

TRIPLE RELATIONS: THE SOCIETY, ARMED FORCES AND CIVIL AUTHORITY IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL TRANSITION – THE CASE OF SYRIA

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The study of civil-military relations, from the standpoint of political science, gains particularly relevance in the periods of transition, i.e. the attempt to change the existing regime through protests or rebellion of the dissatisfied masses. How the armed forces will react, i.e. whether they will remain loyal to the regime or take the demonstrators' part, depends, inter alia, on the closeness of the ties between the armed forces and society. The ethnic, national, religious and other structure of the armed forces, their main mission, the position in relation to the security services, as well as participation in the implementation of repressive measures, are some of the indicators of the relation between the armed forces and society. The objective of this paper is to study the impact of the social structure of the armed forces on their decision to (not) support the protests, based on the following hypothesis: If the structure of the armed forces is mostly composed of members of the ruling ethnic, sectarian, tribal and similar groups, it is more likely that they will support the regime. The hypothesis was tested on the case of Syria, where the armed forces decided to stay with Bashar al-Assad, which was analyzed through their sectarian-Alawite character, i.e. the identity of the Alawites religious sect, the main features of the Assad rule and the armed forces position in that regime. Using the case study method, it can be concluded that the case of Syria shows that if the social structure of the armed forces is a reflection of the structure of the ruling elite, they remain loyal to the regime because their survival depends on that regime.

Key words: armed forces, transition, Syria, Bashar al-Assad, Alawites

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Introduction

The role of the armed forces in the moments of attempts to change the existing regime, i.e. anti-regime protests, largely depends on the relation of the armed forces with the society. The social component of the analysis of the armed forces in the regimes that have faced change is particularly emphasized in the societies in which governing structures, including the armed forces, are based on the ethnic, religious, sectarian, or other affiliation. This is especially present in the cases when the ruling group belongs to a minority community, where the government maintains, by recruiting, members of its community in the state institutions. Thus, it creates the loyal armed forces including both soldiers and members of the security forces.

On the other hand, this encourages dissatisfaction among members of the majority ethnic, religious, sectarian or other group, which often manifests publicly in the form of protests that can turn into rebellion, and even escalate into civil war. This reflects the case of Syria, that is, the rule of Bashar al-Assad, which faced riots in March 2011. Assad is a member of the Alawites sect, which comprises 11% of the Syrian population, and gained its influence in the armed forces during the French administration, when, due to its loyal service, it got a privileged position. On the other hand, the majority of the population are members of the Sunnis religious community, who are not represented in the state structures, especially not in leading positions. That is one of the reasons why they have launched protests against the Assad regime.

The paper offers a brief conceptual analysis of civil-military relations, the factors that determine them including the political transition. In such context, the impact of the social structure of the armed forces on their decision to support demonstrators or take the regime part in the event of a riot, has been explained. This was analyzed through a review of the social structure and identity of the ruling confessional group in Syria - the Alawites, the main features of the closed authoritarian regime of the Assads in the period from 1970 to 2011 and, finally, the role of the armed forces in the „Syrian Spring“.

Conceptual analysis: Civil-military relations in the period of political transition

Since civil-military relations cover the entire range of relations between the armed forces and society at every level,¹ their study belongs to the field of political sciences, as well as sociology, law, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, economics, military sciences and similar scientific disciplines. The problem of the relation between civilian and military authorities is contained in the question posed by Plato in his work *Republic*, as well as the poet Juvenal in ancient Rome: *Who will guard*

¹ Peter D. Feaver, „Civil-Military Relations“, *Annual Reviews Political Science*, 2, 1999.

the guards? (*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*).² The question reflects a situation in which the armed forces - an institution established to protect the society – are given enough prerogatives to become a threat to it.

