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An Assessment of Civil-Military

Relations in Syria

Maen Tallaa

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Military Relations in Syria**

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An independent think tank and policy research center focusing on presenting an objective understanding of Syria and the region to become a reference for public policies impacting the region.

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I. Introduction

The majority of literature discussing civil-military relationship highlight that armed forces must follow a democratic civilian leadership. To achieve such a relationship, a state must undergo a complicated process to meet the necessary requirements, including a comprehensive legislative reform, a change in the entire security sector, the inclusion of transitional justice, establishing democratic institutions, and instilling democratic values. Civil-military relations are the most sensitive and vital aspect of the democratic transformation process, as failure to address the complex relationship may result in a relapse to the pre-democratic authoritarian status. An essential component to establishing democratic transportation, civil-military relations is a key element affecting internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugee return, as well as their engagement in political, social, and economical life.

The necessity to secure a safe environment for dignified and voluntary return is intertwined with promoting civil-military relations. Such an environment does not currently exist across Syria's geography, as various actors struggle to attain more power. The absence of a future plan that entails a "new political era," and the "cautious freeze" on the ground, has resulted in a multitude of governance models backed by the various international and regional powers. This paper seeks to delve into civil-military relations throughout Syria's geography, which consists of numerous governance models, to assess the impact of those relations on a refugee and IDP return. The ultimate research question addressed; to what extent do civil-military relations affect refugee and IDP decision to return?

Although the study sheds light on civil-military relations in all areas of control, there is a particular focus on regime-held areas. Regime-controlled areas provide identifiable features concerning civil-military relations, as the regime has control over the state in legal and institutional terms. Additionally, the regime's security approach will have the most impact on civil-military relations in the future, affecting more than 12 million displaced Syrians decision to return. The paper also sheds some light on such parameters in areas outside regime control as fragile stability in others

zones also hinders the formation of a safe environment conducive of a voluntary and safe return.

II. Civil-Military Relations: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

According to democratic standards, civil-military relations have three essential requirements: civilian control over armed forces, defense **efficiency** and military effectiveness. **Civilian control** means civil oversight over the armed forces and other security institutions, such as the police and intelligence service with emphasis on the degree of control and authority. According to Thomas Bruneau and Harold Trinkunas, civilian control is deemed nominal unless civil institutions are involved in oversight, budget approval, and officer promotion control.⁽¹⁾

Defense efficiency concentrates on the efficient use of resources to undertake the assigned roles and tasks. In other words, it is the ability of security and military institutions to complete their role and mission at acceptable cost for society. **Military effectiveness** focuses on the capacity of security forces and the army to undertake missions assigned by democratically elected leaders.

The **civil-military relations theory** revolves around the policies and procedures that drive the security/military command to operate under political civilian leadership, as well as support and promote the functions of civilian leadership in running the country internally and externally.

Samuel P. Huntington regards the civil-military relation as an explanatory variable. The nature of this relation has great implications for military effectiveness. Huntington further believes that professionalism is a measure for effectiveness. Highlighting the role of the military in democratic systems, Huntington proposed a civil-military model that focused on professionalism and non-interference through a defense policy. In order to maintain professional military competence in a liberal context, the army must have minimal political power. Characteristics of professional armies, according to Huntington, include:

⁽¹⁾ Global Trends and Their Impact on Civil-Military Relations. Thomas Bruneau and Harold Trinkunas

- **Experience:** The main function of the military is managing force and violence management. Hence, it should equip its soldiers with expertise, training, cognitive framework, and special skills within the following domain, enhancing their learning and experiences.
- **Collective responsibility:** All members of the military are responsible for defending the state. Professional soldiers hold an integral important role in aiding society's survival through security and protection.
- **Internal collective solidarity:** Internal collective solidarity is present due to sharing of professional uniqueness, holding a distinguished mission, and for maintaining a military mindset that reflective of the role they feel they play in society.

To establish and grow civilian control, Huntington proposes two approaches. The first is **subjective civilian control**, which focuses on maximizing the power of civilians vis-à-vis military personnel. The following approach may be used even when there is conflict of interest among civil groups, as maximizing civilian interests does not require the involvement of all civilian sectors, but could be orchestrated by a few members of those sectors.

The second approach is **objective civilian control**, through which civilian control is established at the same time security is enhanced. This type of control could be established by promoting professionalism in the military, acknowledging their independence, and transforming them into a tool in the hands of the state. This includes promoting professionalism and political impartiality to the members of the military establishment.⁽²⁾ Morris Janowitz, on the other hand, does not view the civil-military relations as an explanatory variable, like Huntington, because an explanatory variable would not create effectiveness for the army. Therefore, he assesses the power of the army based on the military need of it. He further believes that military personnel must not interfere in politics in democratic systems because they have a different professional domain and their role should be restricted to foreign policy, defense policy and the missions assigned to

⁽²⁾ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Solider and the State", Cambridge: the belknap of Harvard University Press.1975

them by the political elite. However, he develops on the traditional civil military relations theory, noting that military personnel must contribute to establishing the democratic foundations and should have some political orientation, as they are ultimately citizens, not mercenaries. This is while stressing military personnel must not participate in political decisions. This model identified five types of civil-military relations through five types of political systems.⁽³⁾

- **Democratic-competitive:** This type is characterized by civilian control, restricting the role of military personnel.
- **Civil-military coalition:** This system involves a model in which civilians rule backed by military personnel or the army, which remains a political actor and may act informally as an arbitrator between rival political groups.
- **Oligarchies:** These systems feature active military governance in which military elites rule.
- **Authoritarian-personal systems:** The ruler controls the army with the aim of remaining in power, and relies on personal and traditional power to make all the decisions related to military personnel. This results in weakened effectiveness.
- **Single-party authoritarian-mass:** Within this system, the army is small, falls under civilian control, and maintains balance with other forces protecting the President.

In this context, Rebecca L. Schiff proposes the concordance theory by emphasizing separation between the military and citizenry, stressing the importance of dialogue and shared values and goals among the military, political elites, and society. Additionally, the theory emphasizes that cultural institutions prevent or maximize prospects of military intervention and that the more concordance there is between the military, political elite and society, the lesser the possibility of an intervention. This theory further stresses the importance of cooperation between the military, political

⁽³⁾ Morris Janowitz, "Military Establishment and Coercion in Developing Nations", Chicago University Press, 1977

institutions, and society at large, by proposing that the military, political leadership, and citizenry are partners. This theory relies on three main levels of analysis: the military, political leadership, and citizenry. The theory defined several standards as a basis for concordance between the military and civilians, namely the social composition of the officers, political decision-making process, recruitment methods, and the type of military establishment.

