

# Syria

## *The Special Forces and the elite units*



Ministry of Immigration  
and Integration

The Danish  
Immigration Service

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## Executive summary

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As a consequence of the Syrian conflict, the Syrian Special Forces and the three elite units, including the Republican Guard, the Fourth Armoured Division and the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division/ Tiger Forces, have undergone considerable changes in organisation and structure. As a result:

- the regiments of the Syrian Special Forces Command has ceased to exist
- only remnants of the 15<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division survived
- the 14<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division still exists in its pre-war structure
- both the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division have been expanded in terms of manpower and authority
- the new elite unit, the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division was created and restructured to include six regiments.

The recruitment practices of the Special Forces are different from the three other elite units. The Special Forces only recruit soldiers and officers (including conscripts and reservists) from the regular units in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), whereas the three other units recruit members of foreign and local militias, and fighters from former opposition groups. The Fourth Division and the Republican Guard also recruit regular soldiers (including conscripts and reservists) from the SAA. However, all units prefer to recruit Alawite fighters, especially in the high-level positions in the units.

All the units have committed violations against humanity in 2021 and 2022. This includes violations such as (indiscriminate) killings of civilians, detention/kidnapping, blackmailing and extortion.

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## Introduction

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This brief report focuses on Syrian Special Forces and the three elite units,<sup>1</sup> including the Fourth Division, the Republican Guard and the 25<sup>th</sup> Task Force Division.<sup>2</sup> The report endeavours to shed light on the structure and organisation of these four forces as well as the requirements for joining them. Finally, involvement of these forces in violations against civilians from 2021 to 2022 is addressed in this report.<sup>3</sup>

The report is written in accordance with the European Agency for Asylum (EUAA) COI Report Methodology.<sup>4</sup> It is based on a synthesis of the information obtained from written sources and two oral sources, Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and a Human Rights Organisation.

The consulted oral sources have been selected by virtue of their expertise on the topics of this report. The sources were informed about the purpose of the interviews and the fact that their statements would be included in a public report. Meeting minutes have been forwarded to the sources for approval, providing the sources an opportunity to amend, comment or correct their statements to ensure that the minutes reflect the shared information most accurately. The sources approved their statements, which can be found in Annex 1.

For the sake of transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting minutes have been given consecutive numbers, which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes.

During the meetings, the sources may have touched upon topics that are not addressed in the Terms of Reference (ToR). While not included in the report, the information is available in the minutes as some topics may be relevant for asylum cases. ToR is included in Annex II.

The interviews for the report were conducted in August 2022 and in March/April 2023. DIS has monitored the developments of the Special Forces and the elite units continuously during the writing process in order to avoid inclusion of outdated information in the final report. However, it should be noted that the available information on the topics addressed in this report is highly limited and therefore, gaps in the information may occur.

Due to the changeable and unstable situation in Syria, this report may become outdated. Therefore, the issues addressed in this report should be monitored periodically and brought up to date accordingly.

The research and editing of this report was finalised on 12 April 2023.

The report can be accessed from the website of Danish Immigration Service (DIS), [www.us.dk](http://www.us.dk), and is available to all stakeholders working within the field of refugee status determination as well as the general public.

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<sup>1</sup> Some sources, such as Orient News regard the Special Forces as elite forces (Orient News, *ما مهام القوات الخاصة التي تدربها روسيا في سوريا؟* [What is the tasks of the Special Forces that Russia trains in Syria?], 30 September 2019, [url](#))

<sup>2</sup> These units are referred to as elite units by for example, SNHR: 1; Middle East Institute, *The Tiger Forces - Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia*, October 2018, [url](#); Al-Jazeera, *النظام السوري يحشد لهجوم جديد بإدلب*. *القوات النخبية وفصائل إيرانية رأس الحربة.. النظام السوري يحشد لهجوم جديد بإدلب*. *The Syrian regime is mobilizing for a new attack in Idlib*, 30 August 2019, [url](#); Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of The Fourth Division During the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> Information from sources that refer to violations committed by the Syrian armed forces without referring specifically to the Special Forces or the three elite units will be omitted in this report

<sup>4</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), *EUAA Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, February 2023, [url](#)

## Abbreviations

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AFI	Air Force Intelligence
DIS	Danish Immigration service
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
GoS	Government of Syria
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
ToR	Terms of Reference

# 1. Syrian Armed Forces

The Syrian armed forces are comprised of the regular army SAA, the navy, the air force, the intelligence branches (Military Intelligence Department, Air Force Intelligence, General Intelligence Directorate, Political Security Directorate), and the National Defence Forces.<sup>5</sup> As of 2020, the Syrian Armed Forces had about 170,000 military personnel, of which 130,000 were serving in the SAA. The commander in chief of the Syrian Armed Forces is the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and the Chief of Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces, who holds the operational control of the forces, has been Major General Abdel Karim Mahmoud Ibrahim since May 2022.<sup>6</sup>

Alawites hold the 30 most important positions in the SAA, whereas lower rank positions are mostly distributed to individuals belonging to other confessions, mainly Sunnites.<sup>7</sup> The SAA is comprised of regular, special and elite units. These forces differ in terms of equipment, training level, competences and experience.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.1. Organisation and structure of the SAA

Prior to the outbreak of the war in 2011, the SAA consisted of three main corps (the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>) each consisting of divisions and led by a major general.<sup>9</sup> The SAA also had three semi-independent commands that consisted of the Special Forces Command and the elite units, including the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division. These three units operated independently from each other but were organisationally under the command of the Chief of Staff.<sup>10</sup>

The three corps, the Special Forces Command and the elite units of the SAA had thirteen army divisions, of which eight divisions were conventional armoured or mechanized divisions - and each division contained four manoeuvre brigades.<sup>11</sup> The remaining five divisions were specialised divisions and included 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Special Forces divisions, the Fourth Armoured Division, the Republican Guard and the 17<sup>th</sup> Army Reserve Division. These divisions contained both brigades and manoeuvre regiments.<sup>12</sup>

As the Russians started reforming the SAA from late 2015, some of SAA's brigades and regiments ceased to exist while new units were created and others were incorporated in or moved to other units or divisions. Russia created both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Corps in addition to the already existing three corps.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> European Asylum Support Office, *Syrian Actors*, December 2019, [url](#), p. 24, 28- 29

<sup>6</sup> Syrian Observer, *Assad Appoints Chief of Staff After 4 Years of Vacancy*, May 2022, [url](#)

<sup>7</sup> Orient News, بالاسماء والرتب العسكرية: قادة ما يسمى "الجيش العربي السوري" كلهم علويون وهذه أبرز جرائمهم [With names and military ranks: The leaders of what is called the SAA are all Alawites and these are their prominent crimes], January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>8</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth*, 2019, [url](#)

<sup>9</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#), p. 6

<sup>10</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth*, 2019, [url](#). For more information about the structure of the SAA as of March 2011, see Annex III in this report

<sup>11</sup> Each brigade contained four battalions (Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#), p. 6)

<sup>12</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#), p. 5-6. For more information about the size of the different units and sub-units of the SAA, see Annex III in this report

