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The Arab Association of Constitutional Law

Reconfiguring Power: Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Transitions in the Arab Region[i]

Report

AACL Regional Working Group on Civil-Military Relations in the Arab Region

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Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive synthesis of the meetings of the AACL Regional Working Group on Civil-Military Relations in the Arab Region (RWG), which were held throughout 2025, culminating in a two-day workshop convened on 20-21 September 2025 in London. The RWG brought together legal experts, scholars, civil society leaders, and practitioners from across the Middle East and North Africa to assess the state of civil-military relations, explore reform pathways, and identify lessons from national experiences. Participants represented a broad range of country contexts, namely Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria, each offering distinct yet interlinked perspectives on the challenges and opportunities facing democratic transitions in militarized political environments.

The two-day workshop addressed both the conceptual and practical dimensions of civil-military relations. Discussions on the first day of the workshop focused on understanding the historical, institutional, and sociopolitical roots of military dominance in the region. Key themes included the enduring autonomy of military institutions, securitization of state authority, blurred boundaries between military and civilian governance, and racialized, gendered, and geographic exclusions embedded in military power structures. Participants emphasized the need to define the "civil" in civil-military relations –whether political parties, civil society, or technocratic actors–and to consider how these definitions shape expectations of reform and control.

On the second day of the workshop, the mechanisms of reform, including transitional justice, security sector reform (SSR), oversight frameworks, and civic participation, were examined. The discussions underscored the political nature of these reforms, particularly in contexts where the military retains veto power over governance structures and economic institutions. Participants highlighted the limitations of donor-driven SSR models, the fragmentation of oversight systems, and the persistent exclusion of marginalized voices, including women and racialized communities, from reform agendas.

National case studies were presented to analyze the specific trajectories of civil-military relations. In Sudan, repeated coups and the eruption of war in April 2023 underscored the fragility of power sharing and militarization of governance. In Libya, militia fragmentation and foreign interference have created more of a sovereignty crisis than a conventional military dilemma. In Egypt, authoritarian consolidation has erased transitional gains, reinforcing a deeply embedded military economy. In Tunisia, democratic reforms have stalled since 2021 as the expanding powers of the President of the Republic and internal security forces, alongside the legal normalization of emergency governance, have weakened civilian oversight.In Syria, the collapse of state institutions and the entrenchment of paramilitary actors have highlighted the long-term consequences of unchecked securitization.

The report identifies cross-cutting regional patterns, including the historical entrenchment of military autonomy and economic control, the failure of transitional frameworks to establish enforceable civilian authority, the fragmentation of security institutions and the erosion of public trust, the marginalization of civilian actors and the lack of unified leadership, the complicity and contradictions of international actors in enabling militarized governance, and the structural exclusion faced by women, ethnic minorities, and peripheral communities. Women, however, are not formally excluded from military or security institutions in the countries studied. The issue is one of structural marginalization and restricted access to positions of authority, rather than exclusion per se.

The report concludes with a set of strategic recommendations for policymakers, civil society actors, and international partners. These include embedding transitional justice in reform processes, designing context-specific SSR agendas, investing in civilian leadership development, conditioning international aid on democratic benchmarks, and ensuring inclusive participation in all reform efforts.
Above all, the report underlines that civil-military relations are not a technical matter but a struggle over power, legitimacy, and the very meaning of the state. Transforming these relations requires more than legal reform; it demands political courage, civic mobilization, and long-term regional solidarity.

Introduction and Methodology

A. Introduction

Civil-military relations in the Arab region represent a layered and often volatile intersection of institutional power, historical legacy, and transitional aspirations. This report captures and analyzes the discussions, debates, and reflections of the AACL Regional Working Group on Civil-Military Relations in the Arab Region (RWG), which were undertaken in the framework of a series of meetings held in 2025 and culminated in a workshop convened on 20–September 21, 2025, in London. The RWG brought together experts, practitioners, civil society actors, and regional analysts to examine how political transitions – whether emerging from conflict, revolution, or negotiated settlements – have impacted the evolving role of military institutions within civilian-led governance frameworks.

