

INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Syria's 4th Division: A Threat to Stability





Syria's Parastate: The 4th Division

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Contents

Executive Summary	3	The 4th Division in the Syrian Conflict	15
The Origins of the 4th Division	4	The 4th Division's Military Role	15
A Dynamic and Machiavellian Force	4	Networks of Power	18
The 4th Division's Structure	6	Individuals, Entities, and Connections	18
Before 2015.....	6	The 4th Division and External Powers in Syria ...	19
4th Division Leadership	7	The 4th Division and the Iranian Connection	19
After 2015	8	The Military Perspective	20
Combat Militia	8	The Intelligence Perspective	21
Economic Paramilitary	10	The Economic Perspective	21
Systematic Looting (<i>Tafeesh</i>)	11	The 4th Division and the Russian Occupation	21
Levying (<i>Tabeer</i>)	12	The 4th Division in Postwar Syria	23
Security and Paid Escorting (<i>Tarfeeq</i>)	12	The Reconstruction Process	23
Border Control, Intimidation, and Human		Political Reform	24
Trafficking	13	The 4th Division's Significance	24
Drug Production and Trafficking	14	Endnotes	26
Recruiting the Alawites of the Plains	15		

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COVER: Syrian soldiers stand guard at a checkpoint in Daraa in southern Syria in September 2021. The opposition-held half of Daraa returned to state control under a surrender deal. (Photo by Louai Beshara / AFP via Getty Images)

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Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.





Executive Summary

The Syrian military's elite 4th Division has developed into a parastate under the watch of the authorities in Damascus. The group has an interest in using paramilitarism (including warlord structures and organized crime) to gain influence and has honed its ability to appropriate traditional state institutions to extend this influence. Studying the 4th Division bears importance beyond Syria's borders because it is a good example of a state-criminal nexus and highlights a political phenomenon that threatens regional and global stability.

In Syria, militarization has been used to subjugate and co-opt important elements of society. Military institutions – the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its elite units – perhaps shaped the interaction between society and the regime through systematic militarization of important civil institutions: hospitals, schools, etc. And though the elite units embodied the image of the ultimate power in the public consciousness, it remained the subject of myth and rumor for decades, as did most of its commanders, who are either related to the Assad family or are members of his inner circle.

The 2011 conflict presented an opportunity for researchers to shed light on misconceptions



Current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (R) and his younger brother, Gen. Maher al-Assad, attend the funeral of their father, President Hafez al-Assad, in June 2000 in Damascus. (Ramzi Haidar / AFP via Getty Images)

about these units and enable a different understanding of their organization, structure, and mobilization. Yet the studies rarely touched upon the influence the war has had on these units' organizational forms and on their tactics of recruitment and mobilization. What factors drove the change of these mechanisms? When and why did these units mobilize civilians into paramilitary and militia involvement? And how did these changes mirror the shift of these units' role in the war and the balance of power? Moreover, the 4th Division surfaced as an

indispensable partner to the regime's foreign allies, yet the dynamics of these relationships are ambiguous – and there are questions about when and why the ambiguity evolved.

To answer these questions and shed light on the 4th Division's practices and elite divisions' role in the Assad regime, the authors used primary sources such as covert ethnographic interviews with 25 members of the 4th Division, Republican Guards, intelligence, and paramilitary groups, as well as literature, memoirs, media reports, and open-source data.



The Origins of the 4th Division

The roots of the 4th Division's role as an elite force lie in the Defense Companies for Airports Unit 569, which was active before the rule of Hafez al-Assad. The Defense Companies were established after the Syrian Ba'ath Party's 1963 coup and commanded by ex-Defense Minister Muhammad Umran.¹ Umran, a member of the party's ruling Military Committee, recognized the need for a loyal and well-equipped force capable of defending the nascent regime and its critical infrastructure within an unstable political climate characterized by regular coups. Umran created Unit 569 amid internal competition and uncoordinated power seizures, and the independent special forces unit became an instrument for striking down political enemies. Umran saw in Unit 569 a more unorthodox state agency – and a manifestation of his political ambition, along with that of the authoritarian nature of the Syrian Ba'ath regime.

After Umran lost his position within the party and military committee in 1966, command of the unit was handed to Rifaat al-Assad, brother to then-Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad. By 1970, Hafez had seized the presidency, and under Rifaat's command, the Defense Companies were significantly expanded. Throughout some of the most turbulent years of Hafez al-Assad's rule, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Defense Companies filled a crucial role within the repressive apparatus: chastising dissent, most often

through overwhelming violence and performative displays of collective punishment. Rifaat's Defense Companies perpetrated large-scale massacres in Aleppo (1979), as well as in Tadmor Prison (1980) and Hamah (1982), and more targeted operations in Latakia (1979).²

At their height, the Defense Companies were made up of five brigades, based largely within Damascus and its vicinity – well placed to defend the regime against internal or external threats. Also under the Defense Companies' flag were some 30,000 militia fighters, spread throughout Damascus, Aleppo, and Hamah. The Defense Companies' officers and core troops were overwhelmingly recruited from marginalized Alawite and Ismaili communities on the coast, while paramilitary forces were mobilized from Alawite communities in Homs and Hamah, as well as Kurds in Aleppo.³

In 1984, following a fraternal dispute that saw Rifaat al-Assad exiled after an aborted coup, the Defense Companies were effectively dissolved. A large proportion of the formations' units were disbanded or transferred to the Special Forces (Divisions 14 and 15) and to the new Republican Guard, which since its formation in 1976 had served as the primary guard to the Assad elite, directly under the command of the president. The remaining division-sized units of the Defense Companies were reflagged as the 4th Division.⁴ Over the remainder of Hafez's era, the division, as a result of this technical dissolution, was politically and economically marginalized.

A Dynamic and Machiavellian Force

The Defense Companies spearheaded the violent crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood throughout Hafez al-Assad's ideological and political confrontation with the movement. Rifaat al-Assad's forces outwardly promoted an exclusionary Ba'athist ideology that was embedded in anti-Islamic discourse of national identity and reputed for violence and collective punishment against the Sunni majority. It was the Defense Companies that, in 1982, led to the destruction of Hamah, a display of massive indiscriminate violence by the regime that resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians.⁵

The Ba'athist violence between 1976 and 1982, and in particular the Hamah massacre, had a long-term impact on Syrian society, leaving many living in fear that the Assads would “do Hamah again.”⁶ However, following this period of open ideological confrontation, the Assad regime shifted toward a less visible, but equally violent, apparatus of repression. The regime increasingly relied upon disciplined and competing intelligence and security actors, capable of ensuring the systematic oppression and subjugation of Syrian society through mass surveillance, denunciation, detention, and torture.⁷ This apparatus has been integral to the 4th Division's *modus operandi* since its foundation in 1984.

Though led overwhelmingly by Alawite officers, the division's elite units feature a hierarchical