<sup>13</sup> Orient News, بالاسماء والرتب العسكرية: قادة ما يسمى "الجيش العربي السوري" كلهم علويون وهذه أبرز جرائمهم [With names and military ranks: The leaders of what is called the SAA are all Alawites and these are their prominent crimes], January 2021, [url](#)

The 4<sup>th</sup> Corps came under joint Russian-Syrian command and it has since been incorporating local loyalist militias. The 5<sup>th</sup> Corps came under Russian command and, besides Russians and pro-government soldiers, it includes fighters from reconciled rebel factions.<sup>14</sup>

## 1.2. Units and sub-units in the Syrian Arab Army

In order to understand the description of the individual units and forces in this report, it is necessary to know the general structure of different units and sub-units in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

According to the figure below, which depicts units and subunits, a corps consists of divisions that in turn comprise brigades. Regiments make up brigades, which consist of battalions. At the lowest level, there are companies, which make up battalions.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 1: Units and subunits in the SAA<sup>16</sup>

ORDER OF BATTLE					
Symbol	Echelon/Arabic	Command/Arabic (Equipment)	# of Personnel	Component Units	Total #
	Corps/Falaaq	General/Awal	50,000	3-4 Divisions	3
	Division/Firqa	General/Awal	5,000-15,000	5-6 Brigades/Regiments	14
	Brigade/Liwa	Maj Gen/Liwa	2,500-3,500	5-6 Battalions	>40
	Mechanized Brigade 105 IFVs 41 Tanks 3,500 Soldiers			3 Mech Battalions 1 Armored Battalion Artillery/ADA/Engineers	
	Armored Brigade 105 Tanks 31 IFVs 2,500 Soldiers			3 Armored Battalions 1 Mech Battalion Artillery/ADA/Engineers	
	Regiment/Fawj	Brig Gen/Amid	1,500	3 Battalions	>20
	Special Forces Regiment 1,500 Soldiers			3 Infantry Battalions	
	Artillery Regiment 45 Howitzers 1,500 Soldiers			3 Artillery Battalions	
	Battalion/Katiba	Colonel/Aqeed	300-500	4-5 Companies	
	Company/Suriya	Captain/Naqeeb	60-80		

The following sections of this report will deal with changes in the structure of the Special Forces and the elite units of the SAA as well as these units' recruitment practices and human rights violations in the recent years.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Since 2017 reconciled rebels have also been recruited into the 1st, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th Divisions as well as the Republican Guard (Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth*, 2019, [url](#))

<sup>15</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#) p. 4

<sup>16</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#) p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Information about changes in the structure of the five corps of the SAA, is out of the scope of this report. For more information about these changes see Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth*, 2019, [url](#)



## 2. The Special Forces

### 2.1. Organisation and structure of the Special Forces

The Special Forces of the SAA were a unit formed in the 1980s with twelve regiments. The Special Forces were tasked with conducting special missions in Lebanon in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> It was named “special” because of the specialised training in airborne and air assault operations that the personnel received. It was composed of Alawites and Sunnis. The Special Forces were tasked to both national defence and protection of the Syrian President’s family.<sup>19</sup>

In mid-1993, the total number of regiments under the command of the Special Forces Command was reduced to six regiments, i.e. 41<sup>st</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup>, 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup>. The remaining regiments were moved to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Special Forces divisions, each of which had to command three Special Forces regiments. The two divisions were under the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Corps, respectively.<sup>20</sup> In addition to these 12 Special Forces regiments, which existed prior to the outbreak of the war in Syria, there was the 555<sup>th</sup> Special Forces regiment under the command of the Fourth Division.<sup>21</sup>

The Special Forces Command experienced heavy losses between 2011 and 2017. The regiments 41<sup>st</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup>, 53<sup>rd</sup>, and 54<sup>th</sup>, which were all under the Special Forces Command, ceased to exist in the period between 2015 and 2018. Some regiments were decimated whereas others were incorporated into different units in the Syrian Armed Forces.<sup>22</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> divisions, which have always been under the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Corps, respectively, are some of the most effective units in the SAA. The two divisions are light infantry forces that are also trained in airborne and air assault operations.<sup>23</sup> The divisions were deployed intensively to the front from the early years of the war.<sup>24</sup> As the war intensified, the two divisions were divided into smaller units and were either sent to the front lines or attached to regular SAA units.<sup>25</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division, which is directly under the Syrian President’s command, continued to exist throughout the war until present day.<sup>26</sup> As of July 2019, the 14<sup>th</sup> Division consists of the three regiments, 36<sup>th</sup>, 554<sup>th</sup>, and 556<sup>th</sup>.<sup>27</sup> The division is currently deployed to several areas in Syria - mainly near Idlib governorate.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>18</sup> SNHR: 3

<sup>19</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#), p. 6-7; SNHR: 3

<sup>20</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>21</sup> In addition to these twelve Special Forces regiments, which existed prior to the outbreak of the war in Syria, there were also Special Forces regiments, under the command of the Fourth Division and the Republican Guard (Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#), p. 12; SNHR: 6)

<sup>22</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth*, July 2019, [url](#); SNHR: 2

<sup>23</sup> Herald Weekly, *The World’s Most Ferocious Special Forces*, December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth*, July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> Middle East Institute, *Syria’s Republican Guard*, December 2018, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>26</sup> SNHR: 6; Al-Monitor, *Islamic State takes advantage of Ukraine war to increase attacks*, March 2022, [url](#); Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth*, July 2019, [url](#); Herald Weekly, *The World’s Most Ferocious Special Forces*, December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>27</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth*, July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> SNHR: 6

The 15<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division, which is headed by Major General Ghassan Al Yasmina, consisted of the 127<sup>th</sup>, 404<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> regiments at the time the Syrian conflict broke out. However, as of 2019, only remnants of the division existed and the division did no longer recruit new members.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2. Recruitment to the Special Forces

The Special Forces is a regular unit in the SAA and members of the Special Forces regiments are recruited from the other regular units in the SAA.<sup>30</sup> Thus, conscripts and reservists can be assigned to serve in the Special Forces.<sup>31</sup> Most Syrian soldiers prefer not to join the Special Forces units as the training in these units is intensive and hard.<sup>32</sup> However, conscripts and reservists have no choice but to serve their military service in the Special Forces once they are assigned to these forces.<sup>33</sup>

The lower rank officers in the Special Forces are appointed by the Command of the Staff, while high-ranking officers and commanding officers are appointed through decrees by President Bashar al-Assad in his capacity as the commander-in-chief of the SAA and the armed forces with the assistance of the Military Intelligence Service Department 291.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.3. Violations by the Special Forces in 2021 and 2022

According to a Human Rights Organisation, in the last four years, the Special Forces have committed few violations against civilians compared to the years before that as the number of the Special Forces has decreased significantly.<sup>35</sup>

Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) stated that, in 2021 and 2022, Special Forces regiments were involved in artillery bombardment against Syrian cities and villages near the frontlines and in particular in the suburbs of Aleppo Governorate.<sup>36</sup>