Among the factors that determine civil-military relations³ are those that arise from the transition to the new system and which, given the objective and purpose of the paper, are described below. A review of the literature in the field of transitology has identified three possible roles of the armed forces in the transition process: promotional, obstructive and hybrid. The promotional role of the armed forces means that the armed forces, in case of public manifestation of popular dissatisfaction with the current regime by demands for its removal, support those demands and contribute to the overthrow of the current regime, and then leave the political area to civilian leaders. In case the armed forces remain loyal to the regime, they are considered to have an obstructive role because their position prevents change in accordance with the demands of the demonstrators, who represent the majority will of the population of a state.⁴ The hybrid role of the armed forces implies a combination of some promotional and obstructive elements. In other words, the armed forces can help overthrow the hated regime, and then not retreat to the barracks, but begin to disrupt the transition process through the politicization of their actions.

One of the key variables in explaining the position of the armed forces in the transition, i.e. the change of the political regime, according to Huan Linz and Alfred Stepan⁵, is the position and role of the armed forces in the previous regime. Andrew Heywood⁶ and Samuel Huntington⁷, as well as Srđan Darmanović⁸, have dealt with the identification of the armed forces position in the military regimes, single-party and personal dictatorships, and their impact on the model and outcome of the transition. The role of the armed forces in leaving the military regimes and the period of establishment and consolidation of the new regime is considered obstructive, from personal dictatorships promotional, and in the case of single-party systems, they identify both possible roles.

In the analysis of the position of the armed forces in an undemocratic regime, four dimensions can be identified, i.e. the independent variables that determine the role of the armed forces in the transition process:

² Milorad Timotić, „Civilno-vojni odnosi i načela civilne kontrole vojske”, in: Miroslav Hadžić (ed.), *Civilna kontrola vojske i policije*, Medija centar, Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, Beograd, 2000, p. 5.

³ Peter D. Feaver, „Civil-Military Relations”, gen. quote, pp. 222-224.

⁴ Jelisaveta Blagojević, „Civilno-vojni odnosi u arapskim režimima”, in: Sonja Tomović Šundić, (ed.), *Mediteranski politikološki dijalozi – Izgradnja stabilnosti i društvenog konsenzusa u post-socijalističkim društvima*, Zbornik radova, Univerzitet Crne Gore, Fakultet političkih nauka, Podgorica, 2015, p. 161.

⁵ Huan Linz, Alfred Stepan, *Demokratska tranzicija i konsolidacija: Južna Evropa, Južna Amerika i postkomunistička Evropa*, „Filip Višnjić”, Beograd, 1998.

⁶ Andrew Heywood, *Politika*, CLIO, Beograd, 2004.

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *Treći talas: Demokratizacija na izmaku dvadesetog veka*, Politička kultura, Zagreb, CID, Podgorica, 2004.

⁸ Srđan Darmanović, „Demokratske tranzicije i konsolidacije u južnoj i istočnoj Evropi”, *Doktorska disertacija*, Pravni fakultet, Univerzitet Crne Gore, Podgorica, Crna Gora, 2002.

– *institutional-legal dimension*, which implies the institutional or patrimonial character of the armed forces, their involvement in the administrative apparatus, the operation in the appropriate legal framework, the relation of the armed forces as an institution and parallel security services;

– *economic dimension*, which is reflected through the economic position of the armed forces, i.e. the share of the military expenditure in the state budget, ownership or share of ownership in companies;

– *social dimension*, which implies the ethnic, national, tribal and other structure of the armed forces, as well as their relation with the society, i.e. the fact that the regime (does not) enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of soldiers, generals, the public; (non) participation of soldiers in human rights violation, etc.;

– *educational-value dimension*, which refers to the way of education and professional advancement of the armed forces members, training of soldiers abroad, etc.⁹

As stated in the introductory part, this paper focuses on the explanation of a part of the social dimension that refers to the issue of the structure of the armed forces in relation to the structure of the ruling system, i.e. the ruling elite. In order to understand the reasons why the Syrian Armed Forces remained loyal to Assad due to the March 2011 uprising, the paper further describes the identity of the confessional group Alawites, as well as the characteristics of the Assad regime.

