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# OUT OF THE INFERNO?

## Rebuilding Security in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen

**Edited by Bassma Kodmani  
and Nayla Moussa**

August 2017

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*Edited by*

*Bassma Kodmani  
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Nayla Moussa*



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This project was made possible thanks to the generous support of the [International Development and Research Centre](#) and contributions from the [Open Society Foundation](#) and the [Rockefeller Brothers Fund](#).

Translation was done by Wael Sawah.

Image: Yemeni counter-terrorism forces taking part in a US-supported training drill in the Sana'a area, Yemen, July 2011, (c) EPA.

**ISBN** : 979-10-93214-05-4

**EAN** : 9791093214054

August 2017

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# Foreword

When the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) launched three years ago the study that led to this publication, world powers were in the process of shifting their defence and intelligence capabilities primarily to the fight against the latest brand of transnational terrorist movements, the so-called Islamic State. While this book hardly mentions terrorism, it is, in effect, entirely focused on what could ultimately rid Arab societies and the world of terrorism. It analyzes the contexts in which terrorism grew and continues to grow as security systems collapsed and societies fragmented. More importantly, it presents a thorough diagnosis of what currently works and what doesn't in each of the four countries in conflict in the Middle East – Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen – at the local, regional, and national levels.

Populations in these countries are said to be resilient, a word that hardly reflects the inhuman reality in which they live, one where each family needs to re-invent new means of survival every other day. Images of women and children on the roads symbolize the loss of a viable framework for social organization that a state is meant to provide. The question is not whether they will ever return to their homes – most of them wish to do so – but rather who can make their “once upon a country”<sup>1</sup> safe again to return to and, from a selfish perspective of Western countries, what strategies would stand a chance of containing the consequences of the four infernos that have ignited in the Middle East over the last few years. Containment strategies have failed. Approaches to security applied so far are all in question. Europeans have learned the hard way that their security is inseparable from that of the Middle East, that if Arab societies remain insecure, they will remain unsafe. In other words, they need to get actively interested in designing ways of rebuilding security frameworks that bring stability to societies instead of merely fighting terrorism.

The studies in this volume are the work of scholars with the academic expertise in the security issues of the Middle East and the intimate knowledge of the social contexts of each country.

The first paper of the book defines the challenges of rebuilding security when states have all but collapsed and when societies need to engage in a re-foundation of the social contract that ties the different components of the nation together. The two following papers by Florence Gaub set the framework and bring comparative perspectives regarding the key features of the military and security forces of countries with diverse societies.

In the four country studies on Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, authors Myriam Benraad, Virginie Collombier, Abdelnasser Ayed, and Nayla Moussa<sup>2</sup> bring together the diverse insights and experiences of political, military, police and intelligence figures, members of armed groups, tribal chiefs and local council representatives, academics and non-governmental leaders.

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1 “Once Upon a Country” is part of the title of the book *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* by Palestinian author Sari Nusseibeh.

2 Maha Assabalani and Maghed Madhagi contributed to this paper.

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These diverse perspectives inform in-depth analyses of the security institutions in the four countries, institutions built on the legacy of their recent history and the processes of dismantlement, collapse, or fragmentation they experienced. The final paper by Fatiha Dazi-Héni looks at the strategies of the Arab Gulf countries whose role has been decisive in the four conflicts.

The book represents a distinct contribution to the field of security studies in the Middle East. It is part of ARI's continuous effort over the years to expand the body of knowledge on security issues as perceived and experienced by Arab societies and their rulers. A previous series of studies conducted prior to the 2011 Arab uprisings analyzed the structures of security institutions and their overwhelming dominance of state and society in what the contributors named the Arab *securitocracies*. After 2011, the prospects for democratic transition opened the way for ARI to begin to define roadmaps for security sector reform in different countries. Some of the same scholars prepared ambitious strategies to engage the new leaders in processes in which societies would define how security institutions should work and relate to the citizenry. But the behaviour of security institutions was never in concordance with the democratic changes to which societies aspired. Instead, ARI found itself investigating continued repressive practices and analyzing the resistance of the deep states and ultimately their revenge in all but one country, Tunisia.

Each of the studies suggests directions for future work on the security institutions and offers some recommendations on where to start in each case. The security approaches implemented so far have brought limited success. We trust this book will set a path in the right direction.



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# The Chicken before the Egg: Security Frameworks and Democratic Transitions

*Bassma Kodmani*

The Arab regimes of the last four decades before the uprisings were composed of mighty security apparatuses in which civil and political institutions never held much effective power. An accurate description of their systems is the word *securitocracies*, constructed by a group of scholars and used as the title of a publication.<sup>1</sup> Irrespective of the ideological veneer they chose, whether pseudo-socialist as in Iraq and Syria, communist as in South Yemen, liberal as in Egypt or Islamist as in Sudan, the effort of those who seized power by force or governed by monarchical descent focused entirely on building security systems that dominated relations between state and society. They all made sure horizontal relations among social groups were defined by distrust and fear, which, in turn, justified the ever-increasing role of their security agencies. They developed strategic relations and defence agreements with major powers and rendered services that made of them precious partners of the intelligence community in the West and globally.

A key implication is that the governance systems that can replace these regimes are unlikely to be some individual charismatic leaders but are mostly going to be geared towards the building of alternative security schemes to the ones that controlled the countries under their dictatorships. Without a security plan defined in advance, no political authority is likely to control the territory of any of these countries.

The concept of fragile states commonly used to refer to those countries captures only partially the phenomenon of the fragmentation of the political and security order. The approach taken in this volume is built on the premise that the international community is more concerned today with restoring security in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen than it is with the democratic rights of these countries' citizens. While we share the view that security is a priority, we call for defining security arrangements that do not endanger the emergence of inclusive and credible political settlements.

The contributors to this volume explore the security systems of the four Arab countries that witnessed a collapse of order and all-out war. Based on field research and information collected from local actors on the ground, the authors provide detailed insight into the situation in different regions of the countries, the motivations of the different players, the major turning points which explain why and when security went out of control, and how

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1 ARI series on Securitocracies.

transitions failed. They shed light on the interactions between the strategies of outside powers and the local dynamics and draw attention to the mistakes and flaws that continue to plague the international approaches aimed at fighting terrorism and rebuilding stability.

After years of bloody conflict, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen have seen their central security systems fragment and alternative security orders emerge at the local level. Militias that oppose the regimes and units of the regimes' security apparatuses alike, have increasingly become autonomous actors: intelligence leaders no longer answer to their hierarchical superiors as the chains of command are most often lost and have grown financially autonomous as they have all developed methods to levy resources through local networks and criminal practices.

As the Libyan example shows, the overthrow of Qaddafi led to the collapse of the security order he had constructed and the emergence of militias across the country, one of which simply kidnapped the Prime Minister of a defenceless government in 2013. Libya has taught us that a government, even if legitimately elected, that has no power to act on the security situation is doomed to failure. In Yemen, the maintenance of the security apparatus of Ali Abdallah Saleh by those loyal to him led to his return through a reclaiming of former loyalties, and the morphing of the country into an all-out war. In Syria, it is clear by now that the alternative to Assad is first and foremost the plan that will ensure the security of the territory (including the fight against terrorism) in order to avoid another Libya or Yemen. The failed approach (or lack thereof) of the post-overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq is full of lessons on what *not* to do.

This book does not claim to prescribe the right approach, much less the formula for rebuilding security institutions in states that have all but collapsed. A wide array of literature exists on the myriad armed groups present in each country, from political to ideological, tribal or terrorist. While these studies are essential to understand the roles and motivations of the different players, they only compound the perception of hopeless fragmentation. Contributors to this volume take an alternative approach to demonstrate that rebuilding these societies torn by conflict starts with defining a security plan for each country – just as other societies torn by war have managed to rebuild around their military forces, including in cases where communities have been involved in genocidal atrocities.

The fragmentation of the security order and the emergence of local arrangements in Iraq, Libya, Syrian and Yemen are seen by international players as an improvement of the situation compared to the total chaos and mass killings when the conflicts were in a high intensity phase. As the study on Libya in this book shows, micro-analysis suggests that viable security arrangements have emerged locally, in some cases where security is delivered entirely through local networks, i.e. by town families. In 2015-2016, community-based security structures also played a key role in mediating a ceasefire. This seems to suggest that local arrangements may pave the way for rebuilding security in a gradual fashion. However, no broad nationwide security dialogue that would include representatives of all the main armed groups across the country has been attempted, nor were members of these armed groups actually considered political actors with legitimate political claims and expectations. Likewise, in Iraq, different areas of the country live under very different conditions with



some enjoying a quasi-normal life while others remain an inferno. In Syria, both Russia and the United States seem convinced that there is no prospect for an overall settlement of the conflict in the foreseeable future, which explains their efforts at creating what they call de-escalation zones which amount to implementing separate security arrangements with a different combination of guarantors for each area.

This fragmentation of the security situation has important consequences for the way security can be rebuilt and the security sector reconstructed in each country. The contributors to this volume address the question without any ideological bias or assumption that a unified national order should necessarily be sought. They take stock of the *de facto* local situations in all four cases, where lines of fracture have emerged and where many different wars with different stakes and actors are at play, and merely pose the question: should local security arrangements be encouraged at the risk of causing further entrenchment of communities and their further estrangement from each other, as well as the emergence of new interests resulting from new economic arrangements?

Even if we were to set aside the conservative view that states must be restored within their recognized pre-conflict borders, two objective criteria will nevertheless need to determine the answer: first, that minimal human security is ensured for all individuals and all social groups; and second, that the country does not represent a threat for its neighbours and beyond. While the former can be partially and momentarily achieved through local arrangements as can be witnessed in Libya (albeit with a high crime rate), Iraq and certain areas of Syria, experience also shows that reaching the latter – security for neighbours and beyond – is not possible without a legitimate central government exercising state functions.

## The War on Terror: You Only Destroy What You Can Replace

In the four contexts addressed in this volume, the rebuilding of security is hardly a domestic matter. The counter-terrorism campaigns conducted by international coalitions currently override any other considerations and the rebuilding of the security sectors will be heavily influenced by the war on terror and its outcome. Security capacity and organization in each of these countries is therefore a matter that interests key external partners. Though the countries of the Middle East can benefit from the post-conflict experiences of other war-torn countries in Africa or Latin America, they also represent exceptions: the region is the primary producer and primary victim of international terrorism. Over the last decade and a half since the attacks of 11 September 2001, the security agencies of the Arab countries became closely enmeshed with those of major powers and were equipped and reinforced by them in exchange for cooperating on chasing terrorist networks. Examples abound. In Yemen, Ali Abdallah Saleh's nephew headed a paramilitary force whose counter-terrorism unit was equipped by the US. In Syria, US intelligence agencies struck deals with the Assad regime to deliver terrorist elements fighting American troops in Iraq (those same terrorists that the Syrian regime had unleashed in the first place) in exchange for not undermining it. Today, six years after the popular uprisings and the collapse of the status quo, the rebuilding of the security sectors will be heavily shaped by the strategies and terms of cooperation with

the international players involved in the fight.

This reality raises a complete set of new questions. How, if at all, can a domestic agenda to rebuild a sound security sector be pursued while external actors with considerable means are implementing a distinct set of objectives and are choosing local groups to achieve them, often without serious consideration for the long-term implications of their action? Can those local groups be brought under control to take part in the implementation of a national agenda after they were empowered and their expectations raised by external actors? In Iraq, the Kurds succeeded in gaining the autonomy of their region. This in turn whetted the appetite of the Sunni tribes who claimed a percentage of the national resources on the basis of their efforts to chase the Jihadists and bring some of them to repent, serving various security objectives for the West. In Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) movement spearhead the offensive against the so-called Islamic State while most other Syrians watch with suspicion and apprehend the price that the Kurdish PYD will demand for its efforts. More recently in Syria, the reliance of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS on tribes to render various services or to de-radicalize young Jihadists by bringing them back into the fold, re-legitimizes them and pushes their expression of new political demands, such as a percentage of natural resources and some form of autonomy following the Kurdish model in Iraq. In the post-conflict era, how can these armed groups be recycled into conducting security tasks, especially anti-terrorism, after they have been empowered out of control?

Some of the terrorist groups are marbled with armed groups fighting the dictatorship as in Syria or its remnants as in Yemen. The warlords' economies operate alongside the economic systems established by terrorist groups over populations that are subdued and learn to adapt. The fight against the groups stated as the top priority by external powers is watched with much scepticism by the local populations, in some cases, because the air strikes have limited effect, or because targets are chosen by each country's air force according to its strict national interest and based on its own intelligence sources with little concern for the root causes or for the broader goal of resolving the conflict. The statement of French President Emmanuel Macron in June 2017 that Assad is the enemy of the Syrian people while the enemy of France is the Islamic State Organization (ISO) is symptomatic of the disconnect in strategy that has affected all Western governments.

Frustrations within the local population flare when air strikes cause civilian victims and infrastructure is destroyed, creating more vacuums of the very same kind that allowed the emergence of the terrorists in the first place. Power games take place under the guise of the fight against terrorism as in the battles of Sirte in Libya, Mosul in Iraq, and Raqqa in Syria.

Scepticism is high towards the all-military strategy applied by international coalitions in each country with little concern for what comes after: who ensures security and stabilizes the regions from which the terrorists are evicted? What kind of civil governance will be promoted with the needed legitimacy to establish a stable order that prevents their return? Where will the terrorists go once expelled from their strongholds? Since the two massive interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ongoing war on terrorism in Yemen before and after 2011, in

Mali in 2012 and elsewhere, no successful model of an anti-terror strategy has emerged that kills the terrorists and keeps them dead or does not simply cause their displacement. The dominant criterion in the eyes of external actors has so far been the capacity of the actors to fight terrorists within perimeters that are physically delimited with little consideration for the legitimacy factor. Yet, the ability to fight terrorism hinges on the armed groups' capacity to deliver first aid services (water, electricity, hospitals) while conducting security controls and to work with the existing civil governance structures. This is the way to build their legitimacy which then allows them to extend their security control further. The challenge, therefore, is how to move from counter-terrorism oriented security forces into public-safety oriented security services that will be viewed as legitimate across the sectarian divide in each context, and will lead the process of stabilization and eventually of disarmament. Despite divergences over the best approach to lead the fight, external powers and nationals of the countries in conflict have a strong common interest in eradicating terrorism and are in agreement about the need to make it a top priority.

## Sequencing Security Arrangements

Tasks such as fighting terrorists, criminal networks, as well as radical spoilers, curbing warlordism, dealing with the remnants of the old regimes who refuse change, identifying arms caches, controlling borders, preventing retribution and stabilizing territory are all part of the larger objective of building a sustainable security order; in other words, an order that can pave the way for viable political arrangements. In terms of phases, the security challenges dictate an initial focus on measures aimed at reducing public insecurity and working towards restoring the state monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. This in turn requires the definition of phases and their sequencing according to priorities in an order that defines who needs to do what and at what stage.

This is not to advocate for security at the expense of sound political arrangements, quite the opposite.<sup>2</sup> In the Balkans, security sector reform was prioritized by international actors at the expense of democratic consolidation. For many observers, the Dayton Accords were no more than a “ceasefire plus” arrangement that froze the situation but never delivered a decent political settlement. But the synchronization of political and military negotiations has often proven to be the safest method. The process itself provides a precious opportunity to start developing a general common security discourse. The Mozambican negotiation process is an interesting example in this regard. Negotiations between the military demonstrated that even the most fraught issues could be addressed and resolved successfully. Confidence and trust were transmitted from civilians to the military and vice versa in a process of mutual reinforcement. The military was willing to support the elites who advocated cooperation with former enemies and therefore strengthened the civilian investment in the peace process.

Scholars have dwelled on the question of whether security favours political transition and

2 Michael Brzoska and Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, “Security Sector Reform and Post-Conflict Reconstruction under International Auspices”, in *Reform and Reconstruction of the Security Sector*, edited by Alan Bryden, Heiner Hänggi, DCAF Publications, 2004, [www.dcaf.ch/content/download/36142/527501/file/bm\\_ssr\\_yearbook2004\\_6.pdf](http://www.dcaf.ch/content/download/36142/527501/file/bm_ssr_yearbook2004_6.pdf)

should therefore precede it or whether the establishment of the political authorities ought to come first. Many depict the discussion as a chicken-and-egg issue. Experts in security sector reform emphasize that priority should be given to building civil institutions in order to create the needed legitimacy for a political authority to exercise oversight of the army and security apparatus. Yet in post-conflict contexts this principle has often led to failure. We therefore need to ask a different set of questions: should military and security structures be in charge before civil institutions can safely exercise power? If so, what is a reasonable timeframe and what are the guarantees needed to ensure governance will eventually be exercised by civilians? Who are the security forces that can carry out the task? Can a timeframe be defined for civil institutions to exert their authority over the military and security institutions? What type of measures should be avoided and what type of safeguards should be built into any security plan to ensure that the military leadership charged with implementing it will safely relinquish authority to a political (executive and legislative) body at a given moment, and who determines the right moment? In terms of the governance of the process for rebuilding security and reforming or transforming the security sector, what are the appropriate institutions that should manage the process and how should they relate to each other?

The definition of the issue in terms of security sector reform has been misleading. In post-conflict contexts, there is a continuum between the moment the conflict comes to a halt and the adoption of the final reforms that ensure a sound security sector subject to democratic oversight. It is therefore more relevant to speak of developing new security systems which require primarily the definition of a realistic time frame for a series of security measures ranging from the immediate measures (first few weeks) to the short-term arrangements (first few months) to the long-term process of security sector reform or transformation which may take over a decade in some cases. As the case studies in this book show, security sector transformation in Syria will be a lengthy process that may take over a decade while in Yemen, the president's chief of staff had warned during the transition period that the process of restructuring the military needed at least eight years. Sadly, Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi used his position as president to appoint his brother and two sons as heads of special units charged with protecting him.

This book does not address the strategies of external powers in separate chapters. Regional powers, however, have a distinct and decisive hand in each context. Their roles are analysed by Fatiha Dazi-Héni. International powers, however, even when they are heavily involved in the conflicts, are most often insufficiently aware of the rapidly changing dynamics and have often committed mistakes that have led to serious failures. They need eyes and ears on the ground. Most often, when countries and military organizations such as NATO conduct the process of rebuilding security, they tend to fear the formation of a command structure that enjoys credibility, at least as long as the conflict has not ended and their own interests have not been secured. They tend to select docile agents who will “do the job” as imagined by the outside powers with little concern for their credibility as military leaders, their integrity or their reputation within the communities in which they are operating. Local armed groups, because they are dependent on the financial support of foreign powers, are rarely in a position to choose their own commanders and impose them, and foreign powers in turn

are reluctant to empower a command structure that is not of their choice. Yet a trustworthy military command is the first message a population that has endured a long war wants to see. It is therefore useful in the first stage of the security plan to set up a provisional mediating structure constituted of indigenous trusted individuals with deep knowledge of the armed groups and of their social extraction, to inform the outside powers on an ongoing basis. The structure would ideally be composed of military and civilian figures (political, social and religious leaders) and would need to enjoy the full trust of external powers.

## The Governance of the Security Planning

The body in charge of security issues needs to exist from the early stages of the negotiation process, in order to guarantee coherence and continuity, particularly when the level of violence and the seriousness of the crimes committed are high. Various successful cases offer valuable examples from which to draw, namely Germany after 1945, more recently Mozambique and Burundi after the genocide, and Lebanon. In Libya, the Supreme Security Council set up by the National Transition Council after the formation of the first government in 2011 officially came under the control of the Interior Ministry. Its first steps were promising as it was successful in securing the commitment of over 100,000 fighters to integrate the armed forces but its authority was too weak. In Yemen, the National Dialogue Conference established the Military and Security Working Group, a much-needed structure, even though it failed because of the measures adopted by the political leadership of President Hadi, jeopardizing the process. In the current negotiation mediated by the UN Special Envoy, military and security committees are proposed to oversee the process of withdrawals and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

Nowhere is it more important to set up such a body than in the case of Syria. Many voices are calling for the establishment of a joint commission on military and security aspects to be created as of now and to run in parallel with the political negotiations. The failure of both Libya's political elites and international actors to consider armed factions as partners in building new political arrangements largely explains the failure of the Libyan transition and the continuing war in the country. For Syria, a joint military council is one option, though the council or commission may be composed of a mix of civil and military/security figures. Its main mandate would be to articulate a vision for a defence and security policy and provide coherence to the overall process while ensuring that military planning is consistent with political objectives.

In every context, the input of external actors has been decisive. The challenge, however, has been to prevent them from taking control of the process.<sup>3</sup> Decisions made by the local actors themselves are at the heart of the success of the overall settlement process. This hinges partly on the ability of the mediator to enhance national ownership of the process and lead the parties to explore their mutual concerns in ways that stress cooperative security. In some cases, an external chair of the joint commission can be useful. The most obvious example

3 Bruce Baker & Eric Scheye, "Multi-layered justice and security delivery in post-conflict and fragile states", *Conflict, Security & Development*, 2007, Vol7(4), 503-528.

is the United Nations, but it has often been an outside power with a key role in the conflict (the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom or France) that took up this function. In some case, this role was indeed played by a non-governmental organization with moral authority such as the Community of Sant-Egidio in the cases of Mozambique and Burundi, which both put the restructuring of the army at the centre of the peace process.

## The Army as the Rallying Body of the Nation

Armies have traditionally played a nation-building role. When the political order, the military and civil institutions of a nation break down as a result of a protracted conflict, the army emerges as the first rallying institution that can embody the reconciliation process. Former officers who defected from the army or those who remained loyal continue to consider it as the backbone of the state and to value it as a symbol, even when it has been badly damaged by the conflict. The ability of the military to reimagine itself as an integrated institution in a divided country becomes a confirmation of the re-birth of national unity.<sup>4</sup>

While it is important to remain attentive to ensuring civilian oversight over the military in order to build democratic armed forces during the transition period, the cases discussed here call for a slightly different path, one that addresses security needs first and sets the rebuilding of the armed forces as a priority. This is firstly because of the army's symbolic value and the lesser implication of its regular units in atrocities compared with the intelligence and security agencies. Integrative efforts in the army improve its image and its esteem among people. In addition, armies are usually needed in post-civil war contexts to fulfil policing tasks related to domestic security until major threats are settled and the capacity of police forces has been built to address ordinary threats.

The contemporary history of Arab armies and of their officers is one of defeats, humiliations, misuse and corruption. Political leaders had an aggressive discourse towards external enemies (most often Israel and the United States) but the army was in reality structured to protect the regime and its interests, and confront any threat emanating from society. In the four countries studied here, the armies were built on sectarian, regional or tribal loyalties. Their command structures rarely reflected the composition of society and some units were elevated to the rank of Special Forces with equipment and privileges that made the rest of the army all but irrelevant. The pattern is the same in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq as each of the country studies explain: governments weakened the regular armed forces and entrusted the bulk of military capacities to paramilitary brigades most often commanded by relatives.

Since the outbreak of the popular uprisings which morphed into civil wars, the armed groups that emerged have been providing security on regional, ethnic or sectarian bases, thus confirming and perpetuating the cleavages that the political regimes nurtured and manipulated within their own military and security forces for decades. Having been exposed to aggression from other communities, populations have come to trust only those from

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4 Several country studies are relevant in the book by Roy Licklider, editor, *New Armies from Old: Merging Competing Military Forces after Civil Wars*, Georgetown University Press, 2014.



their own communities who are protecting them. The NTC in Libya together with the NATO countries had no post-conflict security plan. When the first successive governments were formed as a result of a compromise between international players, they had no military force to rely on and saw no other choice but to rely on the revolutionary brigades and local armed groups who enjoyed actual power on the ground to ensure short-term security. As Virginie Collombier describes, the NTC's attempts to provide security translated into a call on local communities to form military councils in cities which had experienced limited fighting and had therefore not created such institutions during the war. The hasty formation of these provisional councils contributed to the further fragmentation of the security landscape, and to the emergence of an increasing number of military structures operating largely outside of the control of the state authorities. The failure of the Libyan transition has since become the case *par excellence* of what *not* to do in a transition period.

The rebuilding of a national army is in effect the first and probably the most decisive test for a sound management of diversity within a society after the conflict. The challenge is finding the right process by which militias or rival armies can be merged successfully into one army and respond to a new unified command structure. Several prominent scholars make the argument that ethnic identities are sticky and conclude that partition and ethnically homogenous entities are the best way to rebuild security after a conflict. Others demonstrate through research that strong institutional structuring rather than sectarian cleavages modulate the behaviour of fighters or revolutionary soldiers. When they see orderly command, they regulate their interactions and are ready to cooperate.

Aiming for stronger and fairer institutions rather than partition is to a large extent the answer. Multi-phased programmes have been successfully implemented in countries that witnessed extreme violence and long civil wars. They were aimed at disarming militias or revolutionary soldiers politically and ideologically in order to rearm them professionally. Mandatory multi-ethnic units; training programmes that include intensive political education of soldiers and stress the need for allegiance to the state in addition to conventional military skills; forcing soldiers to serve in missions outside their former areas of influence during the conflict; and developing measures to prevent radical ideological groups from infiltrating the armed forces are some examples of the kinds of measures that give credibility to the new authorities and to their commitment towards inclusivity and the sound governance of diversity. Offering opposition fighters to keep their former military ranks even when they have never received proper training and guaranteeing a set of positions for them in the newly designed military force is also a strong incentive in favour of integration and discipline. Often the tensions between political and military leaderships inside each camp are high, a factor that favours cooperation and facilitates the merger and the restructuring process of the army by a transitional government. Finally training by outside powers and adequate budgets allocated by the international community are vital to bring the technical skills required to build modern democratic armies. One can argue that security budgets during the reconstruction period should be given top priority over any other sector including development as communities are usually capable of restarting livelihoods when their security is ensured.

Florence Gaub's paper on plural police forces reinforces the argument on the factors that

build cohesion. Where pluralism overlaps with resource constraints, she notes, the problem is often wrongly identified – the issue is not the plural nature of the force but its organizational state of being. An underfunded and poorly performing police force will, by default, provide little source for professional identity, whereas a professional, ethical, well-equipped force will. Professional identity as opposed to sectarian is, in this context, highly dependent on the state of the police institution as a whole.

The fact that the police are usually less politically involved in sectarian crimes makes it relatively easier to rebuild a diverse body. While the army's role in internal security missions is inevitable due to the nature and magnitude of the threats posed by terrorism, the police is the first expression of the state's capacity to enforce law and order at the time of transition when militias and warlords are usually seeking to retain their influence. Police forces can be entrusted with critical missions that shape public perceptions of the state.<sup>5</sup> Their behaviour signals if the post-transition state is capable, impartial or corrupt, thus building or eroding the legitimacy of the state. Their success also rests largely upon the population's willingness to be policed by them, in other words on their legitimacy. Adequate funding, training and equipment are the key conditions for success.

## The Struggle for the Control of Intelligence?

The literature on security sector reform is full of politically correct language that stresses the importance of national ownership of the process. The real indicator however of true ownership is the willingness of external powers to help the countries rebuild intelligence capacity within their national institutions. Such willingness is not seen in the experiences analysed here.<sup>6</sup> The various authors note the reluctance of international players to build the capacity of the local intelligence agencies and prefer instead to recruit individual agents to inform them. The most extreme example is Iraq, where the United States decided that there was no need to rebuild a national intelligence apparatus and that intelligence would remain directly controlled by the CIA. The importance of the fight against terrorism explains this reluctance but only to a limited extent. External powers leading the fight against terrorism badly need the information that local communities and intelligence officers who defected can provide and the inside knowledge they have of the state agencies, but this information is not easily shared. In Syria, for example, informal networks of Syrians gather precious intelligence but they are reluctant to share it when they are not sure how it will be used and if it will be to serve the Syrian interest. The rebuilding of intelligence structures by nationals is of paramount importance, not only for reasons related to sovereignty but also to ensure that the various ministries (defence, Interior) fit together with the intelligence system within the overall goal of building the new defence and security structures of the state.

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5 Brenna Marea Powell, "Policing post-war transitions: Insecurity, legitimacy and reform in Northern Ireland", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 2014, Vol7(2-3), 165-182.

6 Robert Luckham and Thomas Kirk, "The Two Faces of Security in Hybrid Political Orders: A Framework for Analysis and Research", *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2013, Vol2(2), pp. 1-30.

## Do No Harm Politically

While this volume deliberately leaves aside the formation of the transitional political institutions, the process of rebuilding security capacity and institutions requires an agreed vision of the organizational framework of the state within which security is to be organized. In the four war-torn states analysed here, federalism is commonly suggested by outside powers as the way out of the civil war. And because outsiders bring resources to the table and have influence, they are able to coerce local actors into accepting arrangements that often make more sense to them than to the local populations.

Speaking of federalism when the central state is almost non-existent carries an elevated risk of further fragmenting societies and harming the overall objective of rebuilding functional states with a capacity to ensure security over their territory. It sends the message that the state is up for grabs and encourages local groups to behave as *de facto* authorities and to hold on to their armaments. No federal state can work without effective central institutions capable of organizing the relationship between the centre and the different regions. This is all the more true for the security realm as federations usually have a carefully defined distribution of security prerogatives between the central and the regional levels.

As the study on Yemen illustrates, the failed attempt to implement a law on federalism plunged the country into all-out war. The law was voted hastily at a time when the army was divided and jeopardized efforts at bringing back all armed groups under central control to restructure the security institutions. Several key Yemeni parties withdrew from the national dialogue process, contesting the transitional government's legitimacy to vote a law that changes the structure of the state. Iraq was likewise transformed into a federation after the US-led invasion in 2003 and at a time when the central state, the army and all security institutions had been dismantled. It has been impossible until today to rebuild the Iraqi military based on criteria that define a national army as Iraqis never had a chance to discuss and agree on what keeps them together, on a security doctrine or on who the enemies of the nation are. In Syria, Kurdish movements are calling for the establishment of a federal system to fulfil their aspirations as a group with a distinct identity, but federalism for a country whose state has all but collapsed carries a high risk of turning into *de facto* partition with the perpetuation of a sectarian order that does not bode well for the stabilization of the country or the end of the flow of refugees, or the war on terrorism for that matter. In Libya two competing visions of the re-organization of the State and of the future of the armed forces and the security agencies led to failure.

In the four countries, the issue of decentralization was treated as separate from security issues with no serious debate of how the rebuilding of a security order and of security institutions relate to decentralization and are likely to be shaped by it.

This book ultimately drives home three key messages. First, defining security plans is a top priority for ending the conflicts and opens the way for the political arrangements that are stalling in all four countries. Second, there is no *real* security but a *shared* security, and building the security capacity of Middle Eastern states and of their institutions is the world's

best bet to ensure domestic security for the democracies waging the war on terror. Third, the international powers fighting terrorism have yet to find the adequate mechanism to coordinate their powerful military means of action with the knowledge and the home-grown approaches of the local indigenous partners in each country. The starting point is to adopt and operationalize the concept of cooperative security.

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# Colliding Concepts? Pluralism and the Military

Florence Gaub

Plural societies have a reputational problem: seen as the opposite of the nation-state, they are said to be weaker in terms of national cohesion and more prone to civil wars. The emergence of seemingly homogenous European nation-states in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ethnic narratives of civil wars such as those in the Balkans and Africa, and the rise of sectarianism all support this notion. Alas, reality speaks a different language: plural societies are in fact less prone to civil conflict than homogenous ones, and most states in the world are to some extent plural.<sup>1</sup>

In the same logic, plural armed forces are considered flawed, potentially inefficient and prone to disintegration at any point in time. Here, too, the generalization does not live up to reality: the forces of countries such as Belgium, Bolivia, Canada, China, Ethiopia, Ghana, Great Britain, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Laos, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Sudan, South Africa, Switzerland, Syria, Trinidad, Uganda and the United States are not made up of a single group and still are militarily effective.<sup>2</sup> And yet, in spite of these realities, the two concepts seem to be mutually exclusive. Where the military embodies the nation-state, cohesion and unity, plural identities seem to constitute the exact opposite: standing for particularity, possible ambitions of separateness and negation of the state/nation model. Where states might fail due to pluralism, armed forces will apparently fail for the same reason.

But the interplay of the two concepts is more complex than a binary answer of inefficiency versus efficiency. In fact, the idea that pluralism weakens the armed forces rests on the erroneous assumption that the institution is a mere recipient of identities, not a shaper itself; it posits that multi-ethnicity is by default at odds with nationalism and unity; and it misunderstands the mechanisms which lead to the breakdown of military cohesion. When turning these assumptions around, one finds that the military shapes identities itself, that ethnic identities can be in line with nationalism, and that military disintegration occurs under very specific circumstances in large part determined by the institution itself. More

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1 Paul Collier, ed., *Breaking the conflict trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, Washington: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2003, p. 59, available at [http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/908361468779415791/310436360\\_200500070100031/additional/multi0page.pdf](http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/908361468779415791/310436360_200500070100031/additional/multi0page.pdf)

2 J. Bayo Adekun, "Army in a Multi-Ethnic Society: The Case of Nkrumah's Ghana, 1957 – 1966", in *The Military and Society*, ed. P. Karsten, London: Garland Publishing, 1998. Khaled Salih, *State-Making, Nation-Building and the Military: Iraq 1941 – 1958*, Göteborg: Department of Political Science, Göteborg University, 1996. Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: its Contribution to the Development of a Nation*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990.

importantly, once a civil conflict is over, the armed forces can play a crucial role in the process of national reconciliation and reconstruction.

## The “Military Mind”: An Identity Apart

Pluralism implies plural identities, possibly at odds with the nation and consequently with the most nationalistic of state institutions, the armed forces. However, the armed forces are not an empty identity vessel waiting to be filled. Instead, they produce, encourage, and shape a separate identity – sometimes called the military mind – which rivals openly with other identities. It is defined by “the supremacy of society over the individual and the importance of order, hierarchy and division of function. (...) It accepts the state as the highest form of political organization. (It is) pessimistic, collectivist, inclined, power-oriented, nationalistic, militaristic.”<sup>3</sup>

The main reason for this is necessity: since the military depends so much more on cohesion and cooperation than other organizations, it logically strives more for unity and the collective than any other given organization. Consequently, most military organizations will resort to all procedures and mechanisms available to stress commonalities over differences, de-individualize the soldier, and tie his identity to the collective. It does this by seeking to encompass all areas of life. Men live together in barracks, and have a specific code of honour, strong traditions, and symbols. Uniforms strip men of their individuality, and discussion of politics is discouraged within the institution. The self-conception of the military is so all-embracing that it can be qualified as a “total institution” (such as prisons or asylums), which strive to replace other loyalties and identities in the individual.<sup>4</sup>

But it is not just the institution which pushes for this identity construction; individuals willingly participate in this for two reasons. Firstly, belonging to a group – no matter whether ethnic or other – generates a sense of well-being. The personal relationships expressed in camaraderie and “buddyship” fulfil this need. In addition, military identity can become stronger than other work-related identities for the individual because the armed forces are more than just an occupation but a profession or indeed a calling, thus generating stronger identities than mere “jobs.” A profession differs from an occupation in three ways: it requires special expertise or knowledge, it comes with an important degree of responsibility, and it displays a corporate culture. This culture is defined by controlled entry into the profession, specific codes of conduct, training, and formation.<sup>5</sup> The strength of military identity is further enhanced by a three-stepped process: individuals self-select for the armed forces in a first instance, are then chosen to become a member, and are then groomed to fit into the body of (mostly) men. Consequently, the armed forces are not a random sample of individuals but those who identify at least in part with the values the armed forces project. This is

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3 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-military Relations*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957, p.79.

4 Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II”, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2, 1948, p. 281.

5 Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A social and political portrait*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960, p. 6.



especially true for those who had to undergo selection (usually applicable to the officer and non-commissioned officer corps). As a result, their willingness to accept the military identity is greater than for a recruit.

Military identity can therefore develop meaning for the individual as much as ethnic, religious, or other social identities. Under some circumstances, it can even be qualified as quasi-ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> Fiji's military, for instance, has developed a strong identity separate from the native Fijian one, despite the fact that most of its staff hails from native Fijian society. Similarly, the Pakistani and Ugandan armed forces have deliberately fostered a "military ethnicity" identity.

It is precisely for this reason that service in the armed forces has been used across countries as a "nation-builder." To date, around half the countries in Africa and the Arab world apply a national service law. The main idea is that the individual ties his destiny to that of the state, and rests his identity on the nation rather than another group. Recruits are sent to a training course which they usually enjoy, in spite of the physical hardship, thanks to the relationships they build.<sup>7</sup> Because military service tends to last only a few months or years, its impact on nation-building is undeniable but limited.<sup>8</sup> In plural societies, national service can indeed be the first contact an individual has with members from other communities. If the contact is positive, it can influence how individuals perceive the other group.

## Ethnic Security Mapping: Plural Identities to the State's Rescue

Because analysis of the military's effect on ethnicity has mostly focused on integration, hence dilution of ethnic affiliation, we tend to overlook the fact that the armed forces make use of plural identities among their ranks for several purposes.<sup>9</sup> This occurs particularly in plural states which are unable to enforce horizontal societal integration, and that instead move towards selective recruitment across society in order to ensure security. In this sense, the ethnic composition of the military reflects the ethno-political stratification on which the state rests; it mirrors who the state chooses to rely on for stability, and who it does not deem trustworthy. Expression of the state's relationship with its ethnic groups can thus be found in the military.<sup>10</sup> By relying on one or several particular ethnic groups for recruitment for instance, it has, over time, bolstered or even created self-perceptions of groups which frequently served as a basis for the formation of group identity. The Sikhs in the Indian

6 Daniel Zirker, Constantine P. Danopoulos, Alan Simpson, "The Military as a Distinct Ethnic or Quasi-Ethnic Identity in Developing Countries", *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol.34 (2), January 2008, pp. 314-337.

7 Walter Korpi, *Social Pressures and Attitudes in Military Training*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964, p. 22.

8 Eric Gorham, *National Service, Citizenship and Political Education*, New York Press: Albany, 1992. Ronald R. Krebs, "A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might", *International Security*, Vol.28 (4), Spring 2004.

9 Cynthia H. Enloe, "The Military Uses of Ethnicity", *Millenium*, Vol.4 (3), 1975, p. 224.

10 Cynthia H. Enloe, *Police, Military and Ethnicity*, New Brunswick: Transaction Inc., 1980, p. 14. Cynthia H. Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers, State Security in Divided Societies*, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980, p. 16.

army, the Berbers in the Moroccan army, or the Hausa in the Nigerian military are just three examples of ethnic identity manipulation by the army the other way around: not the formation of a national identity, but rather a particular identity.<sup>11</sup>

One typical example of such ethnic favouritism is the concept of “martial races” which Great Britain applied in its plural colonies. According to this theory, some ethnic groups would perform better at warfare due to their “race.” Coincidentally, this concept excluded groups which were politically outspoken – such as the Ibo in Nigeria – and instead favoured small, politically disorganized, and ethnically diverse groups. As in India, where especially the Gurkhas were recruited, Great Britain relied in Nigeria mostly on Northerners, mainly Hausas.<sup>12</sup> France applied a similar tactic in its colonies.

Nonetheless, the process is not just top-down; specific groups in society can also be more eager than others to pursue military careers – either to interlock their own ethnic identity with the identity of the state or for economic reasons, and very often both. For example, while the Afrikaners in South Africa made up just over half of the white population, they dominated 80% of the army and 75% of the air force in the 1970s. Their over-representation stood for their natural claim to the state’s power; at the same time, the military served as a tool for social mobility. The overall dominating group within the army often comes from economically disadvantaged sectors of society; however, they are usually to be found in the rank and file, while educated elites make up the officer corps. The military’s hierarchical system, much more than any other governmental body, thus offers a simple reproduction of society’s access to education and opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

States that use ethnicity as a tool thus walk a fine line between antagonizing groups that need to be integrated to a minimum, and excluding them to the extent that they do not threaten stability. The struggle for ethnic representation in the state’s institutions, known as the “civil service issue,” is effectively a struggle for positions of influence in the state as such. Lack of access to state employment can, and has in the past, accelerated conflict: the under-representation of Bengalis in the Pakistani army for instance contributed greatly to the secession of Bangladesh,<sup>14</sup> while pre-genocide Rwanda counted just one Tutsi officer amid its corps. Equitable ethnic representation in the armed forces, and more importantly the officer corps, are pivotal for multi-ethnic armies facing a civil war and its aftermath. Low numbers of Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the armed forces expressed their unease towards the Serb-dominated state that later led to the secession of Bosnia and Croatia from Yugoslavia. Public awareness of the armed forces’ ethnic makeup (especially the officer corps) was acute in all three cases and used for political agitation. Over-represented groups were accused of seeking domination within the state (although low numbers of candidates

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11 Enloe, *Police, Military and Ethnicity*, p. 14.