Human Right Watch reported that the 14<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division was allegedly responsible for killing 12 civilians in an indiscriminate attack on Ariha in Idlib in October 2021.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Lion and the Eagle- Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth*, July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>30</sup> A Human Rights Organisation: 3; SNHR: 9

<sup>31</sup> A Human Rights Organisation: 3

<sup>32</sup> SNHR: 9

<sup>33</sup> A Human Rights Organisation: 3

<sup>34</sup> SNHR: 10

<sup>35</sup> A Human Rights Organisation: 1

<sup>36</sup> SNHR: 44

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Syria/Russia: 12 Civilians Dead in Idlib Artillery Attacks*, 8 December 2021, [url](#)

## 3. The Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division

### 3.1. Organisation and structure of the Republican Guard

The Republican Guard was established during the 1970s and its role was to protect top Syrian government officials from any external threats and to serve as a counter-weight to the other powerful Syrian Army formations near the capital.<sup>38</sup> The commander of the Republican Guard is president Bashar al-Assad and the head of this unit is the President's brother, Maher al-Assad, who is also the head of the Fourth Armoured Division.<sup>39</sup>

Prior to the outbreak of the protests in 2011, the majority of the Republican Guard forces were stationed around the Syrian capital, Damascus. At that time, the Republican Guard was composed of two infantry regiments (101<sup>st</sup> and 102<sup>nd</sup>), three mechanised brigades (104<sup>th</sup>, 105<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup>) and one artillery regiment (the 100<sup>th</sup>).<sup>40</sup>

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the Republican Guard has served as the keystone of the Syrian army. The structure of the Republican Guard has changed several times after 2011. The GoS dismantled the Republican Guard into smaller sub-units to prevent defections, and attached them alongside the regular SAA units, in which the majority are conscripts.<sup>41</sup> Despite the GoS' inability to halt defections or improve the deteriorating performance of the SAA, the Republican Guard has continually expanded.<sup>42</sup> Many of the foreign pro-government militias and local militias, which were formed during the war and were either affiliated with or operated under the supervision of the Republican Guard, have been integrated into the Republican Guard's structure.<sup>43</sup>

In January 2017, the 30<sup>th</sup> division was created in order to expand the Republican Guard. Some foreign and local militias and all of the units under the Republican Guard in Aleppo were incorporated in this new division.<sup>44</sup> In October 2022, the appointed commander of the 30<sup>th</sup> division was Saleh Abdallah, also known as *the Lion*.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Zaman al-Wasl, *الحرس الجمهوري.. تشكيلات جديدة لتعزيز حماية الأسد*, [The Republican Guard: New Formations to Strengthen the Protection of al-Assad]; May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>39</sup> Middle East Institute, *We cannot ignore Syria's emergence as a narco-state*, 29 April 2022, [url](#). Information about the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division overlap on some issues, why these two units are in the same section in this report.

<sup>40</sup> Middle East Institute, *Syria's Republican Guard*, December 2018, [url](#), p.1

<sup>41</sup> Middle East Institute, *Syria's Republican Guard*, December 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Zaman al-Wasl, *الحرس الجمهوري.. تشكيلات جديدة لتعزيز حماية الأسد*, [The Republican Guard: New Formations to Strengthen the Protection of al-Assad]; May 2021, [url](#)

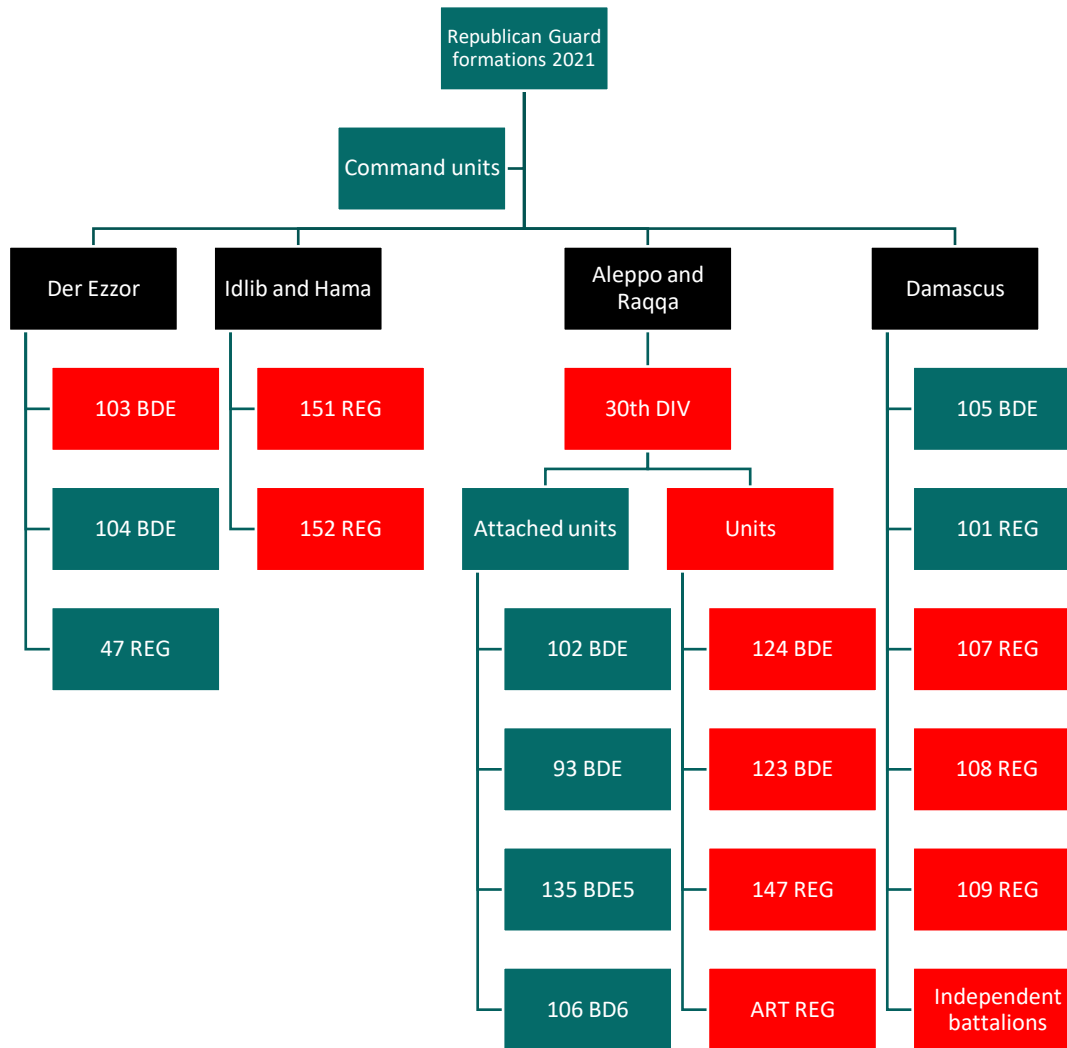
<sup>42</sup> Middle East Institute, *Syria's Republican Guard*, December 2018, [url](#), p. iii