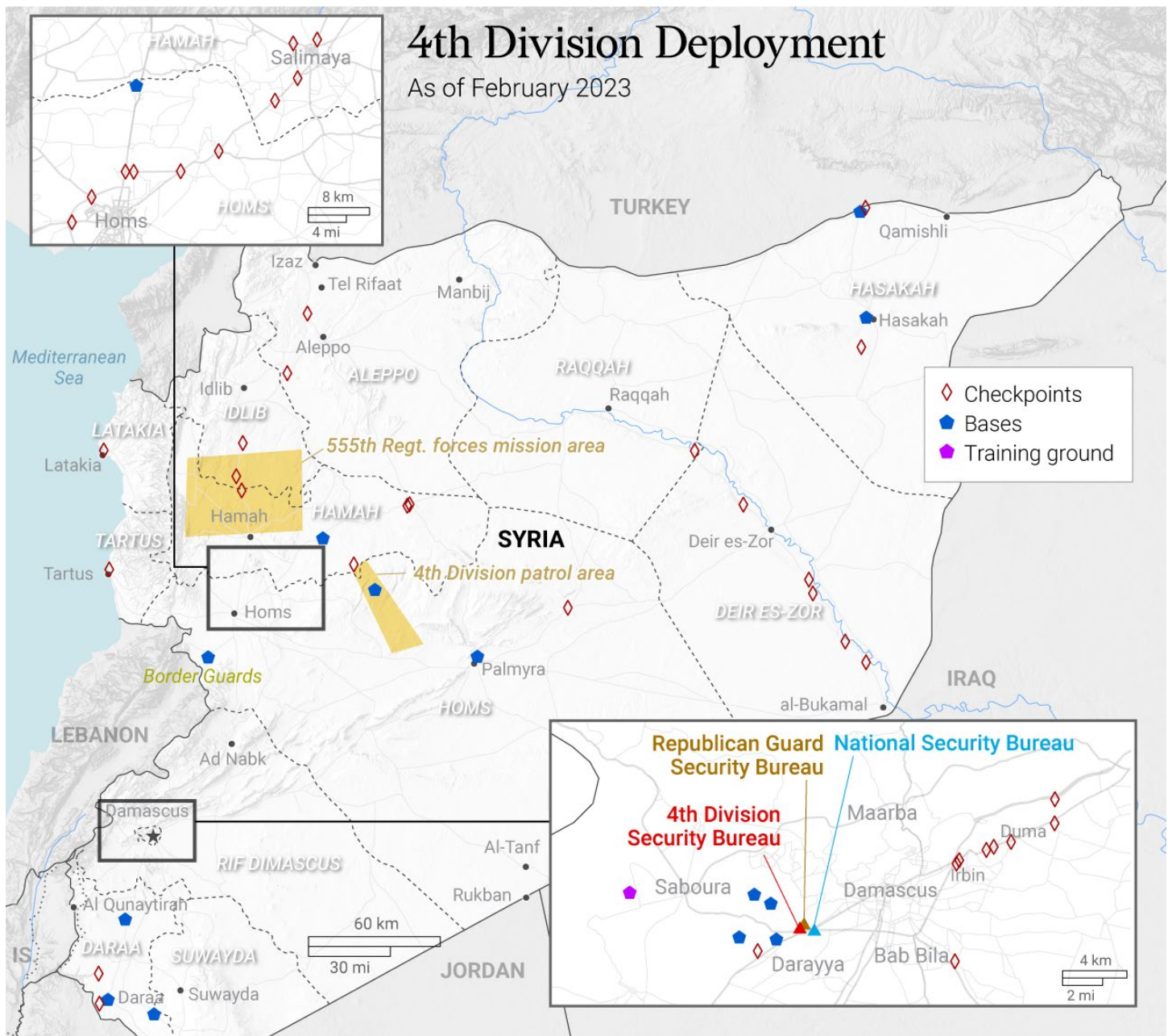


command structure and are less overtly sectarian than the famously ill-disciplined Defense Companies.⁸ This, in part, was a political necessity to manipulate the populace into accepting the regime's secular rhetoric. This Machiavellian behavior was adopted by Bashar al-Assad since a reduction of sectarianism in the

public discourse was necessary to match the image of his leadership and to encourage Sunni businessmen to participate more in the power-business networks.

Throughout the 2000s, the 4th Division was selectively deployed during the bilateral local disputes and protests, such as the 2001

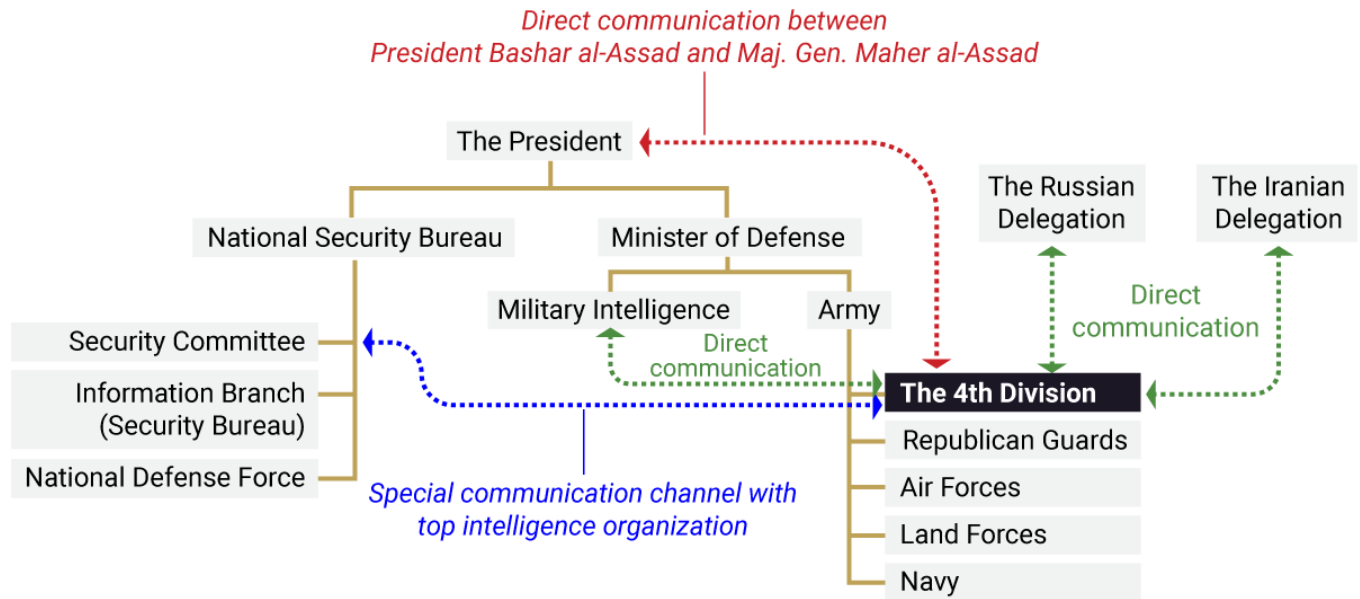
Druze-Bedouin clashes in Suwayda, the 2005 Ismailis-Alawites dispute in Masyaf, and the 2004 Kurdish uprising in Qamishli.⁹ Despite the division's formidable demonstrated capabilities to suppress dissent, it showed its ability to use limited force to painstakingly "police" areas holding heterogeneous groups, depending on the knowledge and





Syria's Military and Intelligence Structure

Where the 4th Division is positioned in the Syrian military hierarchy



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consideration of the complex local dynamic therein. The aforementioned events were characterized by low levels of violence and relatively low-intensity sectarianism compared with the 1980s repression or *fatret al ahdath* ("the period of the events") – a euphemism used to refer to the violent confrontations of 1976-1982 in which the Defense Companies played such an important role.

The ideological and sectarian differences between the 4th Division and its predecessor reflect important changes within the Syrian regime and its state. They also make plain the often-overlooked fact that the 4th Division is not completely a continuation of the Defense Companies and their

unambiguously sectarian role and identity despite the similarities between the two in terms of using brutal force. Since the eruption of conflict in 2011, the Assad regime has strategically and pragmatically positioned the 4th Division as a dynamic, sectarian actor to manipulate Syria's complex social fabric. At times, the division has used existing sectarian rifts, inflaming local grievances with the aim of radicalizing the opposition. At other times, far from being guided by any immutable sectarian ideology, the 4th Division has actively recruited Sunni youths – those who were gradually dragged into the division's forces through persuasion and violence.

The 4th Division's Structure

The 4th Division today has evolved into an amorphous and complex network that has infiltrated almost every sector of Syria's state and society, whether formal or informal. During the Syrian civil war, the division has ensured its survival by significantly changing its structure and recruitment practices – namely its branching into paramilitarism, a strategic wartime expansion driven and organized by Brig Gen. Ghassan Bilal's Security Bureau.

Before 2015

The 4th Division's elite core consists of 15,000 to 20,000 military professionals divided into four brigades.¹⁰ Unlike conventional





4th Division Leadership

Maj. Gen. Maher al-Assad [front, 2nd from right] commands the 4th Division and is the brother of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Maj. Gen. Assad is considered the second most powerful man in the regime. His military activities have boosted his popularity within the military where he has overshadowed President Assad. Maj. Gen. Assad is described as an inaccessible, mysterious, and antagonistic figure who easily tends to violence. He is also known for the enormous financial empire he owns and runs via civil and military brokers.



Sulaf Nasrallah Twitter feed

Brig. Gen. Ghassan Nafia Bilal (aka Abu al-Hamzeh) [front right] commands the 4th Division's Security Bureau. He is Maj. Gen. Assad's confidant and business broker. Bilal masterminds the division's security and military operations. He devised campaigns against government opposition after 2011, and monitored troop activity and established relationships between the 4th Division and both Iran and Russia.

Brig. Gen. Ali Aboud [not pictured] is the deputy head for recruitment for the 555th Special Forces Regiment (Airborne). Aboud greatly influences the mobilization of paramilitary groups, which the 4th Division has conducted since 2014. These paramilitary units have fought alongside 4th Division troops. They effectively suppressed opposition in western Syria from 2015 to 2017.

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SAA brigades, which generally have a single core capability, the 4th Division's hybrid brigades (40, 41, 42, and 138) consist of five battalions, each with different capabilities and roles including commandos, aerial elements, artillery, and infantry. Signal, logistics, and military police units, as well as a command office and security office, are attached to each battalion.

Though its elements have been deployed throughout Syria, the division's influence remains concentrated near Damascus and

its western and southwestern peripheries. The 40th and 138th brigades are based in the high ground surrounding Mu'adamyeh, overlooking the Damascene suburb of Daraya. The 41st and 42nd brigades are garrisoned around the villages of Yafour and Ass'aboura, some 10 kilometers (about 6 miles) west of the capital.¹¹ The division security office is located near the Mezzeh Military Airbase.¹²

The 4th Division's attached regiments (333, 555, 666 and 154) are best described as special forces. Regiment 555, a

commando formation based in Moadamyeh that was deployed to western Damascus and recently to northern Hamah, and regiment 154, an artillery unit stationed in Moadamyeh and its deployment to Hasakah, existed prior to 2011.¹³ Regiments 333, a special force unit stationed in the countryside east of Salamiyah, and 666, originally established as a technical regiment in 2014 but then reorganized as an infantry unit, were deployed to Homs and Daraa.