The theory of power sharing, proposed by Douglace L. Bland, argues that the military have a role mainly in the field of defense, as well as in maintaining internal security when necessary. The theory postulates that:⁽⁴⁾

- Civilian control over the military is established, and power is shared between the two parties, as each have their specific responsibilities and missions with no overlap.
- The sole source of guidance for the military is the elected civilian authority outside the military institution. This dynamic control changes according to ideas, values, surrounding circumstances, and pressures related to crises and wars.

Based on the above and other literature on civil-military relations, it can be objectively concluded that according to Morris's classification of systems, the political system in Syria is an oligarchy. Meaning an authoritarian-personal and single-party authoritarian-mass system. Syria, pre- and post-March 2011, revolution lacks the founding conditions for successful and efficient civil-military relations, such as civilian leadership, separation of powers, political plurality, and civil society engagement. It further lacks any approach related to security and defense reform, such as the reform of security agencies, training parliamentarians and civil servants, promoting civilian control of the army, or training security and military personnel on international law and human rights. This is in addition to promoting parliamentary oversight on security agencies. **It is apparent that the most**

⁽⁴⁾ Rebecca L. Schiff, "Civil-military Reconsidered: A Theory of Oncordance", *Armed Forces and Society* , Vol 22, No.1, fall 1995, pp7-29

essential element is absent, the will to change and the management to change.

In the Syrian context, reforming the civil-military relations is not only tied to military institutions, but civil governance institutions. Given the current political situation and the peculiarity of the situation in Syria, **reforming these relations is intertwined with a number of issues, including a transition and establishing a safe and neutral environment.** As return of the displaced is tied to the establishment of healthy civil-military relations, it is necessary to promote a “safe environment.” The standards to creating the safe environment include an environment free from violence, intimidation and coercion, ensuring adequate legal, security, and political conditions, as well as establishing circumstances that ensures the inclusion of all Syrians, especially the displaced.

Based on the theories outline above, and the realistic situation in Syria, the basic standards to measure the status of civil-military relations and their impact on return are as follows;

1. **Military effectiveness** focuses on the structural and functional capability of the military to control and promote security and stability. These vital factors serve as an incentive for refugees to return and secure a consistent and clear structure.
2. **Clarifying the role of civilians** in legislation, leadership, monitoring, and evaluation.
3. **Establishing clear and transparent guidelines** of the legal structure, as well as ensuring political impartiality of the security apparatus.

and early recovery are dependent upon one another in a political transition and reformation. As highlighted throughout history, security and stability are essential and were predominately achieved by instilling a new political order that removes the main sources of conflict. Syria is no exception, as the need for a political transition grows more urgent. Although security and stability are a focus point for key stakeholders, the growing fragmentation and chaos has only expanded the various layers to attaining security. Also

contributing, the prolonged political process, including the constitutional committee, have laid a confusing path with unclear outcomes that would lead to a stable political climate in the near future. The current outlook does not clearly outline when a secure and stable environment will be set for Syrian to return.

As the Syrian conflict reaches a “precarious freeze,” it has become increasingly apparent that the security borders separating the three zones will be consolidated, which are the zone influenced by Turkey northwest of the Euphrates, the zone controlled by the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AA) in cooperation with the United States, and Assad regime-held areas, secured with Iranian and Russian influence. Despite the divisions, security and stability are critical in moving forward with early recovering and attaining social stability, whether inside Syria or in neighboring regions. **This report will focus on four particular indicators of security; assassinations, explosions, extrajudicial detentions, and abductions.** A variety of cities from a wide range of backgrounds were selected as case-studies to cover the different areas of control in Syria.

Strategically selected, the case studies attempt to present a general picture of Syria’s current security condition. The first and second section of the report, presents an overview of data collected concerning explosions and assassinations over the course of a year, starting from the beginning of July 2019 until June 2020. explosion The sections cover the three areas of control through case studies from the following areas; in the Deir Ezzor and Daraa governorate are covered for Assad regime-held territory, areas in Deir Ezzor and Al-Hasaka governorate are covered for the AA region, and cities in Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa, and Al-Hasaka are covered to represent the situation in opposition-controlled areas.

To measure indicators for assassinations and explosions, a tailored-approach was to collect and analyze data. Forms were utilized to record information on explosions and assassinations, including date, location, type of incident, target, targeting method, status of the target, and the actor. The results and consequences of each event were also recorded. After collection, data was cleaned and cross-checked, after which a cross-regional analysis

was formed on the security conditions, stability, and how it relates to the topic of safe and neutral return.

The report relied on the following sources:

- 1) Accounts of activists in areas under observation or those following security operations on social media platforms.
- 2) Accounts and official websites of agencies and local media that cover events in those governorates.

The other two critical indicators of safe return, detention and abduction, were analyzed through case studies from the three particular zones of control. In regime-held areas, the city of Jasim in Daraa, Douma in Damascus, and Al-Bukamal in Deir Ezzor were selected. All three have been under the control of the regime since 2018. For opposition-controlled areas, the city of Jarablus and Afrin in Aleppo were selected. Both fell under opposition control in 2018, after Operations Euphrates Shield, therefore fitting into the same framework. The timing of control and the sensitivity of the situation in Afrin allows for the security situation to be compared with regime-held case studies.

