

FEATURES

Foreign Fighters Promoted In Syria's New Army Have Their Governments Concerned

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Syria's new rulers have reportedly given high-ranking military positions to several foreign Islamist fighters, a move that has alarmed their home governments, which fear the potential export of revolution to their own soil.

Citing unnamed sources in Syria, reports by Reuters and AFP say that an ethnic Albanian from North Macedonia, a Tajik citizen, and three ethnic Uyghurs from China are among the foreigners promoted to official posts.

Three of the foreign fighters were given the rank of brigadier-general, and at least three others obtained the rank of colonel, according to the reports, which RFE/RL cannot independently verify.

Building Syria's New Army

Macedonian-born Abdul Samrez Jashari -- also known as Abu Qatada al-Albani -- was reportedly appointed colonel.

Jashari, 48, leads Xhemati Alban, a predominantly ethnic Albanian militant group that allied with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) -- the Islamist group, designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and the EU, which overthrew Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024.

Jashari was designated a terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2016.

Another foreigner appointed colonel was identified by Tajik bloggers close to HTS forces as Saifiddin Tojiboev, a fighter from Tajikistan.

RFE/RL has not been able to verify the authenticity of reports about Tojiboev's alleged appointment as a new operations commander and his promotion from major to colonel.

A source in Tajik law-enforcement, who wished to remain anonymous, told RFE/RL's Tajik Service on January 5 that the government is aware of the news about Tojiboev's new appointment.

Tojiboev, 41 is wanted in Tajikistan, accused of taking part in a foreign conflict, being a member of terrorist organizations, and recruiting fighters for terrorist groups. His name also appears in the Tajik central bank's list of sanctioned individuals prohibited from carrying out financial activities.

"Tojiboev and his brother went to Syria in 2013 and have since been taking part in military conflicts there," the source in Dushanbe told RFE/RL. "Tojiboev has also recruited several [Tajik] nationals to join terrorist groups."

Tojiboev was a member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a once popular movement that Dushanbe banned and branded "terrorist" in 2015. The party denies the charges of terrorism.

Tojiboev briefly served as the head of IRPT's local office in his native Spitamen district in northern Tajikistan in 2012, before resigning and criticizing the party's policies.

There have been no official statements about the appointment of foreign nationals from HTS, which has publicly pledged to adopt moderate policies regarding women's rights, national reconciliation, and relations with the international community. The Islamist group is trying to create a professional army from the various militant factions it has aligned with.

HTS includes a large number of fighters from Russia, Central Asia, and the Balkans. Most of them arrived in Syria after the Islamic State (IS) extremist group announced the creation of a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014.

Fears Of Blowback At Home

In their home countries, many of the fighters are seen as potential threats to stability and national security.

In December 2024, when videos depicting Tajik militants in Syria circulated on social media, a source close to the Tajik security forces, who wished to remain anonymous, said that Dushanbe was getting nervous watching its nationals fighting in foreign wars.

"They could come back to Tajikistan one day and try to cause serious trouble here," the source told RFE/RL, describing the militants as a ticking time bomb.

In recent years, Central Asian governments have repatriated hundreds of their citizens - family members of IS fighters -- from Iraq and Syria, helping them reintegrate back into "civilian life."

Dozens of others have returned voluntarily, taking advantage of government amnesties.

According to experts, there may still be several thousand foreign combatants in Syria.



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What worries governments is the possibility that the fighters will try to bring HTS's ideology or Islamic revolution back to their home countries.

Aaron Zelin, who has authored a book on HTS -- *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study Of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* -- told RFE/RL that the appointments do not suggest that Syria's new rulers led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, have any agenda beyond Syria.

"It is an...effort by Golani and HTS to try and make sure that these men follow the orders of the Syrian state and that there is no freelancing now that the war is more or less over," said Zelin, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The expert pointed out that Sharaa has talked about giving Syrian citizenship to foreigners who have lived in the country for a certain amount of time and supported HTS in its fight against Assad's regime.

"Golani is trying to potentially indigenize them and make them Syrian.... [It's] better for them to be integrated and following HTS's new role than them freelancing, or at least this is how they view it," Zelin said.

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