



Syria's Quest for Fast Track Army Unification:

Lessons from Africa and Iraq



Medhane Tadesse

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African Security Sector Network (ASSN)

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For more information, please contact the **ASSN** team by email:

info@africansecuritynetwork.org

or visit the **ASSN** website:

<http://africansecuritynetwork.org/assn/>

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ALC	: The African leadership Center
ASSN	: The African Security Sector Network
AU	: The African Union
DDR	: Demilitarisation, Demobilisation and Reintegration
FMS	: Federal Member States
GCC	: The Gulf Cooperation Council
HTS	: The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
NATO	: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OAG	: Other Armed Groups
PKK	: The Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party
PYD	: The Kurdish Democratic Union Party
RSF	: The Rapid Support Forces
SAF	: The Sudan Armed Forces
SDF	: The Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	: Syrian National Army
SNA	: The Somali National Army
SPLA	: The Sudan People's Liberation Army
SSD	: Security Sector Development
SSR	: Security Sector Reform
UAE	: The United Arab Emirates
YPG	: The People's Protection Units
YPJ	: The Women's Protection Units

Introductionⁱⁱ

Barely weeks after claiming a central role in post-Assad Syria, the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leader Ahmed al-Sharaa declared he has secured an agreement to unite a patchwork of rebel groups into a united national army. The agreement, at least on its face, might suggest that Damascus's new rulers are making progress in asserting their authority over the country. Yet, the merging of former adversaries into functional and legitimate security forces, is a complex and long-term undertaking, fraught with risk and uncertainty. The challenges will likely increase considerably in Syria's case for several reasons. This paper seeks to analyse the nature of army unification in the immediate post-Assad Syria with a focus on who currently controls or will control the military under the developing scenario.

Does the swift declaration of army unification by Ahmed al-Sharaa hold promise? How can it avoid some of the perils of army unification and foreign interference? What can Syria learn from previous post-conflict transitions in Africa, particularly Sudan and Somalia, and other parts of the world? When it comes to army unification or, for that matter, Demilitarisation, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR), there are several lessons the world would have to learn from rich experiences in Africa, a largely uncaptured and underappreciated index. This paper seeks to analyse the nature and challenges of army unification in the immediate post-Assad Syria and adopts a comparative approach in order to both gain analytical insight and traction and capture a potential trend in security transition in a disruptive regional and global (dis)order.

The HTS of Idlib

With the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham assuming control of Damascus on December 7, 2024, in the aftermath of the regime's collapse, its leader, al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has pledged to dissolve existing armed factions and **integrate their fighters** into a newly-formed national army under the auspices of a unified Ministry of Defence. Whether this is part of the broader marketing that al-Sharaa went through or a real attempt at military integration and reform is not yet established. The integration proposal, he **emphasised**, will centralise military authority, enforce the rule of law and ensure that weapons remain solely in the hands of the state. This suggests the groups' determination to assert control over the country. But it also provides al-Sharaa with an opportunity to present himself as a moderate unifying national figure despite past links to Islamist extremists. No doubt, the steps could be important in achieving quick fixes in the country such as building state institutions, and may, therefore, encourage lifting of sanctions and further facilitate release of bilateral and multilateral assistance, which will help start reconstruction and development of the country.

However, the espoused engagement and unity of purpose with other armed groups might also suggest a continuation of earlier attempts by the group at coalition-building operating in Idlib, which were usually short and failed soon after they are formed but helped it to expand power. Yet, the risk is that behind this declared facade of unity lay rival political agendas, factions and countries determined to advance their individual interests. This can be explained in several ways, some related to the specific Syrian context and others to the broader aspect of Security Sector Development (SSD). First, a linear approach to army unification or DDR and, for that matter, SSR, if any, has had limited success in many post-conflict contexts because the political, economic, and social preconditions are often lacking. Key missing ingredients in Syria include political requirements for popular confidence in the would-be national security institutions that can absorb former fighters, most importantly, sufficient trust in the lead military actor that will enable Other Armed Groups (OAGs) to lay down their arms and rely on the political process that guarantees their social, economic and security objectives. Such an exercise is deeply political, and not technical as many examples in Africa, including Sierra Leone and South Sudan, show. Syria, as admitted by al-Sharaa himself, is being run by a hodgepodge of groups not formally united but coordinating by and large.