For this purpose, a tailored form was designed to monitor these incidents and analyze their data as indicators of stability and safe return over half a year starting from October 2019 until the end of March 2020. The form of detention and abduction was designed as follows: (Date – location – type of operation – status of the target – number of those targeted – parties in control – places of observation – targeting party – gender of the target). In terms of sources, the report relied on private interviews with well-informed individuals whom are familiar with the details of the events in the monitored areas. In addition to relying on:

1. The observation points affiliated with the Information Unit at Omran Center in northern Syria.
2. The special security report issued by Ihsan Relief and Development offices inside Syria.
3. The official social media sources of the targeted parties

III. Security and Defense in Regime Areas: The Exclusion of Civilians

When the Baath Party came to power, the army was transformed into an “ideological” army. After the defeat of the Syrian army in the war of 1967, there were comprehensive rebuilding and restructuring processes in preparation for the war of 1973. The army was reorganized to include the system of military divisions transforming combat groups into armored and mechanical divisions while increasing the gear and equipment of the Syrian army. In 1984, the authority conducted “radical reforms in the armed forces” to prevent any coup attempt. The armed forces consist of commissioned and non-commissioned officers. The rank and file of the main forces of the Syrian Arab Army, include land, air and air defense, and marine forces. The secondary forces are comprised of internal security forces that function according to separate regulations. There are also additional forces that include reserve forces, popular army forces, and other ad hoc forces as necessary. This allowed for the formation of new auxiliary forces whom are contracted by the Syrian armed forces, such as the National Defense, Local Defense, or other militias, in which the Assad regime utilized against the Syrian revolution over the past years. The popular army consists of branches and departments, that include enlistment, training, technical affairs, administrative affairs, moral guidance, reconnaissance, communication, physical preparedness, finance department and encoding department, as well as combat formations, including regiments and battalions.⁽⁵⁾

In military terms, Syria is divided into five zones: 1) **The southern zone**, which includes Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Suweida, Daraa and al-Qunaitra, 2) **The central zone**, which includes Hama and Homs, 3) **The coastal zone**, composed of Lattakia and Tartous 4) **The northern zone**, which includes Aleppo and Idlib, and 5) **The eastern zone**: composed of Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and al-Hasaka.⁽⁶⁾

⁽⁵⁾ Bashir Zein al-Abedin: “The Army and Politics in Syria 1918-2000” a critical study. Al-Jabiya Publishing House, 1st edition. pp. 465-479.

⁽⁶⁾ Group of researchers: “Transformations of the Syrian military institutions: the challenge of change and reformation” Omran Center for Strategic Studies. December 2018, pp. 176-178.

Organizationally, the general command of the army and armed forces is at the top of the hierarchy. The regime is no longer the sole actor in its areas of control, as years of conflict have resulted in the emergence of other actors, including those affiliated with Iran or those controlled by Russia. Each adopts conflicting agendas resulting in chaos across Syria, thus adversely affecting the necessary stability parameters. For example, in Daraa, Damascus Countryside, and Deir Ezzor, the map of actors is distributed as follows:⁽⁷⁾

#	Damascus Countryside	Deir Ezzor	Daraa
Foreign Actors	Russian military police Hezbollah	Military police, Iraqi Hezbollah Nujaba, Iranian militias, ISIS, Fatemiyoun, Zeynabiyoun, local defense forces.	Russian military police Brigade 313
Local Actors	Military security, criminal security, political security, air force intelligence	Military security, criminal security	Military security, criminal security, fifth division, national defense.

Legally and constitutionally, handles of the ministry of defense make no reference to the constitutional position of the military establishment and no laws to regulate its work. The Syrian constitution of 2012 lacks any constitutional provisions related to the army’s mandate and its parameters, except for article 11, which defines the army in general terms that are not legally measurable. This article defines the army’s mission as being defense of the homeland’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, advancing the interests of the people, and protecting their goals and national security. In the preamble of the constitution emphasizes promoting cohesion between society and its “Syrian Arab army which is the main guarantor and protector of the homeland’s sovereignty, security, stability and territorial unity.” However, the army’s powers and responsibilities were inflated along with the powers of the President. In Article 105, the President was declared

⁽⁷⁾ For more on map of security actors, see “Indicators of Security Stability in Syria and the Safe Return of Refugees and IDPs: Evaluation of Case Studies”, unpublished paper by Omran Center for Strategic Studies, December 2020.

commander of the army and armed forces, thus being the main decision-maker, holding the power and is able to delegate part thereof.⁽⁸⁾

Based on the information, it could be concluded that the military and security institution is a “tool” for the President, as he controls its powers. However, it was unnecessary for the army to be provided an exceptional position constitutionally, as the army derives its status and power from the President. The President has broad legislative, executive, and judicial powers listed in articles 97-98-99-100-101-112-113-123-141, as well as the power to declare war, mobilize, reconcile, declare a state of emergency, appoint military personnel, and take the necessary measures to respond to danger (102-103-106-114). It is important to note, that despite the inflated powers, article 117 of the constitution asserts that the President is not liable for any action he undertakes to complete a mission, except in case of grand treason. Given these absolute powers, the regime’s approach to civil-military relations is the most effective. Thus, the concept of return is systematically difficult as it opposes the regimes theory of homogeneity.⁽⁹⁾

In terms of the defense and security budget, although the budgets of all ministries are within the mandate of the People’s Assembly (article 75), the budget of the Ministry of Defense and security agencies is not discussed in the People’s Assembly. The budget is approved as is, and contains no technical details. Other civil authorities, such as the Ministry of Finance, the General Commission for Supervision and Inspection, and the Central Financial Control Commission are not authorized to access the details of the defense budget nor practice oversight thereon. An example of the broad legislative powers of the President versus the People’s Assembly, that of all the decrees issues detailing the Pension Law from 2013 until 2018, 11 were issued by the President in the form of Presidential Decrees compared to only

⁽⁸⁾ See the articles of the constitution on the following link: <https://2u.pw/Ed003>

⁽⁹⁾ In the conference of the ministry of expatriates and foreign affairs on 20 August 2017, Assad said, “We have paid dearly in this war in Syria, but we have managed to fail the Western project.” Millions of IDPs and refugees were in Assad’s view mere mathematics to reach a “homogeneous society”. Assad added in his speech, “We have lost the best men and infrastructure and it has been costly, but we have won a society which is healthier and more homogenous and this homogeneity constitutes the foundation for national unity.” See the statement published on the website of the ministry of defense: 2u.pw/19G8d

one law passed by the People's Assembly with 22 minor amendments overlooked by previous decrees and laws.⁽¹⁰⁾