Collectively, the division's core brigades and regiments represent





some of the most elite formations in the Syrian military in terms of discipline, equipment, training, and capabilities. Alongside these formations is the division's Security Bureau, which has been vastly expanded in recent decades. The division is the only formation other than the Republican Guard to have its own security bureau, with military intelligence as an equivalent existing to other regular SAA units.

Brig. Gen. Ghassan Bilal has commanded the 4th Division's Security Bureau since its foundation in 1990.¹⁴¹⁵ As its name suggests, the bureau's main role is monitoring and disciplining the division's personnel (each 4th Division formation has an attached security unit) and providing security to officers, housing, facilities, and weaponry. In addition, the bureau performs reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering in the areas bordering Jordan and Israel.

During the 2000s, in the second half of the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule, the influence of the 4th Division's Security Bureau extended beyond security and intelligence and into Syria's informal economy. The bureau was the key economic actor through which division leader Maher al-Assad – Bashar al-Assad's brother – was able to generate a great profit for himself and the division.¹⁶ Since the onset of the civil war in 2011, the Security Bureau's economic activities greatly expanded. A decade later, the bureau remains a central actor within Syria's war economy. By establishing a vast network of affiliated paramilitary and paraeconomic actors, it has

enabled the Assad regime to infiltrate, co-opt, and dominate private and public institutions and to concentrate profit and power under its direct command.

After 2015

In the first years of the Syrian conflict, the Assad regime encountered personnel shortages – result of high rates of casualties, desertions, and defections – as well as the hesitance to deploy unreliable SAA conventional troops. Within this context, paramilitarism, the mobilization of militias via local brokers, became integral to the violent repression.¹⁷ The regime has a long history of paramilitarism, both in Syria regionally. Indeed, Rifaat al-Assad's Defense Companies, the 4th Division's predecessor, had sponsored numerous pro-Syrian militias in Lebanon, particularly Rifaat Eid's Democratic Arab Party militia in Tripoli.

As early as 2011, the Syrian regime created a paramilitary group under the umbrella of the Republican Guard called The Popular Committees of the Republican Guards. Contrary to existing reports, though the division did fight alongside paramilitary units throughout the first years of the conflict, it was not until late 2014 or early 2015 that the division's Security Bureau began to systematically mobilize paramilitary networks.¹⁸ In examining the emergence and continued influence of the 4th Division's affiliated militias, it is useful to make a distinction between a combat militia and what this intelligence briefing classifies as an economic paramilitary.

Combat Militia

The 4th Division was deployed throughout Syria during the early years of the uprising and conflict. By late 2014, the division had suffered dramatic losses and faced an increasingly well-armed and entrenched opposition.¹⁹ It began to mobilize paramilitary formations to bolster its ranks. In order to raise these forces, the division turned to existing paramilitary units that had emerged in Alawite communities in Homs and in Al-Ghab in Hamah.²⁰ The first paramilitary groups to be integrated into the 4th Division were largely hard-liner loyalist paramilitary groups that had emerged to violently counter the opposition movement on a local level, particularly those who were concerned about the growing Iranian influence in the country.²¹

Exemplified by Ali al-Shilleh's militia and groups linked to the Alawite cleric Hasan al-Hakim, the initial 4th Division paramilitary formations were often fiercely sectarian, part of the *shabiha* forces that the regime had armed since 2011, particularly in areas of pre-existing sectarian tension and grievance. These battle-hardened militias, under the direct supervision and command of Bilal's Security Bureau, fought alongside the depleted 4th Division forces in a role similar to that of an infantry unit.²² From 2015 to 2017, a number of such militias played an important role in the efforts to violently crush opposition in areas under opposition control, deploying to Daraa, Harasta, Latakia, Northern Hamah, and Eastern and Western Ghouta.





This September 2019 photograph taken during a tour guided by Russian army personnel shows a Syrian army checkpoint in Aleppo. (Maxime Popov / AFP via Getty Images)

Since 2017, the manner in which the Security Bureau has recruited and mobilized paramilitary units has evolved. No longer primarily relying on the predominantly Alawite militia, the 4th Division's paramilitary forces now include a significant number of Sunni recruits, both conscripts and former opposition fighters, absorbed into the division's structure as the regime has sought to restore its monopoly on violence.²³ These recruits have increasingly formed part of paramilitary formations that also include Shiite, Druze, and Ismaili.²⁴

Notably, the much-propagandized Al-Ghiath Forces, commanded by the 4th Division's Brig. Gen. Ghiath Dala (42nd Brigade) and notorious for their role on the battlefields of Eastern and Western Ghouta, have increasingly recruited former opposition fighters and factions into their ranks.²⁵ In the last couple

of years, the Al-Ghiath Forces deployed alongside groups of the division's 42nd Brigade to spearhead crackdowns in Daraa, Northern Latakia, and Idlib.

This shift in the 4th Division's recruitment and mobilization tactics – the increasing inclusion of Sunni fighters in its paramilitary elements – reflects the way in which the regime strategically positions the division to best manipulate Syria's social and sectarian landscape.

As the regime and its allies have sought to consolidate territorial control and move toward a postwar Syria, the division's recruitment of former opposition fighters and Sunnis – with knowledge of specific customs, beliefs, and local networks of politics and power – has enabled it to infiltrate communities in contested areas, often formerly under opposition

control.²⁶ The division's combat paramilitaries have thus acted as a Trojan horse aimed at eroding solidarity from within the communities that sympathized with the opposition and thus reducing the capacity for social and political resistance, either through indoctrination or coercion.²⁷

The al-Faris group, consisting of mostly Druze fighters under the military command of Lt. Col. Faris Kridi and civil command of Yaroub Zahr al-Deen, emerged in 2018. The group, stationed in the Syrian south, surfaced with the advancement of the Islamic State in eastern Suwayda amid the attempts to end local resistance to military service therein.²⁸

The 4th Division's recruitment of former opposition fighters has sometimes provoked violent responses from still-active opposition factions. Notably, in



Daraa, as the division's recruitment patterns showed further tendencies toward recruiting former opposition fighters who were part of the "reconciliation agreements," the majority of attacks against and assassinations of 4th Division personnel have targeted those reconverted fighters.

Economic Paramilitary

One feature peculiar to the 4th Division is a spontaneous emergence of economic policy as it developed from a shadow economy, without legal cover from the state, into a paraeconomy. Since 1991, the Syrian economy has increasingly moved toward privatization. A legislative decree by Hafez al-Assad injected limited liberalization into the economic strategies, but while the decree allowed for some economic advancement and growth, it also allowed the emergence of shadow economic networks of intelligence and military personnel on one hand, and the business class in urban centers on the other.²⁹ This alliance was necessary since the military – specifically, generals in key positions – had seized control over strategic sectors, among them tobacco, pharmaceuticals, and real estate, forcing business interests into cooperation.

The shadow economy grew after 2000 with Bashar al-Assad's selective neoliberal strategies characterized by privatization and personalization. This led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a group heavily dependent on its ties to the Assad family. While the family's economic influence surfaced,

the division created networks of intermediary entrepreneurs, whose investments flourished following the promotion of Maher al-Assad to the division's ranks in 2008.

The division commander's interests covered an array of economic sectors, including:

- Industrial (the mining of all metals)
- Imports and exports (tobacco, alcohol, and other goods)
- The trade of gemstones
- A supervisory strategic partnership with organized crime networks involved in illicit activities including money laundering and the sale of antiquities, drugs, and weapons

The evolution of the division's economic activities after the 2011 conflict is an important determinant of its growing economic influence and dominance after 2018; the division was nurtured by the war and its devastating impact as well as other circumstances – most importantly international intervention. Since 2019, and with the establishment of the 4th Division's Investment Department, its economy has featured complex adaptive systems devised on a model that combines elitism, paramilitarism, power, and violence, which resulted in a paraeconomy.

The term "paraeconomy" was first used to describe the widespread sponsorship by the state or businesses of specific paramilitary groups in order to reinforce economic advantages in Colombia.³⁰ Business entities depended on paramilitary groups to facilitate illicit economic

investment, monopolization, and exploitation.³¹ The term also applies to the way in which the Syrian regime has used business entities and associated economic paramilitary influence to dominate the country's economy. The 4th Division's Security Bureau is one of the most important paraeconomic actors, generating huge profits for the Assad family, its chosen elite, and the division itself.

To achieve this goal, until 2016 the 4th Division partnered with a network of paraeconomic actors and businesses to reinvest illicit profits into Syria's formal economy. These business brokers were mediators between the division and civilians, allowing the latter to share information and resources with the militias and enabling mobilization of the necessary personnel to execute missions. Some of these businesspeople had profound ties and partnerships with the division prior to the war (e.g. Ayman Jaber, Mohammad Hamshu, and Khaled Kaddour).³² Others began their business careers with the support of the intelligence apparatus and the division, including those with criminal backgrounds. One infamous business broker, Khodr Taher (also known as Abu Ali Khodr) had been sentenced to prison after being convicted of smuggling and other illicit activities. However, his sentence was cut short after he struck a deal with the head of state intelligence and an NDF security officer in 2014. The exemption was granted, in part, due to Taher's kinship with smugglers in Tal-Kalakh and on the western borders with Lebanon.