The current context underscores the importance of understanding civil-military relations is especially relevant in the Arab region, where the military has historically played a central role in shaping state formation, controlling political power, and navigating regime change. From post-colonial independence movements to contemporary uprisings and peace settlements, militaries have often served as both protectors of the state and barriers to democratic consolidation. In many cases, transitions have been stalled or reversed by military intervention, while in others, weak civilian institutions have failed to exert effective military oversight. This makes the study and reform of civil-military relations not only a theoretical concern but also a strategic and political imperative for building sustainable, democratic, and accountable governance in the region.

The discussions of the RWG were not aimed at producing a definitive or exhaustive analysis of civil-military relations. Rather, they were designed to promote dynamic and comparative reflection across national contexts, namely Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria. Syria was included to ensure that the contexts of protracted conflict, foreign intervention, and fragmented state authority were examined. Through this comparative lens, this report identifies shared institutional patterns, context-specific challenges, and normative tensions between security and democracy. It also highlights how peace agreements, constitutional arrangements, and international actors interact with localized power dynamics to shape the trajectory of civil-military configurations.

Furthermore, significant emphasis was placed on examining power-sharing arrangements and transitional governance frameworks. These arrangements, often forged through political settlements or post-conflict negotiations, have played a crucial role in shaping civil-military relations. In many cases, the ambiguity or imbalance in these transitional arrangements has contributed to institutional instability, contested authority, and recurring crises. For example, in Sudan, the

fragile power-sharing agreement of 2019 between civilian and military actors ultimately collapsed under the weight of competing interests and the lack of institutional safeguards. In Libya, transitional governance has been marked by parallel authorities and heavily militarized zones of control, complicating attempts to build coherent oversight mechanisms. The workshop addressed how different countries have approached the challenge of integrating the military into transitional structures while preserving the prospects of democratic consolidation and civilian oversight.

While the work of the RWG touches on a wide range of topics, it forms part of a longer and evolving conversation. The complexity of civil-military relations, shaped by institutional legacies, contested sovereignty, and uneven democratization, defies uniform solutions. This is especially evident in transitional or post-conflict settings, where fragile state institutions must contend with powerful security actors, fractured legitimacy, and diverse societal demands. This report captures this complexity by weaving together insights, critiques, and comparative reflections shared by the RWG members. It acknowledges both areas of convergence, such as shared challenges in establishing civilian oversight, and divergence, such as differing patterns of militarization, grounded in lived experience and regional expertise.

B. Methodology

This report is based on a comparative and participatory methodology, structured around the materials, reflections, and deliberations gathered during the RWG workshop and prior meetings. The process involved:

- ·A structured workshop agenda: The workshop spanned two days, with Day 1 focusing on conceptual frameworks and Day 2 on reform and accountability mechanisms.
- ·Preparatory meetings: Prior to the workshop, a series of preparatory meetings were convened among RWG members. These meetings identified core thematic areas, conceptualized key questions, and helped to develop a shared analytical framework. They also resulted in the incorporation of diverse disciplinary and regional perspectives into the workshop's agenda.
- ·RWG member-driven discussions: All interventions followed the Chatham House rules to ensure candid dialogue. The participants represented a diverse group of scholars, legal experts, civil society activists, and researchers, each contributing deep knowledge of their respective national contexts and practical experience in navigating civil-military dynamics.
- ·A comparative regional lens: The report reflects the uniqueness of each national case and the interconnected institutional patterns across the region. Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria were discussed in detail, while occasional references were made to Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq.

- Multilingual source integration: Materials were provided in Arabic and English. Arabic-language summaries, notes, and RWG-member working papers were used with English-language concept notes and background readings.

The result is a synthesis that prioritizes lived experience, comparative insights, and practical reflection while situating the findings within broader regional and historical contexts.

This methodological approach balances descriptive accuracy with normative analysis, offering both a faithful record of the workshop proceedings and a forward-looking analytical roadmap for engaging with the evolving challenges of civil-military relations in the Arab world.