<sup>43</sup> Middle East Institute, *Syria's Republican Guard*, December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>44</sup> Middle East Institute, *Syria's Republican Guard*, December 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Zaman al-Wasl, *الحرس الجمهوري.. تشكيلات جديدة لتعزيز حماية الأسد*, [The Republican Guard: New Formations to Strengthen the Protection of al-Assad], May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>45</sup> Shaam Network, *ضابط برتبة "جزار ركن" .. تعين "السبع" قائداً للفرقة 30 بـ "الحرس الجمهوري" وهذا سجل جرائمه*, [An Officer with the Rank of "Staff Butcher" aka the Lion Appointed Commander of the 30th Division of the Republican Guard, This is his Record of Crimes], October 2022, [url](#)

According to the Syrian News outlet Zaman al-Wasl, the Republican Guard had the following structure in 2021:<sup>46</sup>



(Green: old units that existed in 2011 and still exist. Red: new units created in 2011 to 2021)

### 3.2. Organisation and structure of the Fourth Armoured Division

In 1984, an army unit called “the Defence Companies” was reduced in size and renamed “the Fourth Armoured division. The Syrian President’s brother, Maher al-Assad, who had been de facto leader of the Division since 1989, formally became its leader in 2018.<sup>47</sup> The Division is a close ally to Iran and was supported by Iranian militias throughout the war.<sup>48</sup> According to SNHR, the loyalty of the Fourth Armoured Division to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard surpasses their affiliation with the Syrian state.<sup>49</sup>

The Fourth Armoured Division is the most powerful military organisation in Syria due to its military capabilities and the authority of its leadership. The Division is organisationally under the command of the

<sup>46</sup> Zaman al-Wasl, الحرس الجمهوري “.. تشكيلات جديدة لتعزيز حماية الأسد” [The Republican Guard: New Formations to Strengthen the Protection of al-Assad], May 2021, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of The Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#), p.2

<sup>48</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army*, September 2021, [url](#); SNHR: 11

<sup>49</sup> SNHR: 19

Minister of Defence, however, the conventional Syrian army forces has been used in service of the Division.<sup>50</sup>

Prior to the Syrian conflict, the Division's role was to protect the Syrian capital and the GoS from internal threats. The Division had three armoured brigades, including an artillery regiment, a Special Forces unit (555<sup>th</sup> Special Forces regiment), and a mechanised brigade. Most of the division's personnel were Alawites and consisted of 15,000 recruits and officers.<sup>51</sup>

After 2011, there was an urgent need for the Division's forces in combats against the opposition why the Division evolved, and consequently, the structure of the Division changed during the years of the war. The GoS had to strengthen the Fourth Armoured Division and to deploy the Division's forces in areas outside the capital in order to minimise the deployments of the regular army units, which were unqualified for combats and experienced a large number of defections.<sup>52</sup> At the time of writing this report, the Division is mainly deployed in Damascus, Rif Damascus, Daraa, Homs and Deir ez-Zor.<sup>53</sup>

As of 2021, the Fourth Division included the 38<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup>, 41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> brigades and the 555<sup>th</sup>, 666<sup>th</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> regiments, Shia militia brigades and members of dissolved Syrian militias. The number of the Division's fighters was in 2021 estimated to be about 18,000.<sup>54</sup>

The Fourth Division has been supplied with weapons, such as armoured vehicles, about 500 different tank models and air defence systems.<sup>55</sup> The Division has also been expanded with the Suicide Battalion that includes 600 individuals of Alawite origin who would be used to carry out suicide actions in case of the fall of the state and its army. In addition, the Chemistry Battalion has been added to the Fourth Armoured Division, which is therefore the only unit supplied with an arsenal of chemical weapons.<sup>56</sup>

The Fourth Armoured Division has a Security Bureau that was established in the late 1990's to monitor the personnel of the Division and to prevent them from committing military violations and crimes. However, the Bureau has been involved in illegal antiquities trade. Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, the Bureau's authority has grown significantly. The Bureau has been recruiting volunteers and thereby bypassing the Ministry of Defence, which is the official authority responsible for recruitment. The Security Bureau has also been running intensive war economy activities in cooperation with pro-government businessmen.<sup>57</sup>

The accumulated capital from the illegal economic activities is used to fund the Bureau and the Division's fighters and actions. The Division is also financed by the Ministry of Defence and the Syrian President's office.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army*, September 2021, [url](#); SNHR: 13

<sup>51</sup> Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of The Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>52</sup> Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of The Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>53</sup> SNHR: 16

<sup>54</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army*, September 2021, [url](#); Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of The Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>55</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army*, September 2021, [url](#); SNHR: 18

<sup>56</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army*, September 2021, [url](#)

<sup>57</sup> Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of The Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#), p.2

<sup>58</sup> Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of The Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#), p.2

### 3.3. Recruitment to the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division

Based on the physical strength and place of origin, regular soldiers, such as conscripts and reservists, are selected among the regular SAA units to join the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division.<sup>59</sup> Conscripts and reservists who are assigned to serve their military service in these two units have no choice but to serve their military service in these units.<sup>60</sup>

Until 2012, there was no recruitment from outside the SAA into the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division. Recruitment to the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division was undertaken through the Ministry of Defence with the assistance of the Department 291 of the Military Intelligence Service.<sup>61</sup> However, due to the high number of losses in the ranks of the SAA in the beginning of the war in 2012, the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division started omitting the Ministry of Defence and the Command of Staff and directly recruited fighters from outside the SAA to their ranks.<sup>62</sup> These recruits carry temporary security cards that are not registered in the official military records.<sup>63</sup>

The Fourth Armoured Division has established a recruitment office where recruitment takes place without any requirement. Even prisoners serving their sentences are accepted as recruits in the division.<sup>64</sup>

Belonging to the Alawite sect is not an official requirement for joining neither the Republican Guard nor the Fourth Armoured Division. However, the GoS recruits mostly Alawites to these two elites units. The percentage of Alawite officers in the Fourth Armoured Division exceeds 95%.<sup>65</sup>

The incentives to join these two elite forces are the high salaries and the impunity when committing criminal acts.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.4. Violations by the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division in 2021 and 2022

During 2021 and 2022, the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division have committed many violations against civilians in many areas in Syria. The violations include arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances of civilians at checkpoints, especially in Damascus and its suburbs. The units also committed intimidation (including threats, insults, beating, assaults on dignity), harassment of women and girls, robbery and field executions.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>59</sup> SNHR: 34; A Human Rights Organisation: 4

<sup>60</sup> A Human Rights Organisation: 4

<sup>61</sup> SNHR: 34

<sup>62</sup> SNHR: 33, 36

<sup>63</sup> Middle East Directions, *The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict*, 24 January 2020, [url](#) P. 5-6

<sup>64</sup> SNHR: 37

<sup>65</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Fourth Division: Syria's Parallel Army*, September 2021, [url](#)