12 Omar Khalidi, “Ethnic Group Recruitment in the Indian Army: The Contrasting Cases of Sikhs, Muslims, Gurkhas and Others”, *Pacific Affairs*, Winter 2001/2002, pp. 529-552.

13 Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers, State Security in Divided Societies*, pp. 188-197.

14 Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: its Contribution to the Development of a Nation*, Delhi: Oxford University Press 1990, p. 209. Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 224-226, 238-240.

from the under-represented groups might also have been a factor). This is interesting insofar as it equates domination of the officer corps with domination of the state as such, which makes even more sense since often the accused groups were driving forces in the respective state's independence. At the same time, it expresses a fear of domination in those groups under-represented, which points towards a certain fragility of social peace. Hence, Sunni and Croat under-representation in the pre-war armed forces in Lebanon and Yugoslavia indicated not only their frail relationship with the state, but also aroused a possible doubt within the state regarding their loyalty.

## The End of National Cohesion: When Plural Armies Fail

Although the armed forces' internal mechanisms provide an alternative identity and consequently certain protection against political unrest, there are situations where they will be drawn into larger societal conflict. Where dispute over access to position and power in state and society affects the military as such, loyalties can undergo stress. Ethnicity generates a strong emotional attachment and can develop a centrifugal mechanism when it comes to identification. Multi-ethnic armies have an Achilles' heel: they contain an element that, although in itself not conflictual, can be attached or incorporated into conflictual discourse. Once ethnicity is teamed with inequalities in- and outside the military, it can indeed develop a centrifugal effect detrimental to the military organization. Societies with unequal access to wealth, positions, and education tend to mirror this in their armed forces, thereby embodying social stratification that is perceived as unfair and thus contributes to the outbreak of civil conflict. It is for this reason that dispute over ethnic representation within the military is frequently voiced before a civil war ensues. While facing no inevitability in the question of loyalty, multi-ethnic armies indeed have a greater need for institutional balancing and transparency than mono-ethnic ones.

In this context, the military as an agent and intermediary of the state can turn into a theatre of social conflict. The reflection of society (whether in numerical terms or in terms of parity), distribution of key posts, common vision, and ideology are all ingredients that any military institution needs, yet they are more important to multi-ethnic armies surrounded by social conflict. That being said, mono-ethnic armies – such as the ante-bellum US armed forces – can face disintegrative powers from different origins as well, be it political or ideological.

There are two ways a plural force can be affected by intense social stress such as civil war: desertion and disintegration. While the former is a sign of individual discontent, the latter is more damaging to the institution since it implies the breakdown of military structures. In the case of Lebanon, for instance, 5% of men left the army in the first months of the civil war in 1975, compared to 25% of the police.<sup>15</sup> But desertion is not a problem that affects only multi-ethnic armies. In the Prussian Army, 20% of men were lost to desertion every year, just as in the French army of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The length of military work experience also plays an important role in the individual's decision to leave. The higher a military official is in rank, and the longer he has been in the army, the lower the chance that he will follow political

15 Adel A. Freiha, "L'armée et l'Etat au Liban", PhD diss., University Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, 1980, p. 214.

turmoil actively.

In the case of military disintegration, entire units or groups leave, as a whole. This occurred for instance in Lebanon in 1984, and in Nigeria in 1969.<sup>16</sup> In Lebanon, first the Druze soldiers left, and later an entire Shi'a brigade. In Nigeria, 93.3% of the Ibos left the armed forces – comprising up to 10% of the officer corps.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the fact that military units are mono-ethnic or multi-ethnic does not correlate with the disintegration probability. Armies with multi-ethnic units such as the Yugoslav or the Nigerian Army disintegrated faster than the Lebanese Army which was based on mostly mono-ethnic units.

It is worth noting that disintegration is a process which usually occurs only at a later stage of the conflict. In Lebanon, it took nine years after the onset of the civil war; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine (ARBiH) went from a multi-ethnic force containing 20% Serbs, 20% Croats and 60% Bosniaks in the first year of the war to a nearly homogenous Bosniak force by the second year.

Two findings arise from these developments. First, the presumed ethnic identity does not lead automatically to solidarity with one's ethnic group entangled in conflict, an assumption that is frequently made erroneously. For instance, Serbs fighting in the ARBiH were in favour of a multi-ethnic Bosnia, although there were, of course, Serb politicians pursuing the detachment of Bosnian Serbs. The same is true for Sunni officers, who, although traditionally the Lebanese group the least in favour of an independent Lebanon, did not follow the attempted coup of Lieutenant Ahmad Khatib after the civil war broke out. In the case of Nigeria, the persistence of 6.9% Ibos in the officer corps points in the same direction.

What are the reasons for this behaviour? If we take ethnic identity as a basis, it becomes clear that, initially, it is not sufficient motivation to leave the armed forces, although the latter might not behave in favour of one's ethnic group. Two reasons come to mind here, which are both applicable: the first is that ethnic individuals do not necessarily define themselves as such, and the second is that they do not share the vision of their group's political leadership.

## The Post-Conflict Plural Force

Plural military forces face a challenge not only when they enter social turmoil, but also once the conflict is over. In the aftermath of civil war, the military as a place where communities meet *nolens volens* becomes a space where issues of access to posts, promotion, and distribution are even more prevalent. Here, more than in a peacetime, multi-ethnic forces with fair distribution are crucial because the perception of unfairness could jeopardize the

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16 Ulrich Bröckling and Michael Sikora, eds., *Armeen und ihre Deserteure. Vernachlässigte Kapitel einer Militärgeschichte der Neuzeit*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998, p. 9. Christoph Jahr, "Der Krieg zwingt die Justiz, ihr Innerstes zu revidieren: Desertion und Militärgerichtsbarkeit im Ersten Weltkrieg", in *Armeen und ihre Deserteure. Vernachlässigte Kapitel einer Militärgeschichte der Neuzeit*, eds. Ulrich Bröckling, Ulrich Bröckling and Michael Sikora, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998, p. 190.

17 In the years from 1967 through 1970, Ibos constituted 8,06% of commissioned officers, 5,72% of lieutenants, 10.06 % of captains, 7.31% of majors and 3.35% of lieutenant colonels.

freshly established peace. Where access to state resources and wealth were at the heart of the conflict, access to the armed forces will be one of the ways to express the end of the conflict.

One way to ensure fair ethnic complexion of the military are quotas that enshrine the idea of social equity in public service – hence translating into the state abandoning favouritism and prejudgement of people because of certain characteristics.<sup>18</sup> In this context, the public institution is transformed into a moral agent, “that exists to serve values that society considers significant enough to support.”<sup>19</sup> So, the public institution turns into a centrifuge for the collective development of values, an agent that exerts values in the name of its citizens. A quota can have two messages: top down, it distorts the group’s location on the state’s security map, signalling “I make sure everybody is equal in front of the state.”<sup>20</sup> Bottom up, it says “without me, there would be discrimination.” So, while a quota means the opposite of meritocracy, to others it means the end of discrimination and the beginning of *égalité* in the political sense of the word.

Rwanda for instance rebalanced its officer corps after the tragedy to a 50:50 Hutu-Tutsi ratio, whereas the overall army counted 40% Tutsi and 60% Hutu<sup>21</sup> in an estimated population of 15% Tutsi and 84% Hutu.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Lebanon, a Muslim-Christian quota for the officer corps had been introduced in 1978 and reaffirmed in 1990, establishing a 50:50 ratio only for the officer corps; its introduction in the 1970s was, however, too late to impact the discourse of ethnic dominance in the military. Yugoslavia worked on a quota based on its constituent republics, which proved ineffective insofar as regional origin was disconnected from ethnic affiliation. The group most scattered across Yugoslavia, the Serbs, thus entered the military on different regional tickets – Serbs from Croatia or Montenegro thus were able to occupy posts reserved for Croats and Montenegrins. The same was true for the regional quota in pre-war Nigeria: Ibos (originally from the South-East) settling in the South-West were recruited under the Western quota, but were perceived as Easterners by the public and colleagues alike. The quota thus did not manage to dissipate Northern fears of the South, especially South-Eastern domination.

Although quotas are helpful because they are effective, they also have a downside. Recruitment based on quota not only contradicts the military ethos of merit, it usually also creates jealousy among those groups that do not benefit from it. Moreover, the quota usually being applied to the officer corps, it leads to a rather balanced upper rank, but leaves out the common soldier. Furthermore, one has to wonder whether recruitment based on

18 Eugene B. McGregor, “Social Equity and the Public Service”, in *Diversity and Affirmative Action in Public Service*, ed. Walter D. Broadnax, Boulder: Westview Press, 2000, pp. 31-34.

19 Charles Garofalo and Dean Geuras, *Common Grounds, Common Future: Moral Agency in Public Administration, Professions and Citizenship*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2006, p. 1.

20 Matt Cavanagh, *Against Equality of Opportunity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, p. 7.

21 Alon Peled, *A Question of Loyalty: Military Manpower Policy in Multiethnic States*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 171.

22 CIA World Factbook, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html#People](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html#People) accessed 16 June 2017.

ethnicity might not, again, reinforce loyalty towards one's ethnic group even more.

Ethnically mixed units might act here as an antidote. Based on the contact hypothesis, ethnic mixture might contribute to identity deconstruction and improvement of interethnic relations. Immigration countries especially, such as New Zealand, the United States, and Australia, have relied on this principle. In colonial armies, mixed units were avoided precisely because they initiated integration to some extent and diluted the principle of "martial races." It is for this reason that a high number of post-colonial armies inherited a system of homogeneous units. In practice, many multi-ethnic states today have turned to mixed units, or a combination of homogeneous and mixed units. Homogeneous units make sense in cases of linguistic differences and to avoid the imposition of one language on another group, such as in Switzerland, Belgium and Canada.

Plural forces do not have to be inefficient – but even more than homogenous ones, they need to adhere to military rules of discipline, cohesion, leadership and meritocracy in order to build a parallel identity for the individual, and to protect the forces from potential socio-political intrusion. Where the political leadership actively interferes with this – perhaps by hijacking the institution altogether – the armed forces are powerless. Where they are nevertheless seen, by the population, as an institution representing the whole of the plural nation, they ultimately have the luxury to distance themselves from politics.



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# Plural Police Forces

*Florence Gaub*

Internal security forces are, in several ways, the neglected sibling of the armed forces. Generally less funded, less equipped and less appreciated by their surrounding societies, they equally receive less scholarly attention than the military. This is even more so the case when looking at plural police forces: the few studies that exist emerged all in the context of international efforts in the Balkans to build accountable police forces.<sup>1</sup> As with their more strategic counterparts in the military, plural police forces struggle with an image of ineffectiveness, sectarianism and politicization – but perhaps even more so than the armed forces. When Lebanon’s civil war broke out, its police force suffered 24% desertion whereas the armed forces saw only 5 to 10% desertion.

A closer look reveals that this is only partly true, though: while in some ways the police are at a disadvantage compared to the military when it comes to national narratives, it is precisely its local nature which can shield the police from the politicization of pluralism.

## Police Politics: Inroads for Fragmentation

In several ways, the police forces are institutionally less equipped to generate cohesion in their staff than the armed forces are, and seem, therefore, more vulnerable to sectarian tendencies. Although like the armed forces the police have a collective task – keeping the peace in a given society – they achieve this generally in a localized and diversified rather than collective and national fashion. As a result, neither the command structure nor the training and outlook of a police force will be national and focused on a common task; instead, police forces – with the exception of special units – are structured around the localities of which they are part. Police force duties can be as varied as patrolling, traffic regulating, riot control, and crime scene investigation. Moreover, their tasks are constant whereas military operations are singular moments. While the armed forces can therefore prepare and train for an exceptional event requiring cohesion, the police’s task is a daily one which requires very little cohesion.

This also has an impact on morale and thereby professional pride (or lack thereof): where the military will be celebrated for a successful battle, most police forces get very little credit for the occurrence of non-events, such as the prevention of crime. Equally, the often-negative interaction with citizens – be it because of corruption or crime – means that the police generally have a less positive image in society, which has a negative impact on professional

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1 Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Recommendations on Policing in Multi-Ethnic Societies*, February 2006, available at [www.osce.org/hcnm/32227?download=true](http://www.osce.org/hcnm/32227?download=true)

identity.

In addition, police forces cannot tap into the same national narrative as the armed forces. Given their highly localized nature, police forces generally find it difficult to generate support at the national level, and, consequently, neither possess the level of public affection the armed forces often receive, nor provide a national outlook for their service members.

Police officers, therefore, do not see themselves as a larger collective in the same way their military counterparts do. Rather, the immediate reference point is the police station and perhaps the command at town level. From a sociological point of view, police officers could, therefore, be less inclined to identify with their organization as a source of collective identity, and perhaps more with their sectarian identity.

## **The Power of Local Politics: Professional Policing**

However, this does not imply that police forces will by default be vulnerable to sectarianism and politicization. For a start, professional identity is, in this context, highly dependent on the state of the institution as a whole. Where pluralism overlaps with resource constraints, the problem is often wrongly identified. An underfunded and poor-performing police force will, by default, provide little source for professional identity construction, whereas a professional, ethical, well-equipped force will. Where police forces work 72-hour shifts with poor pay – as they do in too many places –, they will not only identify less in a positive way with their work place, they will also be more prone to corruption and violence – and generate less positive exchanges with their surrounding societies.

Yet plural police forces can function even when they are badly resourced. As they are often hired and posted within their own community, communal clashes between police and local inhabitants based on sectarian issues are rare. However, when a police force stemming from one group polices an area inhabited by another, such as occurred in Northern Ireland, clashes may occur. Yet, precisely because of the local nature of policing, conflicts are localized and less politicized, focused on crime or domestic violence rather than strategic issues or political power. Indeed, the plural nature of the police can be an advantage for mediating within a neighbourhood that is itself plural.

Even the police's status as a neglected sibling of the armed forces can be advantageous in a highly sectarian environment. Because they are less national and consequently less prestigious, police forces face less political interference with recruitment and promotion than the military. As a result, the likelihood of introducing politicization into the police force's ranks is reduced.

## **Undoing the Plural Police Knot**

In light of these characteristics, the police force is perhaps a better place to “de-sectarianize” than the armed forces. One such example is the Northern Irish police which, following

the Good Friday Agreement, was renamed and managed to increase the recruitment of Catholics.<sup>2</sup> Flanked with a national political narrative, it has since gained a more positive image in society. Another such example is the Kosovo police force. Although marred by political tension, the multi-ethnic units built after the end of the war – comprising 9% Serb officers – were surprisingly solid: “the inter-ethnic social climate at the KPSS (Kosovo police service) and in the multi-ethnic units was judged to be almost as good as in South Serbia and Macedonia”. The study came to the conclusion that this was the result of living and working together. “Police officers of different ethnic groups developed the basic co-operative attitudes necessary for the joint execution of their tasks”.<sup>3</sup>

Crucially, such police reforms will fail without the political support of the community’s leaders. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where reform was imposed by the international community, it was perceived as a punitive rather than constructive measure. International forces were stationed in local police forces to supervise and vet officers, and quotas were fixed for plural policing. However, after seven years with the quota system in place, the objectives of increased policing plurality remained largely unfulfilled.<sup>4</sup>

In order to achieve de-sectarianization, a police force must provide its staff with a cohesion-building identity similar to the military’s national narrative and call for collective action. This can be chiefly accomplished through the creation of a professional identity across the force, and the strengthening of the rule of law. Where police forces are impartial and are seen as impartial, their sectarian image (and self-perception) will wane over time.

2 McGoldrick, Stacey and McArdle, Andrea, *Uniform Behavior: Police Localism and National Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006

3 Thorsten Stodiek and Wolfgang Zellner, “The Creation of Multi-Ethnic Police Services in the Western Balkans: A Record of Mixed Success”, Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung, 2007, available at [www.bundesstiftung-friedensforschung.de/images/pdf/forschung/berichtzellner.pdf](http://www.bundesstiftung-friedensforschung.de/images/pdf/forschung/berichtzellner.pdf)

4 Florian Bieber, “Policing the Peace after Yugoslavia: Police Reform between External Imposition and Domestic Reform”, GRIPS Policy Research Center, 2010, available at <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ngi/dpaper/10-07.html>

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# Bridging the Gaps: Who Can Build Security in Post-Conflict Iraq?

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*\*This paper was written in June 2016*

In 2014, the brutal offensive led by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (commonly known by its Arabic acronym *Daesh* until it renamed itself “Islamic State” on 29 June the same year) and the takeover of large swathes of both Iraqi and Syrian territories came as a cruel reminder of the extreme fragility, if not the mere collapse, of security in these two countries. The mindboggling speed of the jihadists’ successes resounded as both a stunning failure and humiliation for Iraq’s armed forces, who had to abandon their posts in Mosul – the country’s second largest city – and leave their arms, vehicles and uniforms behind them. Iraq’s military and security apparatus, which was supposed to lead the recapture effort and act as the primary ground relay of US-led coalition air strikes, fled before the assault and deserted again a year later in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar governorate. The Islamic State’s successes, albeit offset by significant setbacks since 2015, continue to resonate as a reminder of Iraq’s profound post-Baathist security crisis. This is all the more evident given that nearly US\$100b have been invested since 2003 in the recovery of the security sector in Iraq and that only meagre progress has been achieved so far.

Rather than being seen as a “model,” Iraq became a counter-model for many of its neighbours, infested at its core with politicization, praetorianism, clientelism, sectarianism, and corruption. The devastating legacy of foreign occupation and years of authoritarian and repressive rule, including under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, have heavily weighed on the difficulties to counter the jihadist expansion, particularly due to Iraqi Sunnis’ deplorable situation and a crumbling political formula in Baghdad. Faced with the breakdown of the state, chaos and a delegitimized transition, the Iraqis, in their ample majority, still do not feel protected by their authorities. This particularly applies to the Sunnis who have borne the brunt of severe abuses carried out by the military and other militias over the past decade. The security vacuum fueled the proliferation of paramilitary groups that all claim the restoration of order and legitimacy – among them tribes, militiamen, but also the jihadists themselves, initially portrayed as “liberators” in the territories that they conquered. In the background, a number of former Baath Party members and officers, dismissed as part of the “de-Baathification”<sup>1</sup> measure, also seem willing to settle their accounts.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Hazem Saghieh, “The Life and Death of de-Baathification”, *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (REMMM), *L’Irak en perspective*, No. 117-118, July 2007, p. 203-223.

2 Sinan Adnan and Aaron Reese, *Beyond the Islamic State: Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency*, Middle East Security Report 24, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), October 2014.

In such circumstances, how can Iraq rebuild security and assist thousands of civilians with no horizon in sight except daily survival? How can the country ensure that the struggle waged against the Islamic State will mean, in the longer run, the recreation of a functional security apparatus along lines that are no longer communal but national? What formula could guarantee the legitimacy of existing security institutions, including informal ones? Is Iraq heading toward recentralization, or increased federalization? Can local levels of powers contribute to stabilizing the country more effectively? Or on the contrary, should they be “contained” so that they cannot thwart current efforts deployed by the central government? What is, therefore, the room for manoeuvre retained by the West? The reconstruction of a security order is inseparable from Iraq’s future as a coherent state, and from issues regarding fairer distribution of power between communities and their representation

## **Iraq’s Military: From Failure to Recovery?**

In 2016, Iraq’s security situation remains dire, as illustrated by the ease by which, two years ago, the Islamic State seized swathes of territory without any resistance from “official” armed forces. Such a situation questions many of the paradigms relating to security reconstruction in conflict-ridden environments, and more specifically raises the question of the role played by the post-Baathist power formula in the failure of security over the last decade. It also highlights the need to reconsider realities more critically in order to define strategies in line with dynamics on the ground and likely to enable rapid improvement of civilians’ living conditions. In this respect, Iraq’s armed forces remain the pillar of the effort to rebuild security, as well as an instructive case regarding past mistakes and current challenges to safeguard Iraq as a sovereign state despite advanced fragmentation. How can we explain that the Iraqi armed forces were reduced to a “phantom limb” in 2014? How can we explain their failure against the Islamic State and threats such as rising Shia militias? What are the root causes of this crisis, and what reforms can help the armed forces recover their strength and cohesion?

Formed in 1921 under the British mandate, Iraq’s army has played a critical role in the country’s history. Until its dissolution by the US in 2003, the Iraqi military found itself at the heart of many socio-political evolutions and, for decades, nationalism coalesced around the almost mythological figure of the soldier fighting for freedom and sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> A majority of Iraqis used to view their army as an emblem and a guarantee of their survival, even though, from the beginning, it was also a factor of instability, with Iraqi officers shaping a symbiotic relationship between the political and military spheres that propelled Iraq toward enduring authoritarianism. Rebuilding security is today the fundamental challenge. At a time when the Islamic State is weakened but still a structural threat, Iraqi armed forces continue to come across as too vulnerable and largely unstructured, unable to extract themselves from violence, sectarianism and corruption to be a successful instrument of stabilization and peace.

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3 Myriam Benraad, “L’armée irakienne au cœur de l’impasse irakienne”, in *Les armées dans les révolutions arabes*, edited by Saïd Haddad, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016, pp. 47-60.

Historically, the Iraqi armed forces were made of officers drawn from the Sunni middle class and, to a lesser extent, the Kurds. Military education used to be the only way to rise socially, although this aroused the hostility of the Shia community that perceived it as a sectarian tool for foreign interests. In the early 1920s, the British, who had inherited the three Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra under a League of Nations mandate, modernized their structures. Early on, the army was less of a national institution seeking independence than a force made of volunteers, which absolved the British from the menial work of maintaining order, in particular against Shia, tribal and Kurdish rebellions. As a result, the colonial strategy never included training a professional army that would federate Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious groups. Quite the opposite, it aimed at keeping precedence over a small and subservient force that would never turn its arms against the Crown – or at least, so thought London.

Following Iraq's independence in 1932, the armed forces enjoyed increasing popularity and became autonomous from the civilian sphere, showing signs of praetorianism with military interference in politics and several coup attempts. The central state generalized the use of force and extended conscription. The army became a crucible of ideologies such as socialism and pan-Arabism, and Iraqi officers, known for their personal ambitions, tried to impose their vision of the nation. The rise to power of the Baath Party only reinforced this turn, crystallized around militarism and the weakening of civil society. The army lost its autonomy as the state became hyper-centralized and militias, secret police and intelligence services subjugated armed forces. Saddam Hussein placed his relatives at the highest positions of the military and security apparatus, and structured whole networks of informants while systematizing repression against his "enemies" and the members of the party itself. Personalization of power replaced traditional links between state and society, and destroyed any sense of national solidarity. Through "warrior populism," the regime built a strategy that guaranteed the loyalty and discipline of armed forces, and curbed dissent. Such inner domination, combined with a quest for hegemony beyond Iraq's borders, as illustrated by the long and deadly war against Iran (1980-1988), decimated the Iraqi army. Less than two years later, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and further eroded the army's capabilities against the background of international sanctions. When an uprising broke out in Shia provinces in 1991, rallying supporters of the opposition and mutinous soldiers, Baghdad turned to violent repression. Having lost territorial control and faced with desertions and coup attempts, the regime had to rely increasingly on tribes and militias to survive.

Before 2003, Iraq's armed forces had thus virtually ceased to exist, highlighting the rapid US invasion and the absence of any meaningful resistance. In the aftermath of a lightning war, the regime was toppled and its organs dissolved. Between 350,000 and 400,000 Iraqi soldiers were banned from working and conscription was suspended. The coalition aimed at recreating forces that would limit the risk of Iraq returning to dictatorship. To achieve this, they were to be placed under civilian leadership, depoliticized and representative of all communities as a way to counter the perception of Sunni domination in their ranks. These decisions proved disastrous, however: Iraq's army was destroyed and its members immediately joined the insurgency. The "founding mistakes" made by the US durably complicated the task of reconstituting a military. Indeed, the new forces – named "Iraqi



security forces”<sup>4</sup> in the Pentagon’s terminology – were, as they had been under the British, dependent on the occupier for their equipment and training, while bases and arms depots had otherwise been looted. The new military was not familiar with the weapons supplied by Washington and was insufficiently mentored. It soon became a full protagonist of the conflict, ridden by ethnic, sectarian and ideological cleavages, and infiltrated by paramilitary groups.

During his eight years in office, Nouri al-Maliki sought to concentrate all powers, like Saddam before him. Acting simultaneously as Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, Minister of the Interior and head of intelligence services, he deftly interpreted his role as Commander in Chief of Iraq’s armed forces to maximize his control. He politicized the military by personally appointing hundreds of commanders, officers, policemen and members of security services. In addition, some ministries and units turned into a quasi “private army” under his patronage in a context of growing repression that Maliki presented as a necessity to counter terrorism and save Iraq’s unity. In 2011, the situation took a more serious turn when the former Prime Minister crushed popular protests demanding reforms to alleviate poverty and insecurity. The movement, Sunni in composition, militarized its ranks in 2013, leading to the Islamic State’s offensive in early 2014. The group captured Fallujah, Ramadi and much of Anbar (Haditha, Jurf al-Sakhar, Anah, Abu Ghraib, Saqlawiyya, Al-Qaim, Al-Rutba), before taking over considerable parts of Salahaddin (Baiji, Tikrit), Diyala (Saadiyya, Jalawla), Kirkuk and Nineveh (Tal Afar), and finally of Mosul and the border crossing with Syria’s Deir Ez-Zor province in June 2014.

With the exception of a few areas, little progress was made by the Iraqi armed forces throughout 2014 to regain lost territory. Their collapse, around the escape of generals from Nineveh (Aboud Qanbar, Ali Ghaidan, and other operational commanders) and the impression that all forces had deserted, leaving behind hundreds of millions of US dollars of equipment in the hands of the Islamic State, marked a stark failure for both Washington and Baghdad. Although they outnumbered the insurgents and had significant firepower, Iraqi troops fled by the thousands, allowing the Islamic State to march toward Baghdad. This dereliction was predictable, unfortunately, and underlined how the Iraqi army remained unable to plan and conduct large-scale operations and successful counteroffensives. Moreover, this gap had much to do with Maliki’s disastrous legacy, singled out for being more focused on his own interests than on Iraq’s ability to defend itself without close air support. 2015 was characterized by virulent clashes in Samarra in February, the dramatic fall of Ramadi in May after deadly suicide attacks, the (at least partial) recapture of Tikrit in March-April, and renewed insurgency in the governorate of Diyala, where the Islamic State has been present since its local inception in October 2006.

In February 2016, Ramadi, which has suffered more damage than any other city, was recaptured after months of siege by the Islamic State. The city must still be cleared by the army. 4,000 Iraqi soldiers also deployed around the Makhmour area in the Nineveh governorate in preparation for an offensive on Mosul. In May, the Iraqi army and its allies

4 They consist of the Ministry of Defense’s forces (army, air force, navy) as well as the Ministry of the Interior’s (police and Popular Mobilization Forces – see below).

broke the 18-month siege imposed by the Islamic State on the western city of Haditha and recaptured a number of villages along the Euphrates River. An offensive was launched under the command of the Anbar Operations for the strategic towns of Rutba and Karma before heading toward Fallujah, a ten-year long sanctuary of Sunni jihadism in Iraq. While it was widely expected that Baghdad would launch a Mosul operation in 2015, the offensive was postponed to 2016. In February 2015, Colonel Massoud Saleh stated that the battle to liberate the northern city would take 30,000 soldiers and months of combat, with an estimated 10,000 Islamic State militants. Since March 2016, operations are underway with increased military assistance of the US (airstrikes, training, and special advisers). This has led to the destruction of key jihadist infrastructure and to the elimination of top commanders.

## A Vast Landscape of Paramilitary Groups

Amid the disarray of the regular armed forces, the discredit of the political system and the disintegration of the security sector, legitimacy has shifted to a variety of informal players, themselves supported by external protagonists that have filled the void left by the collapse of the Iraqi state in 2003. This phenomenon is hardly new, yet it has been considerably accentuated since December 2011 and the US withdrawal, combined with the personalization of the military and security apparatus by Maliki and the Islamic State's onslaught. Iraqi citizens were encouraged to place their protection in the hands of insurgents and militiamen, and tend to expect from them representation that the government has failed to ensure. The Iraqi army has not fully recovered from its defeat in 2014 and many young men prefer to join paramilitary groups, which they consider as bolder and less corrupt. This profound crisis of the military and security institutions in Iraq highlights much of the popularity that the Islamic State has enjoyed; the group built much of its appeal and strength on the security vacuum created by the occupation and by a dysfunctional political system, as well as on the abuses of the military and acts of retaliation carried out by Shia militias and Kurdish forces in many areas.<sup>5</sup>

It is critical, in such circumstances, to assess the status of non-state actors fighting alongside the Iraqi army or independently. Though an accurate overview is difficult because of their sheer number and movement, these actors consist of three main forces in Iraq today: Kurdish Peshmergas, Shia militias and Sunni tribes. They are not simple military forces but also central socio-political entities, inseparable from the environment in which they operate and that have contributed to redrawing the conflict along particular strategies, ambitions and antagonistic visions. All these aspects, in particular the powerful local anchorage of these players, must be better understood and taken into account at a time when a cohesive coalition is still struggling to form itself against the Islamic State and extended menaces. Who are the viable interlocutors apart from established authorities? Do their projects contradict the idea of rebuilding a functional state? Which ones are willing to negotiate Iraq's future while engaging in genuine pacification efforts?

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5 See, on this matter Amnesty International's detailed reports since 2014, highlighting vicious campaigns of sectarian/ethnic retaliations by Shia and Kurdish forces, and the failure of Iraqi authorities to hold them accountable.

## ***Understanding the Fight Against the Islamic State***

More than any other formation in Iraq's highly split armed landscape, the Islamic State has been able to exploit institutional precariousness and abuses by the government and its allies to impose itself in Sunni territories. Beyond its use of extreme violence to achieve objectives (the so-called "caliphate"), the group must be seen as deeply political, ideological and socio-cultural, emanating first and foremost from of the flawed post-Baathist order. Because of the choice made to proceed with the blind dismantling of the army in 2003, many Sunnis found themselves excluded and marginalized from the security sector, without any hope of a turnaround and reintegration. In addition, de-Baathification and anti-terrorism laws led to the arrest of thousands of Sunnis, which provided breeding ground for radicals to impose themselves within the ranks of the insurgency and among civilians. Active in central and northern governorates (Anbar, Salahaddin, Nineveh, Kirkuk), but also in Baghdad and Diyala, many Sunni insurgents joined the Islamic State early on. This dynamic goes back to 2004 and the devastating sieges of Fallujah when Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established a first Islamic emirate in reaction to the occupation and growing Shia ascendance in Iraq,<sup>6</sup> attracting to his cause senior officers of the disbanded army.

Ever since, the Islamic State has obeyed a logic of "remilitarization" on multiple fronts that targets central institutions, their symbols and members (army, police, elite units, and security officials) in what has become a protracted battle. In 2014, its breakthrough served, at least temporarily, the return of other armed factions.<sup>7</sup> The Sunni community is known for its heterogeneity and never entirely supported the Islamic State's ideology and methods; yet, enduring discontent and resentment offered the jihadists renewed opportunities after 2011 and the US withdrawal to win back many of their bastions. Indisputably, raging war in neighbouring Syria also allowed its "vanguard" to export its pan-Islamic enterprise regionally and to bolster its legitimacy. *Daesh* is considered by many Sunnis as the only way to recapture lost political power and as a tool for the "re-Sunnification" of Iraq against Shia supremacy. From the start, the Islamic State manipulated dissatisfaction in the areas it penetrated to garner Sunni support (or popular passivity), while offering repentance to those who had allied themselves with American and Iraqi authorities in the recent past.<sup>8</sup> Once installed, the jihadist group strove to win hearts and minds by restoring basic security, justice and services (electricity, drinking water and sewage), creating jobs, and fighting corruption. The quest for security was particularly vivid among local populations that had lost confidence in the government and the army, loathed for their many abuses, sectarian policies, and repression.<sup>9</sup>

While acknowledging this situation is essential to assessing available options to reverse it,

6 Myriam Benraad, "De la tentation hégémonique au déclin de l'Organisation d'Al-Qa'ida en Irak, miroir des métamorphoses d'une insurrection", *Maghreb-Machrek*, No. 197, 2008, pp. 87-101.

7 Among them factions like Ansar al-Islam, the Islamic Army of Iraq, Hamas of Iraq, the Mujahidin Army, the 1920 Revolution Brigades and Baath Party loyalists such as the Naqshbandi Army, the General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries, the Supreme Command for Jihad and Liberation and the Free Iraqi Army. Opposition to the government allowed for an alliance between these hitherto ideologically diverse forces.

8 Myriam Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa': Its Rise and Fall," *Middle East Policy* (18)1, 2011, pp. 121-131; "La Sahwa tribale irakienne : 'réveil' de la tradition ou subversion ?", *Maghreb-Machrek*, No. 212, 2012, pp. 27-46.

9 Mosul's residents did not feel safe in the presence of an army they used to call the "checkpoint army" and that had multiplied checkpoints, extorting inhabitants and feeding shortage.

the adhesion to the Islamic State's project has significantly differed from one region to the other, and has diminished as the abuses committed by its combatants have spread. Since the loss of Ramadi in 2016, the Islamic State has suffered many military setbacks, high casualties within its ranks and weakening morale, including in some of its traditional sanctuaries such as Fallouja and Mosul. A number of Sunnis, including insurgent factions like the Islamic Army, never identified with the totalitarian view of Sunni Islam that the Islamic State advocates. Many accounts show that Sunni civilians do not consent to the jihadist project and have opposed the centralization of authority within one single entity; their submission to the group has often been purely circumstantial and intended to escape death. Likewise, the security strategy enforced by the jihadists has endured some obstacles. In addition to their exactions and terror regime (which, in practice, few can cope with), they did not keep many of their promises.

In general, Iraqi Sunnis remain divided about the notion of a caliphate and what a "post-Islamic State" would mean for them. On the one hand, a fraction continues to support the group for reasons that oscillate from ideological and political membership to the lack of alternatives; Sunni politicians have indeed, for the most part, lost legitimacy due to their alignment with Baghdad, in particular during the 2012-2013 wave of Sunni protests, or conversely their failure to protect citizens. On the other hand, a growing number of Sunnis reject the Islamic State's brutality and suicidal strategy, and call for arming the men and tribes willing to expel its members. Many feel that the regular armed forces are not only unable to rout the Islamic State, despite the many killings of some of the group's top commanders in recent airstrikes, but that their redeployment in Sunni areas still held by the jihadists is not desirable in view of their past catastrophic record. The counterpart of anti-jihadist mobilization is regional autonomy for many Sunnis, modelled on Kurdistan, which Baghdad has so far always opposed but could be the only way out of the crisis.

### ***Kurdish Peshmergas Between Battle and Border***

In 2014, many Kurds were unwilling to be drawn into the conflict with the Islamic State, in spite of violent clashes that had occurred with political parties and Kurdish Peshmergas ("those who confront death"), namely the independent military forces ensuring the security of Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region (the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil and Suleimaniyya). Since June 2014, the Kurds have become targets of the radical militants, such as the suicide attacks in Diyala governorate where the Islamic State attacked the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the town of Jalawla. Most Kurds had lost faith in the Maliki government to serve their interests and those of Iraq, and initially remained on the margin of the battle. Moreover, the retreat of the Iraqi army from the northern governorates allowed Kurdish Peshmergas to progress and take control of the oil-rich and disputed governorate of Kirkuk, expanding their zone of control and seizing the armament left by the Iraqi army. In August, the Islamic State launched a new offensive against Kurdish-held territory and attacked positions around Zumar, while capturing the town of Sinjar, displacing and later massacring Yazidi populations. The group advanced towards Erbil, prompting the US to launch its first airstrikes to help the Kurds repel the combatants.

Since this attempted assault on Iraqi Kurdistan, the Peshmergas have constituted the vanguard of the fight against the Islamic State, filling the void and taking advantage of these critical events to enhance their influence and gain control of disputed territories. While their exact number is unknown, the Peshmergas are organized around 36 brigades, with Christian and Yazidi combat units under their command. Some Peshmerga units include women, generally assigned to logistical and administrative tasks. In practice, the existing brigades have little contact between one another and are controlled by three distinct entities: the two historical Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and PUK, and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs formally under authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), presided by Massoud Barzani. Some possess intelligence agencies and a specific police force, which is active in tracking down the jihadists. The Peshmergas exhibit a warrior culture that dates back thousands of years and was strengthened by aspirations for independence. While they formed a guerrilla movement in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they turned into a parallel army under the tutelage of local tribal clans to which they are subservient – namely the Barzan and Talaban. In contrast to militias, the Peshmergas were never banned by Iraqi law.

From agreements to confrontations, the military entities that share control of Kurdistan retain their specific security and economic interests despite the constitutional formation of the KRG in 2005. The pre-eminence of partisan entities is marked in the areas beyond the territories of the autonomous region where the authority of the KRG does not apply. These areas include the city of Kirkuk – where Kurdish forces' lines have held despite Islamic State attacks since 2014 to take over its wealth – and surrounding oil fields (Khabbaz) that went under almost exclusive Kurdish control. The conflict opposing the Islamic State and the Peshmergas has led to the recapture of the Mosul Dam in August 2014, Sinjar in 2014-2015 after a series of assaults with the PKK and the People's Protection Units (YPG),<sup>10</sup> and the Nineveh plains in 2015, where the front tends to turn into a border. From the north of Sinjar to the two governorates of Kirkuk and Salahaddin, bypassing Mosul, lies a buffer zone emptied of its population, separating areas disputed between Kurds and Arabs. Large-scale military engagements have become scarce because of air support brought by the US, including drone strikes. Beyond Kirkuk, up to the border with Iran, the situation is even more complex. The jihadists were expelled and the PUK forces share the field with forces loyal to Baghdad. Thus, the border of Kurdish-controlled areas, cropped by the presence of Arab armed forces, is unclear. In the absence of a medium-term prospect of regaining territories controlled by the jihadists, the northern front, stable and calm, tends to permanently define a territory under Kurdish domination. Its layout is guaranteed by the coalition's air presence, which enables the protection of this line that Kurdish forces would be unable to defend on their own.

Between territorial expansion, the establishment of a protection zone and international recognition of this *de facto* border, Iraqi Kurds have so far collected the dividends of the fight against the Islamic State. However, the Islamic State offensive has also complicated Kurdish internal politics and the situation of the KRG is marked by crises that could settle in time. As a result, in spite of a common enemy, Kurdish fractures could deepen. The next challenge for

10 Homegrown defense forces of Syria's Kurdish areas, which emerged in the context of the civil war.

Peshmerga forces is, of course, the recapture of Mosul, the Islamic State's stronghold since it fell into the group's hands in 2014. In January 2015, the Peshmergas launched a preliminary offensive with the objective of severing supply routes to Tal Afar, supported by coalition airstrikes, and to recapture outskirts. However, Kurdish officials stated that they had no plan to move beyond Kurdish areas and the frontline – in other words what they consider as the “border” of their region. Retaking the city of Mosul itself would thus be the responsibility of the Iraqi armed forces themselves. Peshmerga commanders have nevertheless made no secret of the fact that the inclusion of more Sunni tribal fighters in the armed forces would be key to holding Mosul in a still hypothetical post-Islamic State phase.

### ***Shia Militias and the Popular Mobilization Forces***

Shia militias count today among Iraq's most influential forces on the ground and possess a long history that largely predates the US invasion. Paramilitary groups initially emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to the sectarian policies of Saddam Hussein. Iraq's Shia were also divided as to who would take the direction of their community vis-à-vis Iran, most notably after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim split from the Dawa Party to form his party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and its military wing, the Badr Brigade, under the tutelage of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. Underground units that fought against the regime began to form themselves during the course of the Iraq-Iran War and reappeared and flourished following its overthrow. Since that time, groups like the Badr Brigade have played a central role and have taken key positions within the new security apparatuses, operating outside of the state as distinct armed groups.

