

SYRIA

A NEW ERA?

JPS

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“ABOUT JPS

There is often a significant gap between political transformations, both domestic and international, and the knowledge produced by researchers, academics, and specialists regarding social issues and phenomena. Despite the proliferation of many journals in the human and social sciences, there is a shortage of publications that provide deep, research-based knowledge and perspectives, that offer valuable alternatives and recommendations to decision-makers across various policy dimensions.

The Jordanian Politics & Society Magazine (JPS), published periodically by the Politics and Society Institute, aims to fill this gap. JPS serves as a scientific platform dedicated to fostering rigorous intellectual debate on issues related to domestic and foreign policies at regional and international levels, with a particular focus on the Jordanian political landscape. The magazine emphasizes the development of scientific and intellectual concepts to address various real-world variables and promotes the exchange of ideas and interactive efforts among specialists.

Note

The views and opinions expressed in the magazine are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of neither PSI nor the Editors.

Security and Military Formation in Syria after the Fall of the Assad Regime: Context, Challenges, and the Future Agenda

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Introduction

In light of the evolving Syrian landscape and its multifaceted conflict—where the former regime used military and security institutions as tools to secure its strategic advantage, effectively transforming them into a central militia apparatus managing non-national armed groups—the crisis of reconstructing Syria's defence and security sector extends far beyond the immediate post-collapse vacuum.

It is not merely the result of the former regime's abandonment of the army—leaving it without leadership or direction, and even implicitly encouraging its withdrawal—but is also profoundly rooted in:

- Historical trajectories, shaped both by fourteen years of armed conflict and by the systemic erosion of political neutrality, with the security apparatus deliberately instrumentalised by the former regime to consolidate authoritarian rule;
- The regional security order, which struggles to establish stable dynamics, particularly in the context of escalating challenges posed by the war in Gaza and structural shifts in the regional security architecture, notably amid the ongoing Israeli-Iranian conflict;
- The "victor's perspective", prevalent in the post-collapse phase, which prioritises structural cohesion and control mechanisms

over inclusive reform, amid a domestic landscapesaturatedwithriskanduncertainty.

Accordingly, theoretical approaches to building the security and defence sectors must be understood as components of a strategic vision, rather than operational blueprints or measurable benchmarks for institutional reconstruction. Among the most relevant frameworks is Barry Buzan's theory of the "new sectors of security"—beyond the military, including political, economic, societal, and environmental security. Buzan emphasises interrelatedness and proposes disaggregation as opposing things to understand how each shapes and is shaped by the others, forming a complex process from parts to whole.

This analysis proceeds from the above context, presenting a detailed account of the current challenges—both quantitative and qualitative—facing Syria's security reconstruction. It offers a preliminary assessment of ongoing efforts and their limitations, concluding with a series of policy recommendations inspired by critical security studies (notably the Copenhagen School), which aim to lay the foundation for a Syrian vision of post-conflict security and defence formation.

Localised Security Threats: Communal Violence and Assassinations

The Syrian landscape is marred by widespread incidents of violence akin to retaliatory killings—often resembling acts of retribution—intersecting with the stalled transitional justice process and its overlap with concepts of reconciliation and civil peace. There has been a notable surge in community-based violence with varying motivations. The majority of these killings and assassinations have occurred in the provinces of Homs, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia—areas that witnessed intense activity by regime militias and security services before Assad's fall and are marked by significant demographic diversity.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, from January to the end of May 2025, a total of 2,351 individuals were killed across Syria. March alone accounted for 1,562 deaths—approximately 62% of the total—primarily due to military developments in the coastal region⁽¹⁾.

The motivations behind these casualties are varied. However, the most frequently cited reason was suspicion of collaboration with the former regime, either directly or indirectly. Other motivations included personal, familial, sectarian, or tribal

¹ Syrian Network for Human Rights. Monthly Report on Extrajudicial Killings in Syria. June 1, 2025. <https://2u.pw/VZ2Ck>.

vendettas. In many cases, individuals exploited the collapse of security to settle old disputes.

Accusations of affiliation with the former security apparatus or being an informant were often used as pretexts for killings that bore no clear political context, reflecting the dominance of personal vengeance over legal standards⁽²⁾. In most incidents, the perpetrators were unidentified or merely described as "unknown gunmen", revealing a widespread state of lawlessness.

Nonetheless, the nature and execution of many of these assassinations suggest that they were carried out by individuals from within the local communities, driven by personal motives rather than centralised political decisions or organised military orders. In a few cases, links were established between perpetrators and certain armed factions or local security actors.