The identity of the ruling confessional group – Alawites

The most numerous ethnic group in Syria are Arabs (90.3%) whereas Kurds, Armenians and others make up about 9.7% of the population. The most dominant religion is Islam, i.e. 87% of the population are members of the Islamic religion whereof 74% are Sunnis, and 13% are Alawites, Ismailis and Shiites. There are about 10% of Christians, mostly Greek Orthodox, Unionists and Nestorians, and around 3% of Druzes.¹⁰

The Alawites are located in the area around Latakia and Tartus on the northeast of the Mediterranean coast, near the border with Turkey.

Prior to the French rule over this territory, they were known as the Nusayris, after the founder of the sect Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Numayri. Since they did not go to mosques, and they preferred Ali to the Prophet Muhammad and celebrated some Christian holidays, the Sunnis considered them to be non-Muslims.¹¹ The Alawites have been proving their affiliation to the Islamic religion for years, particularly since gaining the

⁹ Jelisaveta Blagojević, „Civilno-vojni odnosi u arapskim režimima”, gen. quote, 2015, p. 163.

¹⁰ Vlatko Cvrtila, „Sirija”, in: Mirjana Kasapović (ed.), *Bliski istok*, Fakultet političkih nauka, Zagreb, 2016, p. 326.

¹¹ Dragan V. Todorović, „Sunitsko-šiiitski raskol i njegove posledice na bezbednost u regionu Bliskog istoka”, *Doktorska disertacija*, Univerzitet u Beogradu, Fakultet političkih nauka, Beograd, 2016, p. 196.

protected status under the French rule, which ensured that Mufti of Palestine Mohammed Amin al-Husseini issued a fatwa recognizing the Alawites as Muslims.¹²

After Hafez al-Assad, who was a member of the Alawites sect, took office in 1971, Sunnis clearly expressed dissatisfaction, believing that the president was not a Muslim. However, Hafez sought to secure the religious legitimacy, i.e. to prove Shiites affiliation through close contacts with Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, in which the Alawites were sent to study the imamah doctrine and, inter alia, to attend public prayers and opening of Hussein.¹³ The successor of Hafez, Bashar al-Assad, sought to strengthen the legitimacy of the Alawites as Muslims by promoting religious tolerance and suppressing extreme forms of religious conduct. However, a part of the Sunnis majority was constantly dissatisfied, particularly with the fact that Alawites and a friend of Iran is the head of the state, and that Shiites have a privileged position.

A special contribution to this position of the Alawites stems from the fact that the Ba'ath party has been the ruling political force in the state and society of Syria for more than half a century.¹⁴ The Alawites have shown great willingness and interest in engaging in politics and have become dominant in the leadership of the Ba'ath party.¹⁵

In 1964, there was a conflict between the Alawites regime and the Sunnis, who attacked the security forces led by the imam of the Al Sultan Mosque in Hama. After the destruction of the Mosque, Sunnis' anger towards the regime increased, but was eventually quelled. In its further rule the Ba'ath party faced problems. In the 1980s, there was a sharp conflict with the Muslim brothers, whose strongholds in Hama were bombed in order to completely eliminate their activities.¹⁶ However, the next period of the rule of the Shiites minority confessional group Alawites was characterized by a high level of religious and national tolerance, i.e. Syria became one of the most tolerant Arab countries, where the Orthodox and Catholic Christmas and Easter were public holidays.¹⁷

However, the forty-five-year rule of the Alawites has met the opposition from the Sunnis opposition including the terrorist groups: the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. The crisis and war in Syria, which have lasted from 2011 until today, began with the intention of the majority Sunnis to take power over the minority Alawites and thus change

¹² Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East*, Transaction Publishers, London, 2009.

¹³ Dragan V. Todorović, „Sunitsko-šiiitski raskol i njegove posledice na bezbednost u regionu Bliskog istoka“, gen. quote, p. 197.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 198.

¹⁵ David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus, Bashar al-Assad and Modern Syria*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2005, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, Westview Press, Boulder, 2013, p. 423.