Despite bloody skirmishes with each other and against the state, Shia militias went unchallenged until 2011. Indeed, after the civil war broke out in Syria and the US withdrew from Iraq, things started to clearly go downhill. Maliki reneged on his promises to the Sunnis and continued to treat their community with distrust. His heavy-handed repressive measures pushed many into the Islamic State's arms, which in turn pushed Shia militiamen to respond. To add to this dark picture, Maliki, to retain his grip on power, splintered militias and pushed key military players away from their root political parties. He did so by co-opting the Badr Brigade to join his cabinet and empowering other militias to weaken his main Shia rivals. As the Syrian conflict escalated, Iraqi Sunnis sensed an opportunity to challenge the central government, while the Shia sensed a threat to the post-2003 political order. The militias were first mobilized to fight on Syrian soil and by early 2014, months before the Islamic State took over Mosul, hundreds began returning to contain the jihadists who were gaining ground in Iraq. They only grew in power until the fall of Mosul. Since then, three main Shia militias exist in Iraq: the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah. They not only assist the Iraqi army against the Islamic State but also spearhead many of its operations. Senior army officers cannot challenge these militias as they know that they were backed by the government and sponsored by Iran.

Against the backdrop of the Islamic State's offensive that proved a strategic disaster for the Iraqi army, elements of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force gathered for the fight in the Diyala and Salahaddin governorates as of 2014. A decisive development was the 13



June fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, calling on Iraqis to bear arms and defend Iraq from the Islamic State. Tens of thousands of volunteers rushed to army recruitment centres. On 15 June 2014, then Prime Minister Maliki set up the “Popular Mobilization Forces” (PMF), *Hashd shaabi*, also known as National Mobilization (*Hashd watani*) to serve as the umbrella for approximately 40 Shia militia groups (with few Sunnis, Christians and Yazidis), to support the army. Overnight, militias went from being unofficial groups to a state-sponsored military organization supervised by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior’s “Popular Mobilization Units directorate”. However, due to the lack of infrastructure and state capacity to absorb new recruits, the largest Shia Islamist parties, as well as offices of the Iranian-backed militias, took them on. It is difficult to confirm the number of PMF but estimates range between 100,000 and 120,000. In addition to the most powerful of the Iranian-backed militias, there are tens of thousands of volunteers operating under the command of the *Hashd shaabi*, who chose not to join Iranian militias.

Since 2014, the *Hashd*, consisting of pre-existing militias and volunteers, has played a prominent role in operations against the Islamic State (as in Salahaddin in 2015) and has made a fundamental difference on the battlefield. Among other militias are the Peace Companies, formerly known as the Mahdi Army, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Kataib al-Imam Ali, all trained and equipped by military advisers from Iran, Hezbollah, but also by Turkey (for Sunni and Turkmeni troops) and the US (probably the most controversial aspect of the battle, with accusations of providing the militias with direct armament). Many militias operate with their intelligence, administrative systems (including a court of law), and media channels for morale boosting, battlefield updates and propaganda. The behaviour of the PMF is supposed to be regulated by laws and directives of the Iraqi government, and Sistani also issued a 20-point “Advice and Guidance to the Fighters on the Battlefields” that encourages respect toward civilians, especially Sunnis, and condemns revenge killings and related criminal acts. Yet, elements of the PMF have been accused in several areas of Iraq of war crimes, primarily motivated by sectarianism. In Tikrit, some militiamen committed violence in 2014 and praised their actions publicly.

### ***Sunni Tribes Between the Islamic State and Dissent***

Sunni tribes have endorsed an important role in the post-Baathist arena. Sometimes peaceful, on the sidelines of the insurgency, sometimes aligned with jihadist factions like the Islamic State, they are no minor player in the battle that is currently waged. The overwhelming onslaught of the Islamic State was in large part a consequence of tribal collaboration. Some tribes, like those of the Anbar tribal revolutionary councils, were indeed seeking revenge against both the US and the Shia government, which they consider to have abandoned them following their mobilization against the Islamic State in 2007-2008. In 2014, Maliki further alienated the tribes when, during the Anbar campaign, he declared that the offensive against the Islamic State would oppose the “followers of Hussein to the followers of Yazid.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike Al-Qaeda, whose members had attacked civilians, the Islamic State promised the sheikhs a return to peace, prosperity and stature. In most of the conquered territories, the tribes, which

11 Hassan Hassan, “More Than ISIS, Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 June 2014, available at [www.carnegieendowment.org/sada/55930](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/sada/55930)



had grown tired with Maliki's policies and the deterioration of security, received money and weapons from the jihadists, and were further promised autonomy in their affairs. In return, they set up combat cells and wide networks of sympathizers and accomplices in favour of the Islamic State and its breakthrough. But this alliance, more opportunistic than ideological, was short-lived. A reversal occurred in the very weeks that followed the fall of Mosul. The tribes to which the Islamic State had promised to hand over power (Dulaim, Jamil, Bakra, Tamim) were set aside, and abuses and killings started.

The potential for rebellion is higher among tribes whose members are former soldiers and army officers. In the Salahaddin governorate, Sunni sheikhs soon realized that the goals of the Islamic State were incompatible with theirs, namely opposing Baghdad while achieving a truce with the Kurds. They rejected jihadist affirmation at the expense of civilian populations and the imposed reign of terror that was similar to past tyrannical excesses. The Islamic State's enterprise was even less accepted by a number of local Sunni tribes who had already experienced such situations in the past. An opportunity emerged for the coalition, consisting of changing the terms of the battle by recreating the conditions of tribal mobilization. American efforts moved towards replicating the former tribal "awakening" against the jihadists, including the sheikhs who had made a pact with the Islamic State. Hundreds of US military advisers were sent to Iraq as of 2014 to explore this option. The jihadists had, however, long anticipated their response. While they had relied primarily on the tribes, they launched a deadly insurgency against them.

Unlike the first *Sahwa*, the Islamic State no longer sought to rely on local players but on its own capacities. In a context of intensifying foreign airstrikes, the Islamic State fighters developed an even more extreme view, considering all of the tribes – allied or not, "pure" or "repented" of their previous cooperation with US and Iraqi authorities – as enemies. This strategy of eradicating any existing or imagined opposition is not secondary: it has been a strong message sent to the Sunnis and to the tribes in particular. When in late 2014 the Islamic State attacked Ramadi, it brutally killed entire local clans accused of siding with the government and Shia militias. In most cases, these murders were facilitated by the complicity or action of other tribes willing to settle old scores. The tribes ready to dislodge the Islamic State have had their requests for support and armament long ignored by both Baghdad and the coalition, while civilian populations, despite local revolts, have been unable to evacuate most besieged areas (Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul in 2016).

## Rebuilding Iraq's Fragmented Security

Indisputably, identifying ground players does not suffice. As a matter of fact, such identification, while necessary, does not solve the more enduring question of their capacities and resources, as well as the issue of their coordination and integration toward rebuilding an operational security sector that will exert influence on institutional reconstruction, power sharing and the contours of the future Iraqi state. 2015 showed that every "liberation" campaign in territories seized by the Islamic State – the governorates of Salahaddin, Diyala, Kirkuk, Anbar and Nineveh – meant long and tough field resistance. Western airstrikes,

while decisive in most battles since 2014-2015, could not have been effective without the active support of local Iraqi players during operations, not only for combat purposes but also to protect civilians, who have suffered a humanitarian crises, including starvation under the sieges of Mosul and Fallujah in 2016.<sup>12</sup> Thousands of Iraqis have been displaced internally, when they did not leave the country altogether for lack of hope of any upcoming improvement in the security situation.

To date, the counter-offensive has proven arduous and most proclaimed “victories” are fragile faced with a jihadist group that is determined and mobile on the ground. Despite setbacks, its complete defeat still seems remote, by the admission of Western authorities. Its structures have proven incredibly resilient over time, and despite the loss of large parts of the 55,000km<sup>2</sup> that the jihadists had initially placed under their control, they pursue their trafficking (including oil smuggling) and terror. Paradoxically, they also capitalize on the bombings to strengthen their ideological grip on civilian populations by presenting themselves as their only saviour. Against all odds, the Islamic State continues to attract a substantial number of recruits. In such a volatile environment, what are the prospects for harmonizing the various active forces and ensuring their coordination and integration? If successful cooperation has been observed in parts of Iraq, how can different players such as the Iraqi armed forces, Kurdish Peshmergas, Sunni tribes and Shia militias gather to promote mutual security?

### ***Addressing the Persistence of Structural Questions***

Iraq has about 272,000 available armed forces. Since the start of the 2014 crisis, these forces have struggled to slow the jihadist progression, a situation that has much to do with structural issues (corruption, cronyism, nepotism), a deficit in communications, logistics and maintenance capabilities, leadership and moral problems, capacity gaps and wider domestic politics. When Iraq needed it most, its army came across as exhausted and incapable of fulfilling its role: the Islamic State, with less than 1,000 militants, took control of entire parts of Iraq’s territory. To the great displeasure of his Iraqi partners, US Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter even declared in 2015 that the Iraqi soldiers had shown no will to fight in Ramadi. This remark was politically daring, but rather accurate, and a remarkable admission from a high-ranking US official, 12 years after the fall of the Baathist regime. Iraq’s military faces enormous internal difficulties and will take years to be fully restored and operational.

In spite of reorganization and dismissals at the highest levels, many officers and soldiers are still missing. Some left out of disillusionment with Baghdad’s failure to reinforce them or because they simply did not want to die for a government in which they had lost hope – this has been the case of some Sunni generals and soldiers, less loyal to the Shia-led government, and explains also why those who were responsible for Mosul, Tikrit and Kirkuk did not really fight in 2014 for a state that they deemed dysfunctional. Lacking armament, resources, and

12 Numerous reports have accounted for the dramatic deterioration of life conditions in territories held by the Islamic State and where combats take place. See Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Fallujah Siege Starving Population. Government Forces Block Aid; ISIS Bars Civilian Flight”, 7 April 2016, available at [www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/07/iraq-fallujah-siege-starving-population](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/07/iraq-fallujah-siege-starving-population)

intelligence to engage in the right missions, they failed to protect populations. Concentrated in and around Baghdad, with a few divisions (between 50 and 80,000 men) whose role is to secure the capital, they could not have regained a semblance of control without the support of internal and external players, starting with Shia militias whose contentious functions have only increased.<sup>13</sup> Such backing has, of course, harmful effects on the military's cohesion, making its training even more fundamental. Broad and cross-communal recruitment (including the return of Sunni Arab officers) to alleviate its sectarian reputation is an imperative for the Iraqi army. At present, though, access to a career and promotions are based for the most part on party and community membership, while partisan allegiances continue to surpass merit and competence.

Against the backdrop of a collapsed military, political credibility and the legitimacy of current elites are called into question. Maliki's excessive centralization of decision-making made it difficult for the Iraqi army to react quickly on the battlefield. Following his investiture in September 2014, and despite fierce opposition from hardliners within his own camp, Prime Minister Haïdar al-Abadi, another member of the Shia Dawa Party, announced he had identified at least 50,000 "ghost soldiers" and approved court proceedings against commanders who had abandoned their posts. He pledged to change things and named a Sunni from Mosul, Khalid al-Ubaidi, as Minister of Defence. Following the collapse of Ramadi in 2015, and with a wave of demonstrations accusing the government of failing to protect Iraqi civilians, the debate on the army's negligence became more accentuated. In August, Abadi reiterated his willingness for reform, including of the police and the special forces, and required a "flattening" of the system left by the occupation and eight-year tenure of his predecessor. During his time in power, Maliki not only used politicking appointments but also deliberately squandered budgets, subverted institutions, estranged the Sunnis by throwing them into the arms of the most radical groups, and pushed many others towards militias. Questions remain about how to implement the Abadi plan, as illustrated by continued discontent in the following months – the latest and most symbolic manifestation was the popular assault (mostly by secular and Shia activists supporting populist leader Muqtada al-Sadr) on the Green Zone in May 2016<sup>14</sup> requesting public accountability and security.

Faced with the challenges engendered by the Islamic State, the Iraqi armed forces remain overall short of equipment, training, leadership, and logistical competence needed to wage battles and ensure coordination with other key players. Distrust remains widespread within its ranks, tinted with sectarianism and conflicting allegiances. After months of setbacks, the Iraqi military shows a lack of energy. This fatigue has forced its members to seek support from other belligerents – notably the Kurdish Peshmergas and Shia militias that are characterized by greater endogenous solidarity. These players can mobilize resources on the ground, often drawn externally. However, it is clear that the army will not regain legitimacy until it figures out how to also cooperate with the Sunnis, many of whom are ready to join its ranks, including local

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13 Ned Parker, "Power failure in Iraq as militias outgun state", *Reuters*, 21 October 2015, available at [www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-abadi/](http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-abadi/)

14 Martin Chulov, "Green zone protests raise questions over viability of Iraq's government", *The Guardian*, 1 May 2016, available at [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/01/viability-of-iraq-baghdad-green-zone-muqtada-al-sadr](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/01/viability-of-iraq-baghdad-green-zone-muqtada-al-sadr)

tribes, former officers and the thousands of civilians who, after bringing support to the Islamic State in opposition to Baghdad, now request arms to join the battle. Abadi reiterated his commitment to granting representation to the Sunni community and continues to enjoy support from the US, concerned with containing the chaos. Equally crucial is Sistani's political backing, as Abadi faces mounting anger and needs loyal forces and a strong and independent chain of command. Improvement in security is vital at a time when popular revolt is brewing. While many oppose change, starting with the militia leaders that Abadi attempts to have under government control, the Iraqi military has to recover its role and serve reconciliation. In 2016, it benefits from a relative revival of Iraqi nationalism.

Lack of capacity and resources also concerns informal actors, including Sunni forces, under-armed and unable to organize any credible resistance, and partly the Kurds, who complain of insufficient weaponry. Indeed, behind the image of unbeatable warriors, the arsenal of Kurdish Peshmergas remains limited due to the fact that the Kurdish region is not an independent state. Incessant quarrels between Baghdad and Erbil have blocked transfers of arms (as well as wages) from Baghdad to Kurdistan, becoming virtually non-existent at one point. The Shia political class is concerned that in the case of Sunnis and Kurds armament will mean more secessionist trends and, therefore, threats against Baghdad. According to sources, the central government blocked the delivery of small arms to the Kurdish region, which had to request weapons from the US. The Peshmergas also rely on weapons captured from the Iraqi army, including equipment abandoned by soldiers in 2014. While several Western governments provided ammunition, Kurdish officials repeat that this is still not enough. Politicization of fault lines complicates this situation by scattering and dividing players around military hierarchies that depend on political allegiances and sponsors in the absence of a clear-cut central command.

While formally independent, Peshmerga forces suffer from intra-Kurdish divisions. Those linked to the PDK are responsible for the governorates of Dohuk and Erbil, as well as territories around Mosul dominated by the Kurds, while those associated with the PUK are responsible for security in Sulaimaniyya and the governorates of Kirkuk, Salahaddin and Diyala. Given the autonomy of the KRG, such scattering must be limited and the Peshmergas brought under a single regional command, including that of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs which is supposed to act like a Ministry of Defence (to recall, the Iraqi army was banned from entering the KRG). For now, despite attempts at integration, Kurdish forces remain directly or indirectly affiliated with both the KDP and PUK, and maintain their respective hierarchies. Due to limited funding, the KRG's priority is to reduce the number of these forces and turn them into a smaller and more efficient force.

### ***Toward Greater Cooperation and Integration***

While it is unlikely that the political crisis that has ravaged Iraq since 2003 will subside any time soon, another challenge is to articulate negotiations between various and competing forces for them to agree on a security cooperation framework and constructive objectives for the future. The central government must do everything possible to bring the greatest number of forces on its side, starting with the Shia militias and Sunni tribes, but also

the Peshmerga forces. In 2009, Baghdad and Erbil had engaged in discussions as to the integration of Peshmerga units into two divisions of the Iraqi army, but persistent tensions over the disputed territories of Diyala and Kirkuk and conflicting sovereignty claims blocked the process. The Peshmergas that moved into the ranks of the military either deserted or kept their allegiance to the KRG beyond Iraq's chain of command.<sup>15</sup> This underlines the tricky command of the Iraqi military which, in spite of progress since the campaign along the Euphrates, is still not entrusted to conduct key ground operations on its own. As such, command and control are the most important obstacles to the reconstitution of the security sector in Iraq.

While Shia militias through the PMF have played a leading role in the repossession of territories, their nature and links with Iran, particularly the Guardians of the Revolution, are problematic. Their action feeds the ideological rhetoric and resilience of the Islamic State, especially when the militias themselves commit violent abuses against the Sunni civilians they are supposed to "free" – like in Salahaddin, Diyala in 2015 and in Anbar in 2016. Although their leaders insist that reported incidents of abuses have only been minor and isolated, in Mosul and elsewhere Sunni dignitaries and officials have accused the PMF of sectarian killings, kidnappings, takeovers of schools and forced sales of property. A major challenge concerns the *Hashd shaabi* and its institutionalization in order to strengthen the state and not the opposite. Indeed, while the PMF are, like other regular armed forces, supposed to be an official body reporting to Prime Minister Abadi since April 2015 and his adviser Faleh al-Fayyad, effective civilian leadership has been a source of disagreement and heightened tensions. While the groups of volunteers formed following Sistani's fatwa in 2014 have no real political roots or ambitions, others are affiliated to parties through their military wings and thus are highly political. The PMF's accrued power base and security functions in "liberated" territories have raised fears that the Shia militias would become a permanent force, a "state within the state", silently replacing regular forces (with which frequent clashes have occurred<sup>16</sup>) and thereby help Iran consolidate its strategic domination over Iraq.

By operating independently, militia leaders – like Hadi al-Amiri, Head of the Badr Organization, Abu Mahdi Muhandis, Head of Kataib Hezbollah, Qais al-Khazali, Commander of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and others – compete for legitimacy and authority. They rely on their chains of command, and rarely work together or follow the orders of the regular Iraqi army. Through their sometimes harsh criticism of the government's security reform, they are a major threat to the central state, beyond the threat posed by the Islamic State. According to several Iraqi and Western security officials, these militia leaders have partially taken control of some ministries, including the Ministry of the Interior, headed by Mohammed Salim al-Ghabban, an important member of the Badr Organization, who is said to redirect budgets to training and equipping of loyal militias – a claim that the latter and the Iraqi government both reject. The fact is that militias have been able to embark on their own path and operate in a position where they often do not have to report their activities. Despite their denial, the militiamen

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15 "1,000 Kurdish soldiers desert from Iraqi army", *Agence France-Presse*, 13 June 2013.

16 In February 2016, Shia militiamen refused orders to vacate a building in a military base near Baghdad.

have also taken control of some divisions of the army, whose “rogue officers” no longer take orders from the official chain of command but from the militias themselves. Their relations with the Peshmergas are also a source of tensions, as the PMF have tried to advance their interests in northern governorates by enrolling Yazidis, for instance, against established Kurdish policies.

So far, Abadi has had no choice but to deal with these groups, without which the Iraqi army could not lead the battle and secure victories against battle-hardened jihadists. Abadi also needs militias and the PMF to ensure his survival at the head of the executive while popular anger grows throughout Iraq. As emphasized in circles that are close to him, he now operates along a delicate balance of power: some militias swore allegiance to his cabinet when their goals converged with those of the government, while others maintained their loyalty to Iran, seen as a stronger guarantor of national interests. For months, Abadi has tried to impose his authority on militia leaders and their allies by delegating security tasks in governorates, such as Diyala, and placing the Ministry of Defence at the centre of military operations. But tensions remain high and government resources limited. Following their significant involvement in the recapture of Tikrit in 2015, the PMF seem set to play another key role in the battle of Mosul, despite Sunni resistance, as well as the fears of provincial and religious authorities of an even more massive sectarian backlash: in 2015, Nineveh’s council rejected the participation of the PMF in the retaking of Mosul and when Shia militias entered Anbar in 2015, heavy Sunni protests took place.

Progress, even minimal, has nonetheless also occurred. While in 2014 *Hashd shaabi* was an exclusively Shia force, the movement now includes thousands of Sunni tribal fighters, bringing together combatants who received almost US\$1b from the federal budget, plus other funding sources favourable to their cause. Shia militias that dominate the main front lines claim their support to the government, which itself reached out to Sunni tribes to mobilize them and “de-sectarianize” the armed forces as a means to restore power to the Sunnis in their fight against the Islamic State. Back in 2015, Sunni tribal fighters from Salahaddin played an essential role in liberating Tikrit. In Anbar, where Sunni tribes have a long history of fighting the jihadists, local tribes, together with a number of politicians, publicly called for the central government to send in Shia militias after the Iraqi army suffered a major setback. According to Salim al-Jubburi, Iraq’s speaker of parliament and one of the highest-ranking Sunni politicians, the official number of Sunni tribal components within the *Hashd* is 17,000. Progress made by the coalition since the recapture of Ramadi and the growing sense of momentum and possible defeat of the Islamic State has incited Sunni tribesmen to abandon or oppose the group, and join the PMF. Several thousands of Anbari tribes have requested training from the US military in a dramatic change of position.

Coordination efforts and the integration of groups must thus be accentuated by strengthening inter-communal recruitment, negotiating the disarmament of militias and insurgents, and their entry into a more formal military apparatus. This could require direct compensation by the government in order to incite the militias and insurgent groups to lay down their arms and shift their allegiances to new “patrons.” Some militia leaders say Iran has already restricted its financial aid while continuing to send in advisers and weapons. Baghdad is



also reported to have taken over payment of equipment of militias, but failed meanwhile to secure the necessary budgets for recruits into the army. Obviously, the continuation of institutional reforms will occur in a very sensitive political context. It will also be essential to convince the Iraqis themselves of the mutual interest of such reconstruction and the possibility of a plural Iraqi state rebuilt on the basis of collective security.

Beyond the military commitment of Sunni tribes and their cooperation with Peshmerga forces and Shia militias, rebuilding security will continue to stumble on one unknown factor: the Sunni community and its specific evolution. The limits of the coalition's operations targeted at the Islamic State have indeed had much to do with the group's strong local anchorage, which led to the fall of numerous Sunni cities in 2014. In most cases, an agreement was passed between local tribes, notables and the jihadists to "liberate" territories against what was seen as mere "occupation" by the Iraqi army, following that of the US. The Islamic State's secession was also perceived as a revolution in this respect, and its leaders were able to convince populations of the rightness of their political project as Baghdad's repression intensified. A number of armed groups also tended either to side with the Islamic State for the sake of tactical victory against the government and Iran, or to continue fighting in lands as yet unconquered. In an ideal but still fictional scenario, the defeat of the Islamic State would mean the reversal of the conditions that fuelled its emergence.

Iraqi Sunnis, who have lived for months under the yoke of the Islamic State, must be genuinely part of the ongoing campaign. Without such a rebalancing of forces on the ground, no revival of the political process can come about. Several questions must be raised: how can we release the Sunni community from the grip of the Islamic State by inducing them to become actors of its defeat? Who are the players likely to be mobilized in sufficient numbers to cope with this? What should be the terms and guarantees of such mobilization? More importantly, is it possible to curb the dynamic of Sunni secession beyond the fight against the jihadists? Clearly, Sunni populations will not rally to any battle if the aftermath means a return to the *status quo*, which was unbearable to them. By 2014, the US had launched discussions with Sunni Arab tribes so they would cooperate with Washington and Baghdad. The idea was to put together a new tribal force inspired by the *Sahwa* and able to fight. This time, the tribes would be mobilized within an institutional framework, namely a national guard (that was never established), and would cooperate with the Iraqi army, the Peshmergas and other self-defence groups. This policy has not materialized. First, the *Sahwa* left a legacy darker than it appears, borne out of rivalries between Sunni sheikhs, suspicions of corruption and financial dependence on the US and the government. Second, the tribes remain divided between support of the jihadists and their outright rejection. This has made the creation of a coherent force extremely complex. In addition, the Islamic State anticipated the threat and murdered hundreds of tribesmen who had stated their readiness to take up arms – like the Albu Nimr, who fought the group for months. As a result, many tribes have found themselves literally disaggregated.

The increasing difficulties met by the Islamic State, which has been unable to mount a successful offensive since Ramadi in May 2015, tend to modify this equation by pushing many Sunni tribes toward the coalition and government. Much is still expected from Abadi,



who chose to normalize relations with the Sunnis and supply arms to their governorates. So far, no serious equipment was delivered, however, and Sunni players often have to purchase weapons on the black market, or join the PMF to fight the Islamic State – in its early stages, the *Hashd* counted only 1,000 to 3,000 Sunnis, and Abadi approved the appointment of 40,000 more fighters in January 2016 to give a multi-sectarian image to the force and set the stage for a future amalgamation of forces.<sup>17</sup> A city like Tikrit is now jointly run by elements of the PMF and loyalist Sunni tribes like the Jubbur, who fiercely opposed the Islamic State, cooperated with the army and thus suffered reprisals of the jihadists for being “traitors” and “apostates.” Most of the Sunni tribes that used to be close to the Islamic State left the city. In light of this case, the existing gap between the Sunnis and the government is not entirely unbridgeable, but many still see Abadi’s mandate as a perpetuation of Maliki’s legacy, which constitutes the main problem. At a time when Baghdad continues to refuse autonomy to Sunni populations, while acknowledging the “milicization” of the state, one option could be gradual “depoliticization” of the *Hashd* and a greater role for Sunnis within its ranks.

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17 According to *The Economist*, as of late April 2016, the PMF included nearly 16,000 Sunnis.

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# **Make Politics, Not War: Armed Groups and Political Competition in Post-Qaddafi Libya**

*Virginie Collombier*

*\*This paper was written in November 2016*

In contrast to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the overthrow of Colonel Mu'ammar Qaddafi was the result of an armed uprising and a civil war. Libyans resorted to weapons, rather than just wide-scale protests, to bring about political change. This feature has had long-lasting consequences. First, it has been directly responsible for the fragmentation of the security sector among a disparate set of armed groups, initially characterized by strong links with local communities and/or ideological affiliations, and by loose coordination. Second, it explains the importance that security and the reshaping of security institutions have taken since 2011 and why they are major obstacles to Libya's political transition.

## **Providing Security in the Wake of the Civil War: The National Transitional Council's Dilemma**

When Libya was declared "liberated" by the National Transitional Council (NTC) in October 2011, it had barely finished a nine month long armed conflict which had started with anti-regime protests in Benghazi in February 2011, rapidly extended across the country and then became militarized as the regime attempted to repress it. Direct foreign military intervention by the NATO-led coalition, and the supply of arms by foreign countries to various armed groups engaged in the anti-regime struggle, significantly reinforced the capacities of these revolutionary groups, which eventually gained the upper hand on their adversaries. Libya's revolution had quickly become a civil war.

### ***A Fragmented Security Landscape after the War***

The security landscape that emerged at the end of 2011 was a consequence of the nature of the uprising and war, and of the support provided to local groups by external actors.

The initially peaceful protests that erupted in February 2011 were organized at the neighbourhood or city level; they generally took the form of diverse, local and loosely connected uprisings that started in Benghazi, al-Bayda and Zintan, and multiplied across the country. Faced with regime repression, these uprisings turned into armed insurrection but

kept their local dimension. In the areas that experienced direct fighting (such as Benghazi, Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains), small fighting cells set up at the neighbourhood level progressively coordinated together to form city-wide revolutionary brigades, or military councils in larger cities. While military coordination improved over time, the command structures of the various groups remained distinct.<sup>1</sup>

These revolutionary brigades were characterized by strong links with specific neighbourhoods, cities, regions or tribes. In each community, locals developed a deep *esprit de corps* and attachment to their local militias, to which they felt they owed their survival and liberation. This is particularly the case for the armed groups that emerged in Zintan and Misrata during the first part of 2011 and included civilians who took up arms against Qaddafi as well as some defecting military officers.

Community links are also often the result of a shared experience of struggle and imprisonment pre-2011, notably for former Islamist detainees. In Derna, for instance, the Abu Slim Martyrs Battalion formed by former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) member Salim Dirbi counts many former inmates of the Abu Slim prison in its ranks. In Benghazi, prominent figures of the 17 February Battalion were Fawzi Bu Katif, Isma'il Sallabi and Rafallah al-Sahati, who were Muslim Brotherhood members or had links to the movement, and who were all former Abu Slim inmates.<sup>2</sup> Ideology and common personal trajectories act as strong cement for these groups. Yet, while their leadership is mostly drawn from the Islamist spectrum, the rank and file fighters are mixed, comprising both former military defectors and non-Islamist young men seeking military training alongside experienced fighters. In contrast to the locally-based brigades, these "Islamist brigades" did not explicitly establish themselves as representatives of particular communities, and chose to keep their command and control structures separated.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the revolutionary brigades formed during the war are remarkable for the cohesiveness of their organizational structures, which notably stems from the personal links forged between members and their commanders.<sup>4</sup> Despite the attempts of the NTC to centralize authority at the end of the war, they remain loyal to their respective communities and leaders and largely autonomous from the Council, even when they profess formal allegiance.

1 Jason Pack, "The Center and the Periphery", in *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qaddafi's Future*, edited by Jason Pack, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, pp. 1-22

2 Mary Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place: Libya's Islamists During and After the Revolution", in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, edited by Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, London: Hurst, 2015. (Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place").

3 In May 2011, the need for these "Islamist brigades" to coordinate among themselves led to the creation of the Gathering of Revolutionary Companies (GRC, *Tajammu' Sarayat al-Thuwwar*) and was perceived as a threat to the relevance and leadership of the rebel forces' chief of staff General Abd al-Fattah Younis, see Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place".

4 Brian McQuinn, "Armed Groups in Libya: Typology and Roles", *Small Arms Survey*, Number 18, June 2012, available at [www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/H-Research\\_Notes/SAS-Research-Note-18.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/H-Research_Notes/SAS-Research-Note-18.pdf)

### ***The Battle for Tripoli: The Early Battle for Power***

The fall of Tripoli on 20 August 2011 further complicated the situation for the NTC, which essentially remained a bystander in the battle. The Misratan, Nafusa Mountains and Tripoli battalions emerged as key forces on the ground.<sup>5</sup> This had major consequences for the evolution of the security landscape, and on the balance of forces between the provisional national authorities and the various revolutionary armed groups controlling territory at the neighbourhood level.

The strategic importance of controlling the capital was obvious to all the rising military and political forces. Therefore, all groups attempted to prevent the others from asserting their authority in the political and military vacuum that followed the fall of the city.<sup>6</sup> With the official aim of providing security and preventing the re-emergence of Qaddafi supporters, some of the revolutionary brigades from outside Tripoli chose to hold and fortify their positions in the city and establish bases. The most prominent of these were brigades from the towns of Zintan (al-Sawa'iq, al-Q'aqa'a and al-Madani Brigades) and Misrata, which formed the bulk of the revolutionary forces in Western Libya, and had the most fighters and equipment. They were concerned that former LIFG member Abd al-Hakim Belhaj, who headed the recently created Tripoli Military Council, or leaders of other Islamist brigades could take advantage of their presence to increase their influence.

Overall, the mistrust and political divisions between the Tripoli Military Council and the Misratan and Zintani brigades underlined the growing divisions and competition between revolutionary armed groups, especially between those originating from Tripoli and those originating from other cities and regions. This competition was further highlighted as attempts were made by the NTC government to unify the armed groups and organize governance and security in the capital after the liberation. In September 2011, the creation of a Supreme Security Committee (SSC, *al-lajna al-amniya al-'ulya*) entrusted by the government to coordinate and supervise all armed groups in Tripoli resulted in direct competition with the Tripoli Military Council, and growing tensions between the two bodies and affiliated armed groups.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Outsourcing Security Provision***

For the Tripoli-based NTC, which was to run the country provisionally, security provision was obviously key to its claim of representing and uniting the revolutionary forces that toppled Qaddafi under a single political and military leadership. Ensuring security was also essential for gaining legitimacy before Libyan citizens, who aspired to returning to normal life after months of turmoil. Yet it immediately became a major challenge.

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5 Peter Cole and Umar Khan, "The Fall of Tripoli" (parts 1 & 2), in *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, edited by Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, London: Hurst, 2015, (Cole and Khan, "The Fall of Tripoli").

6 Brian McQuinn, "After the Fall. Libya's Evolving Armed Groups", *Small Arms Survey*, Security Assessment in North Africa project, 2012, available at [www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/F-Working-papers/SAS-WP12-After-the-Fall-Libya.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/F-Working-papers/SAS-WP12-After-the-Fall-Libya.pdf).

7 Cole and Khan, "The Fall of Tripoli".

While the NTC had been officially recognized as Libya's provisional government, its actions were seriously impeded by the absence of security institutions with the capacity and legitimacy to manage the post-conflict situation. Qaddafi's security apparatus had collapsed, and a disparate set of loosely coordinated armed groups with strong local identities, and in many cases heavy armament at their disposal, controlled the territory.

The NTC's very limited capacity to act in the security realm was highly problematic, as the rebuilding of centralized mechanisms of governance required control over military force to ensure the provision of law and order in general, as well as to intervene and put an end to local conflicts across the country. The civil war between opponents and supporters of the revolution had reignited a multitude of local conflicts between communities, most often building upon historical disputes related to the ownership of land, the control of borders and the revenues it generates, and more broadly to the competition for political power.<sup>8</sup>

Faced with the dilemma of stabilizing the security situation across the country without control over centralized, capable and legitimate formal security forces, the NTC was forced to acknowledge the actual balance of power on the ground and let local armed groups take care of security, at least for what they hoped would be a limited transitional period.

This had at least two consequences: it contributed to reinforcing the power and autonomy of the local armed groups born out of the war, and encouraged local communities across Libya to consolidate or develop their own security apparatus, independently from the central provisional authorities.

### ***Local Military Councils: The Further Localization of Military Power***

The NTC's attempts to exert control over the security realm and provide security to the Libyans also translated into a call for local communities to form military councils in those cities which had experienced limited fighting and had therefore not created such institutions during the war. While the argument for this call was that the absence of functioning state security institutions necessitated alternative (provisional) security structures, the hasty formation of these new councils contributed to the further fragmentation of the security landscape, and to the emergence of an increasing number of military structures created and autonomously managed by local networks of army officers and politico-military entrepreneurs, largely outside of the control of the state authorities.

These new military structures and the armed groups that composed them lacked the cohesion that a common fighting experience had provided elsewhere. In communities already divided by the civil war, they often fuelled new tensions. In Bani Walid, for instance, long considered a Qaddafi stronghold, local supporters of the former regime felt they might need protection from the revolutionary forces that had taken control of the city after October 2011 and

8 For instance, in the Nafussa Mountains and Western Libya, from 2012, major clashes brought into conflict al-Mashashiya and Zintan; al-Asaba and Gharyan; Warshafana and al-Zawiya; and Zuwara, Jmeil and Raqdalín. In Southern Libya, they brought into conflict the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman in Sebha (from April 2012), or the Tebu and the Zway in Kufra (from June 2012).

created several armed groups. While they did not try to gain official recognition from the authorities in Tripoli, neither were they under full control of the Social Council of Warfalla Tribes (SCWT), the tribal institution created after the collapse of the Qaddafi regime to overcome the absence of local governing structures.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the power and influence that came with control of military force were quickly acknowledged by all those willing to play a role in post-Qaddafi Libya, and by those merely interested in financial gain and social status. While many civilians who had taken up arms against Qaddafi went back to civil life after October 2011, a significant number of young men (including jobless youth and criminals) saw the advantages that membership in armed groups could offer and joined existing brigades or formed new groups.<sup>10</sup> As a result, hundreds of new armed groups with dubious loyalties and little to do with the revolutionary fight or community protection had emerged by the end of 2011. The security sector had become even more fragmented, with hundreds of armed groups of different size, nature, cohesion, combat experience, equipment and trajectory which were controlling portions of territory or, increasingly, conducting criminal activities.

Against this backdrop, the provisional government of the NTC formed in November 2011 and led by Prime Minister Abdul-Rahim al-Keib had very limited margin of manoeuvre to provide security across the country. While rebuilding the national army was presented as a priority, together with the need to dissolve the various armed groups and integrate their members into the formal security apparatus, these objectives collided with both the reality of the security landscape and the political objectives of powerful revolutionary armed groups.

## **The Colonization of the Nascent State Institutions by Rival Armed Groups**

For the transitional authorities to ensure order across Libya without significant military forces under their authority, they outsourced security tasks to the armed groups enjoying actual power on the ground (some of which had a good degree of legitimacy within their communities). This significantly contributed the power of these armed groups which remained largely autonomous in practice, even when they were formally integrated into formal state structures (i.e. placed under the control of a state ministry or the government). As a result, there was a significant build-up by the armed groups, which in turn resisted efforts to beef up the capacities of the national army.

### ***The Challenges in Rebuilding the National Army***

One major obstacle facing the transitional authorities was the weakness of the remains of the national army at the end of the war. The regular armed forces had already been marginalized and weakened as a result of Qaddafi's ruling strategy. Under-trained and

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9 Virginie Collombier, "Bani Walid: quelle place pour les 'vaincus' de la révolution?", *Moyen-Orient*, n°25, Jan./March 2015, pp. 42-47. (Collombier, "Bani Walid: quelle place pour les 'vaincus' de la révolution?").

10 The mere fact of leading a brigade allowed them to access cars, money, influence and status.

under-equipped, it had been superseded by a system of revolutionary organizations and security brigades that reported directly to Qaddafi's residences at Bab al-Aziziyya, and were often headed and staffed by Qaddafi's loyalists and confidants. In Tripoli, the Imhammad Imgharyif Brigade (commanded by al-Barrani Ishkal, based in Bab al-Aziziyya) and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Reinforced Brigade (*al-Liwa' 32 al-Mu'azzaza*, commanded by Khamis Qaddafi) were the largest and most powerful of these paramilitary structures and were key to the protection of the regime. In contrast, the national army had very limited capacities, and those were reduced to almost nothing by the end of the war.

The regular armed forces split into two early in the 2011 uprising.<sup>11</sup> The bulk of the Eastern units (including the Sa'iqa Special Forces, the air force and military intelligence) defected and fell under the authority of the NTC's chief of staff (first General Abd al-Fatah Younis until his assassination in July 2011, then General Suleiman Mahmud al-Ubaidi). Some Eastern soldiers also joined revolutionary armed groups headed by civilians, such as the Umar al-Mukhtar Battalion<sup>12</sup> and therefore escaped the authority of the national armed forces. In the west and the south, most military units remained loyal to the regime and fought until the end, though some military officers joined revolutionary armed groups, sometimes in significant numbers, including in Misrata and in the Nafusa Mountains. However, the NTC's chiefs of staff had no authority over them.

Qaddafi's death resulted in the collapse of the regular armed forces in the west and south of the country. Officers and soldiers that had not been killed or imprisoned chose to stay home after the collapse of the regime and the rise to power of new authorities that they considered illegitimate (and which considered them a threat to be excluded). This was particularly the case for the communities and tribes that had opposed the revolution (such as the Warfalla tribesmen in Bani Walid). In the towns where the armed forces had a strong presence, regular units often joined military councils after the end of the war, including in Gharyan, Khums, Tarhuna and Sebha.<sup>13</sup>

At the end of 2011, the remains of the regular armed forces could therefore hardly be envisaged as the backbone of a new national army. The National Liberation Army affiliated with the NTC and headed by General al-Ubaidi was perceived as an Eastern force rather than a national one. Its forces had remained stuck for a long time on the Eastern front and had not taken part in the main battles in Western Libya. Its leadership found it difficult to assert authority over the various armed groups across the country.

Moreover, while the regular armed forces that had served under Qaddafi were not organized along community and tribal lines like the security brigades, army officers were mostly from the Qaddadfa, Warfalla and Magarha tribes, all of which were considered pillars of Qaddafi's regime and therefore closely identified with it. This constituted an important impediment to

11 Wolfram Lacher and Peter Cole, "Politics by Other Means. Conflicting Interests in Libya's Security Sector", *Small Arms Survey*, October 2014, available at [www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/F-Working-papers/SAS-SANA-WP20-Libya-Security-Sector.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/F-Working-papers/SAS-SANA-WP20-Libya-Security-Sector.pdf) (Lacher and Cole, "Politics by Other Means").

12 Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place".

13 Lacher and Cole, "Politics by Other Means"



their capacity to play a central role in the new security structure after 2011; for the civilian fighters who drew their legitimacy from their military successes over Qaddafi's forces, and had paid a heavy price in doing so, this was simply unacceptable. For them, the new national army would have to undergo significant reform and a serious vetting process if it were ever to become Libya's core security institution.

Tensions over this issue, and more broadly between civilian fighters and army defectors within the revolutionary forces, were quick to surface at the end of the war, when the issue of how to rebuild the security apparatus was to be addressed. The July 2011 killing of the commander-in-chief of the National Liberation Army, Abd al-Fatah Younis, purportedly by members of an Islamist revolutionary brigade, had already highlighted these tensions and given an indication of how they would deepen and intensify over the following months.