<sup>66</sup> SNHR: 38

<sup>67</sup> SNHR: 51; USDOS (US Department of State), *2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria*, 20 March 2023, [url](#); UN Col, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/51/45)*, 17 August 2022, [url](#); UN Col, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HR/49/77)*, 8 February 2022, [url](#); UN Col, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HR/48/70)*, 13 August 2021, [url](#); SOHR, *Amid lack of flour in most of bread bakeries | Fourth Division "besieges" SDF-held neighbourhoods in Aleppo*, 5 April 2022, [url](#); EUAA, *Syria - Security situation*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 42, 94, 103

In addition, the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division have targeted houses of civilians using machine guns, mortars, and tanks.<sup>68</sup>

The Fourth Armoured Division has continuously been financing its existence by smuggling narcotics and blackmailing civilians for ransoms to secure the release of their relatives. The Division also funds its activities by stealing cars and extracting bribes at checkpoints.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> SNHR: 50

<sup>69</sup> SNHR: 47, 49

## 4. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division (former Tiger Forces)

### 4.1. Organisation and structure of the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division

The Tiger Forces was formed upon the 53<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces Regiment by Suheil al-Hassan in 2013. The Tiger Forces was operated by the most powerful of Syria's four intelligence services, the Air Force Intelligence. In 2019, the Tiger Forces became the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division.<sup>70</sup>

According to a an article by Middle East Institute from 2018, the Tiger Forces was a militia that had a decentralised command structure and consisted of 24 different groups. The number of fighters of the Tiger Forces was unknown, however, the offensive units of the Forces was estimated to include 4,000 infantry, in addition to an unknown numbers of fighters in the artillery regiment and the armoured unit of the Forces. In addition to its own groups, the Tiger Forces had affiliated militias with unknown numbers of fighters that would support the Forces if needed.<sup>71</sup> Asharq al-Awsar assessed in 2019 that the Tiger forces had a high level of combat capabilities and played an important role in major offensives in Hama, Aleppo and Eastern Homs.<sup>72</sup>

The Air Force Intelligence service financed, trained and commanded the Tiger Forces. In September 2016 when the Russian army entered the Syrian war, it started assisting the Tiger Forces in its combats by providing it with additional military support from the Russian Air Force and its artillery units, as well as command support from Russian officers.<sup>73</sup>

In August 2019, Russia integrated the Tiger Forces in the SAA and renamed it the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division. The new unit was moved out of the Air Force Intelligence command and placed under the Defence Minister, Ali Ayoub, while Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan remained the commanding officer of the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division. The Russian Military began providing the unit with financial support and military training.<sup>74</sup>

Through these changes, the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division was restructured into a more regular division. Since 2019, it has included regiments 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, each commanded by either an SAA officer or a former Air Force Intelligence officer.<sup>75</sup> The task of the Division is to protect the areas in which the Russian military bases, such as the Hmeimeim Base and the Satamu Helicopter Base, are located. The Division is also deployed at the frontlines with the armed opposition factions and Islamist groups, particularly in Idlib governorate.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Middle East Institute, *From Tiger Forces to the 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade: Russia's evolving Syrian Proxies*, September 2022, [url](#), p.1

<sup>71</sup> Middle East Institute, *The Tiger Forces - Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia*, October 2018, [url](#), p.6

<sup>72</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, *Assad Disbands Makhoul Militias, Renames 'Tiger Forces'*, 30 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>73</sup> Middle East Institute, *From Tiger Forces to the 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade: Russia's evolving Syrian Proxies*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 1-4

<sup>74</sup> Middle East Institute, *From Tiger Forces to the 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade: Russia's evolving Syrian Proxies*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 1-4

<sup>75</sup> Middle East Institute, *From Tiger Forces to the 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade: Russia's evolving Syrian Proxies*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 1, 4

<sup>76</sup> SNHR: 27, 32



## 4.2. Recruitment to the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division

Since 2019, the main task of the Division has been to integrate militias from Homs, Hama, Idlib and eastern Aleppo, and to recruit Sunnis from recaptured areas. Therefore, the Division opened recruitment offices in Syria's central and northern governorates.<sup>77</sup>

The Division only recruits volunteers.<sup>78</sup> Men joining this division must fulfil the following requirements:

- have completed military and reserve service in the Syrian regular army
- be in good physical condition and not suffer from physical or mental disabilities
- have military background and previously participated in the fighting alongside the GoS forces or their affiliated militias.<sup>79</sup>

The 25<sup>th</sup> Division can recruit fighters directly to its ranks, i.e. without going through the Ministry of Defence or the Command of Staff.<sup>80</sup> Men, who apply to join the Division, will be security checked before they are accepted into the Division. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division has a significant percentage of Alawite fighters because the Division's area of operation is near Alawite villages and counties.<sup>81</sup>

## 4.3. Violations by the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division in 2021 and 2022

In the last four years, the 25<sup>th</sup> Task Force Division has committed fewer violations than in the previous years, when it operated under the unit called "the Tiger Forces" militia. The reason for this is the undergoing restructuring from a militia to a military division under the Russian supervision.<sup>82</sup>

In 2021 and 2022, the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division conducted indiscriminate artillery bombardment of medical and educational facilities and markets.<sup>83</sup> The Division has been involved in carrying out mass field executions of civilians or armed members of the armed opposition factions each time it gained control of a new geographical area.<sup>84</sup>

The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division has committed violations such as blackmailing civilians for ransoms to secure the release of their relatives arrested by the division, as well as looting of civilian properties and assets, particularly, in the southern suburbs of Idlib and the northern suburbs of Hama.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Middle East Institute, *From Tiger Forces to the 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade: Russia's evolving Syrian Proxies*, September 2022, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>78</sup> A Human Rights Organisation: 5

<sup>79</sup> SNHR: 39-41; A Human Rights Organisation: 5

<sup>80</sup> SNHR: 33

<sup>81</sup> SNHR: 25, 41-42

<sup>82</sup> A Human Rights Organisation: 2

<sup>83</sup> SNHR: 53

<sup>84</sup> SNHR: 54

<sup>85</sup> SNHR: 56

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## Annex I: Meeting minutes

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### Skype meeting with the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 23 August 2022

#### **Special Forces of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)**

1. The Special Forces (القوات الخاصة) is a title applied to the units in the SAA. The units from the other key Syrian military forces are referred to as Elite Forces (القوات النوعية) and comprise the Fourth Armoured division, the Republican Guard, and the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Missions Division.
2. As of August 2022 the Special Forces in the SAA still exist in name and have retained their structure as units, but have been spread out and redistributed to other units in the SAA.
3. The Special Forces of the SAA were established in the 1980s. Ali Haydar was the commander of these forces (until his demise in 1984). The Special Forces was a division tasked with conducting special missions in Lebanon in the 1980s. When Bashar Al-Assad came to power in the year 2000, he marginalized the Syrian Special Forces of the SAA and instead strengthened the Republican Guard and the affiliated Fourth Armoured Division, which became under his brother Maher Al-Assad's command. The task of these were the same as the Special Forces': to protect the capital and the regime. The purpose of the shift was to create military units loyal to Bashar Al-Assad, as the old guard of officers in the SAA had been loyal to Hafez al-Assad but less to his son. The Syrian Special Forces are funded and financed by the Syrian Ministry of Defence.
4. The structure of the Syrian Special Forces in the Syrian Army is:
  - The General Command of the Army and Armed Forces: Bashar al-Assad
  - The Presidency of the Staff: Abdul Karim Mahmoud Ibrahim
  - The Special Forces Command, The Command of the Regiments
  - The Brigades
  - The Companies.
5. The Syrian Special Forces were marginalized in the years [before 2011], as other Syrian government military units were prioritised by the GoS. The Special Forces Command were not under the command of any of the corps of the Syrian Army today, but regiments of them are included according to military need. The regiments were sent as trained combat units to participate in a specific military operation led by a corps. At the end of an operation, the regiment returned to the Special Forces Command. This modus operandi was repeated continuously since the establishment of the Special Forces. The Special Forces regiments were assigned according to security and military needs and according to the state of peace and war.