¹⁷ Dragan V. Todorović, „Sunitsko-šiiitski raskol i njegove posledice na bezbednost u regionu Bliskog Istoka“, gen. quote, p. 267.

the confessional balance of power. Saudi Arabia has immediately expressed support to the Syrian Sunnis opposition, considering that it is not in its interest to have a Shiites sect close to Iran in power in Syria. On the other hand, Iran has shown clear support to Assad, that is, the Alawites. In addition, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iraqi Shiites groups and Lebanese Hezbollah are involved in the conflict.¹⁸

The closed authoritarian regime of the Assads in the period from 1970 until 2011

The first twenty years of Syrian independence were marked by frequent and direct intervention of the armed forces in the political life of the country, i.e. the change of government through military coups. This period of instability ended with coming of the Alawites religious community member, Hafez al-Assad, to power as the president of Syria, who, establishing a strong, centralized and stable government structure, remained in that position until his death in 2000.¹⁹

He centralized the government, stabilized the state and strengthened it economically due to the discovery of oil. He increased the military budget and military readiness due to the Israeli threat,²⁰ and strengthened Syrian regional position.²¹ The source of the legitimacy of his rule was himself as a thoughtful, determined and courageous leader, not an election or the Ba'ath party.²²

After his death, he was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad, who rules Syria to this day. As a military doctor, Bashar enrolled in the Military Academy in 1994, and in 1998 he became the chief of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. He was elected the President of Syria in 2000 and 2007 - both times without opponents, with over 90% of the vote. Moreover, after the outbreak of the conflict in 2014, the presidential elections were held with a voter turnout of 73.4%, in which Bashar won over 88% of the vote.²³

At the beginning of his rule, he advocated political and economic reforms. This allegedly promised his education in the United Kingdom, openness to the West,²⁴ and the fact that he used to be a technophile. Furthermore, he released political prisoners, liberalized the access to foreign media and launched an anti-corruption

¹⁸ Ibid, 262.

¹⁹ Richard T. Antoun and Donald Quataert, *Syria: Society, Culture, and Polity*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991.

²⁰ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, gen. quote, p. 415.

²¹ Raymond Hinnebusch, David Lesch, „Syrian Arab Republic“, in: Mark Gasiorowski (ed.), *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 7th ed, Westview Press, Boulder 2014, p. 274.

²² William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, gen. quote, p. 417.

²³ Mary Casey-Baker, „Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad Wins Re-Election“, *Foreign Policy*, 5 June 2014.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 370.

campaign. However, it soon became apparent that Bashar's democracy lacked a number of elements. He believed that Syria was too fragile for a quick democracy and that the stability of the society was a priority. In other words, the strategic goal of Bashar, like his father, was the survival of the regime.²⁵

Table – Key differences between the old and new guards of the Assad regime

Old Guard	Young Guard
First generation, power struggle	Second generation, born in privileges
Personal loyalty to Hafez al-Assad	Less personal loyalty, vested rights
Autocratic style of governing	Consultation and consensus
Centralized decision-making	Decentralized decision-making
Clearly defined authority	Ambiguity of authority
Weak ties with the Western culture	Educated in the West - US, UK
Socialists and Arab nationalists	Ideological pragmatists
State-controlled economy	Broad support for the private economy
Military technocrats with war experience	Academic technocrats without war experience

Source: Shmuel Bar, „Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview”, p. 384

„The Syrian Spring” and the role of the armed forces

Corruption, nepotism, kleptocracy and high unemployment rate led to mass protests against long-standing regimes in the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011, known as the „Arab Spring”. The trigger for the manifestation of accumulated dissatisfaction was the public self-immolation of 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, which led to the fall of the twenty-three-year rule of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. Soon, the protests spread to other countries, leading to the overthrow of Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak in Egypt; then Muammar Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi, who was killed in the civil war with the intervention of the NATO forces, and the loss of power of Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, also due to popular uprisings and foreign pressure. Mass anti-regime protests also took place in Bahrain, but were suppressed by the military intervention of Saudi Arabia.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid, p. 371.

²⁶ Jelisaveta Blagojević i Radenko Ščekić, „Politička previranja u Arapskom svijetu: Nestabilnosti i priliv migranata na Zapadni Balkan”, *Annales - Anali za Istrske In Mediteranske Studije-Series. Historia et Sociologia*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2017, pp. 540-541.