### ***The Bargaining Power of the Revolutionary Armed Groups***

In November 2011, the NTC appointed Abdulrahim al-Keib as interim prime minister and began negotiations for the formation of a transitional government to rule Libya until parliamentary elections could be organized. The different armed groups (both the revolutionary brigades and the armed groups formed after 2011) started offering their support to politicians in exchange for resources and positions. They made it clear that they would not submit to the new state authorities without receiving far-reaching compensation in exchange. This type of bargain was to become a defining feature of the first three years of the transition.<sup>14</sup>

The Zintani and Misratan revolutionary coalitions only agreed to support the new cabinet in exchange for influential positions within the new political and military institutions. Osama al-Juwaili, the former head of Zintan's military council, was awarded the Defence Ministry. In what looked like an effort to counterbalance this favour, Fawzi Abdul 'Aal, a prosecutor from Misrata, was nominated at the Interior Ministry. The nomination of a Chief of Staff for the armed forces also turned into a battle between the NTC, the revolutionary brigades, and former members of the military. Eventually, the NTC appointed Yusef al-Mangush in January 2012. However, many revolutionaries rejected that choice because Mangush had served as a colonel in the former national army. Moreover, the lack of clarity in the laws of the NTC, and of the General National Congress (GNC) which succeeded the NTC in 2012, regarding the distribution of powers and the competencies of senior military officials caused confusion between the executive and legislative branches of government, and resulted in the multiplication and overlapping of different chains of command.

The Defence and Interior Ministers had to deal with the lack of capacity, distrust and power struggles inside their institutions. Out of pragmatism, they developed personal relations with brigade commanders, hoping to be able to count on their support in case of need. This rapidly resulted into fragmentation and factionalization of the new political and military institutions. Within each institution, competing factions with divergent interests emerged

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14 Jason Pack, Karim Mezran, Mohamed Eljarh, *Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Circle*, Atlantic Council, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, 2014, available at [www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/libya-s-faustian-bargains-breaking-the-appeasement-cycle](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/libya-s-faustian-bargains-breaking-the-appeasement-cycle).

and attempted to expand their resources and influence at the detriment of the others.

### ***The Case of the Supreme Security Committee (SSC)***

After the formation of the al-Keib government, the SSC that had been set up by the NTC in October 2011 officially came under the control of the Interior Ministry headed by Fawzi Abd al-'Aal. Originally, the SSC consisted mainly of Tripoli neighbourhood vigilante groups. It aimed at bringing the numerous, extremely fragmented and loosely coordinated armed groups in Tripoli under a single umbrella and providing them with official state registration and remuneration. The effort made by the Interior Ministry to incentivize joining the SSC, notably by offering relatively generous salaries (around 650 Euros per month) to recruits<sup>15</sup> proved successful. In October 2012, the SSC was deemed to have over 100,000 members – more than the total number of people who had fought with the revolutionaries during the uprising.<sup>16</sup> The SSC was also authorized to open branches in other cities across the country.

Yet the Interior Minister effectively had no oversight over recruitment and actual membership, which was left to individual group commanders. Armed groups from Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains that were based in Tripoli constituted an important part of the SSC membership, but many recruits also came from the unemployed youth who had formed brigades after the fall of Tripoli. Many of these – including the most powerful commanders – had a Salafist background.<sup>17</sup> They were integrated wholesale along with their leadership and thus continued to answer to their former commanders, while the Interior Ministry's hierarchy had no real control over them. Hence, in practice, the SSC became an independent security force that substituted for the absent police forces, developing a visible presence on Tripoli's street and enforcing order.

At the time of the first general elections in 2012, the SSC had cemented its role within the security apparatus. Yet its actions had triggered criticism on many occasions. In addition to being accused of committing human rights violations, it increasingly acted as an armed wing for Islamist factions. For instance, SSC units allegedly provided protection to the Salafist groups responsible for the destruction the Sha'ab Mosque in Tripoli in August 2012.<sup>18</sup> Yet the SSC was in reality much more diverse than it appeared; it hosted other rival factions and interest groups (notably police officers and criminal gangs), revealing the fragmentation of the new official security structures.

In 2012, the GNC called repeatedly for the SSC to be dissolved, with no effect. The GNC-appointed prime minister, constrained by the absence of a credible alternative structure to

15 Pay for fighters who joined an SSC-incorporated brigade was higher than what most Libyans could hope to make in another job or in the conventional security forces.

16 Ibrahim El Mayet, "The Supreme Security Committee – Guardians of the Revolution?", *Libya Herald*, 16 October 2012, available at [www.libyaherald.com/2012/10/16/the-supreme-security-committee-guardians-of-the-revolution/#ixzz33qxAN4L4](http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/10/16/the-supreme-security-committee-guardians-of-the-revolution/#ixzz33qxAN4L4)

17 Lacher and Cole, "Politics by Other Means".

18 International Crisis Group, "Divided we Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts", *Middle East/North Africa Report* 130, 14 September 2012, available at [www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/130-divided-we-stand-libyas-enduring-conflicts.aspx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/130-divided-we-stand-libyas-enduring-conflicts.aspx) (ICG, "Divided we Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts").

ensure short-term security, asked it to continue to “protect the country”.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Case of the Libyan Shield Forces (LSF)***

A very different approach was developed by the army’s Chief of Staff, Yousef al-Mangush, with the creation of the Libyan Shield Forces (“*quwat dar’a libia*”, LSF). In contrast to the SSC, the LSF was a bottom-up initiative launched by the commanders of armed groups who sought to establish themselves as the core of a new national army. They did not trust the regular armed forces, which they thought could be a vehicle for the re-emergence of former regime networks. They also acknowledged the need to intervene in the many local conflicts that had erupted across Libya.

The LSF therefore aimed at integrating the civilians who had fought in revolutionary brigades into a cohesive national force, a network of revolutionary coalitions, which could be deployed outside of their home communities for extended periods (for instance, in case they had to intervene in areas of communal conflict, such as that in the Nafusa Mountains and in the southern cities of Kufra and Sebha).

While officially placed under the authority of the Chief of Staff, the LSF effectively preserved their original structure and continued to operate with a large degree of autonomy.<sup>20</sup> Like the SSC, it was also characterized by deep internal fragmentation and diversity. Yet the LSF came to represent the interests of Libya’s revolutionary strongholds in public opinion and the media. On the ground, the political nature of the more powerful LSF units soon became clear (for instance during the military offensive against the town of Bani Walid in October 2012 or at the time of the passage of the Political Isolation Law by the GNC in May 2013).<sup>21</sup>

### ***The Convergence of Interests between Armed Groups and Political Factions***

Instead of helping unify the different security structures born out of the war and placing them under the authority of the new state institutions, the attempts by Libya’s provisional governments to reorganize the security sector ended up increasing its fragmentation and reinforcing the political nature of its various components. The creation of new structures (SSC, LSF) to integrate former fighters into the formal security sector did not allow for actual control by the state over the members of the armed groups. In contrast, factions within these structures used their contacts and relationships within the state institutions to obtain privileges and financial gain in what looked like “colonization” of parts of these institutions by rival groups. Like the new security structures created after 2011, the army disintegrated into political factions, as new units were established with a specific local, tribal, or political background.

For instance, Defence Minister Al-Juwaili did not create a separate structure to accommodate

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19 ICG, “Divided we Stand: Libya’s Enduring Conflicts”.

20 Frederic Wehrey, “Libya’s Militias Menace”, *Foreign Affairs*, 15 July 2012, available at [www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/07/15/libya-s-militia-menace/csdq](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/07/15/libya-s-militia-menace/csdq)

21 Lacher and Cole, “Politics by Other Means”.

the armed groups into the formal security apparatus. Instead they were simply offered military identification cards and joined the armed forces as regular units. Al-Juwaili's previous position as the head of Zintan's military council notably made him a natural partner of the Zintani revolutionary brigades and their allies of the Western mountains. In January 2012, the Defence Ministry officially registered the Zintani brigades which had remained in Tripoli, including the al-Sawa'iq brigade, which was to become a key player after receiving financial support from the government. The ministry gave their members priority for training abroad and access to new equipment. Al-Juwaili also ensured that these units were placed under his command and not under that of Chief of Staff al-Mangush.

Feeling that they were side-lined again by what they considered irregular forces (as during the Qaddafi era), former army officers from Benghazi and the east also started to form new units composed of soldiers and civilian recruits, most often on a community/tribal basis, and independently of the chief of staff.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the west and in the south, local armed groups predominantly recruited from among civilians were transformed into official army units thanks to the special relationships that their commanders enjoyed within the state institutions in Tripoli. In practice, the central administration exerted little or no authority over these units. Yet their political sponsors hoped that they could convert them into a personal power base. Overall, the disparate networks between armed groups and state officials consolidated.

As the first parliamentary elections approached, the most powerful revolutionary coalitions (organized around Misaratan and Zintani forces), whose cohesion and links with their communities of origin were strongest, backed the candidates and political factions which represented their communities. In Misrata, the Military Council, which gathered most of the revolutionary brigades, was linked to prominent local businessmen. These provided the council with funding and support. Some of them were known for their proximity to the Muslim Brotherhood, and to the Justice and Construction Party (*"hizb al-'adala wal-bina"*) established in March 2012. In contrast, the Zintani community developed privileged links with the National Forces Alliance (NFA) and its leaders. 'Abdal-Majid Amligta, a businessman with roots in the city, was one of their most important figures and biggest sponsors. His brother Othman led the al-Qa'qa' brigade, which came to be widely seen as the military wing of the NFA.

## Electoral Competition vs. Dialogue, Compromise and Reconciliation

The election of the General National Congress (GNC) on 7 July 2012 constituted a major step in the transition process that had been envisioned by the NTC and set out in the Constitutional Declaration of August 2011. There was competition among several visions of how the transitional period should be organized until the approval of a permanent constitution. These diverged, in particular, over how best to guarantee the country's stability in the transition phase while providing the provisional authorities with sufficient legitimacy to rule. In the

22 Lacher and Cole, "Politics by Other Means".

end, the prevailing view was that held by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups that the transition should be overseen by an elected body and that the legitimacy of the transitional authorities should be considered more important than any other consideration, including stability.<sup>23</sup> The July 2012 elections were considered a major success in terms of organization and participation, as 61,58 % of Libyans cast a ballot.<sup>24</sup> In reality, they had the adverse side effect of rapidly increasing conflict between parties and deeply polarizing the nascent political scene.

The choice of the major political forces to privilege early electoral competition over national dialogue and reconciliation proved crucial to developments in the security realm, as well as to the overall Libyan transition.<sup>25</sup> While the Libyans had no experience whatsoever of party politics and electoral processes, the leaders of the new-born political parties had no practical experience of dialogue and consensus building with their counterparts and adversaries. Electoral victory was therefore essentially seen as the way to get the support of a majority of Libyans, win power and control the new political institutions – the elected GNC, the government and other state institutions.

The security institutions had to be redesigned, which required a collective effort on the part of the political and military forces to find a consensus on how this should be done. Yet the lack of experience and the absence of channels and instruments for dialogue, combined with the refusal of the main camps to compromise, led first to complete deadlock within the weak new political institutions and, at a later stage, to direct military confrontation between the supporters of two opposed visions of how the new security apparatus should be rebuilt.

Soon after the June 2012 elections, the GNC ended up divided into two main rival camps supporting two opposing visions of the security apparatus. The first camp included Muslim Brothers, Salafists and representatives from cities and neighbourhoods that had been strongholds of the revolution, such as Misrata, al-Zawiya, and the Berber cities of the Nafusa Mountains, Suq al-Juma' and Tajura. The other camp was led by the National Forces Alliance (NFA) and mostly included representatives of cities or tribes that had supported the regime, or abstained from fighting it. These came from Southern Libyan communities such as Sirte,

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23 Peter Bartu, "The Corridor of Uncertainty: The National Transitional Council's battle for Legitimacy and Recognition", in Cole and McQuinn, *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*.

24 In the party list results, Mahmud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (NFA), with 39 seats, and the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Construction Party (JCP), with 18 seats, came out as the main political forces. Yet the competition for the "independents" seats resulted in domination by the candidates associated with the JCP (17 seats) and the Salafists (23 seats) over the candidates known for being close to the NFA (25 seats), see Wolfram Lacher, "Fault Lines of the Revolution. Political Actors, Camps and Conflicts in the New Libya", *SWP Research Paper*, 2013, available at [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research\\_papers/2013\\_RP04\\_lac.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2013_RP04_lac.pdf).

25 Virginie Collombier, "Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation in Libya's Local Conflicts", in *Inside Wars. Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, edited by Luigi Narbone, Agnès Favier and Virginie Collombier, 2016, available at [www.cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20Wars\\_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://www.cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20Wars_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (Collombier, "Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation").

Bani Walid, Tarhuna and al-‘Aziziya.<sup>26</sup> The division between these two camps also largely corresponded to the fracture between civilian fighters and Islamists, on the one hand, and army defectors and the “liberal” forces, on the other.

Yet the composition of the two camps had nothing obvious from the outset: competition for control over the new institutions played a key role in forging alliances between forces that may not have been ideologically inclined to collaborate. In Zintan, for instance, while the Islamist movement was strong among local notables and the youth, the main political and military forces ended up relying largely on social and business connections with major figures in the NFA and the liberal forces. For the different forces, the need to build alliances would allow them to enter the competition in a position of strength.

### ***The Security Institutions: Two Opposing Visions***

For the coalition dominated by the Islamists and forces from major revolutionary strongholds in Western Libya, memories of terrible repression under Qaddafi meant that the priority was to prevent the reconstitution of the former regime’s networks and institutions in the security realm. They categorically opposed the reconstruction of the military around the remnants of the National Army without a serious vetting process being conducted for former personnel, and the whole security apparatus being revamped, with primary responsibilities given to those fighters (including former civilians) who had played a key role in Qaddafi’s defeat.

The Islamists’ vision of the new security system was a perfect fit for the scores of young revolutionary fighters that refused to submit to the authority of former officers (many of whom had remained far from the front). For this reason, the Islamists and the many young revolutionaries who had no specific ideological or political affiliations made up a solid alliance – both inside and outside the political institutions – in which all were convinced that they could easily manipulate the others to serve their own ends.<sup>27</sup>

For the heteroclite coalition led by the NFA, the former military and what remained of the formal security apparatus after the fall of Qaddafi was naturally constituted to be the backbone on which the new institutions should be rebuilt. In their view, military officers – those who had defected, as well as those who had not – had a key role to play in terms of leadership and training, and the civilian fighters who were willing to join the security institutions after the war were to be integrated into new regular army units, with their previous brigades being simply dissolved.

The vision that combined dissolution of the existing armed brigades (created during and after the war) and integration into regular army units headed by former officers, albeit coherent and *a priori* reasonable, conflicted with the actual balance of power between elements of the security sector and neglected the latest developments within both the army units and the armed groups integrated into the formal institutional framework. While the former army

26 Lacher, “Fault Lines of the Revolution”.

27 Author’s interviews, Tripoli and Misrata, 2013-2014.



units weighed more in the east of the country, the situation was different in Misrata and in the Nafusa Mountains (with the exception of Zintan): there, the most powerful fighting groups included relatively few former officers and the bulk of the military capacity was in the hands of young civilian fighters. The communal nature of the former national army also ended up having an important impact on the prospects of reconstruction of the security apparatus, notably because of the lack of high-level officers originating from certain regions and communities. Overall, however, with varying proportions, all the security structures were now hybrids, mixing together civilian recruits and former military members.

### ***The Use of Force to Bypass Political Deadlock***

In the absence of real debate over how to rebuild the security sector after the 2012 elections, the political battle was over how to deal with former regime associates – which of course would have a major impact on the security institutions. Unwilling to discuss and find compromise on this issue, however, the two main coalitions in the GNC rapidly entered into direct confrontation, plunging the nascent parliament into paralysis.

Islamists who felt that they had suffered most under Qaddafi formed a coalition branded the “Loyalty to the Martyrs,” led by Salafist forces. For them, the exclusion of former regime officials – or “*azlam*” – was a key objective. They took a hard line against all those who had associated themselves with the regime at any point in time, thereby echoing the revolutionaries’ proclaimed goal of protecting the revolution against the risk of reconstitution of former networks of power. Yet it also served to oust competitors out of the new political institutions. The NFA included many leaders and members who had in some way accommodated the old regime.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Mahmoud Jibril, the head of the NFA and Prime Minister in the al-Keib government, had served in the Qaddafi regime until the revolution. Targeting him and excluding him would give a significant blow to the NFA-led parliamentary bloc and their Zintani allies.

Supporters of a broad Political Isolation Law (PIL) started to exert heavy pressure on GNC members. On 30 April 2013, parliamentary debates had to be suspended as demonstrators supporting the law interrupted the GNC hall. In the following days, armed groups favourable to the adoption – many of them reportedly from Misrata – started to blockade and attack government ministries. The PIL was eventually adopted on 5 May 2013. Emboldened, armed groups refused to end their siege of government buildings, demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Zeidan and the immediate removal of all those they perceived to be Qaddafi-era officials. On 28 May 2013, GNC President Magarief announced his resignation, anticipating that he may have to leave his position under the new law. Many other high-level politicians did so.<sup>29</sup>

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28 Mahmud Jibril, the NFA’s head, had been key to Seif al-Islam Qaddafi’s reform efforts between 2007 and 2011. Similarly, several NFA-GNC members were local officials under the old regime. Moreover, the Zintani al-Sawa’iq and Qa’qa’a brigades had remnants of Qaddafi’s forces (including elements from Khamis Qaddafi’s 32<sup>nd</sup> Regiment) within their ranks.

29 Sadeq Institute, “Analysis of Legislation No. 13/2013. Impact on Libya’s Political Sphere”, 4 July 2013, available at [www.sadeqinstitute.org/2013/07/analysis-of-legislation-no-13-2013-impact-on-libyas-political-sphere/](http://www.sadeqinstitute.org/2013/07/analysis-of-legislation-no-13-2013-impact-on-libyas-political-sphere/)



In the subsequent jostling for new positions, the Islamist-led coalition managed to secure the election of its candidate, Nuri Abusahmain, as GNC President. The exclusion process set in motion through the adoption of the PIL had already changed the balance of power inside the GNC. It had also significantly intensified the divisions and tensions between rival politico-military coalitions.

Meanwhile, in Eastern Libya, the severe degradation of the security situation was also having profound repercussions on the political scene. Since 2011, unlawful killings and politically motivated assassinations had rocketed, targeting journalists, activists, judges, prosecutors, and members of the security forces. In 2014 alone, at least 250 persons were killed in Benghazi and Derna, without the Libyan authorities investigating or prosecuting those responsible.<sup>30</sup> In May 2014, as the inhabitants of Eastern Libya and Benghazi felt increasingly abandoned by the government, triggering major anger, former general Khalifa Haftar appointed himself leader of the “Libyan National Army” and launched a military campaign to stamp out the city’s armed groups that the residents blamed for the wave of bombings and assassinations. Haftar initially vowed to go after Ansar al-Sharia, who enjoyed significant influence in the city and whose members were suspected of participating in the 2012 attacks on the US Consulate in Benghazi. Yet, seizing on widespread anti-Islamist sentiment, he rapidly directed his fire at the other Islamist brigades as well, triggering a military standoff between rival factions in the city. Two days after he launched his campaign in Benghazi, the Zintani al-Qa’qa and Sawa’iq brigades stormed the GNC building in Tripoli, pledging allegiance to Haftar. In a televised statement, General Mokhtar Farnana, from Zintan, spoke for Haftar’s “Libyan National Army” and called for the constituent assembly elected earlier that year to replace the GNC and an emergency government to guide the country toward new elections.

While this attempt to hijack the political process failed, it revealed that the two rival camps were now seriously tempted to change the situation – and the balance of forces on the ground – but not through the formal political institutions.

### ***Dignity vs. Dawn: Libya’s New Civil War***

The political deadlock, institutional paralysis and parallel consolidation of the authority of armed groups did not end even after the organization of new parliamentary elections in June 2014 (although these elections were the result of a compromise reached after months of legal dispute over the GNC mandate). While a House of Representatives (HoR) was effectively elected to replace the GNC, political divisions persisted and resulted in the contested establishment of the new Parliament in the Eastern city of Tobruk, with 22 deputies (later reaching 44) boycotting the sessions.<sup>31</sup> Libya was now divided between two rival sets of institutions: two Parliaments (the GNC based in Tripoli, dominated by the Islamists, and the HoR operating from Tobruk, dominated by the “liberal” camp and General Haftar), each with its own government and backed by affiliated armed groups.

30 Human Rights Watch, “Libya’s Justice Pandemonium”, 14 April 2014, available at [www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/14/libyas-justice-pandemonium](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/14/libyas-justice-pandemonium)

31 International Crisis Group, *Getting Geneva Right*, Report n°157, 26 February 2015, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/libya-getting-geneva-right>

The institutional crisis was coupled with increased military tensions between the armed groups supporting the two camps. The launch of Operation Dignity (*Karama*) by former army general Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi in May 2014 had already resulted in a reshaping of alliances at the city level – with Ansar al-Sharia and revolutionary armed groups now fighting side by side against Haftar and his local allies. However, Operation Dignity had repercussions far beyond Benghazi, as it triggered military confrontation, in various places across Libya, between the forces supporting Haftar and the forces opposing him, gathered in the Libya Dawn (*Fajr Libia*) coalition. The political transition process envisioned in 2011 collapsed definitively. Direct military confrontation between the two coalitions happened in several locations, with the nationwide conflict grafting upon and intensifying pre-existing local conflicts.

Libya Dawn was launched with the declared objective of evicting Zintan's armed groups from the airport and other strategic locations that they controlled in Tripoli.<sup>32</sup> Groups from Zintan and Warshafana allied themselves with Operation Dignity against Libya Dawn and fought together in Tripoli and al-Zawiya during the summer of 2014 (notably causing the destruction of Tripoli International Airport), before being forced to withdraw from the capital. The subsequent fighting left scores dead and displaced tens of thousands in Tripoli, Western Libya and the Nafusa Mountains over the following months, as armed groups supporting the two main coalitions sought military advances or engaged in retaliatory attacks.<sup>33</sup>

Operation Libya Sunrise (*"shuruq libia"*), launched at the oil terminal of Sidra by Misratan forces with GNC support in December 2014, marked another turning point. It resulted in direct military confrontation between Misratan and pro-HoR forces, and clashes continued over energy infrastructures even after Misratans ended the siege of Sidra and withdrew in March 2015.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, from the end of 2014, Tebu and Tuareg communities in Southern Libya started to frame the pre-existing conflicts that opposed them – especially around the control of oil and trafficking resources – in terms of the national divide between Dignity and Dawn. Armed groups from the two communities entered in direct military confrontation for the control of oil fields (in particular, the two giant oil fields of al-Sharara and al-Fil, in the Murzuq basin), leading to a serious deterioration of the security situation in the cities of Obari and Sebha, and major displacement of the population.

### ***A Further Step Into "Militia-nization" of the Security Landscape***

The second part of 2014 thus marked a turning point as the political transition process collapsed, leading to major military confrontations in different parts of the country. Yet it also highlighted the increased "militia-nization" of Libya's security sector. Despite the claims

32 Larcher and Cole, "Politics by Other Means".

33 Collombier, "Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation".

34 International Crisis Group, "Oil zone Fighting Threatens Libya with Economic Collapse", commentary, 14 December 2016, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/oil-zone-fighting-threatens-libya-economic-collapse>

of the actors involved – especially in General Haftar’s camp – the conflict between the Dignity and Dawn coalitions was not a conflict between a regular national army, let alone one under the control of civilian leadership (Dignity), and outlawed militias (Dawn).

The reality of the situation was indeed much more complex as both military coalitions were hybrid structures mixing together regular army units, registered armed groups that formally depended on the ministries of Defence or Interior (and therefore received salaries from the government) but were actually autonomous, tribal militias, units or elements with a civilian background who decided to join the fight for ideological reasons (either the fight against “extremist Islamists”, or the fight against “the return of the former regime” or against Haftar, “the new tyrant”). The Dawn coalition allied to the Tripoli-based GNC was dominated by armed groups and politicians from the city of Misrata and included both “official” armed groups registered with the Tripoli government and non-registered armed groups, Islamist and non-Islamists. Fighting units originated from the cities of Misrata, Tripoli, al-Zawiya, Janzur, Zuwara and the Nafusa Mountains (notably Gharyan and Kikla). As for the Dignity coalition, it was a mix of military units (the Benghazi-based Saiqa, air force units operating from Gamal Abdul Nasser Air Base near Tobruk, air force units at Benina airport), tribal armed groups (the Baraghitha tribal armed formations under the command of Ibrahim Wakwak, ethnic Tebu fighters from Kufra, Tuareg from Ubari) or regionally-based armed groups (the Army of Barqa or Cyrenaica Defence Force). In the West, Zintan’s al Qa’qa, al-Madani, and Sawa’iq brigades (many of them including ex-soldiers from Qaddafi’s praetorian units) also joined Haftar, as did the commander of the military police, Mukhtar Fernana, and tribal armed groups from the region of Warshafana, west of Tripoli.<sup>35</sup>

Made of heterogeneous groups with different ideological backgrounds, objectives and interests, the two coalitions were, however, cemented by the general understanding that the battle for power was now to take place on the ground, at the military level, and that building alliances was indispensable to have the necessary weight to defeat the adversary. Significant support provided by external powers from the region (Egypt and the United Arab Emirates for Dignity; Qatar, Turkey and Sudan for Dawn) reinforced the local actors’ view that political victory could be achieved by military means, and therefore fueled the conflict further.

## Armed Actors, the Key to Achieving Peace at National and Local Levels

### *A Political Dialogue which Ignored Security Issues*

The continuing political deadlock and the serious deterioration of the security situation across the country led the United Nations to attempt mediation. A first unsuccessful meeting was organized in the Libyan city of Ghadames in September 2014, with the aim of reaching an

35 Frederic Wehrey, “Ending Libya’s Civil War. Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2014, available at [www.http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/09/24/ending-libya-s-civil-war-reconciling-politics-rebuilding-security-pub-56741](http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/09/24/ending-libya-s-civil-war-reconciling-politics-rebuilding-security-pub-56741)

agreement between members of the newly-elected HoR (sitting members and boycotters). A second try was made in Geneva in January 2015, with the objective of finding a way out of the institutional deadlock and division of the country between two rival parliaments and governments. This essentially meant agreeing on the formation of a government of national unity, and reaching an agreement between rival factions on confidence-building measures and a comprehensive ceasefire.

In contrast to the Ghadames meeting, which focused on parliamentarians, the Geneva talks included a broad array of actors representing some of the factions comprising the two main rival coalitions, belonging to the political, social and economic realms, as well as to civil society. This marked the beginning of a lengthy process, whose focus was largely on political procedures and institutional provisions (including a national unity government) meant to organize a new transitional period, until a constitution was drafted and adopted. The UN-led political dialogue focused on mediating between representatives of political factions, rival communities and civil society members, with the idea of breaking apart the two main rival coalitions by exposing the diversity of interests of their members and building a new “coalition of the moderates” that would be supportive of a political agreement.

The strategy proved partly successful, at least in a first stage and in Western Libya. After some influential forces from the city of Misrata – including major figures from the business community – agreed to participate in the dialogue and pushed for the withdrawal of the city’s armed brigades from Western Libya, the overall balance of power changed in the region, at both the political and military levels. The Dawn coalition ended up profoundly fragmented and weakened after several of its components decided to follow in the footsteps of Misrata. In addition to its dramatic political impact, this development allowed for the conclusion of local ceasefires and prisoner exchanges in Western Libya and in the Nafusa Mountains. As the Libya Dawn coalition became mostly irrelevant on the ground, the overall dispersion and diversity of the military forces in the west of the country resulted in some sort of balance of forces between factions and communities, which proved favourable for local reconciliation initiatives and the signature of a political agreement in December 2015.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, the UN mediation efforts never achieved such outcomes with the Dignity coalition in the east of the country. While the military and political coalition remained heterogeneous, it has been indisputably dominated by General Haftar, with wide support and adhesion – although not unanimous – from the traditional social (tribal) structures.<sup>37</sup> The opposition of Haftar and his allies to the UN-led political dialogue had its roots in the UN mediation itself and the modalities of discussion for the political agreement. Yet their opposition came to focus significantly on security-related issues, and in particular on the control of the armed forces. Article 8 of the Libyan Political Agreement, which would move ultimate control of the armed forces from the President of the HoR to the Presidency Council of the Council of Ministers, was seen as a key obstacle to the approval of the text by the HoR,

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36 Collombier, “Dialogue, Mediation and Reconciliation”.

37 Patrick Hamzaideh, “Libye, l’incontournable général Haftar”, *Orient XXI*, 19 September 2016, available at [www.orientxxi.info/magazine/libye-l-incontournable-general-heftar,1478](http://www.orientxxi.info/magazine/libye-l-incontournable-general-heftar,1478)

dominated by Haftar's allies.<sup>38</sup>

While the course of events since 2012 had shown that the rebuilding of the security sector constituted one of the most contested issues of the post-Qaddafi transition, and while military actors had acquired a dramatic influence over political developments since 2014, the conclusion of the Libyan Political Accord in December 2015 was pushed by the UN and its international backers without meaningful agreement on the main dispositions related to the organization and leadership of the security institutions. Consequently, the push for approval of the LPA and establishment of the Presidency Council in Tripoli were perceived as interference in the Libyan transition process by biased international and foreign parties and helped delegitimize the mediation process.

Despite early announcements that the negotiations would include a "security track," and therefore include representatives of the different armed groups and coalitions, this took time to materialize. Only when the prospect of the conclusion of a political agreement became more concrete, at the end of 2015, did the security issue come under serious discussion. Yet, discussion remained mostly limited to the security arrangements necessary to allow for the establishment of the Government of National Accord in Tripoli. No broad nationwide security dialogue was conducted that would have included representatives of all the main armed groups across the country, nor were members of these armed groups actually considered as political actors with political claims and expectations. While not all of them should have been invited to contribute to the discussions (given the essentially criminal record of some of them), the participation of the major military actors in the talks – or at least the establishment of channels of communication with them at an early stage in the process – would have provided any agreement with stronger legitimacy and credibility, and enhanced the chances of its implementation.

Overall, the limited attention devoted by the political dialogue to these matters, as well as the tendency to downsize or ignore the scope of disagreements and potential conflicts they implied, played a major role in the deadlock that followed the official signature of the Libyan Political Agreement in December 2015. Further attempts by the UN and foreign countries to impose the authority of the Presidential Council headed by Fa'ez Seraj continued throughout 2016, in spite of the ongoing opposition of major (mostly Eastern) leaders and constituencies to Seraj's government (GNA) and to the LPA.

Once again, military pressure appeared to be the best way to force a change in the power balance and impose a renegotiation of the power-sharing arrangements envisioned by the contested LPA. During summer 2016, while a significant part of Misrata's military capacities was engaged in support of the GNA to fight against the Islamic State's forces in Sirte, General Haftar chose to concentrate his military capacities in the region of Ajdabiya, where Libya's

38 Article 8 states, in particular, that the Presidency Council assume the functions of the Supreme Commander of the Libyan army; appointment and removal of the Head of the General Intelligence Service upon the "approval of the House of Representatives; (...) appointment and removal of senior officials; declaration of states of emergency, war and peace, and adoption of exceptional measures upon the approval of the National Defense and Security Council."

main oil installations are located, and to directly challenge the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) responsible for military operations in Libya's central region in the name of the GNA. General Haftar managed to seize control of the region without major infighting, however, as he had exploited political rivalries and secured support among local tribes beforehand. The move, intended to change the perception of Haftar's capacities both domestically and internationally, proved successful in that it underlined the necessity to take opponents to the LPA into better account to reach an accepted and viable political agreement.

### ***Localization of Security, Militia-nization of Society***

Faced with a political process in deadlock and directly threatened by the deterioration of the security situation since 2014, local communities and their leaders have had to renew efforts to ensure their own protection. The reverberation of the national political and military conflict at local levels, as well as the development and expansion of Jihadist forces in various areas of the country (especially the Islamic State in Derna, Sabratha and principally in Sirte) have triggered a consolidation of the structures in charge of local security, and at times of self-armament. This has been undertaken either in an isolated manner by individual communities (towns and cities, tribes) or in a coordinated manner between neighbouring communities (most often at the regional level), autonomously from central authorities. Such efforts have reinforced the two pre-existing trends of "localization" of security and "militia-nization" of society.

In various areas,<sup>39</sup> this has led to a security breakdown at the local level, as a result of increased fragmentation of the security structures and frequent clashes between rival groups. Yet armed actors have also played a key role in providing security to local communities or maintaining peace between local communities in some cases.

In the town of Bani Walid, for instance, one of the strongholds of the former regime during the civil war, the Social Council of the Warfalla Tribes (SCWT), the local tribal leadership, eventually established their own security brigade in the city (*katibat ta'min bani walid*) in early 2015. While Bani Walid previously had no such structure, defiance towards (and marginalization from) all the parties that came to political prominence after 2011,<sup>40</sup> as well as growing concern in the face of IS expansion, have encouraged this move. Based on the principle that the defence of the town is everyone's responsibility, the new brigade is presented as a "popular, communal and local structure" with "no link with any of the different sets of institutions competing for power at the national level or with the national judicial authorities".<sup>41</sup> While police officers have been present in the town after 2011 (both active officers from the former regime and new recruits originating from the town and hired by the local authorities) and at times mobilized by the SCWT to enforce local order, the new brigade has now become the key security structure in Bani Walid. Actual security provision is therefore strictly ensured at the social level, by the town's families. In addition, security

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39 This was, for instance, the case in Sabha, Warshafana, Sabratha or Zawiya.

40 Collombier, "Bani Walid: quelle place pour les 'vaincus' de la révolution?".

41 Author's interview with the spokesperson for the SCWT, February 2016.



coordination has been gradually developed and reinforced with the security structures of neighbouring communities, notably with Tarhuna (north of the town, on the way to Tripoli) and tribes of the south. Organization and control of the brigade's activities are ensured by designated members within the SCWT, with apparently positive results so far in terms of security inside the town.<sup>42</sup>

In 2015-16, community-based security structures have also played a key role in mediation and concluding ceasefires between the Tebu and Tuareg in the town of Obari, in Southern Libya. The conflict between the two communities, mostly rooted in the competition for control of the oil fields and intensified by the 2014 political conflict between the Dawn and Dignity coalitions, resulted in bloody confrontations over the course of 2015. Early in the conflict, several mediation attempts were conducted by various local, national and foreign actors and eventually led to the conclusion of a truce agreement in July 2015. The rapprochement between Tebu and Tuareg community leaders was possible at the social level thanks to the efforts of the Amazigh elders and notables from the Nafusa Mountains and their historical allies of the Magarha tribe in the south. Yet actual implementation of the agreement required the involvement of military actors in the mediation process, as the two warring parties did not trust each other and were therefore reluctant to remove their military positions permanently. This led the Hasawna tribe to intervene, together with a group of military actors from the south.<sup>43</sup> In February 2016, all the contact points between the two parties to the conflict were eventually handed over to a military force from the south made of military people and placed under the tribal leadership of the Hasawna tribe. The State of Qatar secured the implementation of the agreement by pledging to pay financial compensations to both parties affected by the war in Obari. In contrast, despite some attempts to intervene, none of the competing authorities at the national level actually played a role in reaching or implementing the agreement.

While obviously welcomed by the local communities, these developments underline the continuous fragmentation of the country and the increasingly autonomous organization of local communities in Western and Southern Libya. In Eastern Libya, in contrast, the trend has been the consolidation of security under Haftar's leadership. However, despite efforts to institutionalize and professionalize the LNA, the dominant security structure in the East has remained largely dependent on the adhesion and support of the leadership of the local, tribal communities from which its members originate. Overall, these developments will constitute a serious challenge in future plans to rebuild national institutions, both at the political and military levels.

## Conclusion

At the end of the war, the National Transitional Council (NTC)'s primary objectives were to stabilize the security situation and centralize authority. These proved hard to achieve,

42 Author's phone conversations with inhabitants from the city, February 2016; author's conversation with SWP researcher Wolfram Lacher upon his return from a trip to the city, October 2016.

43 A significant number of former high-level military officers are Tebu and Tuareg from Southern Libya.

however, because of the provisional authorities' lack of power and of legitimacy before the members of the revolutionary armed groups, but also because of the legacy of the former regime itself, which had significantly weakened the regular armed forces and entrusted the bulk of military capacities to paramilitary brigades commanded by relatives of Qaddafi.

The NTC and the first transitional governments had no choice but to rely on the revolutionary brigades and local armed groups to ensure short-term security. They mandated these groups to carry out specific security tasks that would normally have been performed by the state. This approach accentuated the fragmentation of the security sector, creating a hybrid security apparatus in which increasingly heterogeneous armed groups, mixing together civilian elements and regular forces, became more powerful and more autonomous from the central state institutions.

Yet, the proliferation of weapons and the importance of armed groups at the end of 2011 does not wholly account for the central role that they have played in post-Qaddafi Libya. In a context characterized by deep distrust and rivalries between Libyan communities, specific political constraints and decisions have proved crucial to the course of the transition.

The primary objective of armed groups, and the communities they originated from, was to secure their position in the competition for power and resources between revolutionary coalitions. In this race, military might was key, as the armed groups had the capacity to bargain concessions and privileges for themselves in exchange for the provision of security. Mistrust and rivalries between the different revolutionary coalitions rapidly resulted in extreme fragmentation and the factionalization of the nascent security institutions. Armed actors, whether registered as regular army units or as state affiliated-armed groups, became parties to the intensifying political conflict.

Overall, the new Libyan elites did not acknowledge the existence of deep rifts across Libyan society resulting from both previous political rule and the 2011 civil war, and did not make any effort to open channels for dialogue, trust-building and reconciliation, which were essential for the establishment of a new legitimate political order. The political class chose instead to prioritize early electoral competition which had the effect of intensifying rivalries between the various communities and the armed groups to which they belonged. When the political process started to derail, these actors found no alternative but to resort to military might to promote their interests in the new environment.

Despite the major challenge of providing security while recreating the security sector, the transitional authorities did not develop a comprehensive, long-term project to rebuild security institutions. While they were constrained by the necessity of reacting to security developments on the ground, it also appeared clear from the very beginning that the revolutionary armed groups deeply opposed such efforts. In the absence of channels and instruments to organize and manage a dialogue over these conflicting views, the opposition by armed groups led to deadlock within the nascent political institutions and, in 2014, renewed military confrontation at the national level.

Developments since then, at the diplomatic level, through the mediation attempts conducted by the United Nations, or at the local level, through efforts by communities to better ensure their own security, have underlined the key role played by armed actors. Yet they have also highlighted the relatively marginal place that these actors have been assigned in political processes. The failure of both Libya's political elites and international actors to address security matters for what they are, i.e. political issues, and to consider armed actors as partners in building new political arrangements largely explains the failure of Libya's transition, and the continuing war in the country.

As developments on the ground have significantly changed the overall balance of forces between the main factions in 2016, any new negotiation over a political settlement will have to address the restructuring and leadership of the security apparatus more in depth.

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# Can Syria Be Salvaged? The Role of the Military and Security Forces

*Abdel-Nasser al-Ayed*

## Introduction

When the Syrian revolution began in March 2011 along with other Arab Spring uprisings, the regime's security forces and army responded to suppress it with excessive force. Their large-scale violent response has had devastating consequences across Syrian society, and its effects have spread regionally and globally. This paper explores the objective, historical context in which the Syrian security forces were formed and the basis of their doctrine shaped, leading them to justify attacking and killing hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens.

The prevailing narrative about the Syrian military is that it is merely an exacerbating factor of the crisis, or that the regime is wrongly forcing the military into confrontation with the people. By contrast, this paper argues that from the very beginning, the military laid the foundation for the state's current predicament, by preventing Syrian society from developing and by controlling and depleting the country's resources. The current regime, in its security and military expressions, is itself a by-product of the army's evolution over the years, a path that could only lead to the explosion the country has witnessed and eventually the implosion of the military.

The Syrian military is a deformed creation of the French Mandate, and its inherent systemic flaws were overlooked by Syrian society and the nascent state. When the military became stronger and imposed itself as a key player in Syrian politics, its destructive potential was unleashed. At that point, Syrian society had become too weak to confront the problem. The army was well on its path to self-destruction with the resulting damage to society. This damage cannot be redressed in the short or medium term. It has endangered the very existence of the Syrian state.

Obtaining data on the Syrian military is an enormously difficult task. The regime considers such information to be its deepest and most critical secret, and thus keeps it highly confidential and protected. This paper presents figures that give a partial indication of the army's composition over the past three decades. Information was gathered through investigating various classes of officers; it was possible to obtain information from only three of them (see Annex).