Framing the Challenge: Civil-Military Relations in the Arab Region

A. The Blurring of Military and Security Roles

Civil-military relations across the Arab region are shaped by a long history of contested state formation, colonial legacies, and the enduring influence of security institutions on political life. These relations must be understood through both military and internal security lenses, particularly within the broader securitization process. In many Arab states, security forces –often encompassing intelligence services, internal police apparatuses, and paramilitary groups– have played a central role in political control, repression, and regime maintenance. At times, particularly during authoritarian consolidation or periods of crisis, these security forces have either complemented or supplanted the formal military in shaping the governance outcomes. This interaction between military and internal security actors is often characterized by overlapping jurisdictions, inter-agency rivalries, and shifting responsibilities, particularly in countries experiencing fragmented authority or contested legitimacy. This dynamic interplay between military and internal security actors complicates efforts to establish civilian oversight, constitutional clarity, and public accountability. It has also reinforced the structural autonomy that many militaries enjoy in the region. In most cases, the military emerged not only as a guarantor of national sovereignty but also as a dominant political actor, often obscuring the distinction between national defense, regime protection, and governance. This has entrenched the military's role in executive decision-making, economic management, and, in some contexts, ideological control.

B. Structural Insulation and Military Autonomy

One of the persistent structural features observed across the region is the military's insulation from civilian accountability, often reinforced by constitutional exemptions, informal patronage networks, and discretionary security budgets. This insulation is not merely symbolic; it grants the military a unique position above the constitutional

and political order in many Arab states, effectively placing it beyond the reach of democratic checks and balances.

In countries such as Egypt, recent constitutional reforms have institutionalized autonomy. The 2014 Constitution, for instance, granted the military the exclusive authority to select the Minister of Defense for an eight-year period and ensured that military budgets could be reviewed only by a closed parliamentary committee. Similarly, in Sudan, even during the post-revolutionary transitional period, military leaders maintained control over key sovereign functions, resisted full civilian oversight, and ultimately disrupted the transition through a coup in 2021.

This structural autonomy has far-reaching implications. This limits civilian institutions' ability to implement meaningful oversight, creates legal gray zones that enable impunity, and restricts public debate on security governance. Moreover, it distorts the balance of power during transitional negotiations, often resulting in compromised settlements that preserve military prerogatives under the guise of stability. The persistence of these insulated structures remains a major obstacle to institutional reform and long-term democratic consolidation in the region's politics.

C. Defining the 'Civil' in Civil-Military Relations

RWG members noted that (with the exception of Tunisia) the legacies of colonial governance and post-independence authoritarianism created militarized state structures that persist today. For instance, securitization in the Tunisian case has historically been driven more by internal security and policing institutions than by military domination.

One of the key conceptual challenges raised during the workshop was the need to define what is meant by 'civilian' or 'civil' in civil-military relations. Several participants questioned whether this term should be limited to elected political representatives or whether it should also encompass political parties, technocrats, civil society organizations, social movements, or professional associations. The ambiguity surrounding the term 'civil' has significant implications for how civil-military relations are framed, analyzed, and reformed. Clarifying this concept is particularly important in transitional contexts, where different actors may claim legitimacy in representing the civilian domain vis-à-vis military or security institutions.

In Sudan, for instance, the transitional period exposed tensions between formal political parties, technocratic appointees, and revolutionary grassroots movements, such as resistance committees, all of whom asserted competing claims to civilian legitimacy in negotiations with the military. In Tunisia, the distinction between civil society and politically affiliated technocrats became difficult to distinguish, especially during debates over police reform and the restructuring of internal

security forces. Police reform debates exposed ambiguity around the meaning of "civil" in civil–military relations. Police unions that emerged in Tunisia after 2011 acted not only as labor representatives but also as political actors, lobbying for legal immunity and resisting accountability. Their role blurred the line between civic actors and security institutions, complicating efforts to establish clear civilian oversight. These examples demonstrate that the ambiguity surrounding the term 'civil' is not merely semantic; it shapes who sits at the negotiation table, who has the authority to speak on behalf of the people, and how oversight institutions are constructed.