After the fall of long-time leaders in Tunisia and Egypt in March 2011, there were protests in the Syrian city of Daraa. The regime responded with force and killing of more than 1,000 demonstrators, leading to a demand for the removal of Bashar and a civil war that continues to this day.²⁷

The weaknesses of Bashar's rule in Syria were reflected in the weakening of the Ba'ath party, as well as the failure to achieve adequate economic growth. In fact, the main characteristics of the Syrian economy were high unemployment rate, trade imbalance, inflation and budget deficit. The economy was largely based on oil revenues, which accounted for 20% of GDP, two-thirds of export and a half of government revenues.

Bashar identified the Ba'ath party and the worker and peasant unions as one of the main obstacles to the conduct of economic reforms. Therefore, the weakening of these structures began, and Bashar increasingly relied on his family, influential Alawites and technocrats, who did not have the support of the social base.

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, where the armed forces supported demonstrators, and Libya and Yemen, where they split into supporters and opponents of the regime, the Syrian Armed Forces, like the Bahrain Defence Force, due to population protests and demands for the resignation of the long-time leader, decided to support the preservation of the long-time leader's rule and his regime with slight desertions in the lower branches of the armed forces. The reasons for this action of the armed forces are described and explained below through the identification of the position of the armed forces in the Assad regime, their social structure, connection with the society, as well as other defined dimensions of the analysis.

The position of the armed forces in the Assad regime, i.e. their impact on the beginning, course and result of the protest is determined, above all, by the nature and character of the regime itself. In accordance with the previously presented classification of the regimes defined by Haywood, Huntington and Darmanović, and based on the characteristics of the regimes described in the previous chapter, it is clear that the regime of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad represents a personal dictatorship, i.e. personal rule based on patrimonial culture, creating a cult of personality, fake opposition, and pseudo-ideology.

In such a system, considered through the institutional-legal dimension, the armed forces were politically marginalized and of patrimonial nature. When it comes to legal regulation, according to the 1973 Constitution (Article 40 and 109),²⁸ which was valid until the adoption of the new one in 2012, the President appointed and dismissed the armed forces officers, and the military service was mandatory. The 2012 Constitution (Article 46 and 106)²⁹ includes provisions of the same content. Through recruiting and deciding on the military advancement on an ethno-religious basis, Hafez controlled the armed forces due to the fear of a military coup, which was a main element of Syrian political life in the period from 1949 until 1970, when there were more than 14 coups. The principle of meritocracy was implemented in the case of young officers and lower military branches, while leading

²⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, David Lesch, „Syrian Arab Republic“, gen. quote, p. 270.

²⁸ „The Syrian Constitution – 1973“, *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center*, 5 December 2012.

²⁹ „Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012“, *Voltaire Network*, Damask, 26 February 2012.

military positions were occupied by loyal persons. He often rotated senior military officers in order to prevent the concentration of power.³⁰ The military decision-making was very centralized, that is, everything was decided by the President. The level of loyalty of the armed forces to Assad is best shown by killing of at least 10,000 people in Hama in 1982 in order to quell the Islamist insurgency.³¹ The rapid progress of Bashar on the military ladder and his appointment as the supreme commander of the forces after his brother's death indicates the importance of the armed forces loyalty to the ruler. After taking power, Bashar replaced most of the officers of the old regime with young officers, primarily through the forced retirement of officers over 60 years of age.³² He initiated anti-corruption reforms in the armed forces, but without success, as patrimonialism, cronyism and favouritism remained the main characteristics of the armed forces.

In terms of education and values, soldiers were trained in the military schools including the Al-Assad Military Academy in Aleppo, the Homs Military Academy, which was founded in 1933 during the French Mandate of Syria,³³ and the Soviet and later Russian military academies.

The analysis of the economic position of the armed forces indicates that they did not have economic activities, i.e. ownership or share of ownership in companies, and the share of the military expenditure in the country's GDP was 4.1% in 2010.