However, the focus on army integration without a broader political agreement or a more ideal situation of "SSR in Peace Agreements" often ends up being short-term initiatives of consolidating power at the expense of other groups and restores security and peace in the aftermath of armed conflicts, even at possible risk to long-term political stability. The challenges will likely increase considerably in Syria's case for several reasons: First, there are significantly more armed groups and parties involved with differing governance models in their spheres of influence and cross-border alliances than in most other international examples. Second, security integration is being platformed simultaneously without a conclusive political agreement and most importantly in the absence of security arrangements. To date, the only political decision or roadmap provided for a post-war Syria is a defunct **UN resolution** <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2254> which is both old and a general call for a political transition in Syria.

In the long term, if there is not adequate discussion about an agreed political and security framework and the need for reform between parties and agreement on the key objectives and principles that should guide the process, this can lead to an unravelling of the entire army unification and transition process and a rapid relapse into armed conflict. The process is multifaceted and daunting, and ranges from economic reconstruction to transitional justice and everything in between which usually requires the deployment of a UN stabilisation or observatory mission. This is particularly so, as a security transition process from DDR to military integration and SSR must be guided by a political and national agenda, not a purely military one. Experiences from Somalia to Afghanistan show the problems inherent in a rushed army unification, and they all lacked legitimacy and durability. There is no such thing as a quick fix. In such a scenario, Syria will likely experience a particularly long ‘interim period’ during which future security arrangements are negotiated, and the different armed factions who independently control territories and with a history of mutual suspicion may be apprehensive about relinquishing their security autonomy. This also points to the general limits of standard DDR and SSR approaches and the need to buy time and space so that long-term security arrangements which have the support of all parties can be worked out.

Third, the complex historical evolution of the different armed groups which has included Salafi-Jihadists while the HTS has emerged as the main player wanting to consolidate power before the emergence of a representative political process and interim national governing coalition. Still, there is much to be said of the need to discourage politics from forming only around religious or ethnic identity. Fourth, the role of external actors in army unification in post-conflict setting both in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa is a highly complicated affair as seen, for instance, in post-Saddam Iraq or Sudan after Omar Hassan al-Bashir. Syria’s civil war has been one of the most internationalised in recent history.

Over the 13 years of Syria’s civil war, hundreds of militant factions emerged, ranging from a coalition of secular, Islamist and tribal groups with diverging ideologies and visions, sharing only the objective of removing the Assad regime. Gradually, however, a more ideologically extreme factions gained prominence, including the Al Nusra Front which used several names and finally settled to the designation HTS, before reaching Damascus. While proposing army unification, HTSs first order of business was to assign army commanders, positioning itself as the nucleus of the army of new Syria as happened in its absorption of armed groups in Idlib Province, evidenced by the rush to make army appointments, taking the **top seven highest ranks** of those promoted, including, at least, six foreigners, either from HTS or aligned with it.ⁱⁱⁱ This has certainly raised doubts that the HTS leader might still be loyal to his regional and international radical allies who fought with him to overthrow Assad’s regime. Evidently, the step is never a good indicator for either peace or a proper army-building in a post-conflict situation.

The destiny of foreign fighters, from Afghanistan to Rwanda, or those who found themselves across new political borders, such as Sudan when South Sudan became independent, are a source of worry than hope.^{iv} No doubt, Some of the Syrian foreign fighters will start to threaten regimes in their homelands. And, yet, there is no clarity whether the reform or the integration process will proceed beyond the general statement that the HTSs **General Command decided 49 people to** be made commanders as part of “the development and modernisation of the

military”. Such statements, and relatedly the appointment of foreign fighters^v as military commanders, raise many questions than answers and is indicative of the ideational complexity of army integration in post-Assad Syria.