The research is guided by the belief that the most effective way to overcome Syria's current

crisis is to objectively explore its root causes and effects. This should be done without bias or prejudice; the facts should be presented as they are, regardless of how sensitive they may be. This is the best way to start building a new, unified Syrian state – one that will only be possible if the country's military and security institutions uphold the values and standards of similar institutions in the developed world.

## Historical Overview of the Syrian Armed Forces

Three structural flaws can be observed in this brief history of the Syrian military, which explain much of the military's subsequent conduct and ultimate fate: ideological flaws, functional flaws, and sociological flaws. In ideological terms, the creation of the Syrian army was designed for bygone purposes as opposed to modern military doctrine. For all armies, military doctrine is the central purpose behind the armed forces' existence and the means of accomplishing military tasks. Modern armies were established to ensure the state's regional security and protect the nation's sovereignty, integrity, and its very existence. The Syrian army, however, was created in the 1920s by the French Mandate. It was designed to be a blunt object by which France could subdue various sections of society that opposed it. The military has continued to play this role over the past 75 years, except for a brief period after Syrian gained independence and the French withdrew. After this, it continued to control and suppress Syrian society – this time as the sole power ruling the country.

In functional terms, the Syrian armed forces have largely overstepped the normal role of the military. In all countries across the world, the military's function – as decreed by the constitution – is to guard the country and protect it from foreign threats. The military is sometimes used for political ends, however, and undertake the task of political work, administration, legislation, justice, and other public functions and powers. Certain armies have risen to power by using the weapons they were entrusted with to protect society – to their own ends. Not only does this violate the overall structure of the state and the division of labour between other branches of government, it also violates professional honour and shows lack of integrity. The Syrian army has fallen into this trap since independence. The first coup d'état in the Arab world happened in Syria in 1949, and the military has dominated domestic and foreign political affairs ever since.

Finally, in sociological terms, the objective of the French in creating the armed forces was to rely heavily on ethnic and religious minorities who had been disaffected by the Sunni majority – particularly residents of major cities, who were the majority of the population and the centre of the cultural and political movement, and who had been responsible for resisting the occupying powers.<sup>1</sup> By the time France withdrew from Syria, this minoritarian force was

1 According to Nikolaos Van Dam, "dividing Syria's population as to language *or* religion shows that 82.5% are Arabic-speaking and 68.7% are Sunni Muslims. In language *and* religion, the Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims constitute a numerical majority of 57.4% of the whole population. The remaining groups can be classified as ethnic and/or religious minorities. The major *religious minorities* in Syria are the Alawis (11.5%), Druzes (3.0%), Ismailis (1.5%), and the Greek Orthodox Christians (4.7%), who constitute the most important community of all Christians in Syria (14.1%). The principal *ethnic minorities* are the Kurds (8.5%), Armenians (4.0%), and Turcomans (3.0%)." Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Sectarianism, Regionalism, and Tribalism in Politics, 1961-1978*, (Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*) p.1.

the only trained force, and the only force viable to be the military of the nascent Syrian state. Furthermore, it was seen as weak and harmless, and its underlying deficiencies were overlooked. The military soon seized power and monopolized it, however. Its minoritarian character became entrenched, increasingly so over time, and the rift between the army and the majority of Syrians increased.

Nonetheless, these flaws alone do not explain how Syrian society and the state have arrived at where they are today. Numerous subjective, objective, and historical factors have contributed to the current crisis. Syrian elites surrendered to an increasingly repressive authoritarianism, and there was no social will to stand up to the prevailing military authoritarianism. Exploring in greater depth the history of the Syrian military sheds light on these dynamics.

### ***Special Troops in the Levant, 1920-1945***

When French forces defeated King Faisal's army in the Battle of Maysaloun in 1920, they proceeded to divide Syria into smaller states based on religious and ethnic affiliations in order to render the territory easier to control. The Sunni majority was split among several entities, and the country was militarily divided into five regions: the Damascus State, the Aleppo State, the Alawite State, the Jabal Druze State, and the autonomous *sandjak* of Alexandretta.<sup>2</sup> The French intelligence had a prominent role in planning and management; they believed their role to be to understand the organization of society and, ultimately, secure French power. In 1922, the French had seventy intelligence officers in Syria. It was the sole institution that covered the entire territory, and played a central role in the French mandatory system."<sup>3</sup>

These officers believed that by empowering minorities and promoting them to positions of power, they could weaken the Sunnis and thus ensure control over this majority that opposed them, and which, at the time, was politically and economically dominant.

In July 1920, the "Auxiliary Troops of the Levant" were established. This was essentially a new name for the Légion d'Orient, a force that had been formed in 1916 to combat the Ottomans. The Auxiliary Troops of the Levant were made up of 4,500 Lebanese, Syrians, and Armenians.<sup>4</sup> Their numbers reached 7,000 recruits by 1924. In 1930, they were renamed the "Special Troops of the Levant,"<sup>5</sup> and by 1942, they included a total of 22,000 men.<sup>6</sup> In 1943, the Lebanese troops separated from the Syrian troops. While both remained under French

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2 Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat Mandataire, Service des Renseignements et Bandes Armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920*, Paris: Publications Sorbonne, 2003; as cited in Konrad Szttyler, "The Security Services in Lebanon and Syria: The Mark of the French Architect", Arab Reform Initiative, August 2012, p. 5, available at [www.arab-reform.net/en/node/589](http://www.arab-reform.net/en/node/589) (Szttyler, "The Security Services in Syria").

3 Jean-David Mizrahi, *Genèse de l'Etat Mandataire, Service des Renseignements et Bandes Armées en Syrie et au Liban dans les années 1920*, Paris: Publications Sorbonne, 2003, as cited in Konrad Szttyler, "The Security Services in Syria", p. 5.

4 Adel A. Freiha, *L'Armée et l'Etat au Liban (1945-1980)*, Paris: Librairie Générale du Droit et de la Jurisprudence, 1980, p. 164, as cited in Konrad Szttyler, "The Security Services in Syria", p. 6.

5 Szttyler, "The Security Services in Syria".

6 Szttyler, "The Security Services in Syria".



rule until 1945, these two forces would become the future armies of Lebanon and Syria.

Mohammad Marouf, a former officer in the Special Troops of the Levant, and one of the leaders of Sami al-Hinnawi's coup in 1949, lists in his memoirs the names and backgrounds of other recruits in his 1939 class at the military academy in Homs, giving a clear picture of how methodically student officers were chosen:

*Anton Khoury (Maronite), Philip Sawaya (Orthodox), Mohammed Marouf and Hassan Muhanna (Alawis), Charles Jean (Catholic), Anwar Tamer (Ismaili), Wajih Haddad, Kamal Maz, Sohail al-Barazy, Zuhair al-Solh (from Beirut), Mufeed Ghosn Halawi (Lebanon), Khattar Hamza Abdul Karim Zahreddine (from Jabal al-Arab), Permian (Armenian), Nizam al-Deen (Shia), Khaled Jada (Circassian).*<sup>7</sup>

An examination of the number of students admitted shows that, aside from Lebanese officers, only around 20% were Sunni. This was not because Sunnis did not wish to enrol in the academy; Marouf himself writes that there were 200 applicants with high school degrees. Education was common in Syrian cities, therefore we can assume that the majority of these applicants were Sunni. There was clearly a systematic and accepted policy that designated a disproportionate number of places to each sect.

Assaf Abu Hamdan, a Druze officer in the army, also noted what sect and social groups officers belonged to, especially urban Sunnis. Abu Hamdan graduated from the Troops of the Levant in 1936, and was the right-hand man in Sami al-Hinnawi's coup. In his memoirs, he writes,

*In al-Jabal [Jabal al-Arab, in the predominantly Druze city of Sweida], people don't feel like Damascus is their capital. They are part of a great Arab homeland, but they have been met with nothing but hatred and hostility from everyone around them.*<sup>8</sup>

Nikolaos Van Dam, author of an objective study on sectarianism in the Syrian military, believes that wealthy Sunni families indirectly contributed to the strong representation of minorities in the Syrian army by refusing to send their children off for military training in a force that appeared to serve the interests of French imperialism, even if they would become officers.<sup>9</sup> Officer Marouf confirms this, writing, "[t]he truth is, there were almost no people from the city in the ranks of the army, just the unemployed and people who failed in school."<sup>10</sup> A large number of minorities sought to enlist in these forces, since "to many people from the poor countryside (where most minorities live) a military career offered a welcome opportunity to climb the social ladder."<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the actual causes, however, social representation

7 Mohammad Marouf, *Ayyam Ishtuha: 1949-1969 (Days that I Lived: 1949-1969)*, Beirut: Riyad al-Rayes, 2003.

8 Chief Abu Assaf, *Zikreiyati (My Memories)*, date and place of publication unknown, p. 15.

9 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 52.

10 Marouf, *Ayyam Ishtuha*, p. 57.

11 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 27.

in these forces was vastly disproportionate. Though only 28.7% of the population was made up of religious and ethnic minorities, they represented 51.3% of the Special Troops of the Levant, whereas the Sunni majority (57.2% of the general population), represented only 35.7% of the military.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Syrian Independence and the Military's Power Grab, 1946-1948***

In early 1943, General Catroux, the representative of the Free French, declared Syria and Lebanon independent; France, however, did not restore Syria's previously elected government until the spring of 1943. A provisional government was declared, and parliamentary elections were held, in which the National Bloc won. Shukri al-Quwatli was elected president, and the first national government was formed. All legislative, executive, and judicial powers were transferred to the national government, with the exception of customs and the military - the Special Troops of the Levant. The Troops were finally handed over to the Syrian and Lebanese governments on 1 August 1946, a few months after independence was officially achieved. Members of the armed forces could choose between enlisting in the National Army or the French one, with some officers and soldiers, "including some Armenian officers,"<sup>13</sup> choosing the French. In 1946, by the time the last French officers left Syria, "the regular armed forces of the newly independent state had grown to around 12,000"<sup>14</sup> whereas the Syrian contingent of the Special Troops in 1946 counted only 7,000.<sup>15</sup>

Representation within these forces was disproportionate, with Alawis most strongly represented. "They would make up 80% of the army, particularly the infantry."<sup>16</sup> When the French withdrew, the ethnic and sectarian composition of the forces was: "Alawites: 15.7% of the general population and 24.4% of the forces; Kurds: 6.9% of the population and 15.7% of the forces; Circassians: 1.7% and 5.5%; Druze: 3.3% and 6.5%; Ismailis: 1% and 1.9%; Assyrians/Chaldeans: 0.1% and 9%."<sup>17</sup>

Certain military units were entirely made up of one community. Out of the eight infantry battalions in the Special Troops of the Levant in Syria under the French Mandate,

*Three consisted entirely or substantively of Alawis and none was Sunni Arab in composition. It is also true that out of the twelve cavalry squadrons on which data is available, only one, the Twenty-fourth, consisted of rural Sunni Arabs from Dayr az-Zur and ar-Raqqah, and two*

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12 Lebanese Security Service, p. 5.

13 Marouf, *Ayyam Ishtuha*, p. 49.

14 Thomas Collelo, *Syria, A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, ed., Headquarters, Department of the Army, Third Edition, 1988, pp. 236-237, as cited in Murhaf Jouejati, "Reforming Syria's Security Sector in the Post-Assad Era", Arab Reform Initiative, July 2014, p. 4, available at [www.arab-reform.net/en/node/607](http://www.arab-reform.net/en/node/607) (Thomas Collelo, *Syria, A Country Study*, in Murhaf Jouejati, "Reforming Syria's Security Sector in the Post-Assad Era")

15 Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, translated by Abd Fadel and Raed al-Naqshbandi, revised by Thair Deeb, Beirut: The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014, p. 158, (Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*).

16 Marouf, *Ayyam Ishtuha*, p. 56.

17 *Lebanese and Syrian Security Services*, p. 5.

*others, the Twenty-first and the Twenty-fifth, comprised some Sunni Arab elements from the tribe of Shammar or from the towns of Idlib and Hims. All the other units were drawn from the Druze, Circassians, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, or Ismailis.*<sup>18</sup>

The military's relationship with society – and Sunnis in particular – was not amicable. In Marouf's memoirs, he describes the bad conditions when his company was stationed in Talkalakh:

*water had to be transported by cistern, because the city of Talkalakh had cut off the water to the barracks. Fruit and vegetables and everything to feed the soldiers every day was transported to us from Tripoli, and soldiers in the company were forbidden from going into town, for fear of problems with the residents.*<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, there was a clear divide between political authority and the military from the moment Syria gained independence on 17 April 1946. Political authority was overwhelmingly urban and Sunni, and as a result of their 25-year struggle for independence, they were relatively well positioned. The military, in contrast, was primarily made up of minorities from the countryside. Now that it was distanced from the mandatory power that had created it, it began to grasp at power on its own. A series of fierce debates ensued in the Syrian parliament about reducing the size of the military. Politicians seemed to succeed in cutting the number of soldiers in the Special Troops of the Levant, and, by 1948 it was reduced to 2,500 men.<sup>20</sup> When Israel was established in 1948, however, the Syrian army's first trial ended in defeat. As a result, the military was increasingly criticized by the parliament and the media. Its reputation deteriorated to the point that soldiers were reluctant to wear their uniforms while out in Damascus to avoid being insulted by civilians. The nascent parliamentary system was fragile and its leaders did not understand how precarious their position was, nor how to manage these risks. Soldiers were humiliated by the way they were being treated politically. The army took advantage of their dissatisfaction and seized its opportunity. On 31 March 1949, Husni al-Za'im, a colonel in the Syrian army, staged the first coup d'état in the Middle East.

### ***Underlying Sectarian Polarization, 1949-1958***

Al-Za'im's coup was a means of testing the waters and his officers – primarily minorities – observed him carefully: they sought assurance he had the power to impose their will politically. They also wanted to ensure he would not have to wait to be granted legitimacy by the urban population, or commercial, religious, or political classes, as there was no way to win their favour. Soon, another coup was staged – one more organized this time, in contrast to al-Za'im's hastily executed coup.

This second coup, known as Sami al-Hinnawi's coup, was staged in August 1949, and was

<sup>18</sup> Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 304.

<sup>19</sup> Marouf, *Ayyam Ishtuha*, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 158.

based primarily on personal ambitions as opposed to socio-political divisions. It was largely planned and carried out by officers from rural areas and minority groups, graduates who had enrolled in the Special Troops of the Levant. This is evident in the composition of the Supreme Military Council, which was formed in the aftermath of the coup. Members included Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi (Sunni, Kurdish), Colonel Alameddine Kawas (Alawi), Lt. Colonel Abu Assaf (Druze), Chief Mohammad Marouf (Alawi), Essam Muraywid (Sunni, from the Joulan tribe), Khaled Jada (Circassian), Mahmoud al-Rifae (Sunni), Mohamed Diab (Ismaili), Lieutenant Hassan al-Hakim (Ismaili).

Colonel Baheij Klass also later joined the Council, even though he had not been part of the coup. Yet, differences between this bloc of minority officers reveal their ambitions and aspirations. There was conflict between the Alawite group and the Druze group, which was led by Hamdan Abu Assaf. There was also conflict within the Alawite group itself, which had three leaders. Two of them – Alameddine Kawas and Mohammad Nasser – were at odds with one another, and the third shrewdly waited for his chance at power.

Marouf relates an indicative incident in his memoirs. As a member of the Military Council, he tried to nominate Colonel Aziz Abdul-Karim for the position of Chief of Staff. Marouf writes on page 150-151:

*I had convinced Khaled Jada, Mahmoud al-Rifae, and Essam Muraywid to support my proposal if I presented it, but Colonel Aziz told me: don't suggest it, there are many officers who are older than me. Don't forget that I am from a certain sect and there's no point in burning bridges.*

On 19 December 1949, Adib al-Shishakli led Syria's third coup, the first of two coups he staged personally. It represented the urban Sunni population's return to power, and a partial restructuring of the urban political class. Al-Shishakli continued to use the army as a political player, however. He interfered in affairs of governance – which had supposedly been handed over to civilians – by controlling the Council of Colonels, despite the fact that it was composed of minority officers.

Syria subsequently underwent a period of dual rule, in which both Hashim al-Atassi's government and the Supreme Military Council (which had replaced the Council of Colonels) managed the country. Al-Shishakli did not wait long, before staging a second coup on 31 November 1951. He arrested and imprisoned Prime Minister Maarouf al-Dawalibi and most members of his cabinet. This, in turn, prompted President Hashem al-Atassi to resign. Al-Shishakli appointed Fawzi Selu as president, but kept real power for himself by assuming the positions of chief of staff and chief of the Supreme Military Council. He sought to establish his military authority during this period by keeping his minority officer allies' influence at a distance. He staged an election and was successfully elected president. Subsequently, in order to build a separate power base from the military – which other officers controlled – he created a civil party, and began to marginalize the officers. He issued several laws and decrees, "aiming at the creation of a homogeneous Arab-Muslim state. 'Kurds, Assyrians,

Armenians, Alawis, and Christian minorities of all sorts were harried by a swarm of decrees.”<sup>21</sup> Al-Shishakli seemed to be attempting to change the composition of the military with these measures. Colonel Jasim Alwan, an instructor at the Military Academy, recalled that:

*al-Shishakli had urged him to give clear preference to Sunni-Arab Muslims in his classes at the Military Academy of Homs, and to limit the number of religious and ethnic minorities.... Alwan, who at the time was instructor of the class which included Alawi officers like Hafiz al-Asad, Ali Aslan and Muhammad Nabhan, rejected the idea.*<sup>22</sup>

There was rising discontent among minorities in the army until an opportune moment arrived. In 1954, a Druze uprising in Sweida was confronted by Al-Shishakli with aerial bombardment of the villages. As a result, a sizeable alliance of minorities in the military quickly formed, rallied against him, and forced him to flee the country in secret.

In the first decade after Syria gained independence, minority officers and soldiers in the army became increasingly audacious and their influence grew. They took advantage of greater access to education and the political and partisan conflict in the country. Akram Hourani, for example, encouraged and facilitated the enrolment of minorities in military academies. Syrian Social Nationalist Party leaders also encouraged this, offering positions to certain individuals, as if “drafting” people from their own regions and communities into the military.

The Ba’ath Party’s entry into politics was even more significant. Its leaders were civilians, and it embraced a brand of nationalism that did not conflict with Sunni Arab identity, which had been at the core of the nationalist movement since the end of the Ottoman Empire. The Ba’ath Party did not attempt to hide its temptation to stage coups as a method of seizing power and making changes to the state and society. Syria’s recent history had paved the way for young men from minority communities to enrol in military academies in large numbers, regardless of their intellectual or social background. These men assumed leadership positions, and then brought in relatives and other acquaintances belonging to their sectarian, regional and tribal communities and favoured their applications to the army, navy, and air academies.

Alawis derived much of their strength from the lower ranks of the army (the non-commissioned officers and common soldiers) and their presence became a permanent fixture in the military. Colonel Adnan al-Maliki’s assassination in 1955– and the complex circumstances surrounding it until today, illustrate how deeply entrenched and sectarian the conflict was within the military. The assassination was considered an act of partisan political cleansing, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party was blamed, though they staunchly denied the accusation. Others blamed the incident on sectarianism, and pointed to al-Maliki’s attempts to leverage his position as head of the Third Division of the army. Al-Maliki had been responsible for recruitment and transfers within the army, and sought to reduce the presence and influence of minorities – particularly Alawis – by recruiting young Sunni men instead. When Alawi sergeant Yunis Abdur-Rahim, chief of the Military Intelligence Bureau,

21 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 29.

22 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 29.

went to investigate the assassination, he discovered to his surprise that “no fewer than 55% or so of the non-commissioned officers belonged to the Alawi sect.”<sup>23</sup> The sectarian explanation is further supported by the fact that al-Maliki’s killers – Colonel Ghassan Jadid and his network – were Alawis.

More than any other group, Alawis profited from these turbulent political conditions. They used a network of solidarity-driven, sect-based relationships, to secure adequate positions within the military. As a sect, Alawis had a cohesive background: they came from a single geographic area, Syria’s coastal mountain region, and had similar socio-economic conditions, mostly poor peasants. Most Alawis joined the Ba’ath Party, under nationalist slogans that rejected differentiating Arabs along sectarian or tribal lines, as did the rest of the officers from minority groups. In contrast, Sunni officers felt united by their sectarian identity but divided across political movements and associations, social backgrounds, and geographic regions. Perhaps they were concerned that minorities were gaining power, and felt unable to stop it. Perhaps that is why 16 officers, mostly Sunnis, travelled to Egypt to ask Gamal Abdel Nasser to create the United Arab Republic: a political union between Egypt and the Syrian Arab Republic. Perhaps some, if not all, of Sunnis were hoping this would effectively end minorities’ unchecked power within the Syrian army, and that their own officers could then assume complete political control of the country.

### ***Marginalization of Alawite Officers and their Response, 1958-1961***

As leaders of the United Arab Republic, Sunni officers were given preferential treatment, with the highest and most sensitive positions reserved for them. In former Chief of Staff Abdul-Karim Zahreddine’s memoirs, for example, he writes that during the political union of Egypt and Syria, military leaders refused to appoint a Syrian Muslim officer as First Army Commander (Syrian Army Commander) unless he was Sunni. When Gado Ezzedine, one of the army officers most enthusiastic about Nasserism, was nominated for the position, “the proposal was rejected because he was a Druze.”<sup>24</sup>

Officers from minority groups found themselves lost in the Egyptian military, and discovered that the transfer process had completely fractured their unity. They were spread out within disparate units, especially in the southern regions of Egypt. Furthermore, their biggest problem was the dissolution of the Ba’ath Party, which had been an acceptable political framework for bringing them together, one that did not give off the faintest whiff of being a sectarian or class-based bloc. The officers in the Ba’athist military who had approved the United Arab Republic were all Sunni. Meanwhile, the officers responsible for the Military Committee (an entity that would play a key role in Syria’s history) were all minorities. The Military Committee was founded by five officers: three Alawis, including Mohammed Umran, Salah Jadid, and Hafez al-Assad, and two Ismailis, Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, and Ahmed al-Mir. Noteworthy here is that Salah Jadid had not been a Ba’athist until that moment; we can conclude that in joining with these officers, he was implicitly responding to the fact that the

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23 Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*, p. 157.

24 Abdul-Karim Zahreddine, *Muthakirati an fatra al-infisal fi suriya (My Memoirs from the Separatist Period in Syria)*, Beirut: Dar al-Ethad, 1968, p. 43, (Zahreddine, *Muthakirati an fatra al-infisal fi suriya*).



minority bloc had declined in prestige.

A bloc of Damascene officers emerged as a result of the Egyptian leadership's preferential treatment of urban Sunni officers. Under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Abd al-Karim al-Nahlawi, they reached the height of their power. On 28 September 1961, they successfully staged a coup. This ended the Syrian-Egyptian union and caused Syria to separate from the United Arab Republic, to the Egyptian leadership's shock and surprise.

### ***Separation and Return to the Centre of Power, 1961-1963***

Al-Nahlawi's faction grew increasingly insular, and wanted exclusive control over the army – not only as a Sunni group, but as an exclusively urban and Damascene one. As a case in point: after the coup of 28 September 1961, the Syrian Army Command was composed of 10 members - five were Sunni Damascene officers, four were other Sunnis not from Damascus (one of whom was Circassian), and one a Druze. Alawis had no representation on the council.

Minority officers nonetheless made a spirited return, now with their own clandestine organization, and reclaimed certain political duties from the Ba'ath Party, which had fallen more and more under the Military Committee's influence. Without Egypt's support,

*the power position of al-Nahlawi's faction of Damascene officers crumbled quickly, partly because al-Nahlawi never received the full support of the non-Damascenes. On 28 March 1962, he tried in vain to tighten his slackening grip on the army and government apparatus by way of a military coup. Following this abortive attempt, he was expelled from Syria together with five of his most prominent Damascene military colleagues.*<sup>25</sup>

Here, it is noteworthy that the rural Sunni Nasserist contingent had a direct role in ousting al-Nahlawi's faction. Sunni military men

*were clearly differentiated into urban and rural officers. Among the urbanites the most active and the most politically distinguishable were the Damascenes and the Hamawis, and among the country officers the groups of Dayr az-Zur and the Hawran.*<sup>26</sup>

On a deeper level, the minoritarian military bloc was the driving force behind this movement, as they had become more organized and cohesive as a result of the era of unity and its aftermath. Through their alliance with rural Sunnis, they were able to unseat the most cohesive bloc out of all their rivals: the Damascene military, which was united religiously and geographically and was the strongest contingent in Damascus.

### ***Ruralization, 1963-1966***

On 8 March 1963, a coalition of independent Ba'athists, Nasserites, and unionists staged a

<sup>25</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 159.

coup against the “separatist regime,” with 104 senior officers being discharged from service and, three days later, 150 middle-ranking and junior officers also ousted. As Batatu writes,

*By the time of the outbreak of the June 1967 war no fewer than 700 officers... had been cashiered and replaced by reservists, who were, to a large extent, rural schoolteachers, or by inadequately trained officer cadets, often of rural origin.*<sup>27</sup>

This number represented more than a third of the total officer corps. According to Abdul-Karim Zahreddine, who served as Chief of Staff from 1961 to 1963, there were about 1,800 officers in 1961,<sup>28</sup> yet after these discharges, “minority groups... were able to occupy important positions of command which had become vacant through the successive dismissals of Sunnis.”<sup>29</sup> Alawis were extremely active during these years and eager to take large strides towards central leadership, with approximately half of the seven hundred officers who were dismissed reportedly replaced by Alawis. Salah Jadid assumed a new position as Army Chief of Staff in August 1963, one he held until September 1965. Hafez al-Assad became commander of the Air Force and Air Defence, and Mohammed Umran – despite his higher rank – was given command of the 70th Armoured Brigade, stationed south of Damascus, and became the effective protector of this new authority.

The 70th Armoured Brigade quickly became the striking force of the Syrian army during this period and, under Umran’s leadership and regulations, was almost entirely composed of Alawis. Ba’athist military leaders each consolidated their power through activating familial, tribal, or regional ties within the corps of officers and non-commissioned officers.

Just a few months after the March 1963 coup, this purge in the military accelerated: the Nasserist bloc was dispensed with, and the rural Sunni contingent’s most important members were attacked. On 18 July, Colonel Jassem Alwan and several other officers, mostly Sunnis, attempted to stage a coup. When the men involved were brought to trial, all Nasserist blocs – as well as blocs of other officers – were eliminated or scaled back. As Van Dam writes,

*The purged Independent Unionist officers, Lu’ayy al-Atasi and Ziyad al-Haririr, and the Nasserist officers Muhammad al-Sufi, Rashid al-Qutayni and Fawwaz Muharib, who had all been members of the National Council of the Revolutionary Command set up as the supreme authority of the state after the 8 March 1963 coup, as well as Jasim Alwan and Muhammad al-Jarrah, two leading Nasserist officers, were indeed all Sunnis.*<sup>30</sup>

In addition to these dismissals and recruitments, transfers also diminished the efficacy of Sunnis who remained in the military command. They were sent away from units around Damascus, and stationed either at the front, or in Aleppo or Latakia. Mohammed Umran, a prominent Alawi officer, took this to a new level of enthusiasm during this period. In a

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27 Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*, p. 157.

28 Zahreddine, *Muthakirati an fatra al-infisal fi Suriya*, p. 481.

29 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 31.

30 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 190.

military meeting, he claimed that “the Fatimids must play their role,” referring to an alliance of Alawite, Druze, and Ismaili sects. Nonetheless, his statement, aimed at this alliance of sects and the officers affiliated with it, did not mean that he rejected or was even hesitant towards sectarian blocs in principle. Those in power feared and opposed open declarations of sectarianism, as they could prompt Sunnis to form a bloc themselves and take a united stance against minorities.

After minority officers in the army had discharged another Sunni bloc – a rural one, this time – further stabilizing their position, they turned their eyes to civil society, where the Ba’ath Party served as a legitimate political cover for their power. They used rural Sunnis to diminish urban Sunni power, playing off the inherent conflict between rural and urban populations across Syria and in particular in Sunni regions such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir az-Zor (in contrast, areas such as Latakia and Hama saw sects mix together). The rural elite, less religious than their urban counterparts, were more inclined to support ideas and positions not based in religion and were more accepting of religious differences with minorities. Nonetheless, they took a firmer stance on political, class, or regional differences.

Hanna Batatu, however, believes the ruralization process had begun before the March 1963 coup, and that this simply served to “accelerate and intensify a process that had begun in the 1950s, which involved the ultimate transformation of the officer corps, the armed forces, and the state bureaucracy into institutions with a strongly rural or peasant colouring.”<sup>31</sup>

In the backdrop of these divisions, fierce conflict broke out between the Ba’ath Party’s National Command (controlled by Amin al-Hafez, Michel Aflaq, and former Ba’athists, most of them urbanites), and the Regional Command (which was controlled by Salah Jadid, and primarily comprised of rural minorities and Sunnis). In an attempt to break Jadid’s control over the Syrian party apparatus, on 19 December 1965, the National Command decided to fully assume power following the dissolution of the Syrian Regional Command.<sup>32</sup> Amin al-Hafez and his group were soon dealt a decisive blow in the form of a military coup on 23 February 1966, in which Salim Hatun (a Druze) and Izzat Jadid (an Alawi) played central roles. Here, it is noteworthy that those purged were by-and-large Sunnis. The Alawite bloc was quick to cement their new gains, and seized the most critical point of power – the Ministry of Defence – quickly appointing Hafiz al-Assad as minister on 23 February 1966.

The National Command, led by Munif al-Razzaz, covertly began to try to regain its former influence. Al-Razzaz had secretly established a civil party organization to attract former Ba’athists, primarily Sunnis from major cities. He also founded a secret military organization led by Major General Fahd al-Sha’ir, a Druze. When prominent Druze officers who were allied with the Alawis sensed that Hatun and others had serious aspirations to monopolize power, they also became involved in al-Razzaz’s military organization. Hatun was commander of a commando unit that had played a prominent role in the March 1963 coup, yet he had not been promoted, or given an important position commensurate with his service. Furthermore,

31 Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*, p. 156.

32 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 50.

one of his fellow officers – a prominent Druze officer named Talal Abu Asali – had been removed from practical political influence, and tasked with command of the Joulan Front.

Al-Sha'ir and his group in the military wing of the secret party organization specifically excluded Alawis, but on 8 September 1966, Al-Sha'ir and al-Razzaz's plot was discovered. Investigations that would eventually lead definitively to Hatum and al-Asali began. Meanwhile, a large number of Druze officers were arrested as they formed the backbone of Hatum's secret military organization. Hatum and Abu al-Asali fled to Jordan, where for the first time, they publicly criticized the Alawis' hold on power, and in particular, the purge of all prominent officers from other sects. They focused on the fact that no Alawi officer had been detained in the most recent arrests. On 13 September 1966, Hatum held a press conference in Amman, declaring:

*The sectarian spirit is spread in a shameful way in Syria, particularly in the Army, in the appointment of officers and even recruits. The ruling group is embarking on a purge of officers and of groups which oppose it and these are being replaced by its own followers at different levels. Thus, the Alawis in the Army have attained a ratio of five to one of all other religious communities.*<sup>33</sup>

In early 1967, death sentences were issued against the group that had participated in the so-called 8 September Plot. Five top Druze officers were sentenced to death: Fahd al-Sha'ir, Salim Hatum, Talal Abu al-Asali, Abdelrahim Bathish, and Fawaz Abu al-Fadl. Alawis firmly and harshly imposed their authority, and cemented their monopoly of military power. This is clear from how they dealt with Hatum: though he had been sentenced to death, he returned to Syria and turned himself in to the authorities, putting himself at their mercy just as the June 1967 war broke out with Israel. On 26 June 1967, the Ba'athist military command, which was predominantly Alawite, swiftly executed Hatum.

Subsequently, purging blocs of independent rural officers who did not belong to any of the major factions became easier. The Chief of Staff, Ahmad Suwaydani, – who was from Hawran and who had once been a prominent supporter of Salah Jadid, was dismissed<sup>34</sup> and replaced by Mustafa Talas, a Sunni fiercely loyal to Hafez al-Assad. Suwaydani and several of his supporters from Hawran were arrested and remained in al-Assad's prisons for 25 years. This was followed by another wave of arrests in May 1970, in which officers from Hawran, Aleppo, and Idlib were charged with acting under Iraqi Ba'athist Amin al-Hafez and plotting to overthrow the government. A third purge further neutralized minorities' positions. Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, head of the National Security Bureau and the last of the prominent Ismaili officers, and several of his associates, were besieged in his headquarters, ending in al-Jundi's death either by suicide or targeted elimination.

In addition to large-scale operations to restructure the military and change its composition, other measures were also taken, including exceptional promotions and the handover of

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<sup>33</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 60.

sensitive units. Although these measures were smaller in scale, they were ultimately highly influential in shaping the sectarian make-up of the armed forces. The case of Rifaat al-Assad, younger brother to Hafez, is a perfect example, both in terms of how quickly he rose within the military command, and his unexpected role in changing the power equations. In 1995, Colonel-General Mustafa Tlass, Syrian Minister of Defence, discovered an intended offence regarding Rifaat al-Assad, from a time when he had been pushed out of power. Tlass relates that when Rifaat al-Assad was a student at the Military Academy in April 1965, the leadership and its director, Izzat Jadid, decided to give him the highest rank in his armoured vehicle course. Mustafa Tlass, then head of the Inspections Committee, checked the results, and discovered that “Rifaat had been 31<sup>st</sup> in the armoured vehicle course, out of 37” students.<sup>35</sup> Tlass writes that Hafez al-Assad deemed this important, and asked him to check the results. Soon after Rifaat had graduated, Hafez called on him to deliver a detachment of tanks that was stationed at the airport to deter any attempts at a coup. This detachment, called the Airport Defence Companies at the time, quickly expanded, and by 1967 was the most important tank battalion in the Syrian army. It later became a force of 50,000 elite troops, called the Defence Companies.

Sectarian bias became even clearer during the June 1967 war, under Izzat Jadid, commander of the most important unit in the army, the 70<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade. On 10 June 1967, Hafez al-Assad issued Communiqué 66, announcing the fall of Quneitra – before a single Israeli soldier had entered the city – leading to the arbitrary and impulsive withdrawal of Syrian troops. Batatu argues that Communiqué 66 was a product of al-Assad and Jadid’s fears that their regime would fall: Jadid in response had the units most loyal to them withdraw from the front and quickly return to Damascus. As a result, the strongest and most sectarian-based units – including that of Rifaat al-Assad - were the first to be removed from the front.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, other files from this period show an increase in the armed forces, from about 12,000 troops in 1948 to 60,000 troops by 1966.<sup>37</sup> This surge shows the growing strength of the army in the Syrian state and reveals certain dynamics about the power and control of those in charge.

### ***Conflict within the Alawite Camp, 1968-1979***

After the fall of the National Command in 1966, and the failed coup led by Salim Hatum and his associates, “most Ba’athist officers and civilian party members clustered around either Salah Jadid or Hafiz al-Asad, who were at the time Syria’s most important political leaders.”<sup>38</sup> The time had come to oust the remaining leaders of the civil organization, who represented the last obstacle to Alawite leaders’ complete seizure of power. The majority of these leaders were Sunni, mostly from the rural, tribal area of Deir az-Zor.

35 Mustafa Tlass, *Mirat Hayati (Reflections of My Life), the Second Decade: 1958-1968*, Damascus: Dar Tlass, 1995, pp. 334 and afterward.

36 Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*, p. 200

37 *Lebanese and Syrian security Services*, p. 8.

38 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, p. 62.

The conflict took the form of a debate about prioritizing the implementation of stringent economic policies intended to drain the urban commercial class. Rural Sunnis, who had a natural animosity towards urban Sunni society, responded to this confrontation and were led by Salah Jadid. Meanwhile Hafez al-Assad, who led the other bloc, advocated for the necessity of allying with other Arab countries to fight Israel. Al-Assad directed his attention towards other Arab countries in order to secure Syria's position in the region by dealing with its most popular issue, Palestine. He seemed to believe that he could completely ignore the fundamental shift that had taken place within Syria's government. He hoped to divert others' attention and pacify the new regime's urban opponents as much as possible through conciliatory steps with the Sunni community, especially the commercial class, which did not threaten his authority.

Jadid's supporters won an overwhelming majority in the Party Congresses held in September and October 1968; however, al-Assad continued to oppose him. He broke from the party politically, cut the military off from the civilian party leadership, and took control of it himself, forbidding contact by civilian party leaders. On 13 November, military loyal to al-Assad occupied the offices of the civilian party section, thereby curbing its once-powerful position.

### ***Alawite Monopolization of Power, 1970-1982***

When Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, though he awarded some of his loyal rural Sunni associates high military positions, they posed no serious threat to his presidency, given the capacity of his followers to deal with any sign of insurrection. He appointed Mustafa Tlass, his colleague from the Military Academy, as Minister of Defence, and gave his ally Naji Jamil the position of Commander of the Air Force and Deputy Minister of Defence. While Tlass held his position from 1972 to 2004, Jamil only kept his position for a few years, until his loyalty was called into question. He was relieved from all his military positions and placed under house arrest until his death in 2014. Instead, Al-Assad used low-ranking troops (like common soldiers, and non-commissioned officers at the beginning of their careers) and a group of young Alawite officers to solidify his rule. Their loyalty to him was unparalleled, even after his death; in return, he rendered them real leaders of the country, though they were not known or covered in the media.

Batatu divides al-Assad's power into four levels:<sup>39</sup> the first one concerns the general direction of policy and questions crucial to his regime, in which Hafez al-Assad enjoyed "sole and undisputed authority." Immediately below him "are the unpublicized chiefs of the multiple intelligence and security networks, which function independently of one another, enjoy a broad latitude, and keep a close watch on everything in the country that is of concern to his regime." Alongside these, on the same level, were "the commanders of the politically relevant, regime-shielding, coup-deterring, elite armed forces, such as the Republican Guard, the Special Forces, the Third Armoured Division, and the Defence Brigade prior to 1984." These units were the most heavily armed, and the troops most loyal; it was "these formations... that constitute the essential underpinning of his power and not the regular armed forces,

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<sup>39</sup> Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, pp. 206-207.



which since 1970 he had been increasingly at pains to depoliticize.” On the third level was the Ba’athist Party leadership, which Batatu considers no more than “a consultative body for al-Assad,” which monitored “the proper implementation of his policies by the elements on the fourth level, namely, the ministers, the higher bureaucrats, the provincial governors, the members of the executive boards of the local councils.” Batatu concludes that “of the officers whom al-Assad hand-picked between 1970 and 1997 as chief figures in the armed forces, the elite military formations, and the apparatuses of security and intelligence, no fewer than 61.3% have been Alawis.” Eight of these were from his tribe, al-Kalbiyyah, and four were from his wife’s tribe, al-Haddadin.<sup>40</sup>

Several serious incidents that occurred between 1978 and 1984 reveal how important these officers were, and that they were the real pillars of his authority. They not only brutally suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood’s 1982 revolt, but also supported Hafez al-Assad during his conflict with his younger brother in 1984, ultimately leading to Rifaat’s exile. After teaching the officers leading the elite forces and security services a lesson – that their fate was tied to his satisfaction with their loyalty, as proven through his dealings with his brother – a new stage began in which Hafez al-Assad had absolute and unrivalled power.

The Ba’ath Party Congress, held in February 1985, was a milestone: Hafez al-Assad’s rule had reached a point of absolute stability. Al-Assad selected leaders at the Congress, most of whom would remain in power until his death 15 years later. The names of military personnel chosen for the Central Committee largely reflect the reality of power control in the country. These included:

1. Hafez al-Assad, General Commander, Alawi.
2. Lieutenant-General Mustafa Talas, Minister of Defence, Sunni.
3. Lieutenant-General Hikmat al-Shihabi, Chief of Staff, Sunni.
4. Major-General Ibrahim Safi, Commander First Division, Alawi.
5. Major-General Shafiq Fayyad, Commander Third Division, Alawi.
6. Major-General Subhi Kosrow Haddad, Commander Air Force, Sunni, dismissed in 1986 and replaced by Mohammad Ali Malahafji, Sunni, and in 1994 Major-General Mohammed al-Khouli was appointed.
7. Major-General Adnan Sulayman Hasan, Commander Ninth Division, later Chief of Political Security, Alawi.
8. Lieutenant-General Ali Aslan, Deputy Chief of Staff, Alawi.
9. Major-General Ali al-Salih, Commander Air Defence Forces, Alawi.
10. Lieutenant-General Ali Duba, Deputy Chief of Staff, Chief of Military Intelligence, Alawi.
11. Major-General Ali Haydar, Commander of the Special Forces, Alawi, dismissed in 1994 and replaced by Ali Habib.