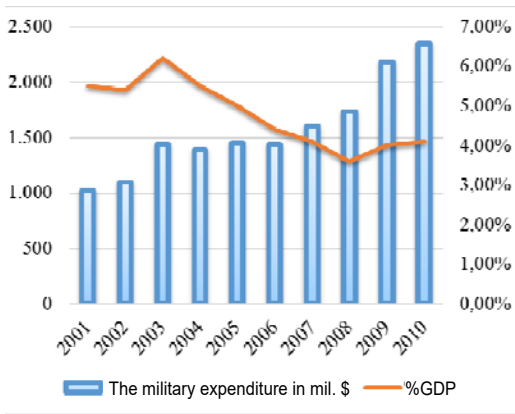


Table 18: The military expenditure of Syria (2001-2010)

Year	Costs in millions of \$	%GDP
2001	1.023	5,5%
2002	1.103	5,4%
2003	1.436	6,2%
2004	1.389	5,5%
2005	1.450	5,0%
2006	1.435	4,4%
2007	1.599	4,1%
2008	1.732	3,6%
2009	2.182	4,0%
2010	2.346	4,1%
2011	2.495	–
2012–2015	There is no data	–

Graph – The military expenditure of Syria from 2001 until 2010

Source: SIPRI Syria: Military Expenditure Database 2019

³⁰ Florence Gaub, „Arab armies: Agents of change? Before and after 2011”, *ISSUE – Chaillot Papers* 131, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2014, p. 37.

³¹ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, gen. quote, p. 423.

³² Shmuel Bar, „Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview”, *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 25, No. 5, 2006, p. 371.

³³ Military School Directory, available at: <https://militaryschooldirectory.com/syria-al-assad-military-academy/> (20.06.2021)

As for the social dimension, it is evident that the armed forces had weak ties to the society, given that the Alawites make up 70% of career soldiers within the Syrian Armed Forces, although they represent only 11% of the population. Moreover, they make up 80-90% of the officer corps.³⁴ The majority of the elite military units are exclusively Alawites and under the command of close Assad's relatives. Furthermore, the units whose members are mostly Sunnis, are under the control of those units dominated by the Alawites, and are present in the lower ranks of the armed forces. That explains the desertion in those ranks due to the protest in 2011, as well as the support of the military leadership and elite units for the survival of the Assad regime. Unlike the Libyan and Yemeni Armed Forces, the Syrian Armed Forces are characterized by coherence, unity and institutionalization. This is explained by the fact that the Alawites in Syria, as well as the Sunnis in Bahrain, perceived the struggle against demonstrators as a fight for their own survival, that is, the survival of their sect.

The Fourth Division has the best weapons and is the largest unit of the armed forces with 40-50,000 members, led by Bashar's brother Maher al-Assad. All members of the Fourth Brigade are the Alawites and have the most sophisticated Russian weapons. This Division enabled numerous victories over the rebels. Moreover, Assad had significant support from unofficial paramilitary units.

Only 3% of soldiers deserted during the war, which was mainly of an individual character, before the entire units of the armed forces cancelled obedience, so there was no collapse of the military structure. Since they changed sides during the course of history, the armed forces did not symbolize national unity, and thus, despite the later war with Israel and a strong pan-Arab narrative, identified more with the regime than with the state.³⁵

It can be concluded that the reaction of the armed forces, and thus the survival of the regime, is explained by the following variables: patrimonial character of the armed forces, the dominance of the Alawites in the military structures, the participation of soldiers in human rights violation, the dependence of preserving the armed forces institutional interests from survival of the regime, the magnitude and composition of the protest, that is, the fact that the rebels are mostly members of the non-regime religious sect - Sunnis. It is evident that the social dimension of the analysis of the armed forces position in the Assad regime has the greatest explanatory power when it comes to reactions and the role of the armed forces, mainly in anti-regime protests, and then in rebellion, i.e. civil war. Moreover, the institutional-legal analysis indicates the politicized position of the armed forces, which is also largely determined by their social structure, i.e. the affiliation of soldiers to a religious sect. The economic and educational-value dimension does not have great explanatory potential in the case of Syria, considering that the armed forces did not have a significant economic position, and education and training did not ensure their neutrality, i.e. independence from the rulers.