In terms of command and control, including creating policies, assigning missions, and rules of engagement: the military and security institution in Syria is not legally or institutionally controlled by anything outside its own framework and systems. The National Security Committee formed by the People's Assembly are only a formality and possess no mandate to interact or affect the security and defense bodies. The President is positioned at the center of the interactions, making the decisions, and delegating inspection to the inspection commission of the forces branch, reserve forces branch, technical affairs branch, planning branch, and marine forces branch. The President is also the leader in accountability measures for the military and air force intelligence, as well as the planning policy, training, operations and military appointments to the chief of staff and his deputies in all specializations, including operations, planning and training and security affairs and artillery, missiles and administrative affairs. He also delegates ammunition and weapon stockpile policies to the department of armament, which is an independent department, and its institutions. The most important power the President also approves promotions, transfers, demobilization, and special missions in the army and all security agencies every six months. He, too, determines the rules of engagement including war, mobilization, and reconciliation in accordance with the constitution as has been clarified above.⁽¹¹⁾

In legal terms, the army is governed by a system of service, military pension, mandatory conscription, mobilization, penal, and procedure laws. The People's Assembly is rarely involved in the making of these laws, most of which are issued and amended by the Presidency of the Republic as legislative decrees. Laws and regulations governing security agencies, on the other hand, were not made public and were annotated with "not to be published in gazette or media". It is also important to note, that the military judiciary is the body that determines the character of a case (civil or

⁽¹⁰⁾ Transformations of the Syrian Military Establishment: The Challenge of Change and Reformation. Ibid. p 159

⁽¹¹⁾ A research interview the researcher had with defected colonel Ahmad Hamadah about command and control (policymaking, assignment of missions and rules of engagement) in April 2020 in Istanbul.

military), for instance the military judiciary may deem charges made against most revolutionaries and political activists in security reports as being within its jurisdiction. Article 51 of the penal and military procedure law stipulates that “Judicial military authorities shall solely hold the discretion to decide whether a case falls under its jurisdiction or not. Any challenge to this jurisdiction brought before any other judicial reference regarding jurisdiction shall be referred to it to resolve before considering the core of the lawsuit. Should this authority find that the case does not fall within its jurisdiction, it shall refer it back. Otherwise, it shall adjudicate the case provided that it informs the court which referred the case to it of its decision.” Thus, the military judiciary decides whether a case falls within its jurisdiction or that of regular judiciary. Regular judiciary may not look into a case, which the military judiciary decides falls within its jurisdiction.⁽¹²⁾

Due to the dynamics and history, the concept of civil-security relations are almost absent in Syria. Despite the clarity of some laws related to military service and military judiciary, national discussion of the defense strategy, priorities, parameters, and standards are totally absent from societal and governmental interactions. Historically, the policy of employing the army in domestic political life has contributed to promoting the centrality, maximizing the army’s role, and constantly expanding its role. Those, whom assume power, reproduce the legal and institutional systems of the state reflecting adversely on civil-military relations. With primary focus placed on controlling the army and combating anti-regime elements, the approach lacks building an integrated professional security sector. Furthermore, the army is beyond critique or accountability, and is given utmost priority in terms of financial budget allocations with no genuine parliamentary procedures.

One of the most important impediments to civil-military relations in Syria is related to parliamentary, electoral and executive authority systems. Those systems contribute to Baath Party’s acquisition of absolute majority in the parliament, as well as executive positions,

⁽¹²⁾ Ibid. pp. 161-170

including Governors, Ministers, MPs, and General Directors. The amount of control leads to a series of decisions and laws that provide further justification for not intervening in military establishment and passes rules that criminalizes those that intervene in its framework. This is according to the law of military judiciary and the dynamics of security and intelligence work. This is illustrated through official and non-official media policies that promote the “inviolability” of the army and security apparatus. Therefore, the laws governing dictate the interaction of the local community with the state and its institutions, thus not building civil-military relations.

Thus, it could be said that all the governance questions which have been posed above mainly around the need to subjecting the defense sector to the national political leadership of the country may sometimes seem to exist nominally within what was known as security committees. These committees operated on governorate levels to coordinate the work with security and administrative institutions. Such governance questions can also be assessed in light of the legislative and executive authorities’ roles compared to the expanded role of the President. But if we realize that both the President and Minister of Defense are de facto military personnel, any reference to subjection of the military to civilian national authority becomes meaningless and unrealistic. In the same context, we find that the roles of the army outside the framework of security and defense and its interference in domestic political life through instructions from the army command, thus making its subordination to civilian command non-existent.

Theoretically, the army’s relation with local or foreign state-sponsored military groups should be established under the command of the armed forces as so-called auxiliary and allied forces. Consequently, the decision to form such forces must be made by the military establishment, which means that the military system and regulations would define the relations. On the ground, however, those groups and the conditions of their formation have sometimes enabled them to control civilian mobility, as well as the security, social and economic interactions. Foreign governments may use their

influence in the army and armed forces on two levels: formally, through concluding bilateral contracts and deals and, secondly, at the level of their groups within the Syrian state.⁽¹³⁾

Generally, discussion of security and defense is not considered acceptable, and leaves civilians susceptible to questioning and accountability. Due to this, there is a collective understanding that the army is a security umbrella for the ruling regime and an institution of “networks” run by sectarian mechanisms under various points of entry. It is also understood that the army’s members, enlisted or conscripted, are not equal. Thus, the army’s human resources are divided into two groups: a domineering and profiteering group and a marginalized group, which is subject to constant extortion. In general, it remains an establishment in which the regime controls all decision-making and power legally, constitutionally, and practically.

On the other hand, this army is regarded as ideological since it adopts the Socialist Arab Baath Party ideology within the army’s regulations. All military divisions and units, whether affiliated with the corps or independent corps, are equipped with Baath Party branches, which are administratively similar to governorate branches, considering intelligence centers as Party divisions. **There are 27 Baath branches, 212 Baath divisions, and 1,656 Baath cells in the army.** The table below shows Baathist hierarchy, which is still in place to date in the armed forces. It is important to note, that enlisted and conscribed military personnel are allowed to elect in the legislative elections in 2020, as well as being allowed to run for office in those elections after retirement.⁽¹⁴⁾

Military Hierarchy	Party Title	Notes
Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Armed Forces	Secretary General	
Minister of Defense	Leadership Member	Member of the Central Committee

⁽¹³⁾ A WhatsApp interview conducted by the researcher with M.A., a retired officer, about contracts and militia formation mechanisms on 14-09-2020

⁽¹⁴⁾ A phone interview conducted by Mohsen al-Mustafa, associate researcher at Omran Center, on 18-07-2020 in Istanbul.