40 Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry*, p. 217, 224.

12. General Fu'ad Absi, Chief of Civilian Intelligence, died two years later, Sunni.
13. Major-General Mustafa Tayyarah, Commander of the Naval Forces, Sunni.
14. Lieutenant-General Hasan Turkmani, Deputy Chief of Staff, Sunni.
15. Major-General Ali Malahafji, Commander Air Force and Air Defence, retired in 1994, Sunni.
16. Major-General Muhammad al-Khawli, Deputy Commander Air Force, Chief of Air Force Intelligence, Alawi.
17. Major-General Muhammad Ibrahim al-Ali, Commander of the People's Army, Alawi.
18. Rifaat al-Assad, Vice-President for National Security Affairs, Alawi, a position he was given in November 1984.

There were also several other important individuals, including Major-General Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek, Chief of the Internal Security Branch in the State Security Department, Alawi; Major-General Adnan Makhlouf, Commander of the Republican Guard, Alawi; Major-General Adnan al-Assad, nephew, Commander of the Defence Companies; and Major-General Hikmat Ibrahim, Director of Officers' Affairs, Alawi.<sup>41</sup>

The army's numbers steadily multiplied under Hafez al-Assad's rule, and by 1985 reached around 396,000, in addition to 300,000 reserves.<sup>42</sup> The image of the army as the regime's protector also grew stronger, an image unmistakably tinged with sectarianism. In 1992, "as many as seven out of the nine divisions now constituting Syria's regular army"<sup>43</sup> were led by Alawite officers, while "Alawi generals commanded in 1973 only two out of the five regular army divisions."<sup>44</sup> Neither the percentage of officers in other ranks nor the percentage of non-commissioned officers was any lower.

The only level where Sunnis accounted for over 70% of the military was among young conscripts. Compulsory military service was the only time in which Sunni communities, particularly urban ones, came into contact with the military in general, and the Alawite community in particular. Yet, this contact only widened the gap and the army's separation from society. For these young men, the extortion and prejudice they faced only further entrenched an image of the army as something detached from and opposed to society. There was an unspoken practice of corruption in the military called *tafeyeesh*, whereby any officer, no matter his rank, could "excuse" a given number of soldiers from service, and send them home to their families on an open-ended leave, in exchange for a certain amount of money paid monthly. The exact amount varied, depending on the family's financial situation and the officers' greed. This was incredibly lucrative for those in the military command: an officer who engaged in *tafeyeesh* could earn double what other state employees did. Continuous dominance of families whose children served in the army was a means of

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41 Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, pp. 208-209.

42 Thomas Collelo, *Syria, A Country Study*, pp. 236-259; in Murhaf Jouejati, "Reforming Syria's Security Sector in the Post-Assad Era", p. 4.

43 Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 227.

44 Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 227.

controlling communities that opposed the regime. It was one of many ways that groups in society were forced into maintaining a relationship with military commanders of various ranks, in ways that benefited the commanders.

In addition to *tafeyeesh*, there were other tactics that, although less important, still had significant economic benefits. These included granting soldiers leave for a limited time, seizing salaries and funds set aside for *tafeyeesh*, exempting soldiers from punishments that non-commissioned officers had invented, and creating their own income. Yet for young men – mostly from poor rural areas – who were not able to pay, and not exempted from serving, military service represented enslavement by sectarianism and impoverishment, a feeling which became ingrained within them.

Relieving officers and others enlisted in the army appears to have been an intentional practice by the senior command, through which they subjugated society, upheld the power status quo, and were able to tax certain members of society, in particular Sunnis. Alawis were rare in normal army units; when they were conscripted for national service, they were placed in elite units like the Republican Guard, special forces, and security services. These soldiers enjoyed high levels of power and influence that middle-ranking officers from other sects did not. Furthermore, people were strictly forbidden from discussing the situation: anyone who dared to speak about it, publicly or privately, would surely meet an ill fate.

Hafez al-Assad patiently arranged these conditions throughout the 30 years of his rule; indeed, this was what the majority of his domestic activities focused on. He was known for his relative lack of interest in economic problems and other technical issues<sup>45</sup> that affected citizens' lives but did not threaten his military authority.

### ***Wealth Outside the Military, 2000-2011***

Hafez al-Assad passed away in early summer 2000. He was smoothly succeeded by his son, which proved how effective and deeply rooted his security control over the domestic situation was. It seemed as if nothing had happened in Syria. This gave Bashar al-Assad a false sense of security, and he promised to ease the military's tight grip on society and make political, and even military, reforms. His first attempts, however, quickly revealed how significant the underlying tension in society was. They also revealed just how much control his father's security and military personnel had over the regime, and how much the regime's survival depended on maintaining their privileges and influence. Bashar al-Assad abandoned his plans for reform, and instead resumed his father's policies.

Economic policies, however, were an exception. These benefitted several Alawite financiers, including some who used their ties with the military and security institutions to position themselves at the heart of business and commerce under Hafez al-Assad – sectors which had once been dominated by urban Sunnis. In less than a decade, his cousin, Rami Makhoul, went from being the son of a customs officer to one of the biggest investors and businessmen

45 Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry*, p. 510.

not only in Syria, but in the world. He owns the largest mobile phone network in Syria, and thus profits from every Syrian who owns a mobile phone. To Syrians – and Sunnis in particular – this feels like an indirect tax or levy, one justified only by the sectarian regime, the ruling family, and its security and military grip on the country. It is worth noting that in the lead-up to the Syrian revolution, the first voices of protest on social media networks spoke out against the price of mobile phone calls.

In a failed attempt to naturalize conditions in the Syrian military, Bashar al-Assad issued an internal decree in 2003 which stipulated that student acceptance to military academies would be on the basis of geography. In other words, each governorate would be given a certain number of places proportionate to their population, while the percentage allocated for children of the military would remain at 12.5%. It was assumed that this percentage would, of course, be filled by Alawis. This decree was only implemented for one year, however, and only in one institution: the Military Academy, where the acceptance figures were unprecedented, and, indeed, seemed unacceptable, to the Syrian military. At the Homs Military Academy, for example, there were 256 students in Course 59. Of these, 128 were Sunni, 81 were Alawite, and 47 were from all other sects and religions. The Alawite troops were dissatisfied with these numbers, and sarcastically referred to it as the “Sunni course.” In response to significant pressure from the senior military leadership, this decision was reversed, costing the officer in charge of the changes, Lieutenant-General Hayel Hawriya, Deputy Chief of Staff, his career.

One feature of Bashar al-Assad’s rule was that numerous senior military officials invested their own resources domestically and abroad. This had been forbidden under Hafez al-Assad, who allowed them to benefit financially within the military and security sectors, but not invest outside of them. This kept them connected and loyal to the regime, and committed to defending it (Hafez al-Assad had only allowed one person, his brother Rifaat, to transfer funds outside the army). In addition, corruption in the army became more blatant and widespread under Bashar. Sunnis in the army were increasingly exploited: their fuel and clothing allocations were meddled with, and their food rations were stolen. The image of gaunt Syrian conscripts in tattered clothes became fixed in the public imagination as the most downtrodden section of society. Conscripts who had no *tafeyeesh* or support from their commanders suffered in miserable conditions. The Syrian army was nicknamed *geish abu shehata*, “the beggar’s army,” because soldiers spent more time wearing house slippers than army boots. Most of these soldiers were Sunnis from poor rural areas in the country that had been excluded by Syrian development policies. Bashar al-Assad and self-interested groups of Hafez’s senior officers’ offspring were only interested in rich urban sectors of society, and in partnering with them politically and economically.

This backdrop explains why people from rural Sunni regions were so quick to revolt and take up arms. They did not enjoy the same privileges as Alawis from rural areas, nor did they benefit from open social market economy policies, which brought some prosperity to the cities. On the contrary, these policies only increased exploitation of the agricultural sector and served those who profited from it.

## ***The 2011 Revolution***

The Syrian revolution began as an uprising against al-Assad's regime, a military-security power that represented a particular combination of sectarianism and class-based discrimination. Political figures, movements, and civil society organizations attempted to lead a peaceful movement, with political demands. They sought greater freedom, and to achieve a more democratic future. Yet, the revolution rapidly devolved into sectarian conflict. From the beginning, the regime resorted to what it termed the "security solution" to prevent any domestic, regional or international attempts at a political solution, believing instead that a military solution is the only way out of the crisis. To the regime, politics means only one thing: laying down its primary weapon, its military advantage over Syrian society. The regime quickly and intentionally told the outside world that the revolution was an uprising tainted by religion, not politics. It tried to rally minorities and other sects with scare tactics about what the Sunni majority's rule would entail if they managed to come to power.

A debate emerged in Syrian society, and among the political and cultural elite, about democracy in the country. In general, minorities were apprehensive about democracy, which they believed would inevitably bring Sunnis to power. They were also apprehensive about secularism in Syria, which Sunni groups believed was just an excuse to marginalize them and dismiss their right to leadership. Pro-regime forces were firmly entrenched along religious lines, and sought assistance from a broad spectrum of Shiite organizations from different parts of the world, including Hezbollah from Lebanon, as well as different Iraqi and Iranian factions. Despite this, they continued to claim a secular identity in order to hide the true face of the conflict. The Syrian opposition diligently did the same: it continued to espouse slogans of democracy, political rights, and legitimacy, even though the core of its armed resistance – and part of its political makeup – was undeniably based on a sectarian orientation.

In terms of the military, most Sunni officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers defected. This only had a moderate effect, however, because they lacked strong, united leadership and support. Explicitly sectarian military organizations gradually dominated, revealing the crux of the country's problem: that the Alawite sect had long controlled the country's fate, resources, and capacity. Yet perhaps unintentionally, the slogans of the opposition strengthened the al-Assad regime's position within the Alawite community and among Shiite circles in the region, who rallied to defend the regime. Governments in the region, fearing they would be swept up in this religious tide, supported and condoned the regime's atrocities.

At the beginning of the revolution, Alawite officers and soldiers fought to defend their gains and privileged position in the state and continued to fight once they discovered how incredibly economically profitable the war was. Al-Assad allowed his soldiers free reign over all Sunni areas they controlled. Most residents fled, and the soldiers looted their property, just as the invading armies of the Middle Ages had done. Property stolen by the regime's forces is sold cheaply in "Sunni markets," as they are derisively called. There is also trade in prisoners, who number in the tens of thousands. People pay huge sums of money to members of the regime to release prisoners, help them in detention centres, or even just to get information about them. As Sunni organizations grew more powerful and became

more entrenched in their sectarian position, their motives gradually began to change. The regime's men began to fight for existential reasons more than for reasons of self-interest tied to the regime's survival or spoils of war. This revealed the true nature of the conflict.

### ***Security Services: The Lynchpin of the Assad Regime***

From the moment Hafez al-Assad's consolidated the pillars of his rule and subdued the Syrian people in the dark basements of the intelligence agencies, it was clear that his authority was first and foremost based on their action. He used the security services and their method of raising high walls of secrecy and confidentiality in order to preserve unjust sectarian conditions. After the arrangements made at the end of 1984, in which any direct military threat from the Muslim Brotherhood was effectively ruled out, commanders of elite army divisions became less important. The possibility of Hafez's brother, Rifaat, challenging him from within the regime also diminished. Hafez al-Assad designed various branches of the security services to be in constant competition for his approval, and he remained the sole authority for the entire apparatus, independent of and superior to all other branches of government. Different parts of the service monitored each other, just as they monitored everyone in Syrian society and the army, large and small.

The heads of these agencies included leaders of the main units in the army and actual political leaders in the country. They managed the smallest affairs and divided material gains and political advantages among themselves. Each had allies from the lowest rank in the army and security services, and a number of high level civil service positions, including within ministries, that they could fill as they wished. Security agencies were tasked with using their unchecked powers to prevent and quash any attempt at rebellion against the regime that arose from the army or society. In accomplishing this, they collected payment for their work directly from society itself. This was done through a variety of means, from blackmail to bribes people paid for "security approval," as it is called in Syria. This refers to the security forces' approval of any kind of activity after one's graduation, from opening a barber shop or founding a company, approving someone for a job with the state, or even holding a wedding. With time, the cost of obtaining approval became public knowledge and increased according to the rank of the person who granted permission, and the amount of money they wanted to earn.

Documents from the Political Security branch in Deir ez-Zor's electronic archives, leaked by Syrian revolutionaries after gaining control of the branch,<sup>46</sup> are quite revealing of the security agencies' long reach and rampant abuses. The documents concern various affairs, ranging from cataloguing citizens' personal lives and social relationships, to granting them travel documents, to detailed reports on the elections of a farmers' association in one outlying village. There are matters of no importance as well as critical matters, such as the killing of citizens in raids during the security branch's rounds. These are described in a few words under the heading "they were making a roadside bomb," which seems to be the chosen justification for extrajudicial killing operations. These are in addition, of course, to

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46 A copy of these papers was obtained for the purposes of this research. The authenticity was verified with defectors from the agency.



lists of those wanted for arrest. The archives only include partial records on this matter, for just three months, from April to July 2011, in which they listed 37,000 wanted persons in a governorate with a population of no more than 1.5 million, and from the records of the least powerful intelligence agency.<sup>47</sup>

Alawis also controlled government employment in the civil service, thanks to their influence in security agencies and elite military forces, which were the real powers in the country. This exacerbated corruption in the administrative sector in Syria as illegal revenue – for positions which did not need to exist in the first place – increased to meet the demands of the authorities creating them. The increasing number of unnecessary jobs led to the phenomenon of disguised unemployment, while disparity in employment exacerbated underlying sectarian tensions. According to preliminary estimates, in the rural coastal region, there was over 90% employment among young men and women in military, security, and government sectors. In other areas, like the three eastern governorates of the country, employment figures did not exceed 5%. According to Syria's Central Bureau of Statistics, in the "Administrators and Office Staff" sector (that is, administrative state employees who dealt with citizens) there were over 13,434 employees in al-Hasakah, a primarily Sunni governorate. By contrast, there were 30,611 employees in the same sector in the governorate of Tartous, which is primarily Alawite – in other words, double the number of employees. The difference is even starker when the governorates' population is taken into consideration: al-Hasakah's population is 1,425,000, twice that Tartous' population of 768,000.<sup>48</sup>

There are four intelligence agencies in Syria, divided into dozens of branches that cover the entire country:

- Political Security Agency, under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry, has branches in all governorates, as well as stations and detachments in all cities and towns.
- Military Intelligence Agency, or the Military Intelligence Directorate, has branches in all governorates, as well as stations and detachments. Theoretically, it is under the jurisdiction of the Chief of Staff, but in practice it is directly connected to the President.
- General Intelligence, or State Security, is under the jurisdiction of the National Security Bureau of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. Traditionally headed by a Sunni officer, it was nonetheless in practice always headed by the Chief of the Internal Security Division, a branch within the General Intelligence and always an Alawite. This post was for a long time occupied by Mohammed Nassif, First Security Advisor to Hafez al-Assad.
- Air Force Intelligence is an agency theoretically entrusted with the task of protecting all matters related to the Air Forces and keeping them under constant surveillance. Enlistment in the Air Force was related to individuals' physical fitness, and extortion in the air force was not as lucrative as in the infantry and armoured vehicles units. As a result, there was consistently a high percentage of Sunni officers in this agency. This feature was a source of concern for Hafez al-Assad, who brought the agency under his control as well. As al-Assad's role expanded, he used his power and influence to dominate all other agencies, along with

47 Copy held in the Arab Reform Initiative's archives.

48 Source for the number of workers: Syrian Arab Republic, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Abstract for 2008, Labor Force, Table 10. Source for the population: Syrian Arab Republic, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Central Bureau of Statistics, Population Estimate by Governorate, mid-2009, Table 2/12.

Mohammed al-Khouli, who was not only Air Force Commander but also Chairman of the Presidential Intelligence Committee. Ultimately, the Air Force Intelligence became the most sectarian, violent, and unconstitutional intelligence agency.

These agencies committed a range of violations to secure the survival of the regime, without any constitutional text legitimizing their actions. Agencies were legally protected by Article 16<sup>49</sup> of the Law creating the State Security Administration, issued by Legislative Decree No. 14 on 15 January 1969; and by Article 74<sup>50</sup> of the Law on Internal Regulations of the State Security Administration and rules governing employees' service within the agency, issued by Legislative Decree No. 549 on 25 May 1969. These decrees subsequently applied to other agencies created after 1969, during Hafez al-Assad's reign. The director of each security agency became the master and protector of his staff, a barrier to any legal claim that might be brought against them, regardless of crimes they committed during their service or outside of it.

These agencies were largely similar to other intelligence services of repressive regimes of the twentieth century: they were characterized by overlapping powers, unclear tasks determined by commanders' visions, assumption of judicial powers, forced disappearances and detention operations unchecked by any other body, extrajudicial killings, embezzlement of public funds, violating laws and regulations, an inflated number of agencies and staff, granting staff special privileges, and interfering in politics. Yet these agencies were also shaped by Hafez al-Assad himself. He had experienced all stages of struggle for power, intimately knew the agencies' strengths and weaknesses, as well as methods of rallying support and mobilizing them in his service. His early experience with low-ranking soldiers from his own sect proved to be a particular advantage, and they played a decisive role in raising him to power. He designed agencies that did not require many officers in charge: officers made up no more than 5% of any organization, while the vast majority of staff was non-commissioned officers. This enabled low-qualified staff to assume advantageous positions of which more highly qualified and trained officers, like pilots, dreamed.

In addition, most individuals accepted into the security command were Alawis from poor socio-economic backgrounds, creating a two-fold loyalty to the regime (this was particularly true in the two branches of military security, the Military Intelligence and the Air Force Intelligence). The positions they occupied fed into their sense of superiority to other sects, and granted them tangible benefits and advantages. Through this, they became a homogeneous, tightly-knit, and fanatical bloc. Their existence was bound to the regime's survival and to the person who had granted them their status: Hafez al-Assad. He embodied the prime example of how they imagined themselves, as if he were a mirror of their collective identity. As a

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49 Article 16 states: It is impermissible to pursue any employees in the State Security Administrations for crimes they have committed during the execution of the specified duties they were authorized to carry out, except by virtue of an order to pursue issued by the director.

50 Article 74 states: It is impermissible to pursue any employees in the State Security Administrations, deputies, borrowed staff, or contractors directly before the court for crimes committed on the job or in the course of performing the job before referral to a disciplinary board in the department and before an order to pursue is issued by the director.

sect, the Alawis' sweeping support and blind loyalty to the point of deification gave Hafez al-Assad immunity in dealing with the Sunni sect and with regime elites and senior officers, some of whom may have challenged his power or position or that of his family.

The security service's role in the Syrian revolution is no surprise, given this history. Its actions represent an extension of its work over four decades of al-Assad's rule. According to human rights activists, these agencies are responsible for the disappearance and murder of tens of thousands of civilians in the decades leading up to the revolution, particularly in the infamous Tadmur Prison, Sednaya Prison, and prisons in security branches. Since 2011, the security services – and particularly the Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence – are likely responsible for the disappearance and murder of over 200,000 Syrian civilians. The novelty of the 2011 revolution thus was not the violence perpetrated by the security agencies but rather that their actions were no longer hidden from the public. The world learned about part of these agencies' crimes in the 2014 Syrian detainee report, also known as the Caesar Report, which included "approximately 55,000 digital images depicting about 11,000 bodies from Syrian prisons"<sup>51</sup> of people who had been killed under torture in detention centres of the security branches of Damascus alone, between April 2011 and August 2013.

As the majority of Syrian society's animosity towards the army grew, the Alawi sect which dominated the army and security apparatus became increasingly conscious of its minority status. This resulted in a destructive form of polarization, which erupted in Hama in 1982 and was suppressed at great cost. The outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011 is largely an extension of these power relations within Syrian society.

As the effective force on the ground, the Syrian military declared its open hostility towards the majority sect in the country. It marginalized urban and educated classes in society and eliminated the middle class, which would have been the most likely instigator of positive change. It had a flawed, corrupt, institutional role in the country, and as the leader of all other state institutions, spread corruption across the state and society. It quashed all possible development projects and squandered the country's wealth and resources. As a result of this climate of violent repression and fear, society lived in a state of terror, suspicion and anxiety. This climate killed people's spirit of creativity as well as individual and collective spirit of entrepreneurship. Social fragmentation between different groups in society and general tension prevented the social and cultural integration that Syria should have had and which it needed to transform from a nascent state into a people with a harmonious culture and aspirations.

Growing despair and dwindling options for the future caused a sizeable percentage of the younger generation to emigrate in search of a better life. Those who remained were forced to rise up against the regime and put their defenceless bodies before its heavy weaponry, in what was both the most extreme expression of nihilism and despair and the greatest pursuit of hope. The regime's army responded with predictable sectarianism, and no opposition or reluctance in the army, except from a few defectors, namely Sunni officers and soldiers

51 BBC Arabic, "The Syrian Crisis: Torture Photos from Syria Shown at the UN Security Council", 16 April 2014, available at [www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/04/140415\\_torture\\_photos\\_shown\\_at\\_unsc](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/04/140415_torture_photos_shown_at_unsc)

whose home regions were bombed and families killed in cold blood. On the contrary, army units attacked all Sunni areas with unparalleled enthusiasm, and with all kinds of munitions – including chemical weapons – while areas with a high percentage of Alawis, and minorities in general, continued their lives in near-total peace.

The Syrian military took great leeway with the role prescribed for it a century ago by the French mandate authority. Yet we must be careful not to view Syria's military history or recent events as a conspiracy by a "secret brotherhood," or as personally motivated acts by a given sect or group. Officers of a certain sect, and indeed minorities in general, have suffered centuries of injustice and oppression as a result of their religious background and personal beliefs. The elites who emerged during the colonial period were not able to overcome this, and Sunni elites – particularly urban ones – did not help them integrate, nor did they offer an inclusive means for progress. Given this situation, the minoritarian elite – as well as Sunnis<sup>52</sup> – resorted to regional and ideological networks of sectarian solidarity, as well as the natural loyalty to family, tribe, and sect that characterizes the Levant.

The summation of this historical overview is that the military devitalized society and tore it apart. The flawed way this institution was designed, and the flawed foundation upon which it was built, inevitably led to the current catastrophe. It has caused great suffering for the Syrian people, who will continue to suffer from it for a long time to come.

## Reforming the Syrian Military

Engaging in the process of reforming the current military seems pointless, given the intrinsic flaws described earlier. The Syrian military is morally doomed, given the acts of repression it has committed during the Syrian revolution, and is unfit to play a significant role within the nation. After all, it would be easy to charge any officer or unit in the army with committing human rights violations during the revolution, which would make it extremely difficult for the military to accomplish any task.

On the other hand, it does not seem wise to haphazardly create an army out of individuals or groups from the opposition forces – which are politically opposed to the regime's forces – and present this amalgamation as if it were a military representing all Syrians. These factions would in turn follow a sectarian approach – one that has grown from the ideology they adopted, or were forced to adopt, during the war. This ideology, based on the approach of sectarian and ethnic apportionment, would eventually overwhelm all aspects of life in the country and destroy it all over again.

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52 Recruitment was geared towards relatives, members of the same tribe, and local communities whenever possible. For example, according to officers in those regions, there were nearly 1,000 officers in the town of Muhassan, east of the city of Deir ez-Zor. This was several times more than the number of officers in the governorates of Raqqah and al-Hasaka. The situation is similar in the town of Rastan in Homs. In Muhassan, all officers were recruited through social and tribal ties. Meanwhile Rastan was given preferential status, because Mustafa Tlass, who served as Minister of Defence in Syria for more than thirty years, was from Rastan.

The best way forward, and the most appropriate given Syria's complex and sensitive social composition, would be to rebuild entirely the military forces, bearing in mind three lessons that can be drawn from the historical narrative above. First, the military and its institutional duties must be professional and strictly forbidden from interfering with politics. Second, favouritism and loyalties must be criminalized within the military, both at the national and supranational levels. Third, the military must reflect society in a comprehensive sense. In other words, it must be composed of all classes and communities within society, without discrimination.

Reaching such an objective will require arduous work and will be slow-going. New members of the army must be selected in accordance with standards that account for social distribution and must be given high levels of professional training. Mechanisms must be established to ensure they abide by national and professional principles in their work, and promotions in rank must be politically neutral and a result of high performance. This will produce a military with consistent national values, ideology, functions, and structure, one that is engaged in completely revitalizing the country.

### ***SSR during the Transitional Period***

It is impossible to propose an action plan for the final form of the Syrian armed forces when there is still no clear way out of the country's current political crisis. Most believe that a regionally and internationally sponsored political settlement between the regime and the opposition forces is the only solution. The proposals for security sector reform (SSR) for the transitional period made here are partially based on the possibility of such a settlement. Arrangements for this period must be temporary, limited, and bounded within a set timeframe. Exceptional arrangements made during this period should not be used to create special or permanent conditions for any party. The success of the transitional plan lies in its ability to come to an end without negatively affecting the post-transition arrangement. The purpose of the transitional stage is to pave the way for the political process to begin, and move society from armed conflict to peaceful political competition.

Decision-makers will face substantial challenges to the process of creating a national army. If the prospective settlement overlaps with the construction of a new army, this process may even be sabotaged. Therefore, we believe the most sensible option is for the settlement to include a phased plan to maintain security among the existing forces during the transitional period, agreed upon by the concerned parties. There should also be a second detailed plan to create a new military and security services according to a specific timetable.

During the transitional period, the duties of these combined forces should be temporary by nature, and primarily domestic as the challenges they will face will mostly be related to local security. It is therefore advisable that the political settlement gives the combined forces the task of confronting everything in their geographic purview. Here, the South African example after the fall of apartheid may be instructive. There, "all the armed formations... [were] integrated into new national security services provided that their political principals

joined the negotiations process,”<sup>53</sup> and the various parties agreed amongst each other on the criteria that would govern the armed forces’ work, the rates of representation, working styles, and capacities needed to confront the challenges of the transitional stage.

During the transitional period in Syria, one of the most significant potential challenges that may be faced concerns parties who are not part of the settlement or who oppose its outcomes. Such groups may stage attacks to create instability or use security and military pressure to produce political outcomes that differ from those in the settlement. Similarly, retaliation from various parties could also arise. There is also danger that foreign groups could find themselves isolated in Syria and unable to return to their home countries or other secure locations and would decide to fight until the end. Other potential security challenges that the transitional forces could face include dangers of a purely criminal nature: gangs that engage in theft, burglary, and armed robbery who take advantage of the chaos, or, more insidious, dangers associated with the spread of weapons or a culture of violence resulting from the war. Finally, there is a risk that intelligence officers from other countries could manufacture foreign security risks for local, regional, or international political ends, or that powers who are part of the settlement will rebel, attempt to achieve more political gains at gunpoint and create chaos.

Given this, our proposal for the armed forces for the transitional period includes the following:

- If political consensus is the basis of the transitional stage, all parties must be convinced it is impossible to achieve a solution by force. All parties must definitively cease all armed action, and a timeframe to lay down arms must be adopted. When the political process is complete, all arms must be handed over to military and security authorities.
- We assume this stage entails a political agreement, given the complexity and interconnectedness of duties, roles and procedures. Therefore, there must be joint political-military leadership of all armed forces, and they must be able to comprehensively manage and control these forces.
- The primary goals of the military and security forces during the transitional period are to maintain stability in crucial urban centres, protect large political communities, and also maintain peace in the capital and other major cities. The different forces must consensually agree to undertake these duties and divide up powers and responsibilities.
- Dissolving military units could spread unrest and chaos, and integrating or incorporating them might entrench current conditions, which would be difficult to change later. Therefore, there should be no rushed decisions to dissolve, integrate, or demobilize the regime’s forces or opposition forces. Instead, their responsibilities must be limited to self-defence or carrying out limited tasks at the request of political powers.
- A plan must be formulated to get weapons off the streets and forbid their display. As many weapons and ammunition as possible should be purchased from armed individuals (of all backgrounds) within a set timeframe, and should be confiscated after that specified time.

To the degree possible, only relatively older people should be allowed to bear arms; everything must be done to prevent young people from carrying arms. This could include programmes

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53 Gavin Cawthra, “Security Sector Reform in South Africa: Lessons for Countries in Transition”, Arab Reform Initiative, July 2014, p. 3, (Cawthra, “Security Sector Reform in South Africa”).



to get them back into education immediately, or they could be made to enter other fields suggested by the parties involved. Younger generations are more prone to zealotry, and the precariousness of the transitional period requires experience and peace in order to succeed.

Partnerships should be built with local communities, in order to provide security services in all regions.

Syria must be prepared to deal with unexpected acts of violence or unrest. Past experience elsewhere in the world has shown a connection between transitional stages and the emergence of conflicts in multiple locations. A special cell could be created to monitor this phenomenon and deal with possible unexpected unrest. This cell could be composed of representatives from opposition military forces, as well as a few intelligence officers and former security officers not implicated in war crimes, and would have special powers to intervene.

All political figures and powers should contribute to maintaining military and security stability during the transitional period, until an institution tasked with this duty is created. Therefore, they must espouse a political environment that allows peaceful gatherings and movements while ensuring that the situation will devolve into a security vacuum or military conflict beyond the security forces' ability to regain control. This requires a binding agreement, committed to principles of political behaviour and regulations as a critical, national need.

It is advisable during this period to have a regional or international joint, neutral force on the ground, which is able to intervene if military factions come into conflict, or to prevent such a conflict from deteriorating. Conflict is highly likely during this period and would completely threaten arrangements for a solution.

Securitization may occur during the transitional stage, which means that the form of the conflict may change from a large-scale military conflict to a limited security conflict that includes assassinations, bombings, and kidnappings. A joint agency composed of all parties must be created in order to deal with such dangers and appropriate technical and legal solutions must be developed. A special "emergency security committee" to deal with unexpected unrest could be created." This committee could include trained individuals from the former police and security services, as well as individuals from the opposition forces. It could also have a high level of political supervision over a special intervention force. The security and military role of the opposition military forces should be determined locally during the transitional stage. These should be divided into police forces that maintain security and order in areas under their control, while other individuals in the forces should be assigned to central authorities working with these factions as per the agreement of the transitional phase.

### ***Final Arrangements for the Post-Transition Period***

For post-conflict Syria, the most important factor of stability will be the emergence of a strong army, police, and security forces that are accepted by all sectors of society and

committed to laws, regulations, and constitutional principles. A carefully thought out plan must be conceived towards this end, one that includes vision, strategy, an implementation scheme, and monitoring. A committee must be formed to establish a new military and security force as soon as a settlement is reached; this is indeed among the most critical steps. Following this, an executive body that all parties approve of should be formed. It should be entrusted with implementing all decisions issued by the committee, with the cooperation and coordination of international entities supervising the process, separately from whatever is going on between political parties on the ground during the transitional stage. As soon as a settlement is reached, the army and security services must be neutral and free of any political influences, until free and comprehensive elections take place, at which point they will become subject to the legitimate elected civilian government.

The vision of the newly created army and security services will be the basis for their success. They must include all Syrians without discrimination, be subject to the law and to the principles of accountability, and committed to their constitutionally-given responsibilities: safeguarding Syrian sovereignty, protecting the Syrian people from domestic and foreign threats, and ensuring that the people are able to exercise the freedoms and rights given to them by law. They should be under the supervision of representatives elected by the people, free from partisanship, and any political or ideological loyalties. Strategically, a combat philosophy and regulations must be determined, together with the goals and stages for their completion. This is extremely important as it is the practical side of creating the new forces, and where they will be tested. These goals must be realistic, and in line with actual demands.

Cadres and individuals must subsequently be selected via a process that takes into consideration the full representation of the Syrian people. The military and security services must be a microcosm of society and attract the most skilled applicants. This requires internal regulations with the highest degree of clarity. It should include who is affiliated with this army, and how; how individuals are classified, trained and promoted; tasks that can be assigned to them; and a system of punishment. Adequate guarantees that these troops and their families will be cared for must also be put in place.

It is extremely important that the transitional stage seeks to combine and integrate individuals who served in military organizations under the regime with those from the opposition. However, they all have a history of violent sectarian feelings or ideologies that developed throughout the conflict; these views are incompatible, and cannot be easily combined to form a cohesive, homogeneous military. Furthermore, the regime's army and opposition forces are not isolated from one another; if they come into conflict with each other, all-out societal war may resume. Continued friction will lead either to explicit or unspoken sectarian apportionment, as was the case in Lebanon, or one sect dominating the other, as happened in the Iraqi army after Saddam Hussein. Both these examples were failures. Syrians must search for more effective solutions.

Instead of pushing former active combatants into the military or security forces, they must be given the opportunity to engage in peaceful political work. They must be provided with civil activities, in which they can release their charged emotions and sectarian preconceptions

outside the military. This will guarantee security for all parties in society – especially individuals who are not politicized or affiliated with any political entity, which account for the vast majority of citizens.

Transitional stages in many other countries have proven that the intelligence service is the most difficult institution to reform, restructure, or even make subject to the law and general principles. This is for reasons related in large part to its requirement for operational secrecy, and its inevitable connection with politics. In the South African case, for example,

*An effort was made to separate intelligence gathering from analysis, and then from policy-making to reduce the political influence of the spies. This was not easily done. External and internal intelligence were separated functionally and efforts were made to improve accountability within the limits of confidentiality by establishing a parliamentary oversight committee and an inspector-general office. Legislation was introduced specifying, amongst other things, that the intelligence services should not be used to further the interests of any political party.<sup>54</sup>*

We can learn from this experience locally, and create appropriate legislature that defines the security forces' duties and responsibilities, imposes secrecy on its work only in cases that are internationally recognized as necessary, and makes the forces' role subject to competent parliamentary or legislative oversight.

The Syrian governing authorities, or the foreign actors supervising the settlement process should form a high committee to design a new military and security apparatus for Syria within a specific timeframe. This should be guided by three basic principles. Firstly, as a doctrine, the army should be a truly national entity. Secondly, the military should be kept from engaging in or influencing politics; in other words, its mandate should be restricted and clearly defined. A mechanism should be created for selecting and evaluating cadres of the armed forces according to their skills, qualifications, and geographic representation, where the seats in each administrative unit should be proportional to the population. This committee could be composed of Syrian and international experts from military, administrative, and legal fields, and could carry out its work under the supervision of a UN agency, or a committee of countries sponsoring the potential peace agreement.

A Syrian executive body that includes both officers and civilians should be formed. It should be approved by the parties to the settlement process, and implement the plan mentioned above, after its approval and allocation of the needed resources. This body should begin its work in complete independence from the transitional process. It should be monitored by the Syrian parties to the conflict with an international mechanism to arbitrate disputes and a set date for handing over its duties to a civil authority.

Recruitment for the military should be done in two ways: voluntarily, and through conscription, which should be for a period not to exceed six months.

54 Cawthra, "Security Sector Reform in South Africa", p. 6.

A limited number of officers from the former army should be selected according to geographical representation. Their files should be examined to confirm that they have not committed any crimes and that they are not clearly prejudiced against religious or ethnic groups. Some of the current officers should be kept in the army to fill gaps in the higher ranks, and the rest of the officers should be given retirement packages at the end of the transitional phase, or transferred to civil service.

The Syrian military should be structured like most armed forces in the world: a ground force, air force, and naval force. At the administrative level, these should be led by the Chief of Staff, or the Supreme Military Council. At the legal, organizational and financial level, they should be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence. The Ministry of Defence should be headed by a civilian, although it could be headed by an officer, provided that he is retired, if justified by his experience.

The former security services should be dissolved, and no more than three security agencies created instead:

- An Intelligence Agency that reports directly to the highest elected executive branch, depending on the electoral system chosen (parliamentary or presidential). This agency's mandate is to investigate all matters, domestic or foreign which the executive authority needs in order to devise its strategy and make decisions. The head of the agency should be appointed by the head of the executive branch, and its internal regulations should be defined by the Security Committee in parliament.
- A Military Intelligence Agency whose mandate is limited to investigating military affairs. The agency's internal regulations should be determined by the Security Committee in parliament, in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence, and in practice it should be under the jurisdiction of the Military Chief of Staff.
- A Police Intelligence Agency whose mandate is to investigate security issues related to citizens' daily lives. The structure of its work and responsibilities should be determined by the parliamentary Security Committee, and its head appointed by the Minister of the Interior. This agency should be considered part of the Ministry of the Interior, its activities serve the Ministry and falls under its legal and financial control.
- A restructured General Police Force should fall clearly under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior at the central level, and managed by the executive and judicial branches of each administrative unit at the local level. The process of designing the police force must take into account the fact that for society, the police is the public face of the state, and under normal circumstances, it is the only contact with the state for most of the population. The police force must therefore foster a culture of human rights with strict commitment to the rule of law. It must be committed to participatory engagement with society and civil society organizations, and developing good relations with local media. It must also be subject to societal supervision, through local courts, for example, for quality control of police services, and adopt a community-based strategy of curbing crime and violence.

## **Conclusion**

The state of Syria did not originate based on a pre-existing people or shared notion of homeland. As a result of the conditions in which the country was founded, Syria has never had an adequate military. In order to achieve social integration, and a collective Syrian

identity, a cohesive military in addition to a vibrant and active cultural and political life, are needed. The failure of the political and cultural elite together with the deviation of the military's mission caused a crisis of integration and fractured identities across the Syrian nation state, tainting the horizon with continued violence.

The military men who seized power from politicians and assumed their responsibilities could have backed a free, democratic, and civil political movement, to liberate society – its minorities and majority alike – from their restrictive bonds by ensuring that all Syrians enjoy their constitutional rights. Instead, they stamped out all political life, and prompted people to regress and entrench themselves in sectarian and ethnic communities in search of protection.

The military could have been a melting pot where Syrians would have grown to know one another, instead of a crucible of violent divisions. It could have been a space for positive change, since it was composed of – and served as a progenitor of – an enlightened middle class, who was patriotic and constituted a core of nationalism. It could have had a stake in the emergence and development of a strong and fair state, instead of being the primary factor in that state's failure, sinking into an abyss of corruption and cronyism.

The thick black smoke of war in Syria is parting to reveal a faint glimmer of hope: the possibility of building a new modern state, as other societies have done. Other nations have risen up from the rabbles of war with enthusiasm and vitality to build stronger states. The fate of this prospect lies with Syrians themselves. The process of creating a national military and the central institutions at the core of this new state will undoubtedly be a testing ground for the country's elite, its commitment, and sense of responsibility in the new era.

## Annex

The following table shows the number of officers who graduated in each class, the number of Alawite officers, Sunni officers, and officers from other sects and religions. In sum, out of 34 classes of officers in training who graduated between 1983 and 2013, 5,729 individuals were qualified as officers. Of those, 4,208 (73.5%) were Alawis, 1,061 (18.5%) were Sunnis, and 460 (8%) belonged to other sects and religions. Estimates vary as to what percentage of Syria's population is made up of Alawis, yet they all indicate that it is less than 15%. The percentage of Sunnis is over 50% according to all estimates. Here, we should note that percentages are different within the Interior Ministry, which has limited authority. Here, positions are filled according to geographical representation. Statistical data about the 29<sup>th</sup> class of police officers who graduated in 2001 is one such example. Of the 294 officers who graduated, 95 (32%) were Alawite, 174 (59%) were Sunni, and 25 belonged to other sects.