6. The 14 and 15 Special Forces Divisions are still active units in the SAA today and the regiments of these divisions are deployed to various Syrian regions. Today there are also Special Forces regiments near Idlib governorate. There are also Special Forces regiments within the Fourth Armoured Division, The Republican Guard, and in the Syrian dessert.
7. More than half of the Special Forces regiments are located near the capital, Damascus, while the remaining regiments have been deployed in separate areas of Syria, the most important of which is the Misyaf region in the western suburbs of Hama governorate. This is near the Scientific Research Facility, which is the Syrian military institution responsible for manufacturing and developing weapons, in particular, scud missiles and chemical weapons.
8. Special Forces undergo qualitative training, focusing on two main tasks; airdrops from helicopters, and ambush operations. According to the laws of the Command of Staff, the Syrian Special Forces are only armed with light artillery and infantry weapons and do not have any heavy tanks or armoured vehicles as they are not trained to use them.

#### **Recruitment to the Special Forces**

9. Members of the Special Forces are taken from the regular recruits and distributed to the various units (unlike the procedure followed in the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division). It is not a requirement to have served in the army before. All recruits are submitted to a doctor's check of physical abilities. Based on these evaluations, and their ethnic and sectarian background, they are distributed to the different Special Forces regiments. Soldiers do not need to obtain a security clearance when joining the Special Forces as the security clearance of soldiers in the SAA takes place at the time of conscription when the soldiers are distributed to the various units in the SAA. Because of the harsh training, the Special Forces units have not been very popular among most Syrian conscripts.
10. The lower rank officers in the Special Forces are appointed by the Command of the Staff, while high-ranking officers and commanding officers are appointed by decrees by President Bashar al-Assad in his capacity as the commander-in-chief of the army and armed forces with the assistance of the Military Intelligence Service Department 291. Members of the Alawite sect in Syria are typically sent to officers' schools in Syria. Since there are not enough Alawites to saturate the need for officers in the SAA, some officers come from other sectarian backgrounds. Regular conscripts in the SAA come from all confessions and religious backgrounds.
11. The Fourth Division owes allegiance to the head of the regime, Bashar al-Assad. It coordinates with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria and is financed, armed, and stocked by the Revolutionary Guards through the Lebanese Hezbollah.
12. The Fourth Armoured Division is the toughest in terms of training and there have been reports of Syrian conscripts dying during training.

13. The officers of the Fourth Armoured Division are present in the Syrian army and government. They have built a mini-authoritarian network in the vital Syrian ministries and the army. In order to obtain their positions, many officials in the GoS and the army need the approval of the commander of the Fourth Armoured Division, Major General Maher al-Assad, the brother of the Syrian president. Thus, the Fourth Armoured Division is the force with the largest percentage of Alawites. It outnumbered the 25<sup>th</sup> Division and receives more financial support.
14. The Fourth Armoured Division has the largest number of fighters and it receives most financial support. It is influential in the SAA and in the security forces institutions and the GoS. In addition, it is the most feared by civilians.
15. Until 2018/2019, the Fourth Armoured Division was primarily deployed in Damascus and Rif Damascus Governorate. Today, apart from Damascus and Rif Damascus Governorate, the Fourth Armoured Division operates in Daraa Governorate and Eastern Syria in areas of Homs governorate and Deir ez-Zor. These governorates are all under the influence of Iran. The security services always threaten to request the support of this division to carry out military operations in the Syrian regions that are still witnessing tensions between the security services and civilians, particularly in Daraa.
16. The Fourth Division operates in all the Syrian governorates under the control of the Syrian regime forces in Daraa, the south, Deir ez-Zor, and Homs, where it has affiliation and coordination offices representing it. The division's presence is concentrated in Damascus and its suburbs but it has offices and small branches outside Damascus where the Division trades in narcotic substances and human smuggling operations between the different areas of control.
17. The Fourth Division moves its unit, or parts of the unit, around as needed. It always accompanies the Lebanese Hezbollah and other foreign Shiite militias. It maintains a constant presence at the crossings between the territories of the GoS, the Syrian Democratic Forces and the armed opposition factions.
18. After the protesters became armed, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard greatly supported the Fourth Armoured Division with ammunition, money, and light and medium weapons. It also provided artillery experts, missiles, and reconnaissance planes to cover the significant shortage of cadres resulting from personnel losses and defections. The Division only partially depends on the supplies of arms and ammunition from the SAA. The bulk of its support of arms and ammunition comes from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria.
19. The Fourth Armoured Division is part of the parallel army that Iran established within the Syrian regular army, and the loyalty of officers and individuals in the Fourth Armoured Division to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard surpasses their affiliation with the Syrian state.
20. The relationship between the Fourth Division and the Republican Guard was strengthened to establish the necessary cover for the Captagon manufacturing workshops in Damascus and its suburbs. The Fourth Armoured Division, through its officers and members, took the privilege of marketing and promoting Captagon and other narcotics in the Syrian internal market. It prevents any other party or individuals from promoting and marketing Captagon inside Syrian territory.

21. In August 2019, President Bashar al Assad, as commander-in-chief of the army and armed forces, issued a decision that created the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division and appointed Suhail al-Hassan as its commander. The “Tiger Forces” militia was renamed “the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division”.
22. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division was created by the Russians and incorporated to the SAA. This division owes allegiance to the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad, and is in full coordination with the Russian Hmeimeim Military Base in Syria.
23. After the Tiger Forces became the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division, it began receiving more financial and military support and training from the Russian military in Syria. After that, the brigade opened recruitment offices in Syria's central and northern governorates (Hama - Homs - Aleppo - Idlib).
24. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division was created by merging several pro-government loyal (shabiha) regiments. It is the only real mobile military unit that could be deployed anywhere in Syria. It is a combat unit, and plays a big role in combat and battles compared to the Fourth Armoured Division. Yet, it is considered to have a very weak influence on Syrian affairs compared to the Fourth Armoured Division.
25. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Division has a significant percentage of Alawite volunteers or paid mercenaries because the Division's area of operation is near Alawite villages and counties, but the Division includes fewer Alawite officers.
26. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division is deployed in large parts at the frontlines with the armed opposition factions and Islamist groups, in particular, on the fronts of the Idlib governorate.
27. Since the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division is not present in Damascus, it does not have an authoritarian network and does not interfere in the work of the GoS. Still, it has established a good network of relations with local militias and prominent Alawite dignitaries.
28. The task of the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division is to protect the gates of the geographical regions in which the Russian military bases are located, such as the Hmeimeim Base and the Satamu Helicopter Base, and this is the reason for its limited deployment in the governorates of Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib.
29. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division enjoys a better reputation than the Fourth Armoured Division among the Alawite circles in the coastal governorates.
30. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division still depends mainly on the supplies from the Syrian army for its funding, arms, and ammunition. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division leadership is trying to present itself as a disciplined military entity that aims to eliminate the armed opposition factions without interfering in civil affairs.
31. Contrary to rumours, the chief of the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division Suheil al-Hassan, did not, disappear for a long time. His disappearance was due to treatment after he suffered severe burns in May 2015



after being targeted by armed opposition factions and Islamist groups at the time. He returned after a short period and underwent several plastic surgeries.