Corps	Party Branch	Corps Commander: Secretary-General of the party branch
Division	Party Branch	The branch consists of three or more divisions
Independent divisions	Party division	The military division's chief of staff assumes the position of the party division secretariat
Brigade	Party division	The division consists of three or more party sections
Military departments + regional military command	Party division	
Battalions	Party section	The section consists of three or more party cells
Companies	Party cells	

There are many further measures to ensure a role for the Baath Party in the dynamics of Syrian military and security establishment, including but not limited to: 1) Baath Party members are given favorable privileges in admission to military academies. Baathists comprise 98% of commissioned and non-commissioned officers. 2) The ideological indoctrination branch is considered a Baathist administrative body in the armed forces. 3) The head of the Party branch in the governorate is named chair of the governorate security committee. After the Syrian revolution, he became deputy chairperson of that committee, while the chairperson is a military leader named by the Minister of Defense.⁽¹⁵⁾

It is evident, that the army is not politically impartial. Rather, the army is a major actor in the local conflict, siding with the authority against the opposition. The army adopted the regimes official discourse and implements the regimes instructions and military policies in the local conflict. Furthermore, the army is an extension of the ruling authority's party and works towards its agenda

⁽¹⁵⁾ Interview with three defected officers about mechanisms of enlisting in the army on 16-08-2020, Hatay, Turkey.

IV. The Military and Security in Opposition Areas: Nominal Institutionalization and Precarious Terms of Reference

The "National Army" in Syria controls 8,835 square kilometers. Those territories include more than 1,000 towns and cities, inhabited by about 1.2 million people, including Afrin, Tal Abyad, Ras al-Ain, al-Bab, Azaz, Dabiq, Jarablus. The Military and Security in Opposition Areas: Nominal Institutionalization and Precarious Terms of Reference

The "National Army" in Syria controls 8,835 square kilometers. Those territories include more than 1,000 towns and cities, inhabited by about 1.2 million people, including Afrin, Tal Abyad, Ras al-Ain, al-Bab, Azaz, Dabiq, Jarablus, Jandarees, Raju and Sheikh al-Hadid. These areas came under opposition control successively in the past years, after expelling ISIS and SDF. There are towns like Azaz that were already under the control of the Syrian opposition before the Turkish intervention. A military court was established in al-Bab city to regulate the work of the Military Police.

The Syrian National Army is formally comprised of seven corps following the merger with other factions, including National Front for Liberation (NFL), as well as the non-extremist factions in and around Idlib. Despite the merge, NFL is still operating on the ground as if it is independent of the National Army. Therefore, there is not enough accurate information about the organization of NFL factions within the new alleged corps. The original legions, on the other hand, are three all stationed in the Euphrates Shield, Afrin and its surroundings, and the Peace Spring areas.⁽¹⁶⁾

The First Corps: (consists of four divisions and includes 15 brigades):

- 1) **Division 11:** (Brigade 111: The Northern Brigade, Brigade 112: Jaish al-Ahfad, Brigade 113: Jaish al-Ahfad)

⁽¹⁶⁾ Information was cross-referenced from several resources, including an interview with Nawar Shaaban, an expert in military affairs in Omran Center for Strategic Studies. Readers can also see:

1. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi Blog: "The Structure of the Syrian National Army", 22/11/2019, available on: <https://2u.pw/lqM5U>
2. Salah al-Dihni: "Introduction to the Formations of the Opposition Syrian National Army (File)", Arabi21, 10/8/2020, available on: <https://2u.pw/x5d2j>

- 2) **Division 12:** (Brigade 121: Samarkand Brigade, Brigade 122: al-Muntasir Billah Brigade, Brigade 123: Ahrar al-Sharqiya Group)
- 3) **Division 13:** (Brigade 131: Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade, Brigade 132: Ghazal Base, Brigade 133: al-Waqqas Brigade)
- 4) **Division 14:** (Brigade 141: al-Sham Legion (Northern countryside of Aleppo sector), Brigade 142: Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, Brigade 143: The Ninth Division, Brigade 144: Division 20, Brigade 145: The Elite Army, Brigade 146: Jaish al-Sharkiya)

The Second Corps: (consists of six divisions, including 22 brigades)

- 1) Division 21: three brigades: 211, 212, and 213, and they are all: Sultan Murad Division.
- 2) Division 22: Three brigades: 221, 222, and 223, and they are all: al-Hamza Division.
- 3) Division 23: Three Brigades: 231 and 232, namely al-Mutasim Division + Brigade 333: the Men of War Brigade.
- 4) Division 24: Three brigades: 241, 242, 243, and they are all from the Sultan Murad Division.
- 5) Division 25: Seven brigades: 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, and they are all: Jaish al-Islam
- 6) Division 26: Three brigades: 261, 262, 263, and they are all al-Rahman Legion.

The Third Corps: (consists of four divisions, including 15 brigades)

- 1) Division 31: Brigade 311: The Northern Storm Brigade, Brigade 312: Ahrar Minnigh, which is a faction affiliated with the Northern Storm Brigade, Brigade 313: Emergency Force (these factions are affiliated with al-Shamiya Front).
- 2) Division 32: It includes the following brigades: 320, 321, 322, 323, and 324. These factions consisted of the Ahrar al-Sham and Suqur al-Sham

Brigades in the northern countryside of Aleppo sector, which merged into al-Shamiya Front, so they had no organizational link with Ahrar al-Sham or Suqour al-Sham in Idlib and its surroundings.

- 3) Division 33: Brigade 331: Marea factions. Fursan al-Shamal (The North Knights) Brigade, Brigade 332: Force 55, Tal Rifaat, Brigade 333: A group of factions that include Jund al-Islam Brigade, Suyouf al-Sham, Sajidoun and al-Fath Brigade. (These factions are associated with al-Shamiya Front).
- 4) Division 34: Brigade 341: Division 51, Brigade 342: al-Mustafa Regiment and First Regiment, Brigade 343: Sultan Othman Brigade and Thuwar Al-Jazariah, Brigade 344: al-Salam Brigade and Division 23 and Fastakim Kama Omirt gathering.