The prevalence of such killings exposes a glaring absence of security governance and the near-total lack of legal accountability mechanisms. It also signals the danger of accumulating communal violence in the post-regime phase. Unless decisive measures are taken to control the security situation and establish transitional judicial mechanisms to address such crimes

outside the framework of revenge, these incidents threaten social cohesion and undermine trust in any emerging authority.

Acts of communal violence are increasingly shaping the Syrian social scene, where security, political, and societal dimensions are deeply intertwined. These dynamics reinforce identity-based divisions and ideological rifts, potentially leading to prolonged instability.

The motivations behind the violence range from sectarian and regional tensions to political, ethnic, and tribal factors. The evolving patterns of local violence in Syria are far from uniform; instead, they shift according to a complex interplay of factors, including local demographic structures, the population's relationship with central authority or local armed actors, levels of sectarian or ethnic polarisation resulting from years of war and marginalisation, and the intensity of incitement and propaganda in traditional and social media—both of which contribute to legitimising symbolic and physical violence.

Security Integration and Structuring: Foundational Phase for DDR and SSR
In light of the principles of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR)—

² The researcher relied on reports by the Omran Center for Strategic Studies that have monitored and documented settlement incidents from the fall of the regime up to April 2025.

alongside Security Sector Reform (SSR)—which together constitute the global framework for transitioning from conflict to peace, the actions taken by the Syrian government can, at best, be described as preliminary policies toward such programmes. These efforts revolve around the concepts of absorption, security regulation, and organisational structuring, especially within a complex local and regional environment marked by overlapping challenges in the post-Assad phase.

Since late 2024, the Syrian government has initiated a phased process of reorganisation through successive waves of appointments and promotions. These began with the elevation of senior officials such as Minister of Defence Merhaf Abu Qusra and Chief of Staff Ali Nour al-Din al-Nassan to the rank of general⁽³⁾. This was followed by broader organisational reforms, including the appointment of brigade and division commanders and the formation of new military units based on voluntary enlistment rather than compulsory conscription⁽⁴⁾. These efforts aim to absorb hundreds of thousands of personnel,

including former members of various armed factions⁽⁵⁾.



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This process was accompanied by the establishment of specialised committees, such as the Supreme Committee for Military Data Organisation and the Restructuring Committee, tasked with documenting both human and material resources and creating a centralised database. This would enable the enumeration and classification of armed factions and their weaponry, as a prelude to their integration into a restructured national army.

Additionally, a series of meetings took place between the Minister of Defence and leaders

3 Amin, Mohammad. "Senior Military Ranks Granted to Syrian and Foreign Fighters in 'Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham": Criticism and Concerns." *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, December 31, 2024. <https://2u.pw/r9JuW>.

4 Kassah, Mohammad. "Syria: First Steps in Restructuring the Army—Seven Divisions and a Moral Guidance Department." *Al-Modon*, March 21, 2025. <https://2u.pw/Z5Ewt>.

5 Syria TV. "Government Announces the Phases and Procedures for Establishing the New Syrian Ministry of Defence." January 19, 2025. <https://2u.pw/5DYu3>.

of opposition factions—including those from Daraa and the Eighth Brigade—focused on incorporating these groups into the regular military⁽⁶⁾. Despite persistent tensions with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), partial understandings have begun to emerge, leading to the SDF’s withdrawal from key areas such as parts of Aleppo and the Tishreen Dam⁽⁷⁾. In



These developments within the Ministry of the Interior represent the initial phase of institutional security building based on a flexible model of absorption. While not completely severing ties with past structures, the approach aspires to rebalance state authority with local community needs.

Suwayda, local factions remain in negotiations, particularly following the establishment of the Suwayda Military Council and the activation of local police forces, with security personnel being gradually integrated into the Ministry of Interior’s structures, signalling a slow but deliberate move

toward broader inclusion⁽⁸⁾.

This security absorption policy, however, faces significant challenges at three levels:

Professional and Military Standards: There is a need to establish meritocratic criteria for appointments, grounded in military academies and inclusive recruitment policies that reflect Syria’s diversity and avoid ethnic or sectarian bias. Human resources remain one of the most acute vulnerabilities.

Discipline and Competence: As indicated by earlier trends, both areas remain under severe scrutiny and represent a critical test for the success of ongoing efforts.

The Foreign Fighter Issue: If not addressed through tailored reintegration programmes, the presence of foreign combatants poses both domestic and regional risks. Left unmanaged, these fighters could form militarised enclaves or even evolve into self-contained socio-political communities.