D. Authoritarian Learning and Institutional Mimicry

Participants also highlighted how regimes across the region often borrow institutional templates and practices from one another, particularly in consolidating security states. This includes mechanisms for controlling internal dissent, legalizing military economies, and managing transitional pacts to preserve security prerogatives under a civilian façade. Some participants observed that authoritarian learning has also been reinforced by international partnerships, whether through counterterrorism aid, military training programs, or surveillance technology transfers, which often privilege regime security over democratic accountability. For example, several regimes have adopted internal security frameworks modeled on Gulf or foreign-supported counterinsurgency systems, embedding practices that prioritize coercive control over inclusive governance. These dynamics are particularly evident in hybrid regimes in which military and civilian actors ambiguously share power, contributing to recurring constitutional breakdowns and fragile political settlements. Transitions in countries like Libya and Sudan were marked by power vacuums, competing security institutions, and uneven civilian capacity, conditions that have undermined efforts to establish enduring democratic oversight.

E. Politicization of the Armed Forces

The politicization of armed forces is another cross-cutting theme. Rather than being neutral protectors of national integrity, militaries in several Arab states have developed partisan affiliations aligned with ruling elites or specific factions. This has weakened public trust, deepened social fragmentation, and complicated disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes, particularly in contexts of civil conflict.

In Libya and Yemen, for example, rival armed forces have aligned themselves with parallel governments and tribal or ideological coalitions, transforming national militaries into fragmented and politicized factions. These divisions have eroded state authority and led to recurrent cycles of violence, stalling peace efforts. Such politicization challenges not only the integrity of security sector reform but also the notion of a unified national defense force.

F. The Political Economy of Military Power

Participants also reflected on the political economy of military institutions and their broader implications for state-building, corruption, and public service delivery. In many cases, militaries and security forces control vast commercial networks and benefit from opaque financing arrangements, further embedding their influence in the state and society. These parallel economies complicate reforms and reduce the incentives for security sector actors to submit to civilian control. Egypt's military-industrial complex, Libya's armed group patronage networks, and Sudan's General Intelligence Service (GIS) (formerly known as the National Intelligence and Security Service – NISS) were cited as examples of how economic entanglement undermines transparency and reform.

In Sudan, the GIS operates a range of commercial ventures and investment holdings, often outside the reach of public scrutiny, further consolidating its power within the security landscape and limiting prospects for financial accountability or restructuring. In Egypt, military involvement in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals has skewed market competition and created a shadow economy resistant to oversight. In Libya, armed groups have consolidated economic control through smuggling networks, fuel subsidies and de facto local taxation. These arrangements often serve as financial lifelines for militia leaders, making disarmament or reintegration politically and economically costly.

G. Gendered and Racialized Dimensions of Military Control

Deeply embedded social inequalities, alongside institutional hierarchies and constitutional arrangements, shape civil-military relations in the Arab region. One important dimension raised during the workshop was how militarized power is experienced differently across gender, ethnic, and geographic lines. Militaries and security institutions have often been mobilized to suppress marginalized communities, enforce racial hierarchies, and exclude women from public and political life.

Participants pointed to the gendered logic of security sectors, where women are frequently excluded from leadership roles, treated as passive victims in security discourse, or subjected to targeted violence in conflict zones and protests. In Sudan, for example, military and security forces, including during both the Bashir regime and the transitional period, were implicated in systematic sexual violence and the targeting of women activists, particularly those leading resistance movements. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, women have been deliberately silenced, threatened, or excluded from ceasefire negotiations and security dialogues, even as they face militarized violence in their communities. In Tunisia, women remain underrepresented in security governance and have faced harassment, surveillance, and repression during protests, reflecting a non-conflict form of gendered securitization.

Race and region have also shaped how the military enforces order. In Sudan, security operations in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile were marked by racialized targeting and the use of disproportionate force. Similarly, in Tunisia and Egypt, security crackdowns have disproportionately affected peripheral regions and marginalized ethnic or religious groups, revealing a securitized hierarchy of citizenship.