**Recruitment to the elite forces: Republican Guard, Fourth Armoured Division, and 25<sup>th</sup> Division**

32. Originally, the Ministry of Defence sorts conscripts into all military units, including the Special Units, the Republican Guard, and the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division. This arrangement remained in place until 2012. Until today, conscripts constitute the basis of all units in the army. The difference is that only the Fourth Armoured Division, the Republican Guard and the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division can recruit paid fighters [i.e. mercenaries] directly to their ranks and without going through the Ministry of Defence or the Command of Staff, unlike all other army units, including the Special Forces. Again, the Special Forces do not include paid fighters [i.e. mercenaries], but only conscripts and officers whom the Command of Staff screens.
33. Until 2012 recruitment of officers to the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division was done through the Ministry of Defence with the assistance of the Department 291 of the Military Intelligence Service. Regular soldiers in these two units were chosen from among the conscripted soldiers with certain requirements as to physical strength and geographical place of origin.
34. It is well known that it is easier to join the Fourth Armoured Division if you have Alawite background. The mentality of the Fourth Armoured Division is built on sectarian loyalty to the Alawite sect. Alawites consider themselves part of the Shiites in general. The relationship between the Fourth Armoured Division and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard is very old and precedes 2011 and the popular protests in Syria.
35. The Fourth Armoured Division has the larger number of Alawite officers compared to The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division.
36. Prior 2012, there were no volunteers in the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division. However, after sustaining heavy casualties, due to the conflict in Damascus and Rif Damascus governorate and especially the Darayya area where the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armoured Division were deployed, the possibility of volunteering in these units was opened up.
37. The Fourth Armoured Division established its own recruitment office without any particular restrictions or requirements for joining. Even prisoners serving time were accepted as recruits in the Fourth Armoured Division. The Fourth Division adds paid fighters [i.e. mercenaries] to its ranks to this day.
38. Motivation factors to join the elite forces are the high salary compared to other Syrian military units; the protection that the members receive from the division; and the impunity when committing criminal acts such as blackmailing and stealing from civilians.
39. An individual joining must have completed his military and reserve service in the Syrian regular army.

40. He must be in good physical condition and not suffer from physical or mental disabilities.
41. It is preferable that the individual is from a military background and has previously participated in the fighting alongside the Syrian regime forces or their affiliated militias.
42. Individuals are subject to a security check before they are accepted.
43. All local militias (national defence - other militias) join with facilitations.

**Involvement of the Special Forces and the Elite Forces in violations against civilians (2021-22)**

44. Members of the Syrian Special Forces are deployed in several regions of Syria. They are involved in artillery bombardment, in particular, with mortars, against Syrian cities and villages near the frontlines in the suburbs of Aleppo Governorate in particular, where the Special Forces personnel work under the command of the brigades they were assigned.
45. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division consists of a collection of regiments loyal to the Syrian Government. They have committed violations against civilians, such as blackmailing civilians for ransoms to secure the release of their relatives arrested by the 25<sup>th</sup> Division, as well as looting the civilians' properties and assets in Syria.

**The Fourth Armoured Division**

46. The Fourth Armoured Division is concentrated in the capital, Damascus and its suburbs, as its main task is protecting the GoS in the capital.
47. The Fourth Armoured Division finances its existence by smuggling narcotics, blackmailing civilians for ransoms to secure the release of their relatives, which have typically been arrested at checkpoints controlled by the Fourth Armoured Division. Detainment of civilians, with the purpose of extracting ransom money, is typically done through checkpoints controlled by the Fourth Armoured Division and the Republican Guard. It also makes money by extracting bribes for people and goods being smuggled through their checkpoints. This could for instance be individuals and goods that are being smuggled to or from areas controlled by the GoS into opposition controlled areas. The division's members enjoy impunity and are allowed theft and extortion of civilians, and the division's recruitment offices deliberately attract criminals and those previously convicted of criminal cases, especially in the city of Damascus. As for data such as numbers and statistics, this is not available.
48. The Fourth Armoured Division has carried out the aforementioned abuses at checkpoints in Damascus and Rif Damascus Governorate and, since 2018-2019, in the eastern regions of Syria as well.
49. The Fourth Armoured Division also has a lucrative business of stealing cars and other goods in different parts of Syria and then using checkpoints controlled by the Fourth Armoured division to facilitate the movements of stolen cars and in order to sell the stolen cars and goods for profit.

50. SNHR has documented that members of the Fourth Armoured Division and the Republican Guard killed civilians in Damascus and its suburbs with different motives during 2021 and 2022 and that members of the Fourth Division carried out arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of civilians as they passed through its checkpoints, especially in Damascus and its suburbs during 2021 and 2022. SNHR has also documented that groups of the Fourth Armoured Division and Republican Guard carried out bombing operations targeting civilian homes using machine guns, mortars, and tanks during 2021 and 2022.
51. Violations that civilians are subjected to at checkpoints of the Fourth Division and the Republican Guard:
- Intimidation: It includes threats, insults, and assaults on dignity, beatings, and causing physical and psychological harm.
  - Robbery: It includes the theft of personal property, particularly money, mobile phones, motorcycles, gold jewellery, or sheep and goats.
  - Arrest and Enforced Disappearance: the arrest of civilians based on their ethnicity, sect, or geographical affiliation. These civilians would forcibly disappear and could later die due to neglect, starvation, and torture, or they might be abducted for extortion of their families to pay sums of money in exchange for their release.
  - Harassment of Women and Girls: It is more common at the checkpoints where foreign Shiite elements, such as the Fatemiyoun militia, are located, and they are concentrated in areas controlled by the Syrian regime forces in the cities of al Mayadin and Boukamal.
  - Field Execution: These executions take place at the checkpoints of the Fourth Division deployed in Damascus and its suburbs, where the checkpoint personnel shoots directly at civilians before or after they cross the checkpoints under the pretext of not stopping or because civilians defend their property and refuse to pay the checkpoint personnel when crossing.
52. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division has committed many violations against Syrian civilians, as it was primarily responsible for indiscriminate artillery bombardment and targeting service, medical and educational facilities, and markets.
53. Its members are also involved in carrying out mass field executions of civilians or armed members of the armed opposition factions after the Division gains control of a geographical area.
54. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division continues to loot civilian property in the areas it has controlled since 2019. These operations are concentrated in the northern suburbs of Hama Governorate and the southern and eastern suburbs of Idlib Governorate, where The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division command allows its members to loot civilian property that they left after their displacements, such as household furniture, crops, and animals. These looting operations by members of the Division reached the level of demolishing the roofs of houses to extract and sell iron and dismantling and demolishing walls to pull electrical cables.
55. The 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division also practices blackmail of civilians, arrests, forced disappearances, demanding ransoms, and stealing, but to a much lesser extent than The Fourth Armoured Division,