	Academy	Class No.	Specialty	Graduation Year	Total No.	No. of Alawite Students	No. of Sunni Students	All Other Sects and Religions
1	Air Force	12	Pilots?	1983	36	18	5	13
2	Military	38	Artillery	1985	160	118	35	7
3	Military	42	Technical affairs officers	1989	205	158	36	11
4	Naval	22	Sailors	1991	57	55	2	N/A
5	Military	46	Air defence	1993	135	97	26	12
6	Military	48	Technical affairs	1996	87	48	17	22
7	Air Force	43	Pilots	1997	43	29	12	2
8	Military	50	Electronic warfare	1997	20	14	3	3
9	Military	51	Field artillery	1998	87	55	22	10
10	Military	51	Infantry	1998	116	83	22	11
11	Naval	29	Sailors	1998	47	44	2	1
12	Air Force	34	Technicians	1998	220	198	17	5
13	Air Force	45	Pilots	1999	43	34	9	N/A
14	Air Force	37	Technicians	1999	190	170	9	11
15	Military	52	Air defence	1999	103	63	30	10
16	Military	52	Infantry	1999	111	67	30	14
17	Naval	31	Sailors	2000	47	43	4	N/A
18	Air Force	39	Technicians	2000	200	173	20	7
19	Military	54	Field artillery	2001	150	119	15	16
20	Air Force	47	Pilots	2001	27	20	6	1
21	Air Force	40	Technicians	2001	207	152	40	15
22	Naval	35	Naval artillery	2004	48	39	6	3
23	Military	57	Administrative affairs	2004	60	47	10	3



24	Military	58	Field artillery	2005	157	88	58	11
25	Air Force	43	Technicians	2005	154	109	37	8
26	Military	59	Infantry	2006	256	81	128	47
27	Military	60	A r m o u r e d vehicles	2007	51	36	9	6
28	Air Force	45	Technicians	2007	183	117	53	13
29	Military	61	A r m o u r e d vehicles	2008	56	33	13	10
30	Air Force	46	Technicians	2008	221	170	23	28
31	Military	62	Infantry	2009	205	136	55	14
32	A c a d e m y of Military Engineering	32	All specialties	2010	167	120	27	20
33	Military	64	All specialties	2011	830	610	150	70
34	Military	66	All specialties	2013	1050	864	130	56
<b>Total</b>					<b>5729</b>	<b>4208</b>	<b>1061</b>	<b>460</b>
<b>Percentage</b>					<b>100%</b>	<b>73.50%</b>	<b>18.50%</b>	<b>8%</b>

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# Bound to Fail: Does Anyone Care about Yemen's Security?\*

*Nayla Moussa*

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2011, when Yemen's uprising began, a critical division within the military institution arose that would cast a dark shadow over the country's transition efforts. General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, a former ally of President Ali Abdallah Saleh and the commander of the Firqa, one of the elite units in the army, sided with the protestors instead of the regime, sparking the initial fissure in the armed forces. Although the regime was able to repress the movement thanks to the units that remained loyal to Saleh, no political solution was found.<sup>1</sup> Facing a stalemate, the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative launched the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in March 2013 in order to arrive at a negotiated political solution. Initially, the transition process in Yemen seemed to be on the right track: the NDC was inclusive and most political actors were represented. Indeed, this process was a unique experience in post-2011 Arab countries. But in September 2014, the Houthi takeover of Sanaa illustrated the failure of the political efforts – failure which can be traced back to the GCC initiative. Saleh's resignation from office of the executive has been accepted in exchange for immunity, an agreement which prevented a process of transitional justice from taking place. Moreover, the lack of consensus between participants, or mechanisms to apply recommendations when such consensus was found, served as triggers of the ongoing war in Yemen.

Though the NDC failed for many reasons, the political “formula” of the state was the most crucial issue on the table. In the absence of consensus on the organization of the state, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, vice-president then president of Yemen after Saleh, took things into his own hands and opted for a federal state divided into six provinces. This unilateral decision swept away months of negotiations between political actors. It also generated great opposition from different groups who felt disadvantaged by this solution, especially the Houthis. The Yemeni case highlights the correlation between the weak legitimacy of political authorities and the outbreak of a civil conflict – and its continuation. The less legitimate a government is perceived, the less armed groups are likely to disarm and join the political

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\* Maged al Madhagi wrote the section on Aden and Maha Assabalani contributed to the research and writing of various parts of the paper.

1 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, April 2013, available at [www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-s-military-security-reform-seeds-new-conflict](http://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-s-military-security-reform-seeds-new-conflict) (ICG, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*).

process.

This paper assesses the political process since the 2011 uprising in order to understand the requirements of rebuilding the security institution – and all other state institutions – in Yemen. This includes analysis of the positions of different political and military actors who can be facilitators or spoilers of any political solution. Taking the NDC as a starting point, this paper focuses on the conclusions of the Workshop on Military and Security affairs – one of the 11 working groups of the NDC – which could have laid the ground for a reform of security institutions. Instead, this process failed because of the lack of commitment on the part of some participants and the distrust between them. In the security sector, President Hadi's first measures aimed only at curbing Saleh's influence within the military by removing his relatives from key-positions, triggering the alliance between the former president and the Houthis and leading to the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in September 2014. The paper also considers different aspects of the ongoing conflict (political, religious and regional) and their impact on security institutions. Finally, the study of the security sector in Aden since the beginning of the war demonstrates the diversity of actors involved and the challenges that the rebuilding process will have to face.

## **The National Dialogue Conference: Paving the Road for Transition?**

The NDC commenced in March 2013, consisting of 11 working groups tasked with addressing crucial issues for the transition period, such as the state-building process, transitional justice, Southern demands for autonomy, and the situation in Saada where Saleh had launched six wars against the Houthis between 2004 and 2010. Before the NDC, the Implementation Mechanism of the GCC Initiative had established a Committee on Military Affairs for Achieving Security and Stability. Its objective was to end the division in the armed forces, ensure that the armed forces and other armed formations return to their camps, and remove militias and irregular armed groups from the capital and other cities. The Committee was also supposed to lay the grounds for an integration of the armed forces under a “unified, national and professional leadership in the context of the rule of law.” In reality, nothing was done at this stage to curb Saleh's influence in security institutions, which had an impact on the second phase of the transitional process. When the NDC was launched, a Military and Security Working Group was subsequently established.

### ***The Military and Security Working Group***

The Military and Security Working Group of the NDC issued a draft report in October 2013, and its conclusions were encouraging on paper but it focused mainly on the military institution, neglecting the police and other security institutions.<sup>2</sup> The decisions of the working group addressed three distinct aspects: the constitutional, the legal, and the executive decisions

<sup>2</sup> Yezid Sayigh, “Crumbling States: Security Sector Reform in Libya and Yemen”, Carnegie Middle East Paper, June 2015, available at [www.carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/18/crumbling-states-security-sector-reform-in-libya-and-yemen-pub-60422](http://www.carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/18/crumbling-states-security-sector-reform-in-libya-and-yemen-pub-60422) (Sayigh, “Crumbling States”).

for immediate action. The constitutional principles set the foundations for the restructuring of the army and police by reasserting the state's monopoly over physical force through the armed forces: "An individual, body, party, agency, group, organization or a tribe are prohibited from establishing such formations, bands, military or para-military organizations under any name".<sup>3</sup> To put an end to Northern domination over military and security institutions, representation during the transition period was to be split 50-50 between the North and the South at the command level in the military, security, and intelligence agencies and at the lower levels. The police was also to become "a formal civilian body" in charge of applying the law and respectful of human rights.

To prevent reproducing the Saleh experience – using security institutions to preserve the regime – the document insisted on the "neutralization of the Military, Security and Intelligence Services from political life." In an effort to "normalize" civil-military relations and reinforce civilian oversight of the military, the office of the Minister of Defence was set to be a political position and would be held by a civilian. Members of military and security institutions were to be banned from voting, enrolling in political parties, or running for elections. This measure, however, was rejected by Saleh and his followers as it was directed against Saleh's son Ahmad Ali, who was commander of the Republican Guard, the army's elite unit. If implemented, this measure would have forced him to wait 10 years after leaving the army before being able to run for presidential elections. When the measure was adopted, four members of the General People's Congress (Saleh's party) expressed their reservations. Another decision stated that "the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the legislature, Minister of Defence, the Minister of Interior, or the heads of Intelligence bodies are not allowed to appoint any of their relatives, up to the fourth level, in any leadership positions in the Military, Security, and Intelligence Services during the period of their tenure in office."<sup>4</sup> Although such measures (and others on the role of women or the need for a new military doctrine) would have set the foundations for a vast transformation of the security and military institutions, they weakened the reform process because they were intended to marginalize political actors – mainly Saleh.

This partly explains why the dialogue failed and why its conclusions on military and security reform – as well as all other conclusions – were never applied. Nonetheless, in both form and content, the NDC was ill-conceived, begging the question: was the process bound to fail from the outset?

### ***A Process Bound to Fail?***

Under UN pressure, the NDC process was rushed and the government did not have time to properly prepare for it. It was also "carnavalesque," as one Yemeni observer describes, "[there was] a lot of publicity and media attention. It took 10 months but a lot of time was spent on details. Time could have been better used."<sup>5</sup> This led to the paralysis of the state

3 Working Group on Building the Foundations of the Security and Military Institutions, *Final Report*, Submitted to the Final Plenary of the National Dialogue Conference, October 2013.

4 Working Group on Building the Foundations of the Security and Military Institutions, *Final Report*.

5 Maysa Shuja Addin, Yemeni journalist, interview, 06 April 2016, (Maysa Shuja Addin).

during the process as many ministers were involved in the dialogue. It was also disconnected from the problems of the Yemeni population (i.e. economic problems, security issues, etc.). And Yemenis themselves did not view the NDC as a viable solution. They lost faith in the state because of Hadi's poor performance, and as a result returned to their primary *'asabiyya* (tribal solidarity).

The decision-making process itself was flawed, especially on the crucial issue of federalism on which discussions were delayed until the end of the NDC. This turned into a race against time, as the government sought desperately to solve this question before the end of Hadi's term on 11 February 2014. The last session, on 10 February, took place within a chaotic context: in the absence of consensus on this issue, Hadi was delegated to find a solution. However, some forces withdrew from the meeting as they did not agree with the federalist option, contesting the transitional government's legitimacy to change the structure of the state: "it was only supposed to organize the transition from Saleh's power to elections. Its role was not to decide on the future form of the state."<sup>6</sup> Hadi thus formed a commission in which most members were his partisans. The commission took only two weeks to decide. On this matter of utmost importance, the division of the country into six provinces was made without any justification given. "Why six? Why not two or three or four? Nobody knows."<sup>7</sup> The commission did not consult civil society or Southern political groups, and indeed Southern groups were not even represented in the dialogue as they had withdrawn. The dialogue started in March and the only force from the South that had accepted to participate had withdrawn by November.<sup>8</sup>

In a context of weak state and government, who was going to apply the dialogue's conclusions? There was no will to implement the NDC's decisions even the consensual ones on the civilian state or the elections.

### ***Political Actors: Spoilers of the NDC?***

Political actors did not have faith in the process; their participation was based less on the legitimacy they accorded to the process than a response to international pressure. As such, they attempted to solve their problems outside the framework of the dialogue, and tried to impose the new realities from the ground onto the political process. And while negotiations were underway, the war was raging in the North. Hadi himself was not serious about the dialogue: he controlled the process, which led to constant interventions from the Executive. At the same time, certain key parties were under-represented, such as the Southern Movement. This situation created great potential for spoiling the negotiation process, hampering the ability of the NDC to achieve its goals.

### ***The Houthis: From the "Defenders of the Revolution" to the Invasion of Sanaa***

Since 2004 and up to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's departure in 2012, the Houthi

<sup>6</sup> Maysa Shuja Addin.

<sup>7</sup> Maysa Shuja Addin.

<sup>8</sup> Maysa Shuja Addin.

movement fought against the Saleh regime to establish their own state. The conflict between Saleh and the Houthis dates back to 1962 when a revolution began in North Yemen to overthrow the Zaidi Imams, a regime that had ruled for a thousand years. The Houthi movement's goal is to return to the pre-1962 rule and restore the power of the Zaidi Imams to govern the whole country.<sup>9</sup> The modern Houthi conflict, for its part, began in 2004 when the Saleh government attempted to arrest Hussien Badreddin al Houthi, a Zaidi religious leader and former parliamentarian. The conflict lasted for more than 10 years but received little international or local attention.

The Houthi movement used Yemen's Arab Spring to strengthen its influence and power in the country. In 2011, the Saada province became *de facto* autonomous. By adopting a populist discourse, the Houthis also presented themselves as the "defenders of the revolution." Expectations of economic, political, and social reform rose during the uprising; however, during the transition period, the situation of Yemenis largely failed to improve. The Houthis capitalized on this dissatisfaction. Although they took part in the NDC, they rejected the commission's six province-plan as it would have deprived their province of Saada from access to the sea. Their opposition was based on a "regionalist" and not a political perspective.<sup>10</sup>

### ***President Ali Abdallah Saleh: The Spoiler-in-Chief***

The GCC initiative not only granted Saleh full amnesty, but he was also allowed a degree of inclusion in the National Dialogue. As such, he was privy to knowledge regarding the Dialogue's conclusions and in particular those that would directly harm his own status – and that of his son – such as the Military and Security Working Group's decision to prevent former army officers from running for presidency for 10 years after leaving the institution. Saleh had the most to lose if the process succeeded, and as such chose to play the chaos card by relying on loyal security institutions and establishing an alliance with the Houthis, who he had fought for years. By doing so, he destabilized an already fragile process.

### ***The Southern Movement: Reform of the State or Independence from the North?***

The Southern Movement (*al Hiraq al janoubi*), emerged in the mid-2000s as an aggregation of grievances emerging from the Southern parts of the country. It began in 2006 when a group of retired army personnel, who had been forced to resign after the 1994 civil war, demanded higher pensions and their reinstatement within the army. As the movement grew, other demands emerged such as equal rights with Northern citizens and more autonomy for the South. Faced with the government's poor response to these demands, the movement began to ask for independence from the North.<sup>11</sup> When the uprising began in 2011, demands for independence were put aside at the beginning and Southerners joined the demonstrations for regime change. However, they quickly came back to their initial demands. When the NDC started, they refused to participate, preferring to focus on independence from the

9 Stacey Yadav and Sheila Carapico, "The Breakdown of the GCC Initiative", *MERIP Report*, 2014, available at [www.merip.org/mer/mer273/breakdown-gcc-initiative](http://www.merip.org/mer/mer273/breakdown-gcc-initiative)

10 Ghamdan al Yousfi, Yemeni journalist, interview, 14 April 2016, (Ghamdan al Yousfi).

11 ICG, *Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown*, September 2015, available at [www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-s-southern-question-avoiding-breakdown](http://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-s-southern-question-avoiding-breakdown)



North instead of state reform. Yet without participation from Southern groups, the process would lose its legitimacy. Knowing this, President Hadi, a Southerner himself, handpicked representatives but failed to secure the participation of people who had the legitimacy to represent the South. The NDC tried to fulfil some Southern demands, like “the reinstatement of all those who were forcibly dismissed and forced to retire from the military and security personnel from the South, as a result of the 1994 summer War” as stated in the Military and Security Working Group’s conclusions.<sup>12</sup> But the main issue remained the shape of the state, and in the absence of representatives from the Hirak, no solution could be found.

Though the Hirak is very popular in the Southern regions, it is not a monolithic movement and was unable – or unwilling – to compromise with Northern groups. Today, with the increasing sectarianization of the conflict, it has been side-lined by Salafi groups in the South as is explained below concerning Aden.

### ***Al-Islâh and Radical Islamist Groups: Marginalization on One Hand, Capitalization on the Other***

Although considered the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood of Yemen, the Islâh Party (Yemeni Congregation for Reform), founded in 1990, is in reality an alliance between different actors: the Hashid tribal confederation, business men, and different religious groups. When the uprising began, protestors accused the party of high-jacking the popular movement. Islâh played a key role during the transition period and benefited largely from Hadi’s restructuring of the military by placing many of its members in high-level positions within the institution. But the rise of the Houthis, and, more importantly, the war against the Muslim Brotherhood led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the regional level, considerably weakened the party.

Al-Qaeda and the Salafi movements, for their part, were of course excluded from the NDC; nonetheless, they were able to capitalize on the weaknesses of the Yemeni state by questioning its legitimacy. They also benefited from the sectarian turn of the conflict, as the particular example of Aden, below, will show.

In looking at the various political groups operating in Yemen, it becomes obvious that their interests diverge greatly and that, for some, failure of the political process is the goal. Yet beyond the existence and actions of spoilers, the reform of the security sector itself, or indeed the lack of actual reform of security institutions, also has proved to be a critical dimension in Yemen’s failed transition process and the continuing war.

## **Reforming the Security Sector after 2011: Overcoming Saleh’s Legacy**

When Colonel Ali Abdallah Saleh arrived to power in 1978 in Northern Yemen, two of his predecessors (Ibrahim al-Hamdi and Ahmed al-Gashmi) had been killed. To protect his life and ensure the durability of the regime, Saleh built a security sector dedicated to his person

<sup>12</sup> Working Group on Building the Foundations of the Security and Military Institutions, *Final Report*.

and position of power.<sup>13</sup> He relied on men from his family and tribe, appointing them to key positions within security institutions, and made use of different techniques to gain the security sector's loyalty. Crucially, during the transition phase, Hadi undertook efforts to curb the influence of Saleh but did nothing to reform the security institutions. This emphasis on Saleh in his personal capacity and not the broader security apparatus that supported him set the tone for increased chaos in the security sector and the eventual Houthi-Saleh alliance.

### ***The Northern Domination over the Army***

In 1990, the unification of the two Yemens led to the merger of two very different armies: the Northern one had been trained by Turkish and Egyptian officers, the Southern one by the British and later by what was then the Soviet Union. This is further complicated by a degree of defection: during the 1986 civil war in the South, the army split between the supporters of President Ali Nassar Mohammed and his enemies within the Socialist Party. The former were defeated, and fled to the North to become allies of Saleh. And though both armies were penetrated by ideological, tribal, and religious allegiances, the Southern army was considered the more professional of the two.<sup>14</sup>

The original unification agreement had given the North and South each half of the military; however, no real integration programme was elaborated and the 50-50 power sharing arrangement was not respected by the North. In 1994, during the civil war, the two armies fought against each other, leading to the defeat and the dismantling of the Southern units and the forced resignation of Southern officers. Ali Abdallah Saleh and Ali Mohsen al Ahmar took control of the military through the Republican Guard and the Firqa that became the two most powerful units within the army.

Under Saleh, officers had to express their loyalty to the president and had to be of the Sanhan tribe<sup>15</sup> to earn promotions.<sup>16</sup> The structure of the army and police was tribal and regional, with its core stemming from the provinces of Sanaa, Dammam, and Amrane (60% of soldiers and officers)<sup>17</sup>. The city of Taiz, which has the highest literacy rate in Yemen, was not represented in the officer corps but only at the rank-and-file level because Saleh did not trust its people. Although tribalism in the army was not a new phenomenon, it was highly increased by Saleh. This led to dysfunctions in the chain of command: "military ranks have no authority unless bolstered by an influential tribe: communication lines follow tribal lines, not command structures".<sup>18</sup>

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13 ICG, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*.

14 ICG, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*.

15 Saleh belonged to the Sanhan tribe which is part of the powerful Hashid tribal confederation.

16 ICG, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*.

17 Maged al Madhagi, Yemeni researcher, interview, 06 April 6 2016, (Maged al Madhagi).

18 Florence Gaub, "Arab Armies: Agents of Change? Before and After 2011", *Chaillot Papers* no. 131, EU Institute for Security Studies, p. 41.

Saleh's strategy "was to build powerful praetorian units and place his relatives in command of them".<sup>19</sup> He took complete control of the military to serve his own clan.

### ***Appointment of Family Members***

Within the army, power was concentrated in two units: the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division (the Firqa) and the Republican Guard. The latter was headed by Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, as of 2000. This is illustrative of Saleh's appointment in the 2000s of family members to key positions, building a "parallel army, security and intelligence services, better equipped and more qualified than pre-existing ones and whose loyalty and purpose were a source of intense debate and suspicion".<sup>20</sup> The Republican Guard became a very powerful unit under Ahmed Ali, who created eight new brigades. Built on the model of the Jordanian military, these were the best trained and equipped units of the army and their soldiers had more privileges than in other units. This granting of privileges was done at the expense of the rest of the army. Other units – even the Firqa led by Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who had been an ally of Saleh – were marginalized. The privileged units led by Saleh's relatives were dedicated to protecting the regime.

Within the Ministry of Interior, General Yahya Saleh, the president's nephew, directed the Central Security Forces, a paramilitary organization that acquired a great deal of power and whose counter-terrorism unit was equipped by the US. Likewise, the Najdah' rescue police was headed by a close supporter of Ahmed Ali, while the rest of the agencies (traffic police, government building guards, etc.) were neglected. Yahya's brother, Colonel Ammar Saleh, was appointed to be the head of the National Security Bureau (NSB), created in 2002 in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks by Al-Qaeda. The objective was to supplant the Political Security Organization (PSO), where many members of Islâh had enrolled. The NSB received American military training and equipment, increasing its superior efficiency over the PSO, and its soldiers were gifted with privileges. This was a reflection of Saleh's will to weaken Ali Mohsen's influence but also of the rise of a new generation that wanted to professionalize the military and security institutions.<sup>21</sup>

To develop the security sector, Saleh relied on foreign American and European assistance. His regime was considered an ally in the "war on terror," especially after 9/11. In reality, Saleh used this pretext to consolidate his grip on security institutions and, through them, on the whole country. This legacy led to a dysfunctional, bloated, corrupt, and inefficient (due to lack of training and equipment) security sector where "recruitment, appointments, and promotions were overwhelmingly based on tribal, regional, and family loyalties".<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the elite units that were under the command of Saleh's family members were much more efficient and were loyal to their commanders, leading to fiefdoms in the sector. Tellingly, they were not used to fight Al-Qaeda or the Houthis; rather, their main function

19 Michael Knights, "The Military Role in Yemen's Protests: Civil-Military Relations in the Tribal Republic", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36 (2), 2012, p. 261.

20 ICG, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*.

21 ICG, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*.

22 Sayigh, "Crumbling States".

was to protect the regime.

### ***Restructuring the Military after 2011***

When Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi was designated as president, he took several measures designed to restructure the army; nonetheless, the process was flawed as it only aimed at ending Saleh's influence: "the problem was not the restructuring process but how it was led."<sup>23</sup> These efforts were also rushed. According to President Hadi's chief-of-staff, the process needed at least eight years to be completed but such time was not to be found:<sup>24</sup> Hadi was criticized for not being able to make quick decisions, but also had to face treason from his own camp. Former Minister of Defence Mohammad Nasser Ahmad, who had relations with Saleh and the Houthis, was responsible for the Houthi takeover of Amrane and the fall of the regiment 310, which protected the capital Sanaa. Though later removed from his position,<sup>25</sup> the damage had largely been done.

The restructuring process began in December 2012 when the Republican Guard and the Firqa were disbanded and the military was reorganized on a regional basis (seven regions). Hadi's government restructured the army by changing its commanders and appointing men who were not loyal to Saleh in the Republican Guard. The objective was to move from a "family-owned" army to a national one. However, Hadi wanted to transfer the loyalty from Saleh to him personally: he appointed his brother and two of his sons at the heads of the units in charge of protecting the president, the missile units and units within the Republican Guard. These measures were criticized by the Houthis as they strengthened Ali Mohsen's position within the army, the man who had led the Saada wars against them. Moreover, removing the commanders was not enough to change the loyalties of the units.

Hadi also saw the Republican Guard as an enemy and thus scattered its units across different provinces. The mountain unit (one of the strongest) was sent to Hadramout desert in an environment where it was not trained to fight – a move that led many officers to defect and re-join Saleh. The Republican Guard remained loyal to Saleh because of Hadi's aggressive behaviour towards its officers.<sup>26</sup> Although Saleh had built the Republican Guard personally – with the intention to hand it over to his son – many officers were ready to abandon him and join the new president in 2012. However, Hadi missed this critical opportunity. The Republican Guard have by then become a militia, fighting for Saleh and cannot be considered a national army."<sup>27</sup> As for the Firqa, it was destroyed by the Houthis. Its main barracks in Abra were surrounded by the Houthis with the consent of Hadi, who wanted to get rid of Ali Mohsen.

While a small section of the army remained loyal to Saleh, other parts stayed neutral: they

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23 Hussein al Wadii, Yemeni researcher, interview April 2016, (Hussein al Wadii).

24 Ghamdan al Yousfi.

25 Ghamdan al Yousfi.

26 Hussein al Wadii.

27 Hussein al Wadii.

did not want to take orders from Saleh as he no longer represented the legitimate state, but Hadi had failed to establish contact with them. He did not provide support to commanders who were willing to stand by his government and fight the Houthis. Indeed, the best unit in the army fought for six months against the Houthis in Amrane without receiving any support: "Why would the army keep fighting for such a government? There is lack of trust between Hadi and the army."<sup>28</sup> Hadi's measures reveal the extent to which his objective was not to reform the security sector. He kept poor commanders from the Saleh era and was accused of dealing with the army from a regionalist perspective (*manâtiqiyya*). Yet at the same time, the "new" officers who had higher positions did not trust Hadi and considered that he had acted irresponsibly.<sup>29</sup>

The failure of the NDC and Hadi's poor performance as president led to the Houthi takeover of Sanaa on 21 September 2014 and the outbreak of all-out war. It was at this point that the security sector completely collapsed.<sup>30</sup>

## From Political to Sectarian: Multiple Layers of Conflict

When the conflict began, the protestors' slogans were political and not sectarian, calling for "legitimacy" (*shar'iyya*), and "sovereignty and revolution." Over time, however, the sectarian and regionalist aspects – minor at the beginning – became reinforced. Because of the Houthis' Zaidi (Shia) identity, their attack of a Sunni region is perceived as sectarian in nature. Tensions that had existed before the conflict between the Sunni populations of the provinces in the centre (part of the Northern Yemeni state until 1990) and the Zaidi populations from the North were revived by the war. In addition, since the Houthis are perceived as a Northern group, their military offensive led the Southern movement to ask for independence. The growing sectarian nature of the conflict and the mismanagement of the diversity of the country by the leadership allowed Al-Qaeda and Salafi groups to thrive.

### ***When the Regional, Sectarian and Political Collide: The Houthi Takeover of Sanaa***

The Houthis consolidated their control in their stronghold of Saada governorate during the 2011 political and security vacuum, essentially governing a stateless north Yemen. In the intervening years, they gained support outside of their traditional base by playing up their position as an opposition movement and fighting to reclaim the 2011 "popular revolution," which many Yemenis saw as having been co-opted by the political elite. They participated in the National Dialogue but rejected its six-province conclusion. They expanded into the Amrane governorate in summer 2014 and became a key powerbroker in Sanaa. By 2017, however, the scene has changed: the conflict essentially pits Yemen's Sunni-majority government against Houthi fighters and their allies, and military followers of former president Saleh. This issue has added importance for many Arab countries worried about

<sup>28</sup> Maysa Shuja Addin.

<sup>29</sup> Hussein al Wadii.

<sup>30</sup> Maged al Madhaji.

the rising influence of Iran.

In September 2014, the Houthis entered Sanaa, gaining the support of Yemeni citizens frustrated and dissatisfied with the poor performance of the central government, especially after Hadi decided to suspend fuel subsidies two months prior. The takeover of the government sites was relatively peaceful, although it was clear that there was no strategy to actually form a new government.<sup>31</sup> Hadi did not object to the Houthis' move. The Saudis and the Emiratis, who were leading the struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood at the regional level, advised him to let the Houthis enter Sanaa to weaken Islâh and Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, who had rejected the decisions on restructuring the army and who was seen, with his unit, as the military wing of Islâh. Once this objective was reached, Hadi was supposed to find an agreement with the Houthis. It was an "adventurous move"<sup>32</sup> motivated by Hadi's – and his regional allies' – short-term vision. Weak political governance played a decisive role. Hadi arrived to power by chance and "lacked Saleh's political skills. Saleh was able to get out victorious of such adventures."<sup>33</sup>

The Houthis, who have a long history of ruling Yemen under the Imamate, look to Sanaa as a Zaidi city, the centre of the Imamate, and not the capital of the Yemeni state. By mid-November 2014, they had stretched southward into Ibb and al-Bayda, westward into al-Hudaydah, and were beginning to move eastward into Ma'rib; as of January 2015, there was even a small Houthi presence in Taiz.<sup>34</sup> In January 2015, the coalition of Houthis and troops loyal to Saleh took over the presidential palace and residence as well as most of the ministries. The four-month negotiation between Hadi's government, the Houthis, and Saleh ended in failure, forcing Hadi to resign. While under arrest, Hadi was given political grounds for further extending his tenure. He escaped in late February 2015 to Aden and then to Saudi Arabia.

The Houthi-Saleh alliance, with Iran's moral support and little else, expanded its control into the other major cities, including the southern port of Aden. This expansion helped to widen the idea of secession from the North. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia launched an air war on Yemen on 26 March 2015 at the request of the Hadi government to "protect Yemen and its people from the continued Houthi aggression and to support it in fighting Al-Qaeda and ISIS".<sup>35</sup> The Saudi intervention can be in part explained as a result of domestic changes, namely with the arrival of a new king – King Salman – in January 2015 and the appointment of his young son, Mohammed Ben Salman, as minister of defence. The war against the Houthis illustrates the Saudi monarchy's desire to appear as the leader of Sunnis at the regional level. Yet since the airstrikes began, Saudi Arabia and their coalition partners have not only been unsuccessful

31 Daniel Martin Varisco, Sato-Kan Hiroshi, and Junji Kawashima, "The Sectarian Crisis in Yemen: Damage from a Divisive Storm", *Middle East Institute*, September 2014, available at [www.mei.edu/content/map/sectarian-crisis-yemen-damage-divisive-storm](http://www.mei.edu/content/map/sectarian-crisis-yemen-damage-divisive-storm) (Varisco, Hiroshi, and Kawashima, "The Sectarian Crisis in Yemen").

32 Maysa Shuja Adin.

33 Maysa Shuja Adin.

34 Katherine Zimmerman, "Al Houthi Areas of Influence", *Critical Threats*, 16 July 2015, available at [www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/al-houthi-areas-influence](http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/al-houthi-areas-influence)

35 Varisco, Hiroshi, and Kawashima, "The Sectarian Crisis in Yemen".



in their mission to target the Houthis and their allies, but the air war has also provoked a large humanitarian crisis. The conflict has essentially turned into a war of attrition, with none of the announced ceasefires proving tenable.

### ***Taiz, the “Martyr City”***

The conflict in Taiz, Yemen's third largest city, is different from that in Sanaa and Aden, and has been particularly violent. To fight against the Houthis who attacked their city in March 2015, Taizis organized their own resistance with little or no help from Hadi's government or the Saudi-led coalition. Civilians who had never used weapons before joined the Popular Resistance to defend their city.

Taiz is a Sunni city located in the centre of the country and thus was part of the Northern state before unification in 1990. It has the highest rate of educated people in the country, and those hailing from Taiz are dispersed all over Yemen. Taiz was also an economically dynamic city, providing the state with most of its tax revenues (Sanaa, though more important economically, failed to provide the state with tax revenues because of corruption). Despite these various factors lending weight to Taiz, the city has always been neglected by the central state and was excluded from playing a political role. The city was perceived as a threat because of the strength of Arab nationalism and leftist ideas among its population. Saleh feared that such positions would influence Sanaa, given that the majority of the population of the capital is originally from Taiz. Those from Taiz were excluded from the army and security institutions at the officers' level, as Saleh doubted the loyalty of its population (and in fact, Taizis did not vote for him). The army instead kept close surveillance, 12 barracks inside the city and at its entry points. In addition, the city's links with Islâh, which sees the city as its last bastion, are not well considered by Northern Zaidis or by Southerners, given the party's ties to Saleh (especially during the 1994 war).

Unsurprisingly, the 2011 uprising began in Taiz and was highly repressed by security forces. Yet in March 2015, when the Houthis and army units loyal to Saleh followed President Hadi to Aden, they did not attack Taiz on their way. According to an agreement between the Houthis and the governor of Taiz, Shawki Hayel Saeed, the city was to be kept out of the conflict. The governor accepted the presence of the Houthis in the city as a political group but not as a militia; however, the Houthis did not respect their part of the deal. After their attack on Aden, they turned to Taiz, which led the governor to leave the city to the militias. The army units stationed in the city were used against its population in support of the Houthis. They attacked schools as a way to attack the city's image as the most educated in Yemen. The Houthis even brought militiamen from Amrane who were dressed as civilians and were fighting in the streets of Taiz.<sup>36</sup> To justify such acts, they claimed they were fighting ISIS, yet neither the Islamic State nor Al-Qaeda was present in Taiz at the time.

These violent affronts led Taizis to take up arms and organize themselves into the Popular Resistance. Hadi's government, for its part, did not provide Taizis with much help in their

<sup>36</sup> Ghamdan al Yousfi.

struggle against the Houthis. The president chose not to send tanks and equipment to put an end to the conflict. The Saudi financial and military support went instead to Salafi groups. Two years later, the fighting continues in Taiz, where the Houthis still control important parts of the city.

In any future political settlement, the status of Taiz will have to be reconsidered, especially its representation within security institutions. The process of demobilization and reintegration of combatants in Taiz might seem like an easier task than in other regions, as many Taizis only joined the Popular Resistance to fight against the Houthis. Once the conflict ends, they might be able to go back to their previous jobs – as lawyers or teachers, etc. – or their studies.<sup>37</sup> However, after two years of conflict, the security scene is more diversified with the arrival of Salafi groups that could represent a challenge during the transition period. In addition, although Taizis' distrusted other regions before the war, this has increased after months of violence. (Re)building trust between Yemenis from all regions who have had different experiences and perceptions of the conflict will be crucial.

### ***(In)security Actors in Aden<sup>38</sup>***

Looking in particular at the security scene in Aden provides an interesting case study given the variety of local and regional actors at play and the challenges for rebuilding security institutions post-conflict. Though the situation in Aden was tense before the war, namely because of the activities of the Southern movement and its conflict with Islâh as well as the presence of Al-Qaeda, the current state of affairs proves far more dangerous.

The withdrawal of security forces loyal to president Saleh and the Houthis from Aden in June 2015 led to an important security void that was filled by diverse armed groups and small gangs. The Saudi-led coalition is not interested in improving the situation by building forces under the control of local authorities. Indeed, the government itself does not consider security in Aden a priority, although its temporary headquarters were directly targeted by car bombs. This complacency with the current status quo is the result of several factors. First is the absence of a political decision concerning the security situation in Aden, with focus instead directed towards fighting the Houthis. This is further exacerbated by the political conflict between Hadi and his prime minister (until April 2016) Khaled Mahfouz Bahhah. Finally, there is no real force on the ground that is under the government's control since the national armed forces are actually under the control of the coalition, which has trained and equipped them.

Hadi, for his part, was supported by militias from the governorate of Abyan. They participated in the armed conflict against the central forces at the beginning, while Hadi was in Aden, but withdrew from the city after his escape to Riyadh. Under the command of Abdel Latif al Sayyed, these militias are present in neighbouring Abyan and not in Aden. As such, they have not engaged in the conflict against the Houthis.

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37 Sumaya Bakhsh, "Yemen war: Professionals drawn into battle for Taiz", BBC, 2 June 2017, available at [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40120202](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40120202)

38 Section written by Maged al Madhagi.

*Who Controls the Army in Aden?*

In reality, Hadi, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, does not have control over the army in Aden. Instead, the “Central Security Forces” or “Private Security Forces”, who hold control, remain loyal to Saleh and his circle, as they are under the authority of one of Saleh’s nephews. Security Intelligence in Aden is also loyal to the former president. Meanwhile, though Saudi Arabia and the UAE wanted to build a new army from scratch in Aden, they refused to recruit former soldiers and officers and are criticized for their systematic sectarian bias: “even if there might be good elements what kind of army will they build? They bring to Yemen their own categories and deal with Yemenis as Sunnis and Shias and deal with Houthis as Shias and not as a reactionary, undemocratic armed group.”<sup>39</sup> They built units that they call the “national army” but these are actually loyal to the South and not to the Yemeni state.

***Non-State Actors in Aden: Factors of Insecurity***

The Salafis are the biggest force in Aden, present in all of the governorate’s districts. They are structured, disciplined, and well equipped compared to other groups, and even though numbers are lacking, according to estimates, they constituted the largest force in Aden after the liberation of the governorate. They benefited from the impact of the war and the rise of a Sunni identity opposed to the Houthis. They also benefited from the arrival of Salafis fleeing the North after the Houthis took control of their academic institutes, especially those affiliated with the Damaj Institute of Sheikh al Houjouri in Saada.

Their strength lies in part in their discipline and culture of hierarchy: decisions are made by sheikhs and are respected by all. They also benefit from a large network of funding through their close relations with other Salafi groups in the Gulf, especially in Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Salafi individuals, for their part, evolve from one group to another, given the minimal importance of their ideological differences. This fluidity between groups has also allowed some to turn to Salafi jihadism.

There are two main Salafi groups in Aden: En-Nahda, led by the sheikh Abd al-Rabb al-Salami, and the group of El-Afiouh Institute (based in Lahaj governorate), which gathers the biggest Salafi groups in the South and is supported by groups from the Damaj Institute. There are also unorganized Salafis who remain close to one of the groups without officially rallying them. Sheikh Hashem al Sayyed, who is close to En-Nahda, is currently one of the most famous Salafi leaders. He is part of a movement called the Southern Resistance, which is mainly constituted of Salafis but also of fighters from the Southern movement who joined the group because of the generous support it received from the Emirati and Saudi governments. Although it has a Southern hue, the objective being to attract Southern groups, En-Nahda remains ideologically motivated as a religious group and is not concerned with the Hiraq’s demands for Southern independence. The group, for example, fought alongside the Saudi-led coalition in the Northern governorate of Taiz. En-Nahda, and to a lesser extent El-Afiouh, received support – particularly military equipment – from the Saudi led-coalition although it

39 Maysa Shuja Addin.

remains unofficial because of the Salafis' relations with Al-Qaeda.

The Hirak, for its part, is the least efficient in Aden although they are very present on the political and media levels. This is due to the fragmentation of the movement and past feuds between its leaders. As a result, other groups were able to attract Hirak's partisans in the fight against the Houthis. The movement does not benefit from external financial or military support and was not able to build relations with the Saudi-led coalition. The latter treated the Hirak with caution and supported Salafi groups instead.

Islâh is one of the most important forces in Aden, with a large base of partisans. However due to its bad relations with the Southern movement and with the UAE, which perceives it as a Muslim Brotherhood movement, the party is less visible in Aden. Islâh members participated actively in the struggle against the Houthis in the city but they did not create their own structure, joining other groups instead such as the Salafis. Some of their leaders played a crucial role in the armed struggle, like Nayef al Bakri, who was governor of Aden and who hid his partisan identity behind his tribal credentials (he is part of the powerful Yafe' tribe, whose support allowed him to emerge as a major actor). Although al Bakri was briefly appointed governor of Aden after the withdrawal of the Houthis, his partisan allegiance led to his removal from the position, after which he took a lower ministerial position in the government.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS are both very present in Aden and indeed have benefitted from the conflict with the Houthis to strengthen their presence. Al-Qaeda had been present in Aden much longer than ISIS. It is the larger of the two groups and has more knowledge of the city's context. Al-Qaeda is also active in the different areas of the governorate, like al-Brika, Salah ad-Dine and the city of Cha'b, and al-Mansoura but especially in the directorates of al-Ma'la and al-Tawahi. The head of the directorate of al-Tawahi explains that Al-Qaeda attacked the headquarters of the *moukhabarat* (the intelligence agency) after the Houthis' ouster from Aden; he was personally threatened by Al-Qaeda and asked not to perform his duties.<sup>40</sup> ISIS, for its part, is present in the same areas. Even though it has fewer partisans, it imposes its authority in very visible and violent ways, particularly through the strict application of its most extremist version of the Sharia law.

Al-Qaeda has proven to be more able to adapt than ISIS, raising less tensions within society. It is profiting from the city's security void to attract new members by infiltrating Salafi movements in order to gain control of the weapons given to them by the Saudi-led coalition. Several witnesses on the ground indicate that weapons go from the coalition to the Salafis, then make their way to Al-Qaeda and to a lesser extent to ISIS and the Southern movement.<sup>41</sup> ISIS also works on attracting Al-Qaeda partisans and Salafis. The tensions between the two groups on the regional level have serious implications in Aden, where competition could lead to confrontation in order to determine the areas under the control of each group in the city.

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40 Ali Qaed Haydar, Director of the Directorate of al Tawahi, interview.

41 Fahmi al Saqqaf, Yemeni journalist, interview.

***The Regional Actors in Aden: Adding to Instability***

Aden is the main base for the coalition's operations against Saleh and the Houthis in the governorates of Abyan, Lahaj, Chabwa, and Taiz. The troops present in Aden are mainly from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, whereas Bahraini and Qatari forces are present in Mareb and Kuwaiti forces only participate in air strikes. Their role in Aden is to secure the main infrastructure, such as the airport, which is being rebuilt under their supervision, and to secure and rebuild the presidential palace in Ma'ashik. In addition, special Emirati and Saudi forces provide security to President Hadi and other governmental figures when they are in Aden.

Beside Gulf troops, Sudanese forces have joined the coalition's operations. Around 400 men and their equipment arrived to the city in October 2016 and more were expected in the course of 2017. These troops have taken positions but have not participated in any military operations, except providing support to the national army loyal to Hadi in the Bab al-Mandab region.