These gendered and racialized dynamics highlight how militarized power is not only centralized and authoritarian but also selective in whom it protects or represses. Recognizing these patterns is essential for any meaningful reform agenda aimed at democratizing civil-military relations and ensuring inclusive, people-centered security.

H. The Crisis of Legitimacy

Finally, legitimacy is a central challenge. Across country case studies, there is visible tension between the military's historical narrative of national salvation and the democratic imperative of popular sovereignty. In Tunisia, for example, a relatively professionalized and less politicized military has contributed to a more stable civil-military balance, although risks remain. However, participants noted that Tunisia has also experienced its own form of securitization, with various internal security forces (especially during periods of political turbulence) playing a visible role in governance, surveillance and protest control. This highlights the need to consider the full spectrum of security actors (military, police, intelligence, and paramilitary groups) when assessing legitimacy and designing oversight frameworks that extend beyond the formal armed forces.

Participants also emphasized that legitimacy is contested not only through institutional arrangements but also in the realm of public discourse. Across the region, state-controlled media and nationalist rhetoric have often portrayed the military as the ultimate guardian of national unity and sovereignty. However, this narrative is increasingly challenged by younger generations, civil society actors, and independent media, who point to the failures of military governance and its repressive consequences. These competing narratives shape public trust, electoral behavior, and the credibility of transitional processes. By contrast, in Syria, the securitized structure of governance and the military's role in systemic violence have eroded any semblance of legitimacy, both domestically and internationally.

I. Toward Structural Understanding and Reform Pathways

This section highlights the importance of moving beyond case-by-case analyses to identify structural patterns (such as military autonomy, informal governance, and securitized politics) that recur across the region. These patterns form the backdrop against which reform strategies must be designed. Participants also emphasized

that addressing these challenges requires more than technical or institutional reforms; it calls for reimagining political accountability, empowering civilian leadership, and building inclusive governance frameworks rooted in legitimacy and in public trust. The following sections examine how various countries have attempted to develop oversight mechanisms, negotiate transitional arrangements, and cultivate civic engagement in response to the evolving and often fragmented civil-military landscape across the region.

Comparative Case Studies: National Contexts and Divergent Trajectories

A. Sudan: Transitions, Power-Sharing, and the Reversal of Civilian Oversight

Sudan represents one of the most emblematic and turbulent cases of civil-military contestation in the Arab region. Following the 2019 ouster of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan entered a fragile transitional period marked by a negotiated power-sharing agreement between the civilian forces and military. The August 19 Constitutional Declaration established a dual sovereignty model, with the Sovereign Council comprising both civilian and military members. This arrangement reflected both a compromise and a core structural tension: the coexistence of civilian aspirations for democratic governance with entrenched military interests in preserving the prerogatives and immunity.

Participants noted that the transition in Sudan was underpinned by decades of militarized rule and the systemic weakening of civilian institutions. The military, together with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), had long operated autonomously from state oversight, backed by a parallel economy, foreign support, and security alliances that extended well beyond the formal chain of command. Despite public pressure, the transitional government was unable to dismantle these structures or to institute meaningful accountability.

One of the key points made in the workshop concerns the internal fragmentation of the 'civil' camp. Disputes between political parties, professional associations, and grassroots revolutionary committees diluted the coherence of the civilian fronts. This fragmentation gave the military an opening to present itself as a stabilizing force amid political chaos –a narrative that eventually culminated in the October 2021 military coup, reversing many of the transitional gains.

Another highlighted factor is the selective nature of transitional justice and security sector reform. While the transitional government initiated dialogues about restructuring the armed forces and reviewing the role of the GIS, these efforts lacked enforcement mechanisms and were perceived as elite bargains rather than inclusive national processes. Gendered violence persisted, particularly during protests, and military officials retained control over economic assets and national

defense policymaking.

The Sudanese case underscores the fragility of power-sharing arrangements in contexts where the military retains coercive, economic, and narrative dominance. Participants emphasized that without clear accountability mechanisms, civilian unity, and control over transitional timelines, civil-military relations in Sudan would remain prone to rupture.

