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Restructuring the Security Sector

Abstract: Opposition figures seem ambivalent on what measures they would take to reform and redefine the security sector in the aftermath of the civil war. The foundations of the existing security system in the country were laid down during colonial rule by the French; the system was preserved after independence. Opposition groups do not suggest drastic changes in the system because it would cause serious additional problems. Instead of completely destroying the existing system, the opposition groups consider constructive reforms and changes to it. On the other hand, they strongly believe that the international crimes committed during the war should be effectively prosecuted. In addition, the intelligence agency is seen as source of evil practices and human rights violations; for this reason, opposition groups agree that it should be completely abolished.

The security sector in Syria

The state institutions and agencies that are empowered to use weapons and arms legally and to issue commands for the legal use of force constitute the security sector. These institutions include the army, police, intelligence and coastal and border patrols and guards.¹ The security sector is of great importance to a state because its primary missions include protecting its territories, deterring illegal behavior and maintaining safety and social peace.² Therefore, the security sector is a major issue that must be considered in the post-war reconstruction of the Syrian state and society.³

The foundations of the current Syrian army and security forces (including the intelligence service) were laid down during the French colonial period. The French based these security institutions on their own system, and these were preserved after Syria achieved its independence. After the French left, military coups occurred in the country because of the failure of political parties to reach an agreement and consensus during the period between 1945 and 1949; as a result, the army became involved in political affairs. The number of military servicemen has increased from 60,000 in 1966 to 137,000 in 1975 and to 362,000 in 1984.⁴

Syria's political relations with the USSR and Iran in the 1960s were supported by growing ties in the military field as well; these relations contributed to the strengthening of Syrian military forces. To this end, high-ranking Soviet officers and experts arrived in Syria for training purposes. The Soviet Union, which became Syria's chief arms supplier, was given a military base in Tartus, a Syrian city on the coast. Iran also had good relations with Syria in military terms. The bilateral military ties were improved during the Iran–Iraq War, in particular, after which Iran became another major arms supplier of Syria.

The security forces became their strongest during the Hafeez Assad period, beginning in 1970. Syria's growing ties with Iran and the defeat suffered against Israel served as facilitating developments for the rise of the Nusayri minority to power in the state administration and the army, which was further facilitated by a non-violent coup staged by Assad in 1970. The Nusayri minority successfully assumed power and strengthened its position within the state during this period. Experts note that the security and intelligence agencies were easily seized because these institutions remained under the control of foreign forces during the colonial period; for this reason, they did not attract the