“ *Tafeesh* [systemic looting] was organized according to a business cycle of a claim, distribution, and marketing, and it involved cooperation among different agencies and actors: paramilitary, hybrid forces or elite units, and business brokers. ”

In 2017, the division established a special department attached to the Security Bureau, later known as the Security Bureau Investment Department,³³ that managed the unit's business investments and partnerships through sponsored paramilitary groups, which it refers to as economic paramilitary. The division's paramilitary setup is placed in the paradoxical roles of being both business partners and employees, and the paramilitary commander bears the responsibilities of business management and implementation. The commander forms a team of contractors in positions that include human resources, accounting, and data analysis.³⁴ The Investment Department serves as an institutional oversight that relies on its paramilitary wing to execute a business plan. More specifically, five categories of economic activities deserve closer attention.

Systematic Looting (*Tafeesh*)

Looting is an organized process integral to the Assad campaign of destruction targeting civilians through monetizing the plundering of property.³⁵ *Tafeesh*, the Arabic word for plundering, was also a constructive self-sponsorship for the militia and military factions.

Tafeesh was organized according to a business cycle of a claim, distribution, and marketing, and it involved cooperation among different agencies and actors: paramilitary, hybrid forces or elite units, and business brokers.³⁶ These committees, able to raise the necessary personnel, organized and carried out the systematic plundering of neighborhoods and districts, stripping them of anything of a value (e.g., electronics, medicine, household goods, clothing). The committees also supervised the distribution of these stolen goods among the division, army factions, and paramilitary groups (largely NDF and al-Bustan Association paramilitary). Specific subcommittees oversaw the theft and resale of specific loot – exemplified by the “Metal Committee” and, by extension, the division, which was responsible for the organized looting of scrap metal (so-called *Lijan al-Taadeen*). The 4th Division's civilian representatives on these committees supervised the looting of scrap metal, most of which would be transported to factories for reprocessing, including those owned by Mohammad Hamshu, whom Maher al-Assad regarded as a personal economic broker.³⁷

Marketing the looted materials thus was not only the link that completes this newly emerged production pattern, but it also was a necessity to replace the economic activities in which those marginalized individuals were taking part before they became militia members. The conflict naturally generated some economic activity, employing construction workers, shop attendants, taxi and transport drivers, and hotel and tourism workers, to name a few. A portion of the gap left in the overall national economy was filled by economic activity generated by looting and other illicit activities. Nevertheless, the regime invested in these economic activities to strengthen the ethno-sectarian aspects of the conflict, as the markets specializing in the sale of looted materials were located in regime-controlled areas. Those markets, known as “*Souq As-Sunnah*,” or Sunnis’ Markets, were located in Alawite strongholds such as al-Zahra in Homs or Mazzeh 86 in Damascus. Apart from the economic purpose of looting, the activity seemed to reflect the disquiet between the communities and a more broadly shared frustration within the existing social economic order. It became an accepted phenomenon





shaped by the socio-economic order of Syrian society.³⁸

One of the rising business brokers of the 4th Division is Rami Abd al-Karim Haidar, an Alawite militia member from the al-Zahraa neighborhood in Homs, who has acted as a representative of the division on the scrap metal committee there. Abd Al-Karim was imprisoned for embezzling from the division in 2018 only to receive a special pardon in 2019. In 2021, Abd al-Karim, together with Khodr Taher, organized an election celebration in Homs on behalf of the division's Security Office, a manifestation of the increasing political influence of the division among Alawites in marginalized areas.³⁹

In 2017, with the military advances and conquest of some opposition-held areas, scrap metal looting was deemed necessary preparation for reconstruction, giving it a legal umbrella. The 4th Division's economic militias were exclusively authorized to storm levelled and abandoned private property to confiscate scrap metal. Although it prohibited the looting of personal belongings, this prohibition was in vain; division security routinely ignored violations of the restrictions, although the records of such violations were kept and later could be used against some members of the militias as a disciplinary action, if needed. Hafez al-Assad, before Bashar, always acted in this manner – particularly allowing his cronies and underlings to conduct corrupt activities while keeping documentation on those activities to be used when deemed necessary.

Levyng (*Tabeer*)

Checkpoint systems have contributed to the enrichment of the agencies, militias, and business through intimidation and blackmail. Levyng at checkpoints is a scheme of Syrian regime-organized violence against civilians, who have been humiliated, beaten, or abducted at them. *Tabeer*, the Arabic equivalent of levyng – the imposition of taxes on individuals, supplies, and convoys of entities at checkpoints, was the most common pattern of economic exploitation in Syria. By 2021, this practice, which began under the NDF leader Saqqer Rustom in Homs in 2013, had come to solely benefit the 4th Division and its paramilitary and business brokers. The division stationed checkpoints across Syrian territory on highways and strategic routes and at entrances of towns and cities to act as informal customs stations collecting royalties.

Many civilians were forced to make payments at the division's checkpoints, which thus became catalysts of poverty and hunger. Fees were levied against entities and business owners for every bit of cargo crossing the checkpoints under direct threat of confiscation. The payments are fixed according to the cargoes' weights and content regardless of whether they are smuggled or official goods, or whether they are owned by for-profit or nonprofit entities. In one case, Hussam al-Qatarji, a military intelligence business broker infamous for smuggling fuel between former Islamic State territories now held by the SDF to regime areas, agreed to pay a levy of 30 percent per cargo/

convoy at the 4th Division militia checkpoints supervised and run by Khodr Taher.⁴⁰

Checkpoints are the main mechanism of the division's economic exploitation, generating a significant share of its daily revenue and serving as a symbol of the unit's social tyranny and economic dominance.

Security and Paid Escorting (*Tarfeeq*)

Tarfeeq is the Arabic word for "providing escort" and denotes the provision of security and protection for convoys and investment sites. This practice, simplified as payment for the service of professional escorting, is another mechanism of economic exploitation that developed alongside the rise of militias' self-sponsorship. The NDF at first imposed a protection/ security fee on business convoys to spare them from having cargo confiscated. Soon, business owners outsourced their own mobile troops, consisting of small units of 15 to 25 fighters, stationed along transportation routes, especially in deserted areas such as Raqqah, East Homs, and Deir ez-Zor. In 2016, this phenomenon became its own industry after the regime authorized the privatization of the security sector. However, Manhal Bareesh's study on these security firms pointed out a direct link between the 4th Division Security Office and the owners of these companies. Privatization in that sense is a pretext to endorse illicit paraeconomic activities.⁴¹





A Russian convoy drives through a checkpoint adorned with portraits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the central city of Hamah on Aug. 15, 2018. (Andrei Borodulin / AFP via Getty Images)

Border Control, Intimidation, and Human Trafficking

Control over land and maritime borders gave the 4th Division rights to act as customs authorities. The division has checkpoints and offices at strategic overland crossings with Lebanon (Qalamoun-Bekaa Valley), Jordan (Naseeb), and Iraq (Abu Kamal), the entrances of both the Latakia and Tartus ports, as well as at all crossing points with opposition-controlled territories.⁴² Through this massive system of checkpoints,

the division imposes extra taxes on every imported or exported shipment, even in the case of smuggled and illicit goods.

Taxes vary according to the shipment's content, owner, and export destination. For example, the checkpoint at the entrance of Latakia's port usually charges 40 percent of an exported or imported cargo's total value.⁴³

A similar approach is exercised across regime-controlled areas. Division checkpoints are positioned

at the entrances of urban centers (Damascus, Tartus-Latakia, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, and Homs) and have the mandate of a parallel, division-controlled customs police. They have collected fees on shipments and have restricted the transport of goods in the country, raising costs for farmers and small businesses.

Furthermore, the division has illicitly and systematically confiscated civilian property across the Syrian-Lebanese border, risking regional instability and inciting armed confrontation with





Lebanese citizens. The practice was prompted by the division's economic interests in gaining total control over smuggling and trafficking routes, including those used for human trafficking. The 4th Division's thorough networks of informants among the ranks of refugee communities in Lebanon have been facilitating reconciliation and return to the country for fees ranging between \$400 and \$1,400 per individual.⁴⁴ Observers and civil society actors suggested that this developing process of legalized human trafficking creates a lucrative business for the 4th Division, specifically as the Lebanese government put more political, security, and economic pressures on Syrian refugees living in the camps.⁴⁵ It also comes with the Syrian tendency to tighten its grip on the communities of refugees in Lebanon and Jordan to facilitate promoting itself internationally again.

Overall, the division's sea and land border control policies have undermined civil institutions and legal norms while jeopardizing the stability of neighboring countries and diminishing the well-being of refugees and host communities.