The Sudan discussion serves as a cautionary tale: reform processes must address not only institutional restructuring but also the deeper questions of legitimacy, social inclusion, and political agency. The urgency of Sudan's current crisis, fueled by the outbreak of war in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), calls for reimagining civil-military relations not just as a governance challenge but as a national survival imperative. The war fundamentally altered the trajectory of Sudan's transitional process and entrenched militarization across the country. Participants noted that the RSF, despite being framed as a militia, has engaged in large-scale military operations and drawn on foreign support, while the SAF has increasingly relied on the mobilization of new paramilitary formations and tribal militias to sustain the conflict. This proliferation of armed actors further erodes the prospects for a unified national military and complicates any future reform agenda.

Moreover, prior to the outbreak of the war, efforts to initiate security sector reform had revealed deep institutional resistance. The military leadership consistently rejected the idea that civilians had a legitimate role in shaping the reform process, viewing security transformation as the exclusive domain of the armed forces. As a result, the proposed reforms were either sidelined or diluted, undermining confidence in the transitional agenda. These dynamics, combined with the deepening humanitarian crisis, have created a civil-military landscape in which violence, fragmentation, and exclusion increasingly define the state's relationship with society.

B. Libya: Fragmentation, Armed Groups, and the Struggle for Civilian Authority

Libya offers a compelling case of prolonged institutional collapse and security pluralism following regime change. Following Muammar Gaddafi's fall in 2011, Libya entered a protracted period of political vacuum and fragmented sovereignty. The country became characterized by multiple centers of power, with competing governments, parliaments, and military coalitions claiming legitimacy across different regions. This fractured political landscape gave rise to a patchwork of armed groups, ranging from revolutionary brigades to tribal militias and transnational jihadist factions, many of which were absorbed into official state structures without meaningful oversight.

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Participants reflected on the paradox of Libya's post-Gaddafi moment: the regime's collapse created space for popular mobilization and institutional rethinking, but the absence of a strong and legitimate central authority allowed militarized actors to rapidly entrench themselves. In the absence of a unified military command, rival coalitions such as the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) under Khalifa Haftar in the east and various Tripoli-based militias in the west exploited the institutional vacuum. These groups derived power not only from weapons and territorial control but also from control over economic assets (such as oil infrastructure, border crossings, and state contracts), currency black market, oil smuggling, and human trafficking leading to what participants described as a "militia economy."

The internationalization of Libya's conflict further exacerbated these dynamics. Foreign actors provided political recognition, military aid, and intelligence support to different factions, thereby reinforcing the autonomy of non-state armed actors and diminishing the prospects for unified reform. The 2020 ceasefire agreement and subsequent attempts at reunification, including the formation of a Government of National Unity, were viewed by many participants as fragile, lacking accountability, and elite-driven, with little connection to grassroots oversight or civil society engagement.

Efforts to build civilian control over the security sector have been inconsistent and frequently co-opted by the military. Attempts to integrate armed groups into formal institutions have often taken the form of financial patronage, rather than structural reform. Civil society organizations pushing for disarmament and accountability face both political exclusion and physical insecurity. Participants also noted the gendered dimensions of this security fragmentation, with women largely excluded from peace processes and increasingly being targeted in public life.

Libya's case raises fundamental questions about how civil-military relations function in a context where the distinction between "civilian" and "military" actors is blurred and where both sets of actors are often implicated in violence, corruption, and authoritarian practices. The discussion emphasizes the need for any future transition to confront the political economy of armed groups, the role of foreign sponsorship, and the absence of cohesive national institutions.
In the words of one participant, "Libya does not have a military problem –it has a

sovereignty problem." This case illustrates the deep interdependence between national unification, security sector transformation, and the reconstitution of political legitimacy.

C. Egypt: Military Entrenchment and Civilian Marginalization

Egypt offers one of the clearest examples of a militarized political order institutionalized through constitutional, legal and economic means. Participants emphasized that, unlike transitional contexts such as Sudan or Libya, Egypt represents a case in which the military has not only preserved its dominance but has also expanded it within a framework of formal legality and national security discourse. The trajectory of civil-military relations in Egypt illustrates how military institutions can entrench their authority through electoral processes, constitutional design, and expansive economic roles.