The role of foreign fighters further complicates the process, given the potential impact on armed groups’ ideologies and behaviour, including the spread of new maximalist positions and repertoires of violence. What role these foreign elements and their ideological outlooks and governance experiences will bring to the table of army integration is less known. Army integration or reform require both political will and expertise beyond the general rule that any peace should include as many groups as possible — the victors and the vanquished. International experts can help the HTS and associated groups to understand the process and craft a framework, but this also requires utilising existing local knowledge, experience, and an understanding of Syria’s military infrastructure. In this regard, a critical question remains unanswered: will the HTS seek advice and support of Syrian experts and incorporate army veterans into the envisioned national army? Or will these individuals be barred from participating? Al-Sharaa has vowed to dismantle the remnants of the previous regime’s security apparatus. This is a clear indicator that the new government is not intending to engage the former security apparatus’s expertise in the plans to rebuild the Syrian army.

Eliminating the whole army as in the case of Iraq will not be a good option either; it only led to externally allied militias overrunning the security system. A key lesson and, perhaps, the most preferred approach for Syrians would be to manage their own processes to the extent possible in both technical and political terms. Nonetheless, given the gathering momentum, the most probable direction, which is not always good, seem to be to depend on external benefactors who helped al-Sharaa in his rebel years and those ideologically aligned, notably, Qatar and Turkey, for training and rebuilding Syria’s security institutions. The outcome of such an approach is likely to be detrimental to army building, and we already know what happened with this model. It often led to negative influence on military consolidation in the context of reform as these countries, notably, Gulf Monarchies are hostile or even antagonistic to people-centred security, reform or the democratic governance of the security sector. The experience of Sudan is still live to learn from. Gulf and Middle Eastern powers played a negative role in democratic transition in Sudan, supporting rival militaries. In the immediate post-revolution period, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the two main military actors, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Hamdan Daglo or Hemedti, which only bolstered an authoritarian infrastructure leading to a devastating war.

Gulf Powers and Security Sector Integration

Gulf and Middle Eastern powers worked against army integration, mainly SSR in Sudan, as well as repurposed their economic support for their own hard security interests and weakened civilian political forces, making sure that SSR and political transition should not take root; even, it must be defeated. Let alone create a unified army, the process in Sudan would not reduce military influence in politics, a scenario very likely to be repeated in Syria. This is partly the reason why the Sudanese (also Ethiopia’s) transition to democracy turned to be a transition from peace to war.^{vi} What steps should external players take to support a successful transitional

period in Syria? Syrians need to consider the shape and role of external actors carefully. Gulf powers can play a constructive role in economic development and reconstruction of Syria but less on security sector transition or democratic institutional building. For those who yearn for a peaceful and democratic Syria, careful attention must be given to the question: who supports the training and rebuilding of security forces, particularly regarding the creation of a unified military?

Whatever army unification and security sector development process that comes with the help of these countries in the name of “professionalism” will not lead to a new army for Syria or signal a decisive break with its authoritarian past. We have several lessons from Africa that security support from countries such as Egypt, having one of the most violent and brutal police forces on earth, allowed to train Burundian police; or Ethiopia and Djibouti training Somali armies. Eritrea, known for its undisciplined army and a grave human rights violator, was made to train Somali forces, ostensibly, with the help of Qatar, sending the same forces to egregious mass atrocities and destruction in Tigray, Ethiopia. Even Turkish-trained Somali National Army (SNA) are implicated in attacking demonstrators. This point is relevant because as in Somalia, both Turkey and the US will likely be crucial players having key allies in Syria which will be discussed later.

Given the fragmentation of Syria’s security landscape and the general quest of armed groups for security autonomy, it is fair to assume that it is the presence of goodwill (among Syrians for its role in militarily removing the regime), than actual control over the country, which placed the HTS to be the main player. The armed groups that decide to integrate into the HTS-proposed unified army and those that choose to fully disband and transition out of it will, both require adequate security guarantees from the group now controlling Damascus and their respective external backers or an international body such as the UN, so they can go down their chosen path with confidence. Many of the groups might feel that at some point, they will have to be knitted together into new Syrian security forces. But before that they will want to be clear on what role their individual groups will be given by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

The task of any unified army, particularly in the Syrian case, must also contend with the legacy of competing governance models established by various factions in their respective territories, each with its own administrative structure and military hierarchies. Without addressing these foundational fractures and fostering a shared vision for Syria’s future, efforts to build a unified force risk perpetuating the fragmentation that has defined the conflict. Still, time is of the essence, if properly done. Many regret the fact that the stakeholders in the country did not realise the hopes of the early post-Gaddafi years in 2011 and 2012 which led to the creation of externally supported two groupings: Misrata and Zintan factions on the one hand, and the Benghazi factions on the other hand. Syrian authorities would be served by forming a sort of nucleus of a national army rather than waiting for ideal security development approaches which may not come soon, given the context of a Middle Eastern.