Drug Production and Trafficking

Drug trafficking in Syria today is not a byproduct of the war; even before 2011, Damascus's stable dictatorship long offered a safe conduit for opium smuggling from Afghanistan toward Europe, North Africa, and the Gulf states. Syrian intelligence operatives oversaw cannabis production in Lebanon's Bekaa valley between 1980 and

2003 and facilitated its trafficking to other parts of the world.⁴⁶

The continuity of violence requires continuous liquidity to fund it. Thus, following the onset of the 2011 war in Syria, all parties to the conflict, including allies of the Assad regime (including Hezbollah and other groups backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), were involved in narcotics production with the aim of providing those products to combatants as well as for financial gain. The Assad regime has become the controller of all legal and illegal trade routes and has emerged as a dominant manufacturer and supplier of drugs since 2019, to the extent that drug trafficking from Syria is considered a threat to international stability.⁴⁷ Accordingly, among individuals and organizations involved in narcotics manufacture and distribution, the 4th Division now controls the lion's share of the trade.⁴⁸

Several factors make discussion of the division's narcotics dealing inside Syria relevant. Not only are the prices of the products cheap compared with those of essential goods, but the market also has been flooded with poor-quality products composed of cannabis residue, glycerol, and sedatives, often causing deleterious side effects.⁴⁹

The Syrian market is of major focus for the division's drug activities. Since 2018, the 4th Division has controlled the entire process, starting with planting and harvesting, on through to production and trafficking. It also has invested in cannabis farms in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, where

a preliminary stage of production occurs in laboratories utilizing huge compressors. Those products are then smuggled into Syria either through Qalamoun or Homs for distribution to local laboratories in Damascus and Homs, depending on the drugs' ultimate destination.⁵⁰ The supplies destined for the domestic market are mostly concentrated in Damascus, then distributed by the division's Security Office or economic militias to local networks that are not necessarily affiliated.⁵¹ A local dealer described how gunmen driving one of the 4th Division's infamous Land Rovers carrying machine guns purchased narcotic substances at a location on the Southern Highway in Damascus.⁵²

Interviews with drug dealers and other sources conducted for this report suggest that the division depends on clandestine criminal networks to produce and to smuggle tactics for three reasons.

First, these scenes can give members and dealers the impression of belonging to an organization with a certain level of supremacy. Second, this forces militia members to acknowledge that they are practicing an illegal activity, one that might be used against them at the first manifestation of disobedience or when internal purges are deemed necessary. Third, the division does not want a monopoly over the narcotics market; instead, it aims to allow other actors to produce and sell narcotics while the division controls the market and trade routes.





“ From its nadir in the spring of 2015, the regime – backed by Russian and Iranian forces – has regained control of two-thirds of Syrian territory, including its key urban centers, focusing on those along military supply routes and with diverse populations. ”

This scheme benefits many Assad family members in the coastal area and other brokers such as Amer Khiti,⁵³ a senior government official whose vast wealth came from agriculture projects, the sale of reconstruction materials, and drug trafficking, among other sources of revenue. Khiti had fled from Syria to Egypt after the opposition's conquest of Douma, his hometown. He returned in 2014 and was arrested by NDF forces before he negotiated his release with Maj. Gen. Mohammad Khalouf, who at that time was the commander of the NDF's Information Bureau.⁵⁴ In 2017, Khalouf and his aide helped Khiti to build his business, protecting special routes for his drug trafficking activities.⁵⁵ Khiti, who developed a close relationship with Bashar al-Assad and his wife, could wield enough influence to trump the NDF.⁵⁶

Recruiting the Alawites of the Plains

The division mostly targets the Alawites of the Plains to be recruited in its paraeconomic militias. (“Alawites of the Plains” is the designation of those who hail from Salamiyah [al-Subborha village] and Northern Hamah [al-Ghab].) Recruitment tactics also target former NDF fighters

from Homs and residents of the pro-Assad neighborhood al-Zahraa. Those who were dismissed and faced legal consequences after the 2017 NDF's internal dispute in the city, which resulted in the death of the guards at NDF headquarters and the abduction of seven section commanders, are targeted for recruitment.⁵⁷

This selective recruitment contributes to the demobilization of Alawite militia fighters. The regime is keen to prevent future potential threats of social upheaval or violence from Alawites, considering the divergence between the Alawites of the Plains and those of the coast in terms of socio-economic structure and hierarchical differences. Their recruitment also highlights a form of compensation to the Alawites of the Plains, whose sacrifices and human losses helped the regime to survive. Nevertheless, the division's economic exploitation and oppression has generated a mounting sense of resentment and frustration among Syrians of all stripes. The division's normative economic use of checkpoints has created a hegemony of resources.⁵⁸ The recruitment is also driven by practicality, since the division's economic activities are concentrated in the middle and east of the country.⁵⁹

The 4th Division in the Syrian Conflict

After more than a decade of conflict, the Assad regime is seeking to consolidate its power and shift toward a postwar Syria. From its nadir in the spring of 2015, the regime – backed by Russian and Iranian forces – has regained control of two-thirds of Syrian territory, including its key urban centers, focusing on those along military supply routes and with diverse populations. Socioeconomic considerations and military capabilities determined the Assad strategic reconquest of selected territory in opposition-held areas. In addition, the presence of foreign powers in an area, especially in its peripheries such as the U.S. presence in the east or the Turkish presence in the north, sometimes hindered the advancement and control of these areas. In other words, intertwined domestic and international considerations have shaped the regime's attempts to reinforce its territorial control through military means.

The 4th Division's Military Role

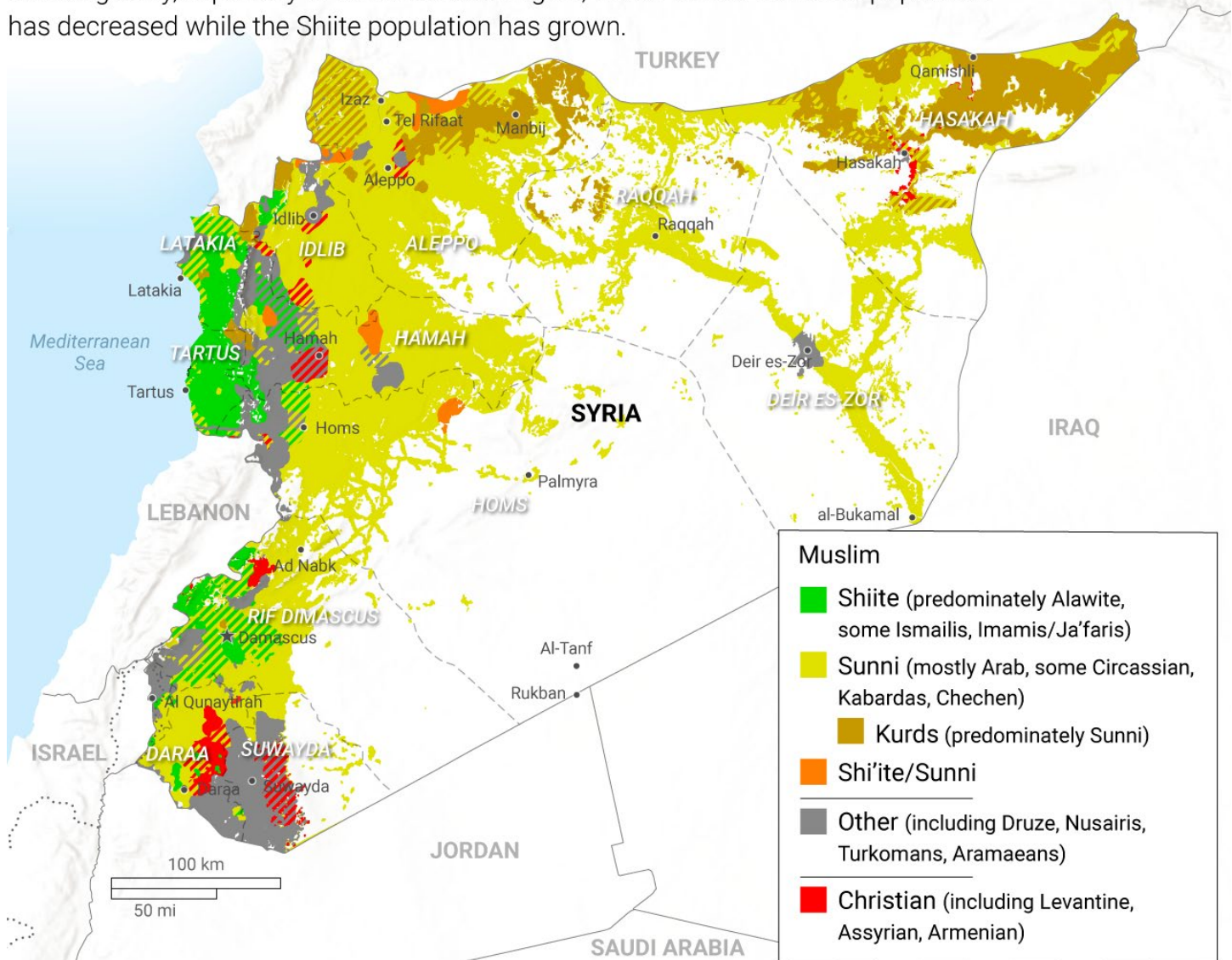
The 4th Division has been one of the cornerstones of the regime's response to the uprising in Syria,





Religious Makeup of Syria

Since the start of Syria's civil war in 2011, Syria's population and demographics have shifted greatly, especially in the Damascus region, where overall the Sunni population has decreased while the Shiite population has grown.



