

المركز السوري  
لدراسات الأمن والدفاع  
Syrian Center for Security  
and Defense Studies



# Representative, Not Monopolistic Security:

## The Imperative of Community Participation in Building Security Institutions



## المركز السوري لدراسات الأمن والدفاع

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Security and intelligence institutions in states undergoing political transitions are among the entities most vulnerable to reconfiguration along pre-state or subnational lines. This tendency often manifests in the restriction of recruitment within these institutions to specific social or sectarian groups, resulting in the exclusion of broad segments of society from access to positions of security authority or participation in sovereign decision-making.

In the Syrian context, security institutions, since the rule of Hafez al-Assad and later Bashar al-Assad, served as a central pillar for consolidating power through a monopolistic model of force construction. This model relied primarily on personal loyalty and narrow affiliation, rather than on professional standards or principles of national representation. As a result, a socially closed security apparatus emerged, characterized by the reproduction and circulation of the same security elite<sup>1</sup>, functioning largely as a mechanism of vertical control rather than horizontal protection of society<sup>2</sup>.

Following the collapse of authoritarian regimes, such structures are frequently exposed as coercive instruments lacking societal legitimacy. In the post-authoritarian phase, they are often reproduced in new forms, either through elite-driven political settlements that leave the core security structure largely unchanged, or through the dominance of a new group that excludes others. In both scenarios, genuine institutional reform tends to falter. Consequently, neglecting the pluralistic dimension in the formation of security institutions represents not only a moral deficiency but also a functional risk, undermining the effectiveness of these institutions in maintaining stability and managing security threats.

## **Reproducing Exclusivity in the Post-Authoritarian Context**

Despite the collapse of authoritarian regimes, exclusionary structures established under the previous order often persist within security and intelligence institutions. This continuity manifests not only through institutional frameworks but also through the cognitive and cultural structures embedded within both society and the state. Public perceptions frequently continue to view security agencies as extensions of political authority rather than as institutions serving societal security. Narratives such as “security must reflect the political orientation of the ruling government,” or the belief that security leadership should come from the ruling sect or from relatives of

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<sup>1</sup> Egorov, Georgy, and Konstantin Sonin. 2011. “**Dictators and Their Viziers: Endogenizing the Loyalty-Competence Trade-Off**”, *Journal of the European Economic Association* 9 (5): 903-30. doi: 10.1111/j.1542-4774.2011.01033.x

<sup>2</sup> Lutterbeck, D. “**Blurring the Dividing Line: The Convergence of Internal and External Security in Western Europe**”, *European Security*, 2005.

political officials, contribute to the cultural and psychological reproduction of exclusive power structures<sup>3</sup>.

These perceptions often translate into widespread reluctance among many social groups to join security institutions, even when nominal opportunities for recruitment exist. Transitional governments may also reinforce this exclusivist pattern, whether intentionally or as a consequence of post-conflict political balances, by restructuring security institutions in ways that preserve their narrow social composition or grant preferential positions to specific groups as compensation for losses sustained during the conflict.

Within such a context, security institutions risk becoming mechanisms for reproducing social exclusion rather than instruments for national integration. The process of “restructuring” thus turns into little more than a repositioning of security elites, leaving their social composition and their relationship with society largely unchanged.

For this reason, newly emerging political regimes must approach security sector restructuring in a broader and more substantive manner. Reform should not be limited to the conventional approaches often observed in transitional contexts, particularly in many developing states, where change is confined to replacing senior leadership or personnel within security agencies. Instead, reform must extend to redefining the relationship between security institutions and society, ensuring the participation of diverse social groups in the security sphere. Such an approach would enhance the operational effectiveness of security institutions, strengthen political stability, and help establish sustainable trust between the state and its citizens.

## **The Positive Impact of Social Pluralism within Security Institutions**

Comparative experiences in post-conflict states and societies transitioning from authoritarian rule indicate that pluralism within security institutions, whether in terms of regional, sectarian, or socio-economic representation, constitutes a fundamental determinant of these institutions’ effectiveness and their ability to perform their functions without devolving into instruments of repression or arenas of internal conflict.

The inclusion of diverse social groups within security agencies enhances their societal legitimacy and improves their capacity for information gathering and analysis. Diversity enables a broader understanding of local contexts and the nature of real security threats, thereby strengthening institutional responsiveness. It also reduces the likelihood that security institutions will rely exclusively on coercive methods to maintain control, as members of the security apparatus remain socially connected to

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<sup>3</sup> Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. **"Dictators and their secret police: Coercive institutions and state violence"**, Cambridge University Press, 2016. P.41-44

their communities. This connection encourages a clearer distinction between a legitimate adversary and ordinary citizens<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, such inclusivity reduces the probability of internal dissent or coup attempts within the security establishment. A broader base of representation generates internal balance and diminishes the likelihood that a narrow faction could monopolize decision-making and resort to a coup in order to safeguard its interests.

Accordingly, the participation of diverse segments of society in security institutions should not be viewed solely as an ethical reform measure. Rather, it represents a structural necessity for ensuring stability, reinforcing state cohesion, and achieving sustainable security sector transformation<sup>5</sup>.

## **Structural and Cultural Obstacles to Societal Participation in Security Institutions**

The absence of pluralism within security institutions cannot be attributed solely to the legacy of authoritarian rule. It is also shaped by a range of structural, cultural, and political factors that constrain the trajectories of security sector reform and often reproduce patterns of exclusion even after political transformation.

