

Risk of Factionalism in Syria's Postwar Civil-Military Relations

Salah Ben Hammou



Photo by [Timothy Kassis](#) – [Unsplash](#)

Postwar security sector reform should account for the risk of military politicization by all political actors in Syria, not just the Ba'ath party.

As the [ten-year anniversary](#) of the Syrian conflict's onset approaches, discussions on [Tawazun](#) and [elsewhere](#) have stressed the need to prioritize security sector reform in postwar Syria. Commentators highlight the professionalization and [de-politicization](#) of the Syrian military as key objectives for maintaining peace and charting a robust democratic trajectory. Such concerns are warranted given the military's [decades-long loyalty](#) to the Ba'athist ruling political order of President Bashar al-Assad, [buttressed](#) by the predominance of the Alawite sect and rampant cronyism across the top brass. Intuitively, it appears that security sector reformers should approach de-politicization by curbing Ba'athist influence in the ranks.

Security sector reform should also address the [risk of military politicization](#) by Syria's [other political actors](#). A polarized postwar environment and the integration of armed factions into the national military threatens soldiers' ability to remain nonpartisan. Political actors previously active during the conflict will have incentives to politicize former allies in the military. These conditions reflect civil-military [struggles in postcolonial Syria](#), which saw civilian parliamentarians actively [politicize the army](#).

Thus, promoting the military's de-politicization in postwar Syria requires addressing the role statesmen play in factionalizing the armed forces.

Factionalized Civilians and Soldiers in Postcolonial Syria

Following independence from France, soldiers entered Syrian politics [as factionalized allies of disgruntled civilian partisans](#) rather than as a monolith. Political discourse polarized over issues of economic distribution and Pan-Arab unity, fomenting bitter rivalries. As a result, party leaders of all stripes, [from Social Nationalists to Arab Socialist Ba'athists](#), created political alliances with soldiers to supplant their rivals through coups d'état. This included courting like-minded officers or encouraging partisans to infiltrate military academies and enlist in the armed forces. Civilian-military coalitions quickly became the driver of regime change and formation and even [gave rise](#) to the Ba'athist ruling political order today. As statesmen factionalized, their rivalries splintered the military and invited soldiers into politics. Ultimately, [prospects for democracy and civilian rule collapsed](#).

The Perils of Postwar Factionalism

Political alliances between soldiers and statesmen will remain a very real risk in postwar Syria, particularly if similar conditions resurface. A political transition will emerge in a [highly polarized environment](#), especially if it results in the reintroduction of a pluralistic system with opposition parties. As political stakeholders such as former armed groups develop political fronts, [questions](#) over reparations, reconstruction, and other sociopolitical issues could deepen communal cleavages already exacerbated by the conflict. Sensitive matters such as [transitional justice and accountability for wartime atrocities](#) will likely split former opponents, placing postwar elites in an even more polarized environment than their postcolonial predecessors. In addition, the relative infancy of institutions and democratic norms could prompt disgruntled civilian parliamentarians to knock on the barracks' doors to remove their rivals.

Collusion between soldiers and statesmen will also be exacerbated given the [potential integration of armed factions into the military](#). Following the conflict's onset in 2011, preexisting political parties, such as the Syrian Social Nationalists, [developed military wings](#) to serve as private armies that advanced partisan interests, be it for or against Assad. Other armed actors, such as [Syria's Tomorrow movement](#), have also developed political fronts to operate at the local level, in hopes of maintaining a political stake in the postwar period.

This presents a dual issue for [stability and military politicization](#) in postwar Syria. The presence of partisan militias following a political transition threatens [any tangible peace process](#). However, if such factions are [integrated into the military to prevent militia politics](#), ties between party leaders and soldiers will persist in the postwar

period, making collusion a viable option and undermining the military's ability to stay above political discourse.

Such ties could override the attachment that former armed partisans have to the national armed forces given that military professionalism takes time to foster. If party leaders revisit their former allies within the military, factionalized civilian-military coalitions will resurface. Syrian history illustrates the threat this poses for civilian rule. Civilian Ba'athist leaders Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar relied on their military allies to seize power in 1963 only to be [ousted by those same comrades](#) three years later. By 1970, Ba'athist soldiers had consolidated power, sparking an era of institutionalized military rule.

Threat of Renewed Instability

Tackling military politicization, particularly during a political transition, must extend beyond undoing Ba'athist influence. Stakeholders besides Ba'athist powerbrokers have the ability to politicize the armed forces, specifically if their former allies fill the ranks. Policymakers should prioritize a [disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration plan](#) that integrates former partisan fighters into civilian life. This means that military wings must disband, a strategy only possible if partisan fighters secure a future as civilian members of the population. Policymakers must also prioritize educating statesmen on the norms of military professionalism. Ensuring a nonpartisan military and a stable future requires statesmen and soldiers alike to commit to a vision without factionalism.

[Salah Ben Hammou](#) is a PhD student in Security Studies at the University of Central Florida.