Source: Dr. Michael Izady, GCKN

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including subsequent regime campaigns of counterinsurgency and collective punishment. The immediate response to the peaceful protests that began in the spring of 2011 was spearheaded by elite and irregular military units, along with intelligence forces – namely units of the Republican Guard, the 4th Division, Secret Service and *shabiha*. These forces led the

initial crackdown on Syria's urban centers, using live ammunition and lethal force to break up protests; systematically detaining, beating, and torturing civilians; and imposing a general climate of terror. By the end of 2012, 4th Division forces had been deployed to numerous hot spots, including Homs, the coastal city of Banyas; Daraa in the south; and various

suburbs of Damascus and Eastern/Western Ghouta (Moadamyeh, Darayya, Mleha, Harasta, Jobar, Zabadani and Madaya), southern Damascus (al-Qadam, As-Sayada Zainab), Northern Latakia, Northern Hama, and Hasakah. This wide geographical spread indicates not only the division's importance in the army but also its political



and economic ambitions in the post-conflict era.

The initial reliance on elite and irregular units reflects a bureaucratic and pragmatic choice, considering the reluctance of some regime elites, including Defense Minister Ali Habib, to deploy the army in the cities, since policing falls outside the SAA's jurisdiction. It was argued that these tasks were better carried out by security and intelligence forces (e.g. the 4th Division's deployments to As-Suwayda, Masyaf and Qamishli during the early 2000s). It was not until July 2011, following the Qatana town incident, that regular SAA elements began to be deployed under the pretext of restoring public order as sectarian tensions erupted.⁶⁰

As the uprising descended into civil war, the 4th Division's interventions were characterized by increasing levels of indiscriminate and sensational violence. In August 2012, for example, units of the 4th Division entered Daraya, a city some 10 kilometers southwest of Damascus in which the Free Syrian Army was active. Over the course of five days, the division's forces, alongside the *shabiha*'s death squads, indiscriminately massacred hundreds of civilians.⁶¹ The perpetrators went house to house, segregating victims by sex and age but sparing none, killing most by summary execution. Many of the victims' corpses showed signs of torture, and other bodies were mutilated, disfigured, and displayed in humiliating ways.⁶²

It was one of the largest-scale massacres in Damascus province

since the uprising had begun, epitomizing the Assad forces' brutality and unscrupulous targeting of civilians. The violence was performative: They killed people at close distance in their houses or in the street, purposefully forcing witnesses to see family members being tortured and shot before them. The corpses were left lying in the streets as a warning to the city's remaining inhabitants. The public display of violence and the perpetrators' claims of responsibility were meant to manipulate the people. There also was a sectarian aspect and a religious manifestation to the violence as the division troops chanted and wore headbands praising Shiite religious figures (*O Ali, For you O Hussein*, etc.).⁶³

The division's intentional public display of violence influenced the course of the conflict in several ways. First, it normalized violence among the division's conscripts, implicating the vast majority of them and strengthening the group's bond. Second, it instigated resentment and tension among sects. This emphasis on sectarian discourse was not always tactically employed to instigate intercommunal violence, but some of the perpetrators expressed anti-Sunni sentiment of their own accord multiple times, likely indicating a Shiite influence. The sectarian zeal of the perpetrators was voiced only by a small minority of the interviewees. In other cases, interviewees cast doubt on sectarian motives for the killings, suggesting that the regime forces' use of sectarian discourse was meant to confuse the public and shift the blame to its allies, namely

Hezbollah and Iran.⁶⁴ If these claims are true, it means that the Syrian regime planned to distort the narratives of the events.

Apart from the performative violence, it is possible to identify a second dimension to the division's actions: the militarization of public spaces and infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. Division troops systematically used these facilities as detention centers or bases to launch their military campaign against opposition-held areas. For example, under 4th Division control, the Police Hospital (which belongs to the Interior Ministry) in Harasta in Damascus became a notorious informal prison and torture center where some detainees were executed.⁶⁵

Coercion was not the 4th Division's sole strategic tactic in the war. Division leadership initiated in 2014 targeted recruitment of local brokers from opposition sympathizers' communities using a combination of threats and persuasion, offering rewards to those who flipped to become infiltrators or recruits for the division. Infiltration was an important security strategy adopted by the division to reconquer opposition-held areas, especially considering territorial fragmentation and barriers to typical informant techniques of gathering intelligence. This strategy emphasized the 4th Division's superiority.

Nevertheless, from a military standpoint, some of the fighters these authors interviewed expressed discontent with their superiors' decisions and behavior





“ [Ghassan] Bilal masterminded the division’s security and military operations against the regime’s opponents, orchestrating a campaign of destruction against towns and cities in a process of blockade, starvation, mass arrest, mass execution, and indiscriminate bombardment. ”

that contradicted all assumptions about the division’s power and superiority. The interviewees spoke of instances when, for short-term agreements or interests, their field commanders sacrificed soldiers on the front lines – “as if they wanted us dead to show they are fighting, they bargained with our blood,” said one of the interviewees. Hence, the powerful façade of the 4th Division is a manifestation of brutality even against its own.⁶⁶

Networks of Power

Individuals, Entities, and Connections

The Syrian regime is a personalized dictatorship that vested power in Assad and his inner circles. This dictatorship features cronyism, in which power is held by a small group of family members and friends. Likewise, the incumbent upper rank of the 4th Division is a crucial element in determining its influence. Maj. Gen. Maher al-Assad’s familial tie to the regime has helped boost the division’s power since 2008, and especially after 2019.

Today, Maher al-Assad is described as inaccessible.⁶⁷ Maher is

known as a mysterious figure even among the regime’s high echelons. Moreover, his military activities were seen as important to regime’s survival and boosted his popularity among foot soldiers and militia members. Within the military, his presence overshadowed his brother’s for years.

Yet the focus on Maher as the pillar of the 4th Division’s power and supremacy would divert attention from its true protagonist: Ghassan Bilal is the division’s mastermind in the regime and has carried the responsibility for 4th Division policy since 1990.

Ghassan Nafia Bilal (aka Abu al-Hamzeh) became a powerful symbol of the division’s brutality as well as its current economic dominion. Bilal is a descendant of an Alawite family from al-Barghalia village, Al-Sheikh Saad in Tartus city’s countryside, and a native of Liwa’ Iskandarūna (Turkish: Antakya).⁶⁸ Although he comes from an average Alawite family, its members pursued careers in state bureaucracy as diplomats or in other sensitive positions. For instance, Bilal’s father, Nafia Bilal, was the head of the

Tanks Directorate in Harasta for over a decade.⁶⁹

Bilal completed his education at the military academy in Homs in the 1980s. He then trained as an engineer and paratrooper under the supervision of Bashar al-Assad’s elder brother Basel, who died in 1994. His kinship with the Assad family, and friendship with Maher al-Assad, boosted his career; he became the head of the 4th Division Security Bureau as well as Maher’s confidante and business broker.

As the head of the 4th Division Security Office and Maher’s personal executive secretary, Bilal oversees a number of sensitive areas. He conducts security activities such as surveillance and information-gathering on the division’s troops and supervises the prison system, including the massive prison built underneath the Mazzeah Airport.⁷⁰ He also occupies the division’s seat in Branch 451, a special security force founded in 1997 to monitor, supervise, and coordinate weapons produced by the Syrian Scientific Research Centre, including Syria’s chemical arsenal. Following the outbreak of the 2011 war, Bilal masterminded the division’s security and military





operations against the regime's opponents, orchestrating a campaign of destruction against towns and cities in a process of blockade, starvation, mass arrest, mass execution, and indiscriminate bombardment.

In 2014, Bilal's influence in the regime expanded as he began to oversee the division's economic and combat paramilitary groups, establishing a force that numbers between 25,000 and 50,000 militia members.⁷¹ Furthermore, on behalf of the division, he established cooperation with Russia and Iran.⁷² Acting as the focal point in matters related to military and economic activities, he translated the agreements into active coordination between the 4th Division's paramilitary groups and the allies' sponsored actors at the micro-level.

Bilal is admired by his subordinates and acquaintances.⁷³ However, his counterparts cannot afford to forget his violent and hostile attitudes.

One officer who serves under Bilal, Col. Ali Aboud, is responsible for the paramilitary recruitment office in Regiment 555, which also hosts the Local Defense Forces recruitment office. Bilal and Aboud shared a special kinship as the latter's father served as a subordinate of the former in the Tanks Directorate in Harasta, a Damascus suburb.

Aboud is a native of an Alawite community in East Hamah that was considered marginalized until 2011, when the regime mobilized the civilians therein through local brokers –former army officers– as

a killing squad. Aboud's promotion can be considered significant in the context of the regime's previous marginalization of the Alawites of the Plains.