The Minister of Defense in the Syrian Interim Government, Salim Idris, established the "Military Court" institution, which follows-up on the violations allegedly committed by members of the National Army or between its members. The army also contains a department for moral guidance, which educates soldiers through lectures, educational lessons, and community outreach to secure public support.⁽¹⁷⁾

Despite apparent institutionalization, the National Army cannot be considered a coherent and professional army, as it lacks the basic elements of the military establishment. **A unified central command that imposes effective military decisions, within a clear structure and a specific military hierarchy like any army is absent**, and is missing in the General Staff or the Ministry of Defense, which are considered bodies and entities without full powers. Most importantly, the state of institutionalization has not ended factionalism. If the factions were to consolidate, it would be a significant shift towards the formation of an army's national doctrine; otherwise, the National Army will continue to be regarded as "a coalition of factions."

⁽¹⁷⁾ Taim al-Haj, Diaa al-Ouda, Murad Abdul Jalil: "The National Army.. an Emergency or Strategic Military Entity", Enab Baladi, 11/10/2019, available on: <https://2u.pw/FhMJR>

When further assessing the civil-military relations, despite the nominal subordination to the Interim Government, a civilian government, actual power still lies in the hands of faction leaders. Therefore, the National Army's structure does not meet the criteria for military effectiveness. Indicators of security instability are reflected by the mismanagement of internal crossings, the marginalization of the Ministry of Defense's central role, the violations committed by factions, and the overlap in the work of factions within the security sector.

When assessing policing and public security, after the end of the military operations, such as Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring, **the territory gained is relatively safe.** This is mainly due to the cessation of bombing by the regime and its backers. To maintain security and manage citizen affairs, Police Units were established across the liberated territories. The list of Police Units, include Azaz Police Command, Marea Police Command, Soran Police Command, Akhtarın Police Command, al-Ra'i Police Command, Jarablus Police Command, Ghandoura Police Command, al-Bab Police Command, Qabasin Police Command, Bazaa Police Command, Afrin Police Command, Maabatli Police Command, Sheikh Hadid Police Command, Jendires Police Command, Sharan Police Command, Rajo Police Command, Bulbul Police Command, Tal Abyad Police Command, Ras al-Ain Police Command.⁽¹⁸⁾

Although present individually, there is no central command that supervises, coordinates, and trains the aforementioned units. Rather, the units report directly to the Government of Turkey (GoT), which monitors and supervises the region along its border. With no central command, the coordination is non-existent between the police units. This is paired with varied instructions issued by the corresponding police force in Turkey regarding the organization and function of police commands in each city. The lack of central command and coordination has led to poor exchange of security and

⁽¹⁸⁾ A group of defected police officers: "Overview of the Establishment of Police in Opposition Areas", non-published paper in Omran Center for Strategic Studies, August 2020.

intelligence information between police commands, leading to increased crime rates.⁽¹⁹⁾

With exception to the Peace Spring region, that includes Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, an announcement was released to join the police force. The Syrian Interim Government's (SIG) Ministry of Interior launched a police courses in the same areas. After conducting oral tests, medical examinations, and security vetting, admitted individuals were required to complete a 21-day police course at the Police Academy in Mersin, Turkey. Upon completing the course, graduates join the police command for which they were enrolled in the course. During the selection process, not much interest was given to the academic qualification of applicants for police work. There is also a growing exclusion of defectors.⁽²⁰⁾

Instead of being labeled police commands, the police force was labeled the Security Directorate. The Security Directorate is divided into multiple sections, each with a specialization. Based on the specialization, the personnel within the particular section receive additional training by specialists organized by the GoT. Each department consists of the following sections: Guards Section, Criminal Security Section, Counter-Terrorism Section, Intelligence Section, Crossing Security Section, Logistics Section, Communication Section, Mines Section, Prints Section.⁽²¹⁾

The security directorates apply Syrian laws in the course of their work, taking into account the "principles of the revolution". Upon forming, the police force adopted the role assigned, maintaining security and public order, as well as building a good relationship with the citizens. The existing relationship with the people is considered better than the relationship between the people and military factions before the formation of the police.

The relationship between the police force and National Army is one governed by personal relationships between the commanders, rather than institutionally. The unclear lines have led to military factions

⁽¹⁹⁾ Focus group conducted by the researcher with a group of stakeholders interested in the security situation in opposition areas on 22/10/2020, Azaz.

⁽²⁰⁾ A group of defected police officers: "Overview of the Establishment of Police in Opposition Areas", Ibid.

⁽²¹⁾ Ibid.

encroaching civilian life and in many cases, obstructing police officers from completing work professionally. The main reason for the unclear separation between military factions and the police force is the unwillingness of military factions allow the police to practice their complete role. The police force completing its assigned role would ultimately lead to stripping military factions of the powers to interfere in the public life of citizens.

Security directorates also hold favorable relationships with the Local Councils, which often support the police, due to the police force's civilian nature, their flexibility, and impartiality. As aforementioned, in every security directorate there is a coordinator from the Turkish side who resides in the region and fully supervises the work of the police. They are considered a reference, which makes the work of the police more problematic with the duality of reference. Additionally, other problems are outlined below:

1. The absence of a central structure that controls the work of the police through unified standards, the absence of coordination between existing police commands, along with the absence of regulations, instructions, and bylaws that regulate the work of the police.
2. Failure to select police personnel and officers according to the standards of competence, integrity, experience, and professionalism. There is also an inflated number of personnel working in policing, which relies on quantity rather than quality.
3. No training center that continues to qualify police officers and build their professional and behavioral capacities.
4. Weak coordination and cooperation between police commanders in liberated areas and the National Army, especially with regard to the deployment of checkpoints and the exchange of information.
5. Lack of modern devices, equipment, and forensic laboratories that facilitate the detection of crimes, especially murder and fraud.

6. The spread of crime in opposition areas, the continuation of terrorist operations, and blasts in these areas.
7. The proliferation of arms among civilians and the absence of a mechanism to control them. This has resulted in rampant, uncontrolled arms trade in liberated areas.