Thus, while the Ministry of Defence’s current initiatives suggest an attempt at preliminary

6 Arabi21. “Syria Announces Merger of All Military Units under the Ministry of Defence.” May 17, 2025. <https://2u.pw/Kf85B>.

7 Al Jazeera Net. “Military Forces Enter Tishrin Dam amid Calls for Protection.” December 14, 2024. <https://2u.pw/Elk7t>.

8 Syrian News Channel (Al-Ikhbariya). “Governor of Suwayda: Activation of Police and Security Services Has Begun in the Province.” May 4, 2025. <https://2u.pw/3ti21>.

disarmament and absorption of armed actors, they simultaneously reveal deeper challenges related to ideological alignment, political loyalties, and professional standards. Addressing these gaps requires more robust institutional and political reforms to foster military unity and cohesion. Only then can the armed forces evolve into a national institution capable of contributing to peace and stability in the short, medium, and long term.

In parallel, the Ministry of Interior has embarked on implementing a new organisational framework aimed at modernising and regulating the security and police apparatus, both administratively and operationally, while maintaining centralised decision-making in Damascus. The new strategy involves dividing the country into five main geographical sectors⁽⁹⁾. The Ministry also initiated what it terms a "comprehensive restructuring", including numerous administrative appointments and changes aimed at regulating decentralisation.

Under this vision, the Ministry proposed merging the police and public security services under a single entity called the "Internal Security Command in the Governorate", reflecting an awareness of the need for administrative

streamlining and the integration of local factions into the official security apparatus without triggering confrontations. Simultaneously, the Ministry seeks to introduce oversight mechanisms by establishing complaint reception units, institutionalising public relations, and investing in digital infrastructure⁽¹⁰⁾.

These developments within the Ministry of the Interior represent the initial phase of institutional security building based on a flexible model of absorption. While not completely severing ties with past structures, the approach aspires to rebalance state authority with local community needs. Nevertheless, it is essential that the institutional architecture aligns with on-the-ground implementation, and that a new security culture emerges—one grounded in the principle of the rule of law.

It is also worth noting that General Intelligence and the National Security Bureau are now under presidential oversight. However, no tangible preliminary steps toward structural reform have been observed yet. As it stands, Syria's official security providers currently consist of the

9 (Eastern Region: Hassakeh, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor; Northern Region: Aleppo, Idlib; Coastal Region: Latakia, Tartus; Central Region: Homs, Hama; Southern Region: Damascus, Daraa, Suwayda, Quneitra).

10 Al Jazeera Net. "Syrian Ministry of Interior Announces Comprehensive Restructuring and Creation of New Directorates." May 24, 2025. <https://2u.pw/PVYH7>.

Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior, the General Intelligence, and the National Security Bureau.



The challenge of rebuilding Syria's security landscape goes beyond issues of structural deficits, operational capacity, or the mere availability of tools. At its core lies the complex legacy of pre-collapse security arrangements, many of which developed outside central authority and later fragmented into quasi-autonomous bodies governed by local loyalties and diverging political or ideological frameworks.

Complex Mandates: An Inherited Legacy and the Interplay of Domestic and External Dynamics

The challenge of rebuilding Syria's security landscape goes beyond issues of structural deficits, operational capacity, or the mere availability of tools. At its core lies the complex legacy of pre-collapse security arrangements, many of which developed outside central authority and later fragmented into quasi-autonomous bodies governed by local loyalties and diverging political or ideological frameworks.

As outlined earlier, the newly established Syrian government has inherited a polycentric security map, comprising actors such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Syrian National Army factions, the unique dynamics of Suwayda, and the Southern Front arrangements.

This situation has produced a reality of "enforced balances" rather than a cohesive institutional framework, underscoring the urgent need to establish national understandings within a new social contract. Such a contract must reject sectarian quotas and instead embrace inclusive participatory standards that resonate with the ethos, narrative, and instruments of a unified state.

Meanwhile, sovereign security files—most notably border control and counterterrorism, especially concerning the threat of ISIS—continue to pose serious tests for the defence and security sectors. ISIS has been able to regroup and adapt through decentralised structures, exploiting porous border zones governed by transnational smuggling networks and militias. These networks have facilitated ISIS's mobility and intelligence-gathering capabilities. Compounding the challenge is the re-emergence of compounding the challenge are remnants of

the former regime who are now operating within Syria's fragile post-conflict environment. These actors deploy grievance-based rhetoric and align with regional powers opposed to the rise of a strong new Syrian state.