³⁴ Derek Lutterbeck, *Arab Uprisings and Armed Forces: Between Openness and Resistance*, DCAF, 2011, p. 46.

³⁵ Florence Gaub, „Arab armies: Agents of change? Before and after 2011”, gen. quote, p. 36.

Instead of a conclusion

Civil-military relations that shaped the development of Syria since gaining independence in 1946 went through two phases: the first, in the period from 1949 to 1971, when fourteen military coups took place, and the armed forces directly exercised political power and the other, from 1971 until today, characterized by the civilian regime of Hafez al-Assad and then his son Bashar al-Assad. The Assads have established civilian control over the armed forces, i.e. the level of conflict with civilian authorities is low, and the level of prerogative is not high either. However, similar to the Bahraini Armed Forces, the Syrian Armed Forces are an instrument for the execution of political and other objectives and the protection of the interests of the ruling Assad family.

The Syrian Armed Forces members resisted the rebels due to the high degree of patrimonialism and the lack of closer relations with the society, as well as the fact that they enjoy a privileged position in Syrian politics. On the other hand, the unorganized and fragmented opposition is unlikely to improve their status. Moreover, during the war, they became more corrupt, less professional, and isolated from the wider society. The military networks of nepotism and patronage, developed even before the 2011 riots, turned officer corps into kleptocratic organizations.

The fact that the armed forces are predominantly made up of representatives of a religious sect, has determined their position due to the anti-regime rebellion, i.e. confirmed the hypothesis of this paper that the case of Syria shows that if the armed forces structure consists mostly of members of the ruling ethnic, sectarian, tribal and other groups, it is more likely they will support the regime, that is, play an obstructive role in the transition. It is important to point out that the object of loyalty of the Syrian Armed Forces is not the state and service to their nation, but Assad's system of government that created them and without which they would not even exist.

The study of this issue is important for the improvement of literature in the field of transitology, international relations and comparative politics, and is the basis for a detailed study of this, not so common topic in the Western Balkans countries. This is particularly important because the instability from the Arab territories also affects the Balkans, which has been manifested since 2015 by a massive influx of migrants. Moreover, illegal migration creates conditions for the promotion of organized crime, especially human trafficking.

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[2] „Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012”, *Voltaire Network*, Damask, 26 February 2012, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article173033.html>, 11/02/2021.

[3] Derek Lutterbeck, *Arab Uprisings and Armed Forces: Between Openness and Resistance*, DCAF, 2011.

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Summary

The study of civil-military relations, from the standpoint of political science, especially gained attention in periods of transition, i.e. attempts for changing the existing regime through protests or rebellion of dissatisfied masses. The reaction of military in that moments, i.e. whether it will remain loyal to the regime or side with protesters, *inter alia*, depends on the relationship between the military and society. The aim of this paper is to examine the influence of the military social structure on its decision to (not) support the protesters, based on the following hypothesis: If the structure of the military is mostly made up of the members of certain ethnic, sectarian, tribal or other group it is more likely that it will support the regime. The hypothesis is tested using case study of Syria, where the military decided to stay with Bashar al-Assad, that is analyzed through its sectarian-Alawitess character, i.e. the identity of the Alawitess religious sect, the basic features of the Assad rule and the military's position in that regime.

Bashar al-Assad inherited the position of the President of Syria from his father Hafez al-Assad, who took power in a military coup. Assad family is the part of the Alawitess religious sect, which makes up 11% of the population. Alawitesshad strengthened its position during the French rule thanks to its dominant position in the military that became one of its basic instruments for establishing its own political system. The majority Sunnis religious community was represented in the military lower ranks. That explains the desertion in those ranks during conflict, as well as the support for the survival of the Assad regime by the military leadership and elite units. Apart from the mentionednegligible desertion, the Syrian military is characterized by coherence, unity and institutionalization. This is explained by the fact that the Alawitess in Syria perceived the fight against protesters as a fight for their own survival, that is, the survival of their sect. These conclusions are results of application of the method of case analysis.

Key words: *military, transition, Syria, Bashar al-Assad, Alawitess*

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