V. The Military and Security in Autonomous Administration Areas: Absence of Impartiality and Amplified Totalitarianism

The “Charter of the Social Contract for Northern Syria” issued by the Autonomous Administration (AA), considered the Syrian state a free, democratic, independent, and sovereign state, with a parliamentary, federal, democratic, pluralistic, and consensual system of governance. The AA provinces lead a general coordination council that includes the heads of executive councils. The council was formed on March 27, 2014. Each province has a group of military, security, and administrative structures. Before announcing the formation of military forces, the AA adopted the “principle of popular protection,” which aims to “acquire popular legitimacy” and after the ratification of the social contract, it politically adopted these institutions.⁽²²⁾

Since July 2012, the People's Protection Units (YPG) underwent several structural junctures, especially after gaining control of territory from the regime. In December 2014, after the battle of Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, the YPG formed a relationship with the international coalition to fight ISIS. This prompted the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces in October 2015.⁽²³⁾ In conjunction with the increase in support provided by the international coalition, especially the USA, to SDF, the AA has tended to announce the formation of military regiments since the beginning of 2017, in line with an American trend to make the military forces in northern Syria closer to a regular army structure, and to prepare for a unique presence in the region.²⁴ On February 8, 2017, The People's Protection Units announced

⁽²²⁾ Bader Mulla Rashid: “Autonomous Administration in the North of Syria: Questions of Legitimacy and Identity”, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 8/6/2018, available on: <https://2u.pw/tdi9O>

⁽²³⁾ Commander of the special forces in the US army, General Raymond Thomas, made a statement back then in a speech at Aspin Institute in Colorado, about the formation of SDF. He said: “We asked YPG to change its name, which happened indeed”. The General explained that this request was due to the pressure of their Turkish ally. For more see: Badr Mulla Rashid: “The Formation of Military Councils in the Autonomous Administration: Context – Aims – Consequences”, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 20/9/2019, available on: <https://2u.pw/i8FeI>

⁽²⁴⁾ This tendency was reflected in a financial study issued by the US Department of Defense. The study referred in the part related to Syria that the total of local forces in Syria is about 25 thousand fighters, with the expectation for 5000 more fighters to join early 2018, directly affiliated with Washington and they will be

their intention to form military regiments. The statements of officials in the AA, the Movement for a Democratic Society, and the People's Protection Units (YPG) focused on the announced plan to form a typical military hierarchy.⁽²⁵⁾

In June 2019, the SDF announced the formation of the regional military councils, as part of a strategy to restructure. It is important to note, that in 2016, the SDF formed the "al-Bab and Jarablus Military Council", both of which are still not active. The SDF also formed the "Manbij and Deir Ezzor Military Council," that are active and have participated in most of SDF battles against ISIS, bringing its number to 15 military councils.

The security apparatuses of the AA areas can be divided into several categories, each category is focused on specific tasks. The most important of the categories are the Internal Security Forces (Asayish Rojava), Traffic Police "Traffic Rojava", Counter-terrorism forces, Rapid Intervention Forces (HAT), Asayish for Women, and Civilians' Defense Forces (HPC). These institutions are affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and the Legislative Council of the Autonomous Administration. The Asayish structure and role has become clearer over the last five years, since its formation. This is illustrated through its institutional structure, which consists of; checkpoints security, police, general security entity, counterterrorism forces, and the Division for Combating Organized Crime. The Asayish also has administrative offices, that include the Internal Security and Civil Peace Office, Rehabilitation, Training and Information Office, Criminal Investigation and Monitoring Office, Social Services Office, Supervision and Inspection Office, Legal Office, Administrative Office, Financial Office.⁽²⁶⁾

provided with salaries, weapons and supplies. The budget allocated for that was about 300 million USD in 2017 and 400 million USD in 2018.

⁽²⁵⁾ Head of Public Affairs office of YPG, Dr. Salah Jamil, announced the necessity to "establish a military force that is more organized and professional as the YPG has been getting into more battles for 6 years", which gave it enough experience to be like regular armies. Supposedly, advanced members from the YPG itself will supervise the training of regiment members.

⁽²⁶⁾ Badr Malla Rashid: "Military and Security Structures in Autonomous Administration Areas", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 31/10/2017, available on: <https://2u.pw/OBELE>

According to set bylaws, “every citizen living in ‘Western Kurdistan’ has the right to join the Asayish, regardless of gender, race, and religion, provided that the person is “Syrian and has been living in Western Kurdistan for no less than five years, and has completed eighteen years of age.” However, the last condition is contradictory, as minors under 18 are found among fighters.⁽²⁷⁾ In addition, applicants shall not be convicted with a disgraceful crime or a crime in breach of the honor or morals of society. Applicants shall be between 18 and 40 years of age, in adequate fitness condition.

The AA areas also include seven self-defense academies, that are distributed as follows; Kendal Academy in Qara Barkal Mount south of Ain al-Arab (Kobani), Omar Nabu Academy in Manbij, Majd Othman Academy in Tal Kujer in al-Hasaka, Nidal Youssef Academy in Kabka, Ahmed al-Ali Academy in Raqqa; Bashar Jariba Academy in Raqqa, and Mishaal al-Idris Academy in Deir Ezzor.⁽²⁸⁾

Despite the clear hierarchy and its subordination to a civilian leadership, legal ambiguity remains. There are constant negotiations managed by the AA concerning security positioning and transformations. It is also evident that the security apparatus is not completely under the leadership of a civilian body, as the AA is dominated by the People’s Protection Units that is afflicted with the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD controls the center of power in the AA.

There are several signs indicating that the military and security are organically linked to "non-Syrian” Kurdish figures connected to the PKK. Although the SDC constitutes the nominal civilian leadership, the centers of power and influence in the military, security and judicial structure lay with the YPG, the military arm of the Democratic Union Party PYD.

⁽²⁷⁾ The Syrian Observatory calls on “the Autonomous Administration and SDF to abide by Geneva Convention in relation to not recruiting children”, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 3/6/2020, available on: <https://2u.pw/KNOQT>

⁽²⁸⁾ Amana Riyad: “The Autonomous Administration opens the ‘Military Officers Academy’ in al-Hasaka, Smart News, 22/8/2020, available on: <https://2u.pw/Qu8VS>

The most prominent dilemma concerning civil-military relations within the AA region is the law of mandatory conscription, especially as the region falls under two controlling powers; the regime and the AA. The citizens of this region live in a state of confusion as a result of conflicting laws and procedures. Citizens covered by the mandatory military service law are required to have two military service documents, one from the regime and another one from the AA.