Yet, these internal developments cannot be separated from the broader regional and international environment, which continues to regard Syria with structural uncertainty. The positions of neighbouring countries—particularly Turkey, Israel, and Iran—are marked by contradiction and volatility, making it exceedingly difficult to establish sustainable regional security arrangements.

Israel, for instance, openly opposes any military formation with an Islamic identity near its borders and seeks to shape an environment conducive to the emergence of a weak political order. It also

resists regional alternatives to Iran's influence in Syria.

Turkey, on the other hand, remains deeply sceptical of any rapprochement between Damascus and the SDF, viewing such moves as threatening to its national security. As a result, the borders of the new Syrian state have become the site of dual tensions and external contestation.

Despite early indicators of international willingness to support stability and the emergence of a new regional security framework, amid the ongoing Iranian-Israeli confrontation, serious challenges remain. The lifting of economic sanctions and the initial preparations for reconstruction do signal a potential turning point. Yet the cost of conflict and its possible escalation could undermine both Syria's security capacity and its development agenda. This underscores the need for strategic caution, balanced foreign policy, and a sustained commitment to the principles of stability.

Within this context, Track II diplomacy emerges as a valuable approach. It involves conducting informal dialogues with key stakeholders to understand their concerns, link them to Syria's national interest, and propose innovative security

arrangements for core issues (such as ISIS and border management). This should be accompanied by the creation of a platform for regional security dialogue, grounded in a nuanced reading of the regional power matrix and the evolving map of interests.



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Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the present realities, the organisational formation of the new national army emerges as the foundational pillar for re-establishing Syria's national security arrangements. This must be pursued through a comprehensive national agenda across five strategic tracks:

Military and Security Doctrine: This doctrine

should be grounded in core principles, notably: the military as a non-partisan national institution representing all Syrians; protection from partisan politicisation; and reflection of Syria's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Additionally, it must ensure that official military conduct aligns with social values and local customs and traditions.

Evaluation and Restoration of Absorption Policies: A comprehensive and technically robust security information system must be developed to integrate non-state actors, reframe their roles, and rehabilitate them within the national army. The framework should also strengthen operational capacity to address ongoing threats such as ISIS, organised crime, and remnants of the previous regime. This track also demands precise mechanisms for the reintegration of defected officers uninvolved in wartime atrocities, based on strict professional and ethical standards.

National Military Restructuring: Moving beyond classical models of army-building, Syria must adopt a more agile, multifunctional force structured around a new doctrine that emphasises the protection of the homeland, not the regime. This entails building a modern military education system and implementing clearly defined criteria for recruitment, roles, and responsibilities.



Reconstructing Syria's security architecture after the collapse of the regime is not simply a matter of replacing individuals or reshuffling actors; it requires a comprehensive overhaul of the system. It requires dismantling the decentralised structures that emerged during the state's collapse and constructing a professional national army capable of enforcing internal balance and building realistic external partnerships, moving the country from a paradigm of security exceptionalism to one rooted in legal and institutional statehood.

Constitutionalism and Legal Frameworks: It is essential to integrate the work of military and security institutions within the constitutional framework. This includes defining their mandates, clarifying the role of the National Defence Council, and regulating matters such as elections, political neutrality, defence budgeting, senior appointments, conscription, military courts, peace and war declarations, mobilisation, emergencies, and international treaties. These institutions must also be placed under parliamentary oversight. Furthermore, fostering balanced civil-military relations is of national importance to build a

highly skilled defence sector that also contributes to sustaining civil peace.

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Crucially, there must be early recognition of the need for home-grown security dynamics, both governmental and non-governmental, to produce a comprehensive security strategy that accounts for all facets of national security. The new Syrian security equation must be holistic, recognising the five interlinked security sectors mentioned earlier. This imperative highlights the need for enhanced coordination and inclusive participation among all actors in the security domain, expanding its scope to encompass civilian and grassroots stakeholders. This is especially urgent given the escalating indicators of communal violence and its severe societal repercussions.

“ ABOUT PSI

Politics and Society Institute (PSI), is a Jordanian nonprofit, policy and research organization established to advance practical research, innovative ideas and realistic solutions toward building a more prosperous Jordan and a stable region.

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The Institute advances its mission guided by the values of the rule of law, civil society, good governance, and moderation. It provides an innovative, integrated, and global approach to its analysis of complex trends and transformations with particular attention to youth dynamics.

The Institute aims to provide practical solutions, based on up-to-date studies and research in political, economic, security, and social fields. The Institute hopes to define future trends for Jordan and the region through its analysis and projections, focusing on the impact of accelerating transformations on the politics and societies of the Middle East.

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