**The first** of these obstacles lies in the limited political will among newly emerging governing elites, who frequently tend to replicate authoritarian models within security institutions. This tendency may stem either from concerns over potential security instability or from a desire to maintain firm political control over the instruments of legitimate coercion. In many cases, security institutions are restructured according to a logic of power-sharing among new political actors, transforming them into arenas for distributing influence. As a result, the principle of "societal inclusiveness" is often replaced by systems of political or sectarian patronage<sup>6</sup>.

**A second** obstacle arises from the deep horizontal divisions that characterize many post-conflict societies, including ethnic, sectarian, tribal, and regional cleavages. Such divisions complicate efforts to rebuild institutions on the basis of a unified national framework. In these contexts, the participation of groups that were previously perceived as political or societal adversaries may be viewed not as a step toward

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<sup>4</sup> Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. "**Dictators and their secret police: Coercive institutions and state violence**", Cambridge University Press, 2016. P.41-44

<sup>5</sup> Kabir, Md Humaoun, and Helal Uddin. "**Instilling and Fostering a Sense of Community through Inclusive Security and Development**", Society & Sustainability 6, no. 1 (2024): 59-67.

<sup>6</sup> Brett L. Carter, "**Unite and Rule: a Theory of Compulsory Elite Social Networks in Autocracies**", paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, New Orleans (2012).

integration but rather as a potential threat, thereby generating internal resistance to reform initiatives themselves<sup>7</sup>.

**A third** challenge is the profound deficit of trust between society and security institutions, resulting from decades of repression and coercive governance. This legacy frequently produces a spontaneous societal reluctance to join security institutions, even when recruitment opportunities are formally expanded or reform initiatives are introduced. Bridging this gap cannot be achieved through administrative or legal measures alone. Rather, it requires the construction of a new public narrative redefining the role of security institutions and their place within the state's social contract<sup>8</sup>.

### **Integration Policies Model: Toward Inclusive Security Institutions**

Building security institutions that genuinely represent all segments of society cannot be achieved through random recruitment or symbolic distribution of positions. Rather, it requires the adoption of systematic inclusion policies integrated within a broader process of security sector restructuring. In this regard, valuable lessons can be drawn from comparative experiences in post-conflict contexts, including South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, where deliberate strategies were implemented to rebuild security institutions on professional and inclusive foundations.

For example, Uganda succeeded in developing a civilian intelligence service incorporating members from multiple ethnic communities, which enhanced its capacity to penetrate complex local environments and anticipate potential insurgent activity.

More broadly, societal inclusion requires the establishment of strict and transparent recruitment standards for admission into security institutions. Such standards should ensure geographical, sectarian, and socio-economic balance through equitable hiring systems<sup>9</sup>. In addition, independent oversight committees should be created to monitor recruitment processes within the security sector, ensuring that inclusion policies are not manipulated to serve narrow political or factional interests.

At the level of training and professional development, transforming security institutions from coercive instruments into national institutions serving the public

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<sup>7</sup> Stewart, Frances. "**Policies towards horizontal inequalities in post-conflict reconstruction**", In *Making peace work: the challenges of social and economic reconstruction*, pp. 136-174. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Frühling, Hugo. "**The Impact of Insecurity on Democracy and Development in Latin America**", In *Democratic Governance and the Rule of Law*, 27-52. New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Janet I. Lewis, "**How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda**", PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2012, especially Chapter 6 on the development of the Ugandan civil intelligence system.

requires a fundamental redefinition of the security doctrine itself. The guiding principle should shift from the protection of the regime to the protection of citizens and society. This transformation necessitates the development of new educational and training curricula for security personnel, incorporating principles of human rights, human security, and civilian intelligence practices, rather than relying exclusively on rigid military-oriented frameworks.

Finally, inclusion should not be treated as a one-time administrative measure implemented through appointment decisions or quota allocations. Instead, it must be understood as a continuous institutional process that gradually reshapes the relationship between the state and society. Through such a process, security institutions can become an expression of a shared national identity, rather than a continuation of the divisions and exclusions inherited from the past.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis of the relationship between the societal composition of security institutions and the nature of their functional performance demonstrates that social exclusion is not merely a deficiency in representational justice. Rather, it constitutes a structural factor that undermines institutional effectiveness and increases the likelihood that these institutions will be used as coercive instruments directed against specific social groups.

Furthermore, the absence of pluralism within security institutions in post-conflict states often leads to the reproduction of authoritarian practices through new mechanisms, thereby weakening prospects for building an inclusive state grounded in a renewed social contract.

On this basis, the following recommendations may be advanced for transitional governments, security councils, and institutional reform and training centers:

- **Establish clear representational criteria in security recruitment**, ensuring regional, sectarian, and gender balance without compromising the principle of professional competence.
- **Reframe the security doctrine by incorporating principles of political neutrality**, respect for civil liberties, and adherence to human rights within security training and professional development curricula.
- **Develop selective and intelligent deterrence mechanisms**. Comparative experiences indicate that security institutions characterized by greater social diversity are generally less inclined toward indiscriminate violence and more capable of responding to security challenges through targeted and adaptive strategies, including the calibrated use of force<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Lutterbeck, D. “Blurring the Dividing Line: The Convergence of Internal and External Security in Western Europe”, *European Security*, 2005.

- **Create independent civilian-military oversight committees** responsible for supervising recruitment and promotion processes within security institutions, with the authority to review and evaluate their internal organizational structures.
- **Link security sector reform to transitional justice and societal reconciliation programs**, thereby ensuring broader public acceptance of efforts to rebuild security institutions.
- **Draw upon comparative international experiences** by establishing partnerships with organizations specializing in Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs.

Taken together, these recommendations constitute a practical entry point for dismantling the entrenched exclusionary structures within security institutions and restructuring them as instruments of integration and stability, rather than mechanisms of division and domination.



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