On June 22, 2019, the General Assembly of the Autonomous Administration for North and East of Syria approved the Self-Defense Law that included “mandatory military service” in the AA areas. Large regions were included, such as the governorates of al-Hasaka, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Aleppo. Locally, this law is referred to as “mandatory conscription,” and it is implemented by defense sub-committees within civil departments, or “councils”, of the regional defense committees, which are in turn are subordinate to the Defense Office of the Autonomous Administration. The Self-Defense Act covers all males between the ages of eighteen and thirty, those born between (1990-2001), and females have the right to enlist voluntarily. Mandatory military service shall be a complete calendar year (twelve months) to which a reserve month shall be added. Employees of departments, councils, and workers in non-governmental humanitarian organizations were not exempted from this decision.⁽²⁹⁾

Forced conscription enforcement is carried out by the military police approximately every three months. Random checkpoints emerge through the main entrances of cities and towns to forcefully draft young men; this is in addition to home and workplace raids. Those conscripted are transported from the military police headquarters to self-defense academies, where the conscripts undergo a military and ideological training course for 45 days. After that period, the conscripts are dispatched to brigades and points affiliated with the Self-Defense Forces, especially lines of contact with the Assad regime forces in the western and eastern countryside of Raqqa (al-

⁽²⁹⁾ Hasan al-Kassab: “A new Nightmare Threatens the Lives of Young Syrian Men in al-Jazeera and Euphrates Areas: “Self-Defense Act” imposes Compulsory Military Service”, al-Quds al-Arabi, 29/8/2020, available on: <https://2u.pw/7DYAA>

Shamiya). It is noteworthy that the self-defense conscripts are not assigned to security branches and Asayish.⁽³⁰⁾

The methodology of implementing security missions in the AA region is distinctly similar to the methodology in regime areas prior to the revolution. There is a necessity to control society through the totalitarian political ideology of the ruling party. The security structure in both systems suffer from contradiction, and there are duplicate references between the regime and the AA. **This made civil-military relations a track imposed by the ruling party, neglecting civilian roles, especially civil society.**

⁽³⁰⁾ Ibid

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

A common theme, despite clarity in security and military structures, the structures choose to operate away from set law and are not functionally affiliated with legitimate civilian bodies. Without a political agreement, the elements and parameters of civil-military relations remain subject to the directives of the authorities in power. The elements to establish a foundation on democracy and participation are missing, as civilian actors are excluded, and are unable to influence and monitor security and military actors. Without the established foundation and capacity to maintain security, creating a safe environment for the voluntary return of citizens is difficult. This also leads to delays in social cohesion, stability, and early recover

The following recommendations emphasize the need to achieve a political agreement that includes establishing a democratic political life. A democratic political life will fuel the restructuring and integration; strengthen national participation in promoting and maintaining a national defense that follows the requirements of the state and society. Currently, the national defense remain solely at the discretion of the leading political leadership legally and constitutionally. Accordingly, the absence of this participation leads to the decline of combat capability, efficiency and effectiveness. This participation requires efforts that contradict the perception of the authority that makes the course of civil-military relations challenging. Efforts that should be undertaken include:

1. **The legal and constitutional approach:** Constitutional change has an important role in establishing civilian control over the military establishment by constitutionally restricting the army and its mandate and restricting the legislator. However, texts do not necessarily translate into reality, thus this constitutional reform must be followed by additional policies and procedures enacting legislation and laws to regulate the relationship.
2. **Spreading a culture of professionalism:** this culture prevents soldiers from violating democratic principles and standards. The key mandate and

ethics of the military establishment should be redefined, and an institutional culture based on self-restraint and respect of law and civil authority should emerge.

3. **Changing the ideology of the army to include a philosophy of civil-military relations, and rebuilding the relationship with civilians in a sound manner that is free of supremacy.**
4. **Clarity of social norms and recruitment:** the status of the military establishment depends on its social acceptance. This is achieved when the military establishment reflects the social, ethnic and geographic components of society. In addition, the clarity in policies surrounding mandatory conscription would reduce exploitation and corruption.
5. **Activating parliamentary roles:** The parliament fills a critical role, which includes evaluating the accuracy of framework, publicizing the mandate of the military sector, and the parliament holds legal and procedural responsibility to hold institutions accountable through their democratic leadership. The parliament is democratic civilian oversight of the framework. In addition, the parliament must ensure that international rules and norms are observed including the protection of human rights, religious and gender equality, as well as participate in the assessment of the military situation taking part in decisions concerning war and peace.
6. **Dialogue and integration:** Dialogue and integration of the military elite, the political elite, and the citizenry (or civil society) must be formally integrated in decision-making. The parties must strive on a joint agreement concerning the military establishment, which meets the interests of the institution, and reinforces its civil nature. This agreement will lead to less military intervention in politics. The following requires strong political organizations that are based on a broad social base representing a counterbalance to the strength of the military. The outcome of civil-political relations is determined by the strength of political parties and forces, and their success in forming a civil democratic bloc in the face of the army and its political ambitions. Just as the division of elites increases the chances of military intervention, the

opposite is also true. Additionally, the army does not withdraw from control of political life if the alternative is weak and unable to control a divided partisan system and disintegrated political life.

Although civil society is currently absent, civil society holds an important role in enhancing and redefining the civil-military relations, in accordance with the requirements for professionalism and effectiveness. The role of civil society can be divided into three components;

- **Educational and cultural** - Civil society organizations should bear the responsibility of educating members of society the premises of democracy, as they have the reach and independence. Political awareness is reliant on education, and altering deep-rooted cultural norms on political participation.
- **Mobilization:** To mobilize is to garner political participation and provide society with promising political cadres and leaders. With increased political awareness of individuals, their desire to participate in political work or influence will also be elevated. Their newfound awareness will encourage them to participate, and thus the second level of contribution by civil society institutions to democratic building is achieved through expanding and developing modes of public political participation, as well as qualifying and training new political leaders that can break the monopoly by the ruling class over politics.
- **Monitoring and Supervising governmental institution** – Civil Society should have the capacity to pressure the government if they exceed their powers in any way. In such cases, civil society institutions stand to exercise the role of oversight over government actions, and represent the voice of their constituencies, which is supposed to reflect society at large. Civil society institutions embark on educating people about the dangers of the situation in the political arena and its societal repercussions, and are able to mobilize their collective forces to act as a popular barrier in facing the excesses of the authority.



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