After the war began, Aboud's responsibilities extended to organizational supervision of recruitment and mobilization of paramilitary groups. He determined a recruit's eligibility under 4th Division criteria, and thereby the deployments of the new recruits. His kinship to other militia leaders, such as the former head of the NDF in Damascus, Fadi Saqqer, empowered an implicit balance of forces, in which requests by NDF militiamen to join the 4th Division were often turned down.⁷⁴

Bilal and Aboud are examples of the second generation of Syrian autocratic rule and its faithful bureaucrats born and raised around Assad's regime of absolute power.

The 4th Division and External Powers in Syria

Foreign intervention in the Syrian war effectively determined its outcome. It yielded unpredictable and contested politics fueled by underlying regional and international interests. Scholars have explored myriad aspects of international intervention and its effects. However, the interrelation between the regime and its allies were mostly subject to speculation and claims that are at times difficult to verify. A close observation of the institutionalized relationships between the regime's agencies and its allies challenges those claims.

This analysis touches on two points that have dominated the research on foreign intervention in Syria. First is that the Iranian/Russian rivalry in Syria has been overstated. Despite the countries' distinctive strategies and focus, they have a common political interest in preserving the current Syrian regime's power. Second, it is unquestionable that the allies' intervention in the conflict has compromised the Syrian state's sovereignty and increased their influence over the regime. The Syrian regime, however, has oscillated between Russian and Iranian strategies in a way that has guaranteed its survival and relative independence. The Syrian regime officially and constantly argued that its alliances with Iran and Russia are a strategy based on mutual benefits and interest. But an analysis of the scope and dynamics of these relationships suggests otherwise, as a sensitive source explained: "the Syrian repressive institutions remained intact; these institutions, both in substance and in form, resist foreign influence."⁷⁵

The 4th Division and the Iranian Connection

The Syrian-Iranian alliance is based on political, military, and cultural expedencies, which brought together the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Syrian Ba`ath regime, as Hafez al-Assad overlooked the Iranian Eight-Years' War with the Iraqi regime, the rival twin/wing of Syrian Ba'athists. This cooperation, shaped by internal and external forces, has visibly intensified since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and threats to overthrow the Syrian regime and the international boycott and





isolation of Syria following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

The 2011 uprising in Syria was a turning point in the balance of the alliance. Direct military, financial, and cultural investments in Syria crystalized Iranian influence.⁷⁶ Despite the pro-Assad environment and a growing ambivalence about Iranian leverage in Syria – especially in terms of religious activities – there is a consensus on the effects of Iran’s intervention on the outcomes of the war.⁷⁷

Throughout 10 years of conflict, Iranian consultants such as Qassem Soleimani had advised and fought alongside the Syrian regime’s troops, in addition to sponsoring and training local paramilitary groups. The Iranians also oversaw the emergence of local militias (Hizballah Syria, Force 313, and Local Defense in Aleppo and Homs), aside from the multinational and cross-border militias under the *al-Rasoul al-Azzam* (Great Prophet) militias (including Lebanese Hezbollah, Fatimioun, Zainebiyoun, Liwa al-Quds, etc.).⁷⁸ The overwhelming Shiite manifestation of these militias notwithstanding, their members included Sunni Arab tribes, Alawite, Ismaili, Shiite, and Christian. These groups consist of about 40,000 personnel stationed in military bases and civilian facilities in cities such as Deir ez-Zor, where the Iranians allied with former opposition figure Nawaf al-Bashir. In Aleppo, the local defense militia consisted of members of the al-Jiesi tribe and Syrian Shiites in the four villages. In addition to Iranian-backed



Two men ride a motorcycle in Douma, on the outskirts of Damascus, in April 2018. The Syrian army had announced that anti-government forces left the area following a two-month offensive. This strategic victory for President Bashar al-Assad came after U.S.-led strikes pounded Syrian government targets in response to a suspected chemical attack on Douma. (Louai Beshara / AFP via Getty Images)

militias stationed in Sayeda Zainab, Eastern As-Suwayda, Eastern Salamiyah, and in Masyaf Southern Hamah, the militia stationed in The Syrian Scientific Centre Project 4000 oversees the production of conventional weapons.⁷⁹

Within this framework of Iranian intervention, what is the relevance of the ties between Iran and the 4th Division? Where are they situated? How do they operate? To answer these questions, it is necessary

to understand the mechanisms and logic of the 4th Division’s institutionalized relationship with the Iranian presence in Syria.

The Military Perspective

Iranian troops and aligned militias operate under the joint institutional umbrella of Commission for Liaison and Coordination (Hay’at al-Ertibatt wa al-Tanseeq), which consists of the membership of the 4th Division, military intelligence,





and state General Intelligence. Iranian delegates, consultants, and troops hold military IDs from the three agencies; these cards imply an Iranian presence in the country since they offer protection to their holders from legal consequences and arbitrary violence.⁸⁰

Three forms of communication also define another dimension of the military relationship between the 4th Division and Iran:

- On the ground level, trustworthy Syrian liaisons handled the transmission of information and coordination between the division and the Iranians.
- Operation centers often located in military bases near the front lines supervised and coordinated military actions and campaigns. The centers were staffed by Iranian officers and advisers alongside senior generals from the 4th Division and the Syrian Army.
- The central military operation rooms in Damascus, led by Bilal and his officers, worked closely with the Iranian central delegation office in the al-Rawda Hotel in Sayyidah Zaynab, where Bilal was often spotted in 2015 and 2017.⁸¹ Sources noted the existence of a massive informal prison and interrogation center jointly run by the Iranians and officers of the division.⁸²

The Intelligence Perspective

Intelligence coordination between Iran and the 4th Division worked in parallel with military operations. It was at first handled by trustworthy security officers and hand-picked civilians. This

coordination was institutionalized in 2015 with the formation of a joint and special security branch (Branch 900). This central branch is located in al-Qutayfah in the Damascus suburbs, with a number of local subbranches located in strategic cities. Branch 900 falls under the jurisdiction of the General Intelligence Administration and coordinates with military intelligence.

The staff consists of Syrians with Iranian and Lebanese consultants chosen according to certain criteria including clearance by Syrian intelligence and being considered fit to meet the religious, physical, and educational requirements of the Shiite jihad by the regional and central Iranian delegations.⁸³ Therefore, the branch is a counterintelligence unit that focuses on Iranian, Hezbollah, and Syrian members in the Shiite militia. Militia members who disobey or breach the code of conduct (i.e., trafficking weapons with the opposition) are imprisoned and interrogated in regional subbranches. Syrian nationals proven “guilty” are transferred to the Syrian intelligence and judicial system conditioned by a preapproval of the Iranian delegate.⁸⁴ Subsequently, the 4th Division also follows similar procedures, sending accused Iranian militiamen to Branch 900. Furthermore, branch offices are occasionally used as temporary detention centers.

The Economic Perspective

The Syrian-Iranian business council oversees Iranian investments⁸⁵ and projects in Syria, including

the partnership with the 4th Division, in which joint committees composed of Iranian and select well-connected Syrian members assist, organize, and facilitate the progress of the Iranian projects (including Hezbollah and Lebanese investors). The council works under the umbrella of legal partnership with the Syrian Business Union, whose general assembly director is Mohammad Hamshu. Some Iranian investments are overseen by the president’s office and designated committees, such as media production (OWJ Arts and Media Organization). Other ventures arranged in conjunction with the 4th Division include fossil fuel extraction, mining, and import and export businesses.⁸⁶ In effect, Bilal, as the head of the investment department of the 4th Division and its coordinator with the Iranian delegation, supervises this partnership in terms of security, administration, and distribution of sources and shares.

Within this framework, 4th Division-Iranian cooperation seems to be of mutual interest with an equitable balance of power. While the Iranians found in the division’s leadership a powerful ally within the regime, the division viewed the Iranians as a backing power, facilitating the consolidation of its dominance in the economic, political, and military spheres.

The 4th Division and the Russian Occupation

Despite skepticism about the Russian military and political intervention in Syria, scholars seem to have come to a consensus on the importance of Russian backing





“ On a military level, the relationship between the 4th Division and Russia began in the era of the Defense Companies, which were equipped and trained by Russian experts. This relationship continued throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. ”

to the survival of the Assad regime to date.⁸⁷ Russia also sponsored and outsourced paramilitary groups as of 2015, when Assad struggled to maintain territorial sovereignty of the country. In addition, it provided the regime with political support, both on the national and international level. The Russians, together with their Syrian counterparts, also fashioned a local reconciliation process combining coercion and persuasion.

Russia employed force and categorically backed its aim to subjugate civilians and local representatives and force them to submit to the regime. At the same time, Russian-Syrian negotiators offered the absolute subjugation of rebel troops and their merger with Assad's forces in exchange for reconciliation, impunity, and protection. Ostensibly, the Russians have emerged as both punisher and the peacemaker in Syria since 2015.

The Russians have accumulated a profound understanding of the Syrian polity and societal dynamics due to their historical relations, as well as through cultural, scientific, economic, military, and intelligence exchanges with Syria. It reflected

on their political and military strategy in a war-torn Syria.