The complexity of the situation in Aden is the result of the multiplicity of actors, with more spoilers than parties willing to reach a settlement. This situation is largely a result of the failure to include security sector reform in the political settlement in the first place and is emblematic of the conflict in Yemen more broadly.

**Challenges for Rebuilding Security and Military Institutions**

Yemen morphed into war as a result of a combination of local political rivalries and a Saudi proxy war. Although Saleh had waged a brutal war against the Houthis for several years, his quest to retain power drove him to ally himself with them in a mutually-beneficial relationship: without the support of the military still loyal to him, the Houthis would never have been able to take over Sanaa. Meanwhile, the current Saudi proxy war against the Houthis affects the entire Middle East. The bombing campaign supported by the major Western powers increases insecurity and sectarian rhetoric that provide a powerful recruitment tool for regional terrorism.<sup>42</sup>

After more than two years of conflict, no party has been able to claim victory. Long-term political negotiations, under the supervision of the UN, appear to be the only solution towards reaching settlement which requires no less than a new social contract. One critical dimension that this intractable war has shown over four years is that political negotiations must reach consensus on the nature of the state: federal, centralized, or decentralized? Although political actors agreed on a federal state during the NDC, this option raised numerous questions. The issue of how to divide the provinces remains an unresolved problem, and the federal model highlights the weakness of the Yemeni state. At the heart of the transition, there should be a process for building consensus on federalism, as actors may agree on a different formula. If they opt for the federal option, they will have to take into account important risks such as partition (with the South becoming an independent

42 Varisco, Hiroshi, and Kawashima, "The Sectarian Crisis in Yemen".

state) and will need to take the necessary measures to avoid them. Decentralization can be a second option. A central state is needed to maintain peace and stability in Yemen; yet, in some areas, a legitimate demand for self-governance can be recognized and thus fulfil the desires for increased autonomy of certain key players.

Whatever the chosen option, the future political organization of Yemen and its structure of government must be agreed upon as part of the constitution. The political formula will have an impact on the willingness of political and military groups to join the process and to participate in the rebuilding of security institutions, a crucial and highly critical task in the transition period. Two main issues will arise: the rebuilding of a national army and the disarmament of the militias and their reintegration. Finally, regional and international actors will have to play a different role in ending the conflict and fostering peace and stability in Yemen.

### ***Rebuilding Security Institutions***

Who will rebuild the army? This is a fundamental question. All army units are linked to political actors, and every political party wants the army to be loyal to it.<sup>43</sup> A more representative army can reinforce the cohesion of Yemeni society and be trusted to fight against groups who may represent a threat to Yemen's stability during the transition period. For this to occur, a long-term strategy and a gradual restructuring of the military institution is necessary. This process must in particular prevent these institutions from turning again into the vectors of a "counter-revolution," as in 2011.<sup>44</sup> To achieve this, the conclusions of the NDC's working group on military and security affairs could lay the ground for the future process. In addition, lessons should be learnt from the post-1994 war experience and from the failed restructuring process launched by Hadi. In the first case, many Southern members of the military institution were forced to retire, which reinforced Northern domination. In the second case, the process was politicized, which proved to be counter-productive: a few commanders who were close to Saleh were dismissed but there was no real strategy for reform.

Integrating former combatants will also represent a major challenge. This is particularly true for the Houthis: their ranks are endowed with strong group loyalty, which will be difficult to replace with national loyalty, especially in the absence of a national project.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Southerners may not accept the Houthis in the army. A balance will have to be found between Southerners, on the one hand, and pro-Saleh and pro-Houthis, on the other. The NDC's conclusion on this issue – 50% for the North and 50% for the South at the command level in the military, security, and intelligence agencies and at lower levels – can be a solution.

43 Hussein al Wadii.

44 Mohammad al Mekhlafi, "Yemen between Revolution and Counter-Revolution: The Army and Police Position towards the Revolution and their Role in Counter-Revolution" (in Arabic), *Al Eshteraky*, October 2016, available at [www.aleshteraky.com/pgbaj-h-cbajij/item/11295-h-adeгдаai-icfhd-ai-adfdbq-4-rf-ehba-adeim-ef-dhjq-adc%D8%BAiij-hhhjg-ai-addhjg-adeoahq](http://www.aleshteraky.com/pgbaj-h-cbajij/item/11295-h-adeгдаai-icfhd-ai-adfdbq-4-rf-ehba-adeim-ef-dhjq-adc%D8%BAiij-hhhjg-ai-addhjg-adeoahq)

45 Maysa Shuja Addin.



The development of a military doctrine will also be essential for the cohesion of the institution. The NDC had already insisted on the necessity of such a doctrine as the basis for building a national and professional army. In addition, all political actors will need to agree on what national security involves and its priorities.

Shielding the process from the influence of external actors will be difficult but their role should be restricted to technical issues only. Jordan and the US were in charge of restructuring the security sector under Hadi, a task in which they failed. The Saudis are trying to rebuild army units in the South, but the loyalty of such units is questionable. The reform of the army requires a national agreement by Yemeni actors themselves.

### ***Disarmament of All Armed Groups***

The Houthis are the main armed group in Yemen today. While Saudi Arabia has a veto against Saleh, it is willing to negotiate with the Houthis as both parties are opposed to Islâh. Similarly, the Houthis' pledge to rid Yemen of Al-Qaeda would also seem to have made them allies of the Saudis and the United States.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the Houthis now have the upper hand in their alliance with Saleh. They have control over security institutions, through their Revolutionary Committees, and were able "to win over several senior military officers by taking control of some military bases, aided in this by the tribal and regional structure of the army, which fits well with the sectarian nature of the Houthi group".<sup>47</sup>

Saleh, on the other hand, is more and more isolated, as international and regional actors involved in the Yemeni situation perceive the Houthis as more trustworthy than Saleh. Though the Saudis supported and helped him for years, they are now punishing him for turning his back on them. And the Houthis, for their part, are willing to let him go because they see him as a Zaidi competitor. Despite all this, it will be difficult to exclude him as he still has the loyalty of many in the army and still enjoys wide popularity among segments of Yemeni society. If ignored in a settlement, Saleh can emerge as a new spoiler of the political process. His party – the General People's Congress – will likely disappear after the conflict, as it is a party built on the control of power (*hezb soultah*) whose only function was to provide partisans with public administration jobs. Once the party loses power it will have no reason to exist, as long as Saleh's military and security capacity is brought under control through the political process or otherwise (indeed, this was a key reason for his counter-revolution).

As for President Hadi, though it is not in his interest to reach a solution, he does not have the power or the popularity to hinder the process. He will likely have to step down, as he is largely held responsible for the failure of the political transition.

For its part, Islâh's situation is complicated because of a Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian veto against the Muslim Brotherhood. If the coalition bars the return of Islâh to political life, there will be a risk that the party's followers turn to more violent actions. Islâh has already agreed to cut

46 Varisco, Hiroshi, and Kawashima, "The Sectarian Crisis in Yemen".

47 Maysa Shuja Addin, "Yemen's Houthis and Former President Saleh: An Alliance of Animosity", *Arab Reform Initiative*, October 2016.

its ties with the Brotherhood, a sign that it is reading the regional map and seeking to adapt to the new balance of forces.

Terrorist groups are of course the key spoilers of the political process. The current level of terrorist activity in Yemen is higher than the international community anticipated. Importantly, it cannot be fought by external actors but instead must be dealt with locally. Once a political solution is reached, it is much more likely that the fight against Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other Salafi groups will become effective. But it will take time to defeat them. The sectarian nature of the war has allowed them to win over legions of new partisans. Local communities have a critical role to play against such groups, and the tribes in particular are able to weaken Al-Qaeda. It will be for the state to provide them with incentives that surpass what Al-Qaeda is offering. The problem is more acute in the South, however, as socialist rule and Saleh's manipulation weakened local communities.

Defeating such groups requires a state that is trusted by its people. To reach this goal, rebuilding trust between all political actors is crucial. Although the Houthis have lost the trust of other Yemenis, they cannot be excluded from any future political solution as they represent a large segment of the Yemeni society. They were popular after their takeover of Sanaa under the slogan of eradicating corruption, though they will need to make important concessions –starting with the release of thousands of prisoners. Their sense of marginalization was one of the triggers of the current war, and as such their inclusion in future political processes is a necessity for re-establishing peace.

### ***Regional and International Actors in the Transition Period***

The role of regional and international actors is critical to bring an end to the conflict and restore the transition process. The intervention of the Saudi-led coalition has not helped. Any type of intervention needs prior comprehensive planning, and any strategy adopted should encompass all phases of military activity as well as post-conflict reconstruction. It will also need to re-establish the rule of law.

Transitional justice has been absent in the Yemeni process, something which has contributed to failure of the post-authoritarian transition. Moving forward, these same mistakes should be avoided, as they have proven to be important obstacles to sustainable peace. All groups who are involved in the conflict have committed human rights violations and need to be held accountable for their actions. Some experts advise that Yemen join the International Criminal Court, which can prosecute past human rights violations as well as protect Yemenis from such actions in the future.<sup>48</sup> Putting an end to a long tradition of impunity may help to stop political and military leaders from resorting to violence. The local judiciary system does not have the capacity at the moment to lead the transitional justice process. Such a process must be comprehensive and global, and should be tailored to the particularities of the Yemeni context (building on other experiences). Human rights organizations have been documenting violations against civilians, and their work will be crucial for the process.<sup>49</sup>

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48 Abdel Rashid al Faqih, human rights activist, interview, 07 April 2016 (Abdel Rashid al Faqih).

49 Abdel Rashid al Faqih.

Within security institutions, officials of the Saleh and Hadi eras should undergo a vetting process before re-employment. Finding a balance between justice and the need to maintain some institutional continuity is difficult but vital. Finally, systemic transformation of the security sector should enjoy support of the Yemeni population. The aim should not be to impose solutions devised by Western countries or neighbouring states. Local ownership of the process is crucial for the reform process to succeed.

## Conclusion

Since the outbreak of the war in Yemen, there have been multiple rounds of political negotiations to put an end to the conflict. which ended all in failure, the result of what one Yemeni activist calls the “balance of weakness.”<sup>50</sup> all groups are aware that there will be no military victory on the ground; yet, it is in their interest to prolong the state of war. Hadi is likely to face exclusion in any future settlement, while Saleh and the Houthis benefit from their illegal activities in the context of the war economy.<sup>51</sup> The road map presented in October 2016 by Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the UN for Yemen, foresaw the “creation of military and security committees which would supervise withdrawals and the handover of weapons in Sanaa, Hodeida and Taiz” and the appointment of a new vice-president. A Government of National Unity was also to be formed. This was summarily rejected by all political parties. Their refusal to make concessions provoked a stalemate in the political process which renders the reform and the rebuilding of the security sector difficult to envisage in any concrete way.

The post-2011 experience shows that reforming the security sector should be at the heart of a post-authoritarian transition if it is to succeed. The opportunity for security sector reform was missed in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprising. Today, new challenges have emerged that greatly complicate the possibility of such a process. Rebuilding security institutions after a conflict requires a comprehensive disarmament-demobilization-reintegration (DDR) process that is often difficult to apply. Disarmament should include all groups, and a road map should be put in place to collect weapons. Reintegrating former combatants into society is also crucial, yet their enrolment in security and military institutions represents a challenge: how can former combatants who previously fought on opposite sides be managed? Although this issue poses numerous difficulties, it is a priority and its failure is likely to lead to renewed conflict.

Events have shown that transitional justice is also crucial during the transition phase to put an end to the sense of impunity among key political actors.

The half-cooked federal system proved dangerous. Discussions on the shape and organization of the state – federal or decentralized – should be reopened with all political actors in order to reach a settlement that is acceptable to all. Whatever option is chosen, it should include a fair distribution of resources, as this will be a prerequisite for sustainable peace. Such

50 Abdel Rashid al Faqih.

51 Nadwa Al Dawsari, “Breaking the Cycle of Failed Negotiations in Yemen”, *POMED*, May 2017.

discussions could be led during the transition period.

Hadi's poor performance and his lack of "statesmanship" during the transition period was one of the triggers of the conflict. During the transition, Yemen has yet to see the emergence of leaders that are trusted by all political parties for them to have faith in the process and see it as fair – and not as an act of revenge against former opponents.

Finally, external actors have mostly played a negative role: from the former UN Special Envoy, Jamal Benomar, rushing the National Dialogue, to Saudi Arabia's war against the Houthis that has brought huge destruction and killed thousands of civilians. Western countries have been ambiguous in their position on the Yemeni conflict: while providing millions of dollars of assistance to the Yemeni population, their support to Saudi Arabia, is further fuelling the war.<sup>52</sup> While local ownership of the political and reform process is crucial, sustainable peace will be difficult to achieve without regional and international support.

This conflict has led to the disintegration of an already weak state; however, paradoxically, it has increased Yemenis' attachment to their state as all political factions have lost credibility.<sup>53</sup> The success of the transition period will be at least in part measured by its ability to bring Yemenis together around a national project that is inclusive of all segments of society.

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52 Ian Black, "Yemen: Remembering the Forgotten War", May 2017, available at [www.raconteur.net/current-affairs/yemen-the-forgotten-war](http://www.raconteur.net/current-affairs/yemen-the-forgotten-war)

53 Abdel Rashid al Faqih.

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# Saudi Uncertainties and Divergent Strategies in the Gulf

*Fatiha Dazi-Héni*

In the face of major domestic uprisings and civil/regional wars in the Arab world, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>1</sup> states, notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and, to a lesser extent, Qatar, have recently adopted more assertive foreign policies and intervention. However, the degree to which this reflects a renewed regional dynamic is questionable. The Gulf monarchies have failed to initiate a common and coherent strategic vision, and this failure, especially in the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts, has added to lost influence in Iraq alongside the rise of Iranian activism. The lack of a coherent regional policy illustrates divergent political aims, despite the existence of a military coalition. This weakness is further compounded by the countries' quite different approaches to the perceived Iranian threat as well as their differing definitions of Islamist activism and extremist groups. Most importantly, the recent shake-up of the Saudi governance model has reverberated across the Gulf countries, pushing competing foreign policies that work at times at cross purposes.

## Incoherence in GCC Strategy and its Consequences

The increasing deployment by GCC states since 2011 of their military, financial, and other assets in the MENA region is revealing of their priorities, and their utmost goal to maintain the power status quo. This includes bolstering the security-based political orders and preventing the establishment of Islamist governments close to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)<sup>2</sup> or Iranian-supported Shia movements. In this vein, the GCC military apparatus (the Arabian Peninsula Shield), composed of Saudi and UEA troops, moved into Bahrain mid-March 2011 to save the Al Khalifa Sunni dynastic regime, threatened by predominantly Shia popular protests. They also engaged in air strikes against Qaddafi's regime in Libya, via Qatar and the UAE's involvement under the NATO umbrella,<sup>3</sup> and provided financial and military assistance to rebels fighting the Syrian regime. The GCC backed their Arab allies in Egypt, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen, and to a lesser extent Jordan and Morocco with political and above all financial support, and through their local proxies in Tunisia and Libya.<sup>4</sup>

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1 The GCC regional pact was established in 1981 and includes the six dynastic monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

2 Qatar represents an exception in its support for the MB.

3 Kristen Coates Ulrichsen, "Small States with Big Role: Qatar and UAE in the Wake of the Arab Spring", *HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohamed Al Sabah Publications Series*, UK: Durham University, 3 October 2012, available at [www.dro.dur.ac.uk/10011/1/10011.pdf?DDD35](http://www.dro.dur.ac.uk/10011/1/10011.pdf?DDD35)

4 Karen Young, "Foreign Policy Analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Breaking Black Boxes and Explaining

Preoccupied with regime survival, these various interventions into regional affairs were linked by a common desire to prevent the spread of the Arab Spring uprisings. The relative “hard power” of the KSA-UAE entente demonstrated a strong willingness to influence developments in ways that no other contender for regional power could. And even if some issues such as borders and GCC currency still provoke tension between these two states, most of their regional interests track closely: Gulf security, stabilizing oil prices, containing Iran’s regional power, and fighting political Islam, which is seen as an alternative to their dynastic power.

Abu Dhabi, in line with KSA under the rule of King Abdullah, has also tried to shape regional events by taking matters into its own hands, coupling financial resources with the use of coercion and force. Both supported the Bahraini and al-Sisi regime in Egypt in defending traditional orders against revolutionary or alternative forces. They also combined their efforts to isolate Qatar diplomatically from March to November 2014, when they recalled their respective ambassadors in protestation of Doha’s support for the Egyptian MB. These tensions are today re-emerging through a media campaign allegedly orchestrated by Abu Dhabi, whose crown prince, Muhammad Bin Zayed, is at the forefront of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood battle and who disdains Qatar’s support of the MB in the region.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the intervention in Yemen, even if GCC states were all associated in supporting the country’s transition – keeping it neither too weak, nor too strong<sup>6</sup> – it was under the new Saudi King Salman, who succeeded his half-brother King Abdullah, that KSA and the UAE took the helm in the war in March 2015. Yet despite their coalition, there exist deep divergences on the main targets to achieve in this conflict, which are increasingly turning these two allies into rivals.

These frictions and inter-states rivalries are detrimental to the establishment of a regional bloc and the emergence of a regional power capable of containing the growing influence of Iran. Teheran has adopted a highly efficient strategy of intervention and influence via regional proxies, namely Hezbollah and Iraqi militias in Syria, strengthened by comprehensive cooperation with Russia. The lack of a strong and coherent GCC political agenda in the region renders the Gulf states’ pact weak, even if it remains the most valuable multilateral coalition in the Arab world. This situation appears to be the most damaging to KSA, which seeks to defend its position as the primary Arab regional player vis-à-vis Iran.<sup>7</sup> Yet even for the other Gulf states, especially those who have adopted interventionist policies such as the

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New Interventions”, in Karen Young (ed.), *The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States*, London: LSE, Middle East Centre, Vol.1, 2015, pp. 4-12.

5 Saif Ahmed Al Thani, “Quotes were falsely attributes to the emir of Qatar and its foreign minister”, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2017, letter to the editor, available at [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/30/quotes-were-falsely-attributed-to-the-emir-of-qatar-and-its-foreign-minister](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/30/quotes-were-falsely-attributed-to-the-emir-of-qatar-and-its-foreign-minister). See also Nabil Ennasri, “Reprise de la guerre froide du Golfe. Le Qatar entre les Emirats Arabes Unis et l’Arabie Saoudite”, *Orient XXI*, 31 May 2017, available at <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/reprise-de-la-guerre-froide-du-golfe>, 1883

6 Stig Stenslie, “Not Too Strong, Not Too Weak: Saudi Arabia’s Policy towards Yemen”, *NOREF Policy Brief*, March 2013.

7 Fatiha Dazi-Héni, “The Smaller GCC States’ Foreign Policy and Regional Role”, *Orient, Gulf Politics One Year after the JCPoA*, IV/2016, German Orient Foundation, pp. 27-33.



UAE and Qatar, the Saudis' failure to become a decisive regional player has had important consequences. The UAE in particular, and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi specifically, have benefited from Saudi weakness and emerged as the strong man and the representative of "hard power" in the region. Riyadh under King Salman is now more than ever on the defence, despite its more assertive foreign policy. While the Kingdom is challenged on its borders by the Yemeni chaos, Iran is recovering in full its self-assurance with its international rehabilitation –and looking for regional dominance in the Middle East.

### ***A Divided GCC Pact***

Given the different orientations and capacities of its constituent states, the GCC has distinct foreign policy streams. On the one hand, the UAE (with Abu Dhabi on the frontline) and Bahrain, under the tutelage of KSA, have been promoting since March 2011 a hardliner orientation focusing on a defensive security approach. The effort has been directed to reinforcing GCC defence and security apparatuses under US patronage in order to prevent any threat from Iran. On the other hand, Kuwait and Oman have adopted a more pragmatic approach, objecting to military intervention and instead opting for a more open and diplomatic agenda. As for Oman, the country's traditional neutral and anti-interventionist policy, coupled with its historic close relation with Iran (stemming from its gratitude for the Shah's decisive military role in defeating the Dhofar rebellion<sup>8</sup>) has led Muscat to promote peaceful coexistence between the Gulf countries and their Persian neighbour. Indeed, Oman facilitated the rapprochement between Iran and the US, and could play a positive role in the future in easing tensions with Gulf states fearful of Iran's prowess.

Kuwait and Qatar's stances, for their part, have always been guided by pragmatism, with a view to preserve good relationships with neighbours. This is in part because they share common offshore gas fields with Iran, notably Qatar who shares the world's largest gas field. Moreover, Kuwait's ruling family shares historically strong and close relations with its powerful merchant Shia families, mainly of Persian origin. Yet, Kuwait is living difficult times with respect to its foreign policy, and namely its ability to maintain the sophisticated equilibrium between loyalty to KSA that produces an aggressive regional policy with a sectarian narrative that Kuwait does not share.

In Qatar, since coming to power in late June 2013 following his father's abdication,<sup>9</sup> Emir Tamim has inherited the difficult task of assuming his predecessor's tumultuous diplomacy. Tamim has considered rivalry with Saudi Arabia unproductive. As a case in point, the Saudi-Qatari rivalry has not helped build a cohesive Syrian opposition, to which both countries were committed. Quite the contrary, the Assad regime has benefited from this regional divide, as Iran stepped up to bring its full and cohesive support via Hezbollah and Russia, which has aided Assad's domination of the conflict. Yet at the same time, Emir Tamim has not rejected his father's diplomatic heritage, especially his continuing support for the

<sup>8</sup> The military intervention of Iran and the UK (and to a lesser extent Jordan) in 1976 helped Sultan Qaboos end the Dhofar Rebellion that lasted from 1964 to 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Fatiha Dazi-Héni, "Qatar's Regional Ambitions and the New Emir", *Middle East Institute*, 9 May 2014, available at [www.mei.edu/content/article/qatar%E2%80%99s-regional-ambitions-and-new-emir](http://www.mei.edu/content/article/qatar%E2%80%99s-regional-ambitions-and-new-emir)

MB and strategic partnership with Turkey, which established its first Gulf military facility in Doha. This orientation nourishes the animosity with Abu Dhabi, which considers the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group. In response, Emir Tamim has renounced unilateral interventionism and prioritized discussions and cooperation with KSA.

Bahrain, as the poorest and weakest Gulf state, has no independent margins of manoeuvre and thus must be contented to follow KSA's directions. As for the UAE, its position is unique given its singular federal system, composed of two pillars: on one hand, Abu Dhabi, a wealthy distributive state, is asserting itself as a traditional hard power and encouraging militaristic nationalism among its GCC neighbours (an unsustainable stance given Iran's regional rehabilitation); on the other hand, Dubai, the wealthy financial and tourist hub, is putting forth its soft power devoted to trade and international exchanges, especially with Iran.

These different diplomatic approaches of the region feed inter-states rivalries among GCC states, but can also at times be complementary. More precisely, even if perceptions of the Iranian threat diverge significantly, Iran remains globally perceived by all GCC member states (even Oman) as a hegemonic player. But when a member state defends an opposite political approach, such as Qatar in supporting the MB, this difference may become a source of division as it is seen as a credible alternative to the status quo of the dynastic regimes upon which the resilience of the GCC pact rests.

### ***The Qatar Embargo: A Prelude to the GCC's End?***

On 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed their diplomatic ties with Qatar, officially accusing it of supporting terrorism and participating in diverse destabilization efforts in conjunction with Iran. As part of the embargo, the Saudis and Emiratis have closed their air and maritime space along with the tiny peninsula's only land border, through which 90% of its basic products, and notably food, transit. The measures were accompanied by a denigrating media campaign designed to pressure the Qatari regime to fall in line. The crisis has been smouldering since 23 May, after the Qatar News Agency diffused a report that Emir Tamim had denounced the demonization of Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah, following the official visit of Donald Trump to Riyadh several days earlier. Doha refuted this information the following day, stating that its press agency had been hacked and that the false report had been published. This explanation proved insufficient to prevent the escalation of tensions with neighbours.

The preceding diplomatic crisis dates back to 2014, when Doha's position vis-à-vis the repression against the Muslim Brotherhood by Egyptian president al-Sisi resulted in KSA, the UAE, and Bahrain recalling their ambassadors from Qatar for eight months. As with the 2017 embargo, these strained relations seemed the result of Qatar's decision to maintain its support of the Brotherhood. Doha suspects that the operation was orchestrated by Abu Dhabi, given that the Emirate has undertaken for almost three years a virulent media campaign against Qatar over its position in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood and because of the crown prince's strong aversion to the Islamist organization. This crisis profoundly shook the GCC.

Although rivalry and tension between the Gulf monarchies is nothing new, the virulence of the most recent Saudi-Emirati reaction towards a fellow GCC member state is unheard of, and will certainly leave traces on the pact. The violence of multiple media attacks and the diplomatic, political and economic retaliation against Qatar are out of the ordinary. While the Gulf monarchies have always attempted to solve dissension “within the family”, hidden from external scrutiny, this crisis has been provoked through the deliberate use of aggressive methods that resemble the intimidation techniques used by coercive structures. This reflects the change in generation and political culture of those responsible for such manoeuvres, including the Emirati Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed al Nahyan and the newly-appointed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who models his strategy of economic development on Dubai and his anti-Iranian and anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance on that of Muhammad bin Zayed al Nahyan. Indeed, the future Saudi king sees in his Emirati counterpart a model of leadership to be emulated upon ascension to the throne.

The consequences of this crisis are so deep that the survival of the GCC itself is called into doubt. What was so remarkable and powerful about the GCC was its cohesion resulting from inter-dynastic solidarity. This has now been ruptured, perhaps irreparably. In addition, the populations of the Gulf, themselves stemming from the same tribes and configured in cross-border marital arrangements, are shocked by the virulence of this crisis that is affecting thousands of families. The Saudi and Emirati authorities have threatened the maximum punishment (up to 15 years in prison in Abu Dhabi, 10 years in KSA) for all persons demonstrating sympathy for embargoed Doha.

The brutality and the mostly-baseless accusations against Qatar, unique among the GCC states to support the Arab Spring and the Muslim Brotherhoods, especially through its enormously influential Al Jazeera satellite channel as well as financial backing, has revealed itself to be pitfall for Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. International powers, and in particular the US – with the exception of the inconsequential tweets of President Trump, which were quickly rescinded by the Secretary of Defense (James Mattis) and the Secretary of State (Rex Tillerson) – and the vast majority of Muslim countries, and notably Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan as well as Morocco (an important ally of the Saudis and Emiratis), have all called for the Gulf authorities to return to reason. As a result, Kuwait and Oman, who are currently playing the role of mediator, have important international support. This situation, the gravity of whose consequences are still unknown, reinforces significantly the Iranian position as a coherent regional power, while simultaneously disqualifying the Gulf monarchies for said title.

## **King Salman’s Failed Approach in Syria and Yemen**

King Salman’s ascension to power on 23 January 2015 was accompanied by radical shifts in the management of the Syrian opposition and a more pro-active and interventionist regional policy, as encapsulated by the Yemen war. The new tone and strong determination of KSA foreign policy has served to place Saudi Arabia as the main reliable bulwark against Iranian influence and expansionary policy in the Middle East. As part of this, King Salman has not hesitated to veer sharply from his predecessor’s diplomatic choices in the Syrian and Yemeni

crises. Whereas King Abdullah classified the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in the same category as al-Qaida and its affiliates, ISIL/ISIS, the Houthis, and Hezbollah, King Salman has instead engaged in a rapprochement with Qatar and Turkey, no longer considering the MB an immediate threat to the Kingdom's stability. On the contrary, the new strategy aims to unite as much as possible Sunni Islamists to act as a counter-weight to Teheran's cohesive bloc made of a wide range of Shia regional proxies. This attempted "Sunni alliance" has not entirely succeeded, however, as Egypt and the UAE have shown no signs of reconciling with the destitute MB.

Nonetheless, this shift has increased the Kingdom's ability to negotiate with a wider range of local players in Syria, given the MB's extended reach, and in Yemen with al-Islah party (a hybrid of Salafist thought and the Brotherhood's political agenda). At the same time, King Salman has concentrated his fight against Iranian proxies on Syrian and Yemeni battlefields: the Assad regime, and the Houthis allied with former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh's loyalists. These new tactical moves have opened space of quasi-arrangements with al-Qaida affiliates in Syria (al-Nusra, renamed Jabhat Fath Al-Sham in July 2015, and Ahrar al-Sham) and in Yemen (al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula) in order to give priority to defeating the Iranian proxies. As part of this tactical shift, the war in Yemen, launched on 26 March 2015 under a Saudi-led, Sunni Arab coalition, neglected by "default" the fight against ISIL.

If KSA gained some success in so doing, especially in Syria with rebels gaining ground against the Assad regime from March to September 2015, the Russian intensive air campaign to support Assad and Iran's positions completely reversed the game at the expense of opposition forces. Instead, Riyadh's conference on 9 and 10 December 2015, which aimed to unify the Syrian opposition, known as the High Committee for Negotiations (HCN),<sup>10</sup> became among the most successful outcomes of the Saudi involvement in the Syrian conflict. Even if the Yemeni war has become the main regional priority for the Saudis, Riyadh is still committed to supporting the HCN.

Riyadh is today confident it will have a heavy say in Syrian post-conflict reconstruction, boosted by the Trump administration's overtures and the regular dialogue with Moscow concerning oil market regulation and the Syrian transition. In this sense, the Syrian issue for KSA is now a matter of continuing patronage of the opposition in order to secure its inclusion in the after-war scenario. The aim is to avoid a replay of the Iraqi scenario, where Sunnis have been marginalized from power and KSA has been unable to support them as strong local proxies.

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10 This group brings together all Syrian opposition forces that agreed to participate in the inclusive transitional process in the after-war perspective. It includes the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces based in Turkey, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change based in Syria, Jaysh al-Islam, the Southern Front mainly composed of the Free Syrian Army, and Ahrar al-Sham before its withdrawal after the Riyadh conference.

***Riyadh and Abu Dhabi: Trapped in the Curse of the Yemeni War***<sup>11</sup>

After more than two years of daily air strikes by the GCC coalition, the so-branded “decisive” military approach in Yemen has dramatically failed. The primary aim was the reinstallation of Yemen’s president Abd Raboo Mansour Hadi; however, he remains in exile in Riyadh along with most of his government. The other primary goal, to defeat the Teheran-supported Houthis, a Zaidi Shia organization allied with Ali Abdallah Saleh and the most capable units of what was once the Yemeni army, has also produced mostly disappointing results. While the Houthis and their allies were pushed out of the port of Aden by mainly Emirati military forces in July 2015 and from the small Red Sea port, al-Mocha, in April 2017, the Houthis still retain control over the capital Sanaa and most of western Yemen. Moreover, compared with the high human cost of the war (around 10,000 deaths and 44,000 injured, two million displaced and 18.8 million out of a total population of 25 million in need of humanitarian assistance, along with widespread hunger and a cholera outbreak),<sup>12</sup> very few gains have been achieved.

Though Emirati troops proved their operational efficiency on the ground in southern Yemen, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Muhammad Bin Zayed, the architect of the UAE’s modern army and promoter of a new “Gulf military patriotism” mixed with “hyper nationalism,”<sup>13</sup> tried to gain immediate advantages from his military success at the expense of his main ally, Saudi Arabia. Since Aden’s liberation, divergences between the UAE and KSA have grown and contributed to the deterioration of their relationship. This has been exacerbated by King Salman’s willingness to negotiate with the Islamist al-Islah party: as the champion of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood cause in the Arab world, Bin Zayed is adamantly opposed to Riyadh’s new approach. These differences have not only incurred operational difficulties on the ground but have also severely impacted the ability to find a political solution in Yemen. Indeed, finding a political compromise in the peace negotiation process has proven elusive even after UAE troops played a decisive role in the liberation of Mukalla, the capital of Hadramawt province in the south. Failing to translate its military gain into a political outcome with the Saudis, Abu Dhabi threatened on 16 June 2016 to withdraw most of its ground troops from southern Yemen. The breakdown of peace negotiations on 6 August 2016, ostensibly the result of a rejection of the deal by the Houthis and Ali Abdallah Saleh, is also the result of the troubled relationship between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

In February 2017, the fight over Aden’s airport that opposed rival Saudi-backed and Emirati-backed factions, clearly turned the Yemen war into a major rift between these two allies with opposite military and political objectives.<sup>14</sup> Saudi Arabia, who has relied on a massive

11 This refers to the decision to intervene in Yemen’s civil war (1962-1970), when Egypt lost 25,000 soldiers. This trauma led President al-Sissi to turn down a Saudi request to send land troops to Yemen. Pakistan, the other major military ally of KSA, also declined to participate.

12 Karen Young, “War at Any Price: Domestic and Regional Economic Consequences of Yemen’s Civil War”, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 25 May 2017, available at [www.agsiw.org/economic-consequences-yemens-civil-war/](http://www.agsiw.org/economic-consequences-yemens-civil-war/)

13 Madawi Al Rasheed, “How United is the GCC?”, *Al-Monitor*, 3 April 2015, available at [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/gulf-nationalism-regime-survival-saudi-qatar-uae.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/gulf-nationalism-regime-survival-saudi-qatar-uae.html)

14 Michael Hurton, “The Battle for Yemen: A Quagmire for Saudi Arabia and the UAE”, The Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 15(10), 19 May 2017, available at [www.jamestown.org/program/battle-yemen-](http://www.jamestown.org/program/battle-yemen-)

and destructive aerial campaign, is now focusing on taking control of Hodeida port on the Red Sea. To achieve this goal, the young and unskilled Vice-Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, is asking for additional assistance from the US. KSA concentrates its efforts on the northern and southern west coast to defeat Houthis at strategic sites close to the Bab al-Mandeb strait. The UAE, for its part, gave timid support to this military target and is more focused on consolidating its influence in southeast Yemen, seeing members of secessionist groups as more reliable proxies. Though both are determined to combat Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, KSA has turned a blind eye to the group since as it is the sworn enemy of the Houthis. Meanwhile, the UAE considers that President Hadi, in exile, has no future in Yemen.

Given Saudi traditional influence in Hadramawt with prominent and well-established merchant families from the region (the Ben Laden, Bugshan, and Bin Mahfuz) that share huge business interests with royal Al Saud princes, the UAE's ambitions on this territory come into contradiction with Saudi's historic interests.

## **Domestic Uncertainties Hindering the Saudi Regional Role**

The radical shift in governance style ushered in by King Salman's ascension to the throne has come at the expense of many influential princes in the House of Saud. This new model of a vertical dynastic monarchy breaks significantly with the horizontal model left after the death of King Ibn Saud, founder of the modern Saudi Kingdom, in 1953. Under the horizontal model, monarchical ruling was based on collegial power-sharing between the king's leading sons. This multi-domination system of monarchy defused executive authority among powerful royal figures, with decisions taken on the basis of consensus. The result in terms of policy-making was lengthy decision processes and ineffectiveness. At the same time, however, it guaranteed agreement on foreign policy, which was essentially based on a low-profile approach in coherence with strong US involvement alongside leading Arab states (Iraq, Syria and mainly Egypt). This configuration functioned well under King Fahd's reign (1982-2005), the head of the Sudeiri clan, the most powerful branch of the royal family.<sup>15</sup> Under King Abdallah's rule, the decision-making process was further slowed as his decisions were often disputed by the Sudeiri branch. Under his reign, the uprisings of the Arab Spring, combined with US withdrawal during the second Obama mandate, created panic about the lack of a coherent strategy, generating a confused regional policy.

Under King Salman, monarchical power was reduced to the hands of three main royal figures: King Salman himself, his nephew Crown Prince and Minister of Interior Mohammed Bin Nayef (MBN), and most notably his favourite son, the Vice Crown Prince and Minister of Defence, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), who is also in charge of reforming the economy since oil prices plunged in the fall of 2014. This shift led to the exclusion of the rest of the influential

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15 Sudeiri is the name of the mother of the six brothers who used to represent this clan: King Fahd, Crown Princes Sultan and Nayef (all deceased), Princes Abdulrahman and Ahmad (without official functions), Turki (deceased) and the current King Salman.



family members and to the growing presence of technocrats in the Saudi government. It also provoked a great deal of uncertainty. While these changes led to more rapid and efficient executive decision-making to promote new economic reforms and to endorse an assertive regional policy, this did not translate into a constructive and efficient foreign policy, as the issue of succession – a flashpoint in Saudi politics – remained unresolved.<sup>16</sup> The adoption of the Fundamental Law in March 1992 under King Fahd and the establishment of the Committee of Allegiance in October 2006 by King Abdallah failed to provide institutional arrangements to the succession problem.

In choosing the smart option to bring the second generation to power, with MBN as crown prince and MBS, a political neophyte, as vice crown prince, King Salman nonetheless created a degree of competition at the top of the state. The competent MBN maintained a low profile, despite his status as the head of the Kingdom's security apparatus and at the forefront of the sensitive fight against terrorism. Meanwhile, the young unskilled MBS, who inherited huge responsibilities, and in particular the Yemeni war, was placed squarely on the world stage. As an example, the appointment of Khaled Bin Salman, the younger full brother of MBS, as the new Saudi ambassador in Washington in replacement of prince Abdallah Faysal Bin Turki, a close relative to MBN, reflected MBS' ambitions to market his name in American circles as his father's successor. During the night of 20-21 June 2017, the issue came to its largely presumed conclusion: by royal decree, MBN was deposed of his title and function of minister of Interior and MBS was elevated to the position of heir to the Saudi throne.

This situation of internal uncertainty and doubt is further aggravated by a deteriorated economic context, with oil prices that have dropped from \$110 in June 2014 to \$28 in January 2016, and which have stabilized since fall 2016 at around \$50. King Salman, through his forceful son MBS,<sup>17</sup> announced in early 2016 an unprecedented austerity program with massive spending cuts, cancelling bonuses of public employees. However, this latter measure has been reversed by royal decree on 22 April 2017 to prevent the mounting opposition caused by this unpopular decision from becoming louder.

This unstable domestic situation coupled with the damaging cost of the war in Yemen may be linked to the lack of preparation of the young prince, who is highly influenced by his mentor, the powerful crown prince of Abu Dhabi. Mohammed Bin Zayed is known to be the one who convinced MBS to adopt the very ambitious economic reform programme to achieve the post-oil area in the Kingdom. He is also keeping the young prince under his wing to promote more interventionism and hard power as a GCC dynamic. However, this alignment may be risky on the Yemeni battlefield: Abu Dhabi's ambitions in southern Yemen challenge those of the Saudi state. But is the young Saudi crown prince ready to reconsider his country's primary objectives of war in Yemen to comply with his mentor's line? Abu Dhabi's crown prince, opposed to the weakened President Hadi, encourages Ahmad Ali Abdallah Saleh, the son of the previous president, to return to the top of the Yemeni state, promoting the previous pre-revolutionary power arrangement and encouraging the division of the Houthis-

16 Fatiha Dazi-Héni. *"L'Arabie Saoudite en 100 Questions"*, Paris: Tallandier, 2017.

17 Interview with Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, *The Economist*, 6 January 2016.



Ali Abdallah alliance. This orientation could have convinced Riyadh to change its mainstream support if the strategy had defeated the Houthis, given that this was the main objective of the Saudi-led coalition war in Yemen, but has until now failed.

The obstacles to building a coherent strategy among GCC states, and even in the Saudi Kingdom itself, in order to promote a regional policy in the face of regional wars and terrorist threats were aggravated by US disengagement in the Middle East under Obama's last mandate. This situation favoured the more skilled Iranian diplomacy that largely expanded and benefited from US disinterest, from the weakness of the Arab states, and mostly from Saudi Arabia's failure to emerge as the decisive Arab regional player. President Trump's radical hostility to Iran and his rapprochement with Arab traditional allies does not guarantee a deep US re-involvement in Middle East.

The decision of the Saudi king to depose the crown prince in favour of his son is likely linked to the backlash of the crisis with Qatar. The former crown prince, opposed to the anti-Qatari measures, combined with the pressure of the international community on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to end the embargo, incited MBS and his Emirati mentor to accelerate his promotion to crown prince or risk losing his chance to access the summit. This new configuration of hardliner duopoly foreshadows a period of great instability in the region, especially if the Trump administration utilizes them to harden his tone with Iran and its position in Syria or Lebanon, targeting in particular Hezbollah. Such a configuration would bring together the common interests of Israel, the Trump administration, and the hawks of the Gulf with the objective of reducing Iranian influence in the region.

# Contributors

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