

Recruitment of Women into the Syrian Army: A National Justification

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Although 40 years have passed since the recruitment of women into the Syrian Arab Army, the process has not progressed significantly, and remains in the realm of the ruling regime's need, as a national justification rather than a national need.

October 1, 2021 marked the 40th anniversary of female recruitment in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). In the 1970s, Hafez al-Assad decided to impose a uniform on middle and high school male and female students, followed by requiring some school levels to conduct training camps and [parachute jumping courses](#). Al-Assad also used the policy of profiling to ideologize and stereotype popular, student and union organizations to impose the Ba'athist ideology. These measures prepared the ground for announcing the recruitment of women in the army.

Voluntary Recruitment of Women

Military service in Syria is not mandatory for women as it is for men. The voluntary recruitment of women in military colleges was announced for the first time by al-Assad

during his address at the [graduation ceremony of the third course of parachutists](#) in October 1981. The address revealed the degree of sectarian tension of that time, and the clash between the various components of society, especially concerning the wearing of the veil by women. Al-Assad drew on Ba'ath Party tracts and literature on women's issues to announce that women could volunteer for service in the SAA, adding for good measure that they were already employed throughout the state apparatus. In announcing this decision, al-Assad catered to a specific social group that had previously been involved in youth work.

The announcement, moreover, came after female paratroopers demanded the right to be admitted to military colleges. The first female volunteers joined the Military College, previously restricted to male cadets, in 1981 and 1987, after which they joined a newly established Women Military College. Later, women were admitted to Al-Assad Academy of Military Engineering. Recruitment of women extended after that to include acceptance in other branches of service under [specific conditions](#) and specializations, such as engineering, signaling and informatics. The duration of study varies between one year for non-commissioned officers and three years for officers in military colleges, compared to five years at the Military Academy. Women did not have any combat roles before 2011.

Legal Framework

The [Syrian Military Service Law](#) is not gender discriminatory. The term "military personnel" is used to refer to both men and women, in relation to salaries, promotions, transfers, marriage, and other issues. The term "female personnel" is only used in specific instances, such as maternity leave. However, practice is completely different, resulting in far from equal treatment for men and women, whether in terms of promotions, appointments, or even security assignments. In addition, the Military Service Law and the [Military Code](#) do not contain explicit references to combating gender discrimination or sexual harassment. Cases where either arises are dealt with in strict secrecy, at the discretion of local commanders. In some cases, penalties are imposed under the heading of the misuse of military authority, or of insulting superior ranks.

After 2011

The acute lack of human resources in the SAA following the 2011 uprising accelerated the recruitment of women. An estimated [8,500 women](#) were recruited in following years, mostly into the newly-constituted National Defense paramilitary force. However, media reporting on the [graduation ceremonies](#) for female officers reveal that no more than 25

officers and about 50 non-commissioned officers were inducted, as opposed to thousands of male graduates. Currently, the proportion of women to men in the army hardly exceeds 1 percent at most.

Female recruitment was moreover extended to include participation in combat roles. The [first women's commando battalion](#) was established as part of the Republican Guard, to take part in battles against the Syrian opposition. A number of female recruits were [killed](#), while others were the victims of [sexual blackmail](#), in incidents that prompted intervention by Russian officers.

In reality, female participation in combat appears to be a propaganda ploy by the Assad regime, intended to project an image to Western audiences of the SAA as liberal in gender terms and opposed to radical fundamentalist ideology. This portrayal was reinforced by permitting select [international media outlets](#) to interview female fighters and publish reports about them.

Lack of Strategy

There is no government strategy on female recruitment and professional development in the defense sector. Senior ranks and key positions are still reserved for men. Only two women attained the rank of major general, one in 2015 in [the Ministry of Interior](#) and one in 2017 in [the Ministry of Defense](#). The lack of a strategy made women in the army, like men, a tool of the political leadership. Rather than seeking balanced civil-military relations, the ruling regime sought to use the issue as a [soft power](#) tool dominated by Alawite women to serve its own interests. The lack of a real action plan to empower women in the military has also limited the specializations they may enlist in, depriving them of opportunities for professional development.

A “National” Justification

The Assad regime, backed by the Ba’ath Party, has used the recruitment of women in the SAA to serve a tangled, sectarian and partisan political doctrine. It claims that female recruitment responds to a national need for women's empowerment, while in fact instrumentalizing it to serve its own regime maintenance needs. The integration of women into the SAA remains under-developed in all areas, including the legal framework and operational level. Various obstacles to female recruitment and professional development have yet to be removed. Women should be allowed to engage in planning and operational tasks, and admitted to sensitive specializations, such as security, inspection, and so on. This should be undertaken within a balanced civil-military relationship, and pursued with local culture and social values in mind.

Military educational and training institutions should be developed, and civilian organizations should also be encouraged to work with women recruits, as part of any future reform process in the SAA. This is, of course, if the ruling regime actually wants the integration of women to be truly "national."

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