level public sector salary. For the best-paid fighters, the salaries are 180 times greater than the minimum public sector salaries. For the many young Syrians who have little or no professional experience apart from fighting, few credentials, and little hope of finding civilian-sector work in a shattered economy, this is an offer that cannot be refused.

### Russia

Russia's mercenary recruitment in Syria is most pronounced in two areas: As-Sweida and northeast Syria. Moscow has struggled to build influence in As-Sweida, although its initiatives to quell inter-governorate violence between As-Sweida and 5th Corps fighters from Dar'a has allowed Russia to make inroads, while the large salaries it offers make the intervention easier to stomach, although its efforts have met with resistance (see: [Syria Update 4 May](#)). Northeast Syria is likewise passing through dire economic straits, although the most useful avenue of Russian mercenary recruitment in the area is the result of geopolitical happenstance. Since late 2019, Moscow has deftly expanded its influence and military recruitment in northeast Syria, following the partial withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Syria-Turkey border. Facing Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in the wake of the U.S. drawdown, the SDF was forced to welcome Russia into areas east of the Euphrates River as a bulwark against Turkey. Russian forces quickly entered strategic communities and began to carry out reconciliation negotiations and armed recruitment.

#### Wagner Group in Syria: Rise of the Valkyries?

As early as December 2019, Russia — through local security branches and private military contractors, including the Wagner Group and the Military Security branch in As-Sweida — has successfully recruited dozens of Druze fighters from As-Sweida to serve as mercenaries in Libya. Reportedly, fighters have been offered salaries ranging from \$800 to \$1,500 per month, with higher salaries going to fighters who participate in direct frontline combat. Although the community was initially hesitant to engage, the safe return of the first batch of fighters encouraged hundreds of additional combatants to enlist for Russia's Libya campaign. However, on 9 September, the Druze leadership registered their objection to the recruitment drive. With the intercession of Russia, they prevented most of the second wave of Druze recruits from departing for Libya. Although they gave no formal statement clarifying the reason for their opposition, the reluctance to tolerate greater involvement in exogenous military affairs is in keeping with the community's long standing pursuit of neutrality. However, if Syria's adverse economic conditions do persist, Druze leadership will face greater pressure to permit would-be fighters to seek fortune on the battlefield in Libya or elsewhere.

#### Targeting Arab tribes in the northeast

Local sources indicate that throughout summer 2020, Wagner Group has actively recruited Arab tribesmen

in Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, and Al-Hasakeh governorates. Media reports link the recruitment campaign directly to the deterioration of the economic conditions in northeast Syria. Indeed, as the pandemic continues, livelihoods opportunities have significantly declined, while local sources note that considerable volatility in crop prices within the region have further immiserated agriculturalists and communities with a heavy reliance on agriculture-dependent industries.

Notably, recruitment has reportedly continued despite harsh condemnation by leaders of several tribes, including the Ma'amara, Harb, Bani Saba, and the Sharabi clan in Al-Hasakeh. The tribal leaders accused the Russian leadership of exploiting the financial desperation of young tribesmen to mobilize them for combat in Libya. The contracts offered by Wagner are reportedly between three and five months in length and renewable, with salaries ranging between \$1,000 and \$1,500. An additional incentive is the prospect that recruits will be able to settle their status with the Syrian government upon returning from Libya.

### Turkey

In effect, Turkey presides over a patchwork girdle stretching across the northern Syria borderlands from northern Idlib governorate in the west to the recently captured Peace Spring area in the northeast. Four distinct Turkish military campaigns lend their names to the various zones of Turkish influence in northern Syria, although evidence suggests that the epicenter of Turkish mercenary recruitment for Libya is the Euphrates Shield zone in northern rural Aleppo. Long neglected by Damascus, the area's local population is disaffected and rigidly opposed to living under Government of Syria rule. It is also among the areas in Syria with the greatest concentration of IDPs, many of whom were forcibly evacuated or voluntarily relocated from central and southern Syria during reconciliation.

### From Mare' to the shores of Tripoli

Anecdotally, the massive salaries provided by Turkey are the primary driver of military recruitment to Libya. Recruitment to Libya is open to Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters and civilians. The primary recruitment center is located in Mare' city, in northern Aleppo, where civilians can enlist after undergoing a battery of tests and receiving additional training. Notably, recruitment

to Libya is also open to minors, with the consent of their family. New recruits are sent to Turkey, where they complete administrative procedures before departing to Libya on two- to three-month contracts with salaries ranging between 4,000 Turkish lira (\$530) and \$4,000 per month. The marked decrease from previously reported starting salaries of \$2,000 may be a result of a power imbalance during salary negotiations conducted by officer recruiters directly. Additionally, some fighters are promised Turkish citizenship upon the completion of their deployment. The families or designated beneficiaries of Syrian combatants who are killed in Libya are reportedly given a \$50,000 indemnity.

## In it for the long haul

It remains to be seen how these campaigns will shape the arc of the conflict in Libya — or future conflicts elsewhere. What is clear is the fact that foreign powers are increasingly recognizing that military recruitment and remobilization will furnish the basis for long-term strategic influence in Syria. Turkey's hold over much of northwest Syria is seemingly absolute, based largely on its support to the region's dominant armed factions. Likewise, Dar'a governorate is functionally split between Russia and Iran through their support for well-resourced local armed groups. Following a similar template, armed recruitment in As-Sweida may provide Moscow a vehicle for the influence which both it and Damascus covet, particularly following a flare-up in violence and anti-government protests in mid-2020. Syrian fighters who mobilize behind foreign-backed armed groups are seemingly pinning their hopes of navigating a future Syria on the likelihood that regional powers will remain important power brokers in a fractured state composed of competing spheres of influence. There is good reason to believe that hope is well placed. As Syria's economic deterioration persists, the new economic, political, and relational boundaries formed by state fragmentation are likely to harden.

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