

Security Sector Reform in Post–Civil War Syria

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Security sector reform in post–civil war Syria should go beyond asserting civilian oversight or rebuilding technical capabilities to include a complete reassessment and transformation into a modern and professional defense sector.

In addition to the challenges of [militarized politics](#), [societies](#), and [economies](#) common to all Arab states, Syria today faces the consequences of a [civil war](#) that has fragmented the state’s armed forces and generated multiple nonstate armed actors, all of which are embedded in a [war economy](#). The state has used the armed forces and security apparatus extensively [against the civilian population](#) since 2011. As a result, the defense and security sectors have become powerful political actors.

This has reversed conventional civil-military dynamics. Security commanders now manage strategic decisionmaking and cooperation with Syria’s [key allies](#)—Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah—as well as relations with other armed factions operating inside the country. Restoring the pre-war civil-military dynamic—under any political management—will require much more than asserting civilian oversight or rebuilding technical capabilities. It will require a complete reassessment of goals, missions, and organization and a transformation along modern, professional lines.

Fragmented Defense Sector

Syria's official defense sector has suffered [severe fragmentation](#) and extensive debilitation due to [massive casualties](#), even while continuing to display poor combat performance and high levels of corruption and profiteering. The regime does not control militias that are integrated into national military structures but remain under Russian and Iranian sponsorship, and it lacks the revenue to demobilize militiamen or even to pay adequate compensation to war dead and wounded of its own armed forces.

Post-conflict reconstruction of the Syrian defense sector will thus be complex, protracted, and fragile. Control over the coercive agencies of the state—the armed forces, police and internal security agencies, and intelligence services—will be a key asset in future political contestation. This complicates demobilization and reintegration of armed actors, organization of the defense sector, and compliance with the rule of law and subordination to accountable governance. Failure to address these challenges effectively may lead to a relapse into conflict in Syria, as occurred in [Libya](#) and [Yemen](#) after the failure of their own transitional processes in 2014.

These challenges underline the importance of making defense sector reform and transformation an integral part of any reconstruction process in Syria, placing it on the domestic public agenda in any subsequent political process, and breaking the regime's monopoly over power. Indeed, Syria needs more than mere rebuilding or reform of its defense (and security) sector(s). It needs full military transformation to become a modern, professional, and capable sector compliant with the rule of law in an accountable framework.

Nuts and Bolts of Defense Institutions

Much of the focus at [peace talks](#) to date has been on “high politics” concerns such as power-sharing formulas for a transitional military command council or on the general goal of ending Alawi preponderance in the officer and noncommissioned officer corps. But far too little attention has been paid to the practical “software” through which the regime has always maintained its true control of the defense sector: how recruitment and promotions are conducted, content and implementation of military education and justice, pay and pension systems, nature of employment and career contracts, national service (conscription), status and upward mobility of noncommissioned officers, in-service professional and technical development of personnel and preparation for civilian life, and many other “nuts and bolts” of the military institution.

Without addressing these and other practical issues, the ruling political order's existing control system will not be dismantled and it will continue to control the armed forces during and beyond a political transition. The task of addressing these

challenges falls to a range of domestic and external stakeholders, but cannot proceed fully without building the [capacity of civil society](#). This includes opposition and independent think tanks, other civilian actors such as political parties and future parliamentarians, and relevant civil servants to discuss, assess, and propose policy options and technical proposals touching on all aspects and levels of the sector in an informed and expert manner.

Military reform and restructuring in Syria is vital, but must go beyond a mere declaratory assertion of the principles of civilian oversight and accountable governance over the defense sector, or rebuilding technical capabilities. Rather, all aspects of the current defense sector must be reassessed in order to undertake a complete transformation into a modern and professional defense sector that is both capable and rule-compliant. This includes items like structure, combat posture, and doctrine, but most crucially encompasses recruitment and promotions, training regimes, command arrangements, and information management, which are the key to military cohesion and effectiveness but also to political control and the uses to which it is put.

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