The different forces in Somalia and Sudan have generally fallen short of integrating themselves into a unified national army as they consistently remain beholden to either local peculiarities or the agendas of external backers. In both cases, there has not been a sustained level of trust among the national military players, and different external supporters have been pulling in

different directions for different aims. While Qatar established closer relations with Islamists, the UAE initially sought to leverage its support to the Sudanese Military Sovereign Council and later began to mainstream its backing to the RSF in the war against the military, in turn, inviting increased involvement of Saudi Arabia in support of the SAF. This did not only impinge on army integration but also peace and security at both national and regional levels. Qatar is increasingly known to be a major player in Mogadishu and an interlocuter for the Islamist group, al-Shabaab, a case I made back in 2010, forewarning that rival Sunni powers are positioned to support rival Islamist groups in Somalia and beyond. This is particularly true provided the ideological background of the various factions trying to unify. The experience of Somalia with the entry of various religious actors into military politics such as Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a, Islamic Courts and Al Shabab can be echoed and is a source of learning, as it can lead to fragmentation of the country and creation of different groups who are ideological affiliated and loyal to other groups outside the country.

Like the Horn and Iraq, army integration in Syria will be the major battle ground among regional players as a tool of strategic pivot, as Gulf heavyweights will view the transition as an opportunity to cement their hegemonic status in the Middle East. They pressured allied armed groups in Somalia and Sudan to be at the forefront of the fight against their adversaries and rival powers, and they could do the same, spoiling Syria's chance of post-conflict rebuilding of inclusive security institutions. The concern over the expansion of one of the players in Syria, in this case, Turkey or Qatar, will almost certainly turn into another showdown with rival Sunni powers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Qatar has already been serving as a backchannel for the HTS leader akin to its role with al-Shabaab in Somalia, which could be considered as an advance payment underscoring Doha's ambition and potential to be a leading player in Syria.

There is a sense that the Saudis and the Emiratis feel their rivals will have more influence and deter them from having a role in Syria, as happened in Somalia, and they will certainly invest more heavily in probing allies and antagonistic foreign policy. The case for doing so is enhanced by their previous alliances with Syrian armed groups and newfound cooperation with the US and Israel, partly through the Abraham Accords. However, at this very moment of regional discord, there is also a slim chance that Qatar and Turkey will look for a détente with regional rivals, and they could be influenced to take a de-escalatory path, including diplomacy with the Arab Gulf monarchies and the Trump Administration. Indeed, there is a possibility that Syria could be a major testing ground for an interface between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, bridging their antagonistic foreign policy of supporting rival Islamist groups which had aggravated conflicts in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Perhaps, for the first time in more than a decade-and-a-half, both might be ready to work, surrounding the same actor in Syria. This, coupled with Doha's increasingly 'cautious' and Riyadh's less Salafist foreign policy in recent years, might help to deescalate conflicts elsewhere. I hope the dynamics will slightly change as it seems improbable that Qatar or Turkey will break ranks with the rich Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia especially), and finance reconstruction of Syria.

Turkey and the US: Lessons from Somalia

As in Somalia, the two leading powers with military allies in Syria – Turkey and the US (through NATO allies) train and equip armed groups with differing political objectives. As the civil war

evolved, Turkey supported several groups mutating into factions, often splintering from, or aligned with, earlier groups. These included the Syrian Turkmen Brigades, representing Syria's Turkmen minority, and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, a coalition of Arab and Turkmen fighters supported by Turkey since 2017 and later reorganised as the Syrian National Army. No doubt, the events in Syria and the collapse of Assad's Baathist regime bolstered Ankara's regional standing. Turkey is already exerting military pressure in Syria, with the opposition rebel army, the Syrian National Army (SNA) targeting critical infrastructure controlled by Kurdish forces. On the other hand, Syria's Kurds, who have been cooperating with US troops in the fight against the Islamic State, are also worried about a Damascus-Ankara axis strategizing their demise.