because the areas controlled by the 25<sup>th</sup> Division have less inhabitants, especially in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate and the northern suburbs of Hama. Members of the division blackmailed civilians at checkpoints in the areas where they are deployed, and have done so since 2011, even before it took the name of the 25<sup>th</sup> division because its core nucleus is still present. The first extortions of civilians were observed in the city of Hama where these elements participated in the storming and siege of the city of Hama in July 2011. The Division blackmailed civilians in conjunction with the Air Force Intelligence branch in the governorates of Hama and Aleppo. The Air Security Branch in the two governorates arrested civilians so that the Division members could play the role of the mediator to release civilians in exchange for sums of money.

56. SNHR documented that members of the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division carried out special tasks of stealing household furniture and personal belongings left by the displaced in their villages, which the brigade took control of, in particular, in the southern suburbs of Idlib and the northern suburbs of Hama.
57. The division does not have detention centres or checkpoints on a large scale compared to the Fourth Armoured Division, and its presence is concentrated in the northern governorates, mainly Idlib and Aleppo, in addition to the frontlines of Hama.

## WhatsApp interview with a Human Rights Organisation, 21 March and 11 April 2023

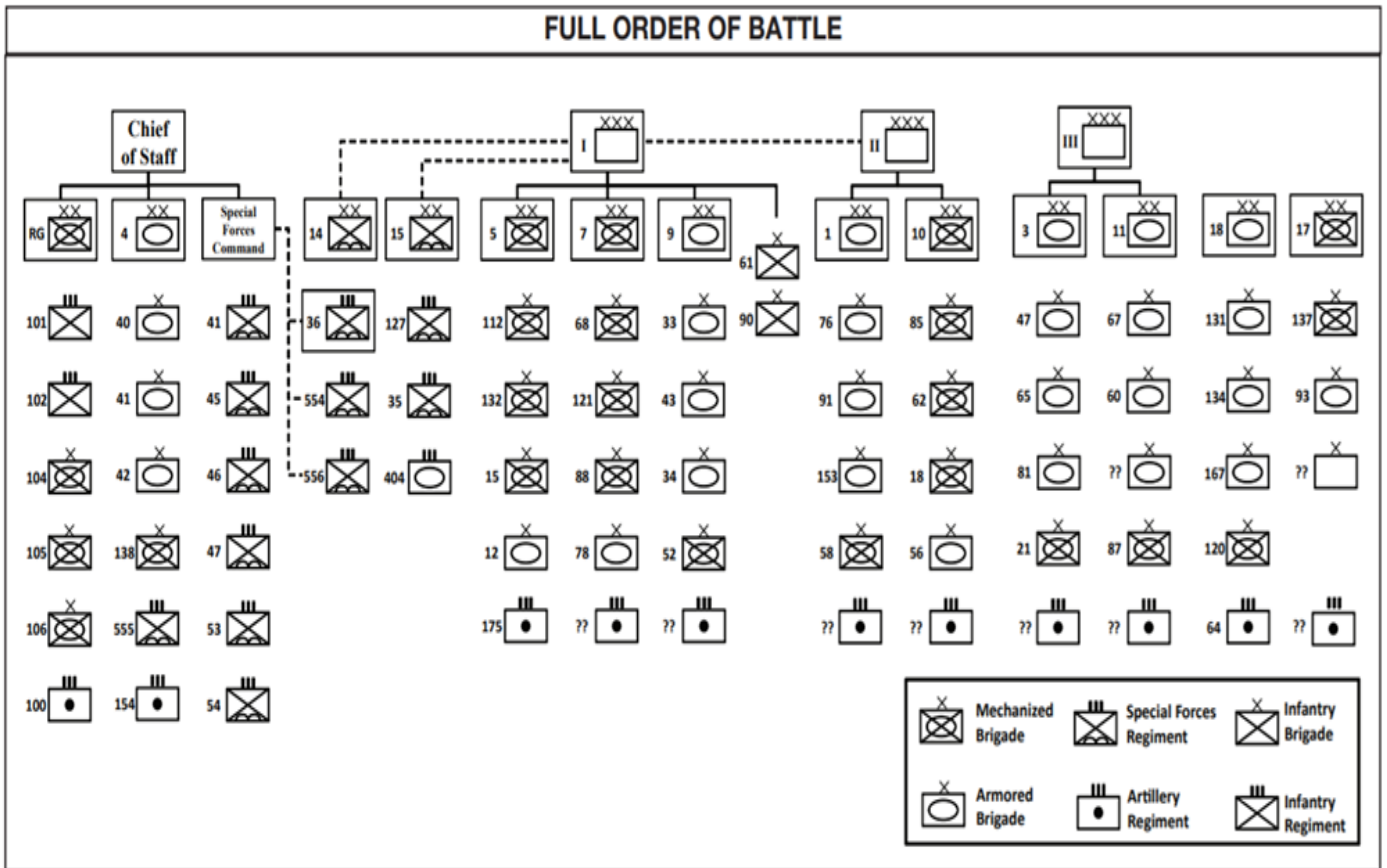
1. In the last four years, the Special Forces have committed few violations against civilians (compared to the years before that) as the number of the Special Forces has decreased significantly.
2. In the last four years, the 25<sup>th</sup> Task Force Division has committed fewer violations compared to the years before (when the unit was called “the Tiger Forces” militia) because it has been undergoing restructuring from a militia to a military division under the Russian supervision.
3. The Special Forces is a regular unit in the SAA and conscripts and reservists can be assigned to serve in the Special Forces. Conscripts and reservists have no choice but to serve their military service in the Special Forces if they are assigned to them.
4. Conscripts and reservists can also be assigned to serve in the Fourth Division and Republican Guard, and they have no choice but to serve their military service in these units if they are assigned to them.
5. The 25<sup>th</sup> Task Force Division recruits only volunteers who have combat experience or who are physically fit for hard training.

## Annex II: Terms of Reference

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1. The Special Forces and Elite forces 2011-22 organisation and structure
2. Requirements for joining the Special Forces and Elite Forces
3. The involvement of the Special Forces and the Elite Forces in violations against civilians in 2021-22.

## Annex III: Structure of the SAA as of March 2011



Source: Institute for the Study of War, *The Syrian Army. Doctrinal Order of Battle*, February 2013, [url](#), p. 12