The turning point came with the 2013 ousting of President Mohamed Morsi and the subsequent rise of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to the presidency. This moment marked a rupture in Egypt's short-lived democratic experiment and inaugurated a new era of military-backed authoritarianism. The 2014 Constitution granted the armed forces constitutionally protected status, including the authority to approve the appointment of the Minister of Defense for eight years and immunity from civilian prosecution. Participants noted that such provisions embedded military autonomy into the constitutional fabric, making civilian oversight structurally difficult.

Beyond constitutional provisions, the participants highlighted the military's expanding footprint in the Egyptian economy. Through military-owned companies, informal networks, and privileged access to state contracts, the armed forces have become central players in sectors such as construction, transportation, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals. This military-economic complex operates with minimal transparency, distorting market dynamics and sidelining private-sector actors who lack similar political backing.

Participants also noted that internal security forces –including police and intelligence services– operated in close coordination with the military, reinforcing a broader architecture of securitized governance that targets dissent across civilian life. The judiciary has often reinforced military power through the selective application of national security laws, mass-trial procedures, and legal frameworks that restrict civil society and press freedoms.

The workshop discussions emphasized the marginalization of youth and grassroots political actors, particularly those active in the 2011 revolution. Many of these groups have been sidelined from formal politics, with limited access to state institutions and minimal public policy influence. This exclusion reflects a broader strategy of controlled political space that privileges loyalty and compliance over pluralism and reform in the political sphere.

Participants also reflected on the gendered dimensions of Egypt's securitized governance model. Women have faced systemic exclusion from decision-making positions in civilian and security institutions. Moreover, women's rights organizations and feminist movements have been subjected to heightened surveillance, funding restrictions, and smear campaigns. In addition to structural exclusion, participants noted that female activists –particularly those speaking out on human rights and accountability– have experienced gender-specific forms of repression, including harassment, defamation, and legal persecution. These patterns reinforce the militarized logic that defines dissent not only as a political threat but also as a violation of the gendered social order.

Unlike contexts marked by fragmentation and contested legitimacy, Egypt represents a model of centralized control in which military dominance is legal, visible, and normalized. However, participants cautioned that this appearance of stability comes at the cost of deepening authoritarianism and growing social disenfranchisement.

The Egypt case illustrates how civil-military relations can evolve not only through coups or conflict but also through legal engineering and institutional capture. This underscores the importance of assessing not only overt military interventions but also more subtle forms of structural entrenchment that limit democratic renewal and civilian empowerment.

D. Tunisia: Professionalism, Securitization, and Fragile Democratic Gains

Tunisia has often been regarded as an exception in the Arab region, where the military has historically remained politically subordinate and relatively professional. Participants emphasized that, unlike in Egypt or Sudan, Tunisia's armed forces did not assume direct political control during or after the 2011 revolution. This absence of overt military intervention created space for a civilian-led transition that, while fragile, sustained electoral competition, constitutional debate, and pluralistic political life for nearly a decade, avoiding many of the authoritarian reversals observed elsewhere in the region.

At the same time, the case study underscored that Tunisia's civil–military dynamics are more complex than this exceptionalist narrative suggests. Participants highlighted the evolving role of internal security forces—particularly those under the Ministry of Interior—which played a prominent and at times controversial role in managing protests, monitoring opposition, and enforcing public order. In contrast to the military's posture of institutional restraint, internal security institutions were more deeply embedded in day-to-day governance and political mediation, often operating with limited transparency and weak civilian oversight. This distinction between a professional, non-interventionist military and a politicized internal security sector emerged as a central theme of the discussion.

Following the 2011 uprising, Tunisia experienced a prolonged period of contested securitization rather than a linear authoritarian drift. National security concerns—especially related to terrorism and border control—were periodically invoked by successive governments, particularly after major attacks between 2013 and 2015. However, these measures remained subject to parliamentary debate, judicial scrutiny, and sustained civil society contestation. During this period, securitization coexisted with constitutional constraints, competitive elections, and active efforts—albeit uneven and often blocked—to reform the security sector.