In southern Syria, another US-backed Syrian Free Army is still operating primarily in the Al Tanf region. As is often the case, special forces trained by external actors though capable of offensive operations, are not designed for people-centered security and operationally lacked effective coordination with those trained by other countries and can be used by regimes for partisan political agendas.^{vii} This looks like a rehearsal of what has developed in Somalia. Over the years, the size of the Somali National Army (SNA) has significantly expanded, which included two foreign client special forces – the *Danab* and *Gorgor* Brigades – trained by the US and Turkey, respectively. Many others are involved in training Somali forces in different Federal Member States (FMSs), from the UAE to the British, in the town of Baidoa. However, there has not been the sustained level of trust or coordination needed to unify Somali forces.

No doubt, externally generated security trainings and arrangements would only serve the interest of the supporting partners. For instance, *Danab* has been trained to support the US Africa Command's operations in the Indian Ocean, and Somalia against pirates and terrorist groups. Although several of the middle echelon officers in *Danab* are Somalis, it has been difficult for them to lead joint operations with other Somali army units due to differences in doctrine and concepts of operations adopted. The same is applicable to *Gorgor* or any other units trained in isolation of the main national army by foreign supporters. It is, therefore, important to learn from these instances when trying to establish unified national army through support from bilateral partners. Meanwhile, US support in Somalia is geared towards the war on terror bolstering the military-security axis and militarisation than democratic principles and human rights. Successive Somali presidents have used Turkish and US-trained special forces to protect their power.

Internal discord between powers in Mogadishu and the Federal Member States (FMS) supported by rival powers overshadowed the implementation of the 2017 Somalia Security Pact. The fact that the leaders of the FMS of Somalia insisted on keeping their own regional forces such as Jubal Land Security Forces, Darwish Forces in South West State and Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a Forces in Galmudug State for fear that they will lose power if they remain without forces, while asking for financial and logistics support from the Federal Government of Somalia to run those forces; besides, strong affiliations and ties of most of those leaders with some regional governments in the Gulf, Middle East or the Horn of Africa, created strong resistance to the implementation of the Somali Security Pact and led to the complete failure of the process.

This is a true lesson for the new leadership in Syria, as some factions may refuse to integrate their forces into the national army. Middle Eastern powers have played with the different regions in Somalia, often one against the other, an issue that cannot be easily avoided in Syria, particularly because the different actors will push for a decentralised governance system and security arrangements. Until that happens, the Kurdish forces, for instance, might not be willing to give up their weapons or confidently unite their forces. Political infighting and clashes between regions and sub-clans in Somalia have also undermined the attempt at creating an effective national army. There is no guarantee that similar issues will not be raised between powers in Damascus and the regional armed and political entities such as the Kurds-dominated area.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) rose to prominence, comprising a multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance dominated by Kurdish groups such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), affiliated with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). And there is no guarantee that the HTS leader would not continue Assad's time-tested tactic of intimidating the Kurds with the threat of a Turkish offensive enough to allow his forces to regain further ground in northeast Syria. The declaration for army unification was immediately followed by the meeting al Sharaa held with representatives from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. The HTSs alliance with Turkey and Turkey allied troops attacking Kurdish strongholds at the time al-Sharaa declared his plan to unite the army, might mean he is also trying to work with Turkish allies in Syria and unite other mainly Arab rebel factions against the Kurds.