The Russians, unlike the Iranians, aim to establish a permanent legitimate influence in Syria, becoming a de facto soft occupier. Their policy is far from redeeming the regime; rather it focuses on adjusting the repressive apparatuses' performance and bureaucracy. In doing so, they are establishing an institutional influence and creating networks of brokers within the Syrian polity, intelligence, and military agencies, and more precisely in its elite agencies: military intelligence and the 4th Division.⁸⁸

The narrative gleaned from social media accounts of those interviewed regarding relations between Russia and the 4th Division did not indicate a divergence; on the contrary, it indicated cooperation based on interest and power balance. The strengthening of the Russian-4th Division axis splits into three broad narratives emphasizing shared political and economic interests and martial law.⁸⁹

On a military level, the relationship between the 4th Division and Russia began in the era of the

Defense Companies, which were equipped and trained by Russian experts. This relationship continued throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Since the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, two senior officers in the 4th Division Security Bureau, Brig. Gen. Issam al-Khateeb and Col. Mulhem Mayhoub, have coordinated with delegates in the Russian operative centers in Hmeimim and the presidential palace.⁹⁰ Those sites are where the Russians' political activity has a privileged strategic position.

However, that arrangement did not prevent possible tensions from emerging in 2017, followed by multiple changes in the leadership of the 4th Division. We cannot be certain whether these changes were a consequence of that tension, but they have shaped the level of representation at a meeting held between the Russians and the division, where Maher Al-Assad was officially the leader of the division and in the presence of his senior officers; the results of that meeting may have helped shape later relations.

While there is no evidence of direct economic cooperation between





the 4th Division and the Russians, close collaboration in guarding oil facilities and routes between the 4th Division and military intelligence, the latter being an agency supported by the Russians, suggests that Moscow is turning a blind eye to the division's economic exploits and drug cultivation, production, and trafficking in spite of the consequences for the regime's foreign relations. Syria has become a narco-state that threatens regional and global stability. Regime agencies such as the 4th Division have become a transnational organized crime group, flooding neighboring countries with drugs and burdening them with the social and economic consequences of the drug flows.

In other words, the Russians have accepted the division's importance and growing influence on the regime's fragile stability.⁹¹

Finally, in terms of communication, a Russian misinformation campaign emerged to cast doubt on reports of the Assad regime's violence, especially the 2013 East Ghouta attacks for which the 4th Division was allegedly responsible. This recasting of the narrative of the conflict is in the interest of the 4th Division.

The 4th Division in Postwar Syria

The Reconstruction Process

A decade of war has left Syria in ruins. Physical destruction of residential areas and infrastructure resulted from bombardment and shelling by both Syrian regime forces and international actors

involved in the war.⁹² The cost of rebuilding the country is estimated between \$250 billion and \$400 billion.⁹³

This constitutes a huge sum for a country wracked by political uncertainty and continuing political and economic violence. Rebuilding Syria will depend on foreign subsidies, adding another layer of complexity to an already difficult process.

The main actors in the process have critically different priorities for postwar reconstruction: The Syrian regime deems it important to reconsolidate its power and redeem itself nationally, while the international community ties reconstruction subsidies to political reforms. Meanwhile, Syrian civilians – regardless of their political orientations – have struggled to secure means of survival. These difficulties mounted under the Assad regime's economic policy that impedes the recovery of small-scale industries, impacting businesses that provide essential sources of income for ordinary Syrians.

The 4th Division seems to have asserted its right to claim a role for itself in reconstruction. This premise corresponds to the political status quo with trajectories of the 4th Division's dominance and surveillance over some economic sectors essential for reconstruction, including steel production, control over land and sea borders, and the private security sector. These factors position the division as an indispensable partner, regardless of the ultimate direction of reconstruction.



A propaganda poster in Damascus depicts the Syrian military. The majority of the soldiers are Alawites like President Bashar Al-Assad. Although they make up 7 percent of Syria's population, Alawites make up about 70 percent of career soldiers in the Syrian army. The military's most elite divisions, the Republican Guard and the 4th Division, are exclusively Alawite. (David Henley / Pictures From History / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

If this scenario were to occur, it would enforce the current political and economic power of the regime's elite, which would reflect heavily on Syria's social and economic situation. For sure, the division would put its grip on resources, strengthening its position and generating further poverty and suffering in society.





There remain, nevertheless, several challenges to the division's economic position caused by both internal and external factors. First, it faces the threat of exclusion due to Western governments' conditions associating a reconstruction pact with political transition, ensuring the restructure of the Syrian military and intelligence (including the 4th Division). Second, in a repetition of the 1984 scenario, the Assad regime could revert to a more conventional system of rule with less reliance on the military to secure the reconstruction pact. This would raise the chances of impairing or undermining the division's growth leaving the unit marginalized and less relevant.

Finally, the division's ultimate outcome could depend on the success of its command's strategy to address internal issues and the "cracks in the armor" attributable to the increase of its paramilitaries' misconduct and violations against civilians. In that sense, the division could become a liability. Regardless of which outcome prevails, the division will be a controversial participant in the reconstruction process.

Political Reform

Despite the broad consensus among Syrians today about the country's desperate need for political reform, the topic has become controversial, especially since it is increasingly dependent on the interests of regional and international actors. The model of political reform, its framework, and its implementation are becoming subjects of debates as the living conditions of the Syrians worsen

and more people realize that there will be no breakthroughs that decrease their misery without some sort of political reform. The banners lifted recently by protesters in the southern city of As-Suwayda requested a political change in accordance with UNSCR 2245,⁹⁴ including the institutional reforms and restructuring of the regime's coercive agencies, including the army and intelligence agencies.

The restructuring of the security apparatus is intertwined with the success of political reform, as Maan Talaa argues,⁹⁵ Talaa suggests a comprehensive legal, structural, and functional change of said apparatuses. Some have proposed an unorthodox approach of dissolving the entire Assad regime, while others, and particularly international stakeholders, seem to prefer a cautious approach, fearing the chaos that could erupt – much like the situation in Iraq in 2003. Ideally, armed forces would pledge support for political reform and refrain from interfering with the process. However, given the prevalent patrimonial conditions, the military, and especially its elite units, have already sought to influence political reform. The 4th Division, for instance, has increased its political relevance and access to national wealth. Since 2017, the division established predominantly informal networks and a patronage system of the economic and military elite, which has increased its influence on the social, institutional, and economic fronts.

Division members rank above those members of bureaucratic elites. The division endorses this

sense of superiority by means of the benefits, protection, and impunity extended to its members. The division's recruitment pattern demonstrates unprecedented mobilization of civilians across sectarian and social binaries, introducing a form of inclusive identity configured for becoming a loyal member of the division.

Given the power wielded by the division, it is tempting to argue that it would undermine political reform that could bring about its ruin. And as detailed above, the division has everything it needs to become not only a key obstacle to the political reform but also a serious threat to the future stability of Syria and the region.

The 4th Division's Significance

The 2011 Syrian conflict was a turning point that shaped the ontology of Syrian politics. Syria's elite units were crucial to the survival of the Assad regime when its rule was challenged – both in the 1980s and after the 2011 uprising. While driven by multiple indirect political and socio-economic factors, these units perpetrated atrocities that reinforced the authoritarian and autocratic nature of the regime. Moreover, the division plays a role in the regime's relationships with its foreign allies.

Apart from combat paramilitarism, the 4th Division uses its institutional and non-institutional/formal and informal capacities in systematic economic exploitation. It also oversees production and trafficking of drugs domestically and





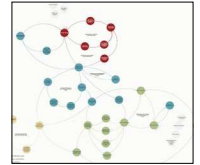
internationally. This suggests that the Assad regime's governance is influenced by or patterned after organized crime models and is threatening regional and global peace and stability

The division should be considered one of the most dangerous transnational criminal organizations. Its paramilitarism

and illicit activities – by creating new chains of production and supply – are transforming the socio-economic structure of Syria. This situation is dependent on the status quo situation, making the last a condition for the division's continuing prosperity and explaining why it could disrupt any political transformation in Damascus. □

At the following link, please find an overall systematic analysis (Eco-System Graph) of The 4th Division, showing all formal and informal relationships, dominance and gains, violence, economic and non-violent factors:

<https://embed.kumu.io/f826b422488881fee38281d5f4a56e4e#general-scene>



Annsar Shahhoud focuses on state violence in Syria in her research. She holds a bachelor's degree in law and received her master's degree in Holocaust and Genocide Studies from the joint master's program of the University of Amsterdam and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Shahhoud's most recent publications include "Medical Génocidaires in the Syrian Civil War (2011-2019)" in the Journal of Genocide Research and the New Lines Magazine reportage piece "How a Massacre of Nearly 300 in Syria was Revealed," co-authored with Uğur Ümit Üngör. She also has field experience working with humanitarian organizations such as Doctors Without Borders.

Muhanad Abulhusn is a researcher and data analyst specializing in open-source investigations who worked on several reports on Syria. Abulhusn has experience in documenting violations and collecting testimonies and participated in many international conferences on transitional justice and building post-war strategies in Syria.



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