This dynamic changed qualitatively in July 2021, when President Kais Saied suspended parliament and assumed exceptional powers. Participants described this moment as a rupture rather than an intensification of previous trends. While the military did not take over governance or articulate an autonomous political agenda, it was operationally deployed to secure state institutions and support executive decisions. This episode illustrates how even professional and institutionally restrained militaries can be instrumentalized within executive-driven political crises, without becoming dominant political actors themselves.

Participants further noted that the consolidation of securitized governance after 2021 was reinforced by the erosion of civilian oversight mechanisms and judicial independence. Exceptional legal frameworks, expanded use of military courts for civilians, and the weakening of constitutional and administrative checks facilitated the legal normalization of emergency governance. In this context, internal security institutions gained greater leverage over political life, contributing to a more pronounced authoritarian consolidation rooted in law and procedure rather than direct military rule.

The Tunisian case highlights challenges related to public trust, socio-economic and regional inequality, and institutional reform. Participants noted that marginalized interior regions—such as Gafsa, Kasserine and Tataouine—and socially disadvantaged communities more broadly have been recurrent sites of protest and securitized state response, reinforcing perceptions that the security apparatus primarily serves elite and coastal interests. Civil society organizations advocating for transparency, accountability, and police reform have faced increasing pressure, with limited capacity to embed democratic norms within security institutions.

Gendered dimensions of securitization were also central to the discussion. While women played a pivotal role in the 2011 revolution and in post-revolutionary civil society, their representation within security institutions remains limited, particularly in leadership and decision-making positions. Participants noted that securitized governance has generated gender-specific forms of exclusion, including surveillance, harassment, and intimidation of women activists—especially in marginalized regions—linking gender inequality directly to broader patterns of security-driven governance.

Overall, Tunisia's experience underscores the importance of moving beyond a narrow focus on formal military institutions to examine the broader security architecture shaping civil–military relations. It demonstrates how democratic erosion can occur without overt military domination, through the convergence of internal security power, executive exceptionalism, judicial weakening, and the legal normalization of emergency rule. Tunisia thus remains a critical comparative reference for the region, illustrating both the possibilities of military restraint and the vulnerabilities of democratic transitions that leave authoritarian security legacies fundamentally intact.

E. Syria: Securitized Statehood, Fragmentation, and Wartime Governance

Syria represents a stark example of how civil-military relations can be shaped by protracted conflict, authoritarian resilience, and foreign intervention. Participants acknowledged that Syria's case differs fundamentally from others due to the sustained civil war, massive displacement, and collapse of centralized state authority in large parts of the country. The regime's reliance on militarized governance –anchored in decades of Ba'athist rule– has produced a security apparatus that extends far beyond traditional military institutions. Drawing on the work of Syrian scholars and practitioners, the discussion emphasizes how the political economy of war, external sponsorship, and the destruction of local civic structures have fundamentally reshaped civil-military relations.

Prior to the 2011 uprising, Syria's military and security services were deeply embedded in the ruling apparatus of the Assad regime. The distinction between military, intelligence, and civilian authorities was deliberately blurred, creating a securitized form of statehood in which loyalty to the regime was prioritized over institutional accountability. When mass protests erupted, the regime responded with overwhelming force, triggering a nationwide conflict that quickly evolved into a multi-actor and internationalized war.

Participants emphasized that Syria's militarization deepened through both state and nonstate actors. Pro-regime forces –including the Syrian Arab Army, the Republican Guard, and various intelligence agencies– were supplemented by paramilitary groups such as the National Defense Forces and later, foreign-backed militias. Meanwhile, opposition-held areas developed their own military structures, which were often fragmented and reliant on shifting alliances with foreign sponsors. The result has been a fractured security landscape where armed actors, both regime-aligned and opposition, assert territorial control without consistent oversight, legal accountability, or public trust.

A