Clearly, there is a widespread agreement that disbanding rebel factions was a logical step for the Syrian leaders vying to establish a single national military. However, a litmus test in any security sector transition, a unified army in Syria, is being handled upfront or in a rush, very rare occurrence. Is this a political strategy to corner the Kurdish SDF with the tacit support of Turkey? Or is it a genuine debate on unified command, whether substantive or otherwise? Whether the HTS leader likes it or not, his group carries the burden of proof of its benign intentions. He will have to tread lightly, refrain from gloating and carefully nurture confidence internally and abroad. Al-Sharaa's swift army integration proposal, partly pointing at the Kurds, cannot be totally delinked from these military developments and the nature of external actors. It is not totally out of context to assume that "army unification" might be used as a means of isolating, than integrating, an army or even undermining true army unification. A related development of concern is that Turkey's growing influence and its determination to defeat the pro-US Kurdish forces would put Washington and Ankara on a collision course. It can also alarm the Gulf powers, such as the UAE (given the influence of their rivals Turkey and Qatar), that an-Islamist force would control a unified army. If this scenario holds, they, including the US and Israel might conclude a weak government is better than an Islamist government.

Alternatively, US army leaders could determine that the anti-ISIS coalition with the Kurds has served its time and is no longer capable of deterring Turkish advance along the border. Recent announcements from Washington, and Trump's withdrawal policy, may be an indication that the HTS and its main backers have acknowledged this as reality. But it is also clear that both the US and Turkey will compete for influence in post-Assad Syria and curve a role in army integration, given that they had probed allies during the last 13 years. In this regard, Somalia

could be a major lesson where both countries trained and equipped security forces which lacked harmonisation, undermining the formation of integrated and operationally effective security forces. The United States and Turkey are likely to be principal bilateral players in influencing security developments in Syria. It is, therefore, paramount that they coordinate their activities effectively, and they, including the Gulf powers, quarantine the process of army integration from their partisan agendas and geopolitical rivalry.

Conclusion

The speed with which Syria's defacto rulers are approaching army integration without a semblance of common front among powerful external players *is* fraught with risk and uncertainty. Generally, short time horizons tend not to work for achieving durable unified forces. Experiences in Somalia, Sudan and neighbouring Iraq show that the role of external military actors in post-conflict transition and army unification is annihilatingly complex. Unless external players divest away from unilateral and antagonistic military support and, instead, focus on a concerted effort of creating a national army, the world should anticipate more risks. A domestic political settlement, an agreement on a lead nation to support army integration and reform among external partners and prioritising Joint Integrated Units, can benefit from active and committed international support, potentially through a dedicated support group of international organisations and/or other countries that provide financial, administrative, and technical support. There might be some utility in a "Group of Friends"—a gathering of most of the countries mentioned earlier, along with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — to coordinate actions and try to bring about some consensus on institutional-building and how to get Syria back on its feet and stabilise the region.

ⁱ Currently based at IMAF/IRD Paris Medhane Tadesse is academic specialist on peace and security issues in Africa who has researched extensively on civil wars, peace agreements, geopolitics, governance of security, political Islam, and interstate conflicts. An international expert on Security Sector Reform/SSR/, he is a Visiting professor at Kings College London and teaches at Sciences Po, Paris. He served as an advisor to governments and peace and security related organizations such as the African Security Sector Network/ASSN/ and the African leadership Center/ALC/ and worked as Senior ASSN SSR advisor to the African Union/AU/.

ⁱⁱ Cover photo is taken from release via Michael A. Horowitz on X

ⁱⁱⁱ Those appointed include commanders from armed and Jihadist groups as well as ex-army officers who had deserted to join the opposition in the early days of Syria's civil war.

^{iv} The example of Sudan People's Liberation Army/SPLA/ in South Sudan is quite illustrative. Many SPLA fighters from Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile regions which became part of Sudan after cessation of the South in 2011 remained in the South Sudan army ranks till the outbreak of war in Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile in 2011 when they were allowed to join the fight in their respective territories.

^v Syria's new rulers have installed some foreign fighters including Uyghurs, a Jordanian and a Turk in the country's armed forces as Damascus tries to shape a patchwork of rebel groups into a professional military, two Syrian sources said.

^{vi} Medhane Tadesse on "Militants and the Military in Sudan", keynote speech at the launching of the African Public Square/APS/ June 27,2024 Nairobi, Kenya.

^{vii} US trained Special Forces also find themselves well positioned to conduct military coup's as is the case in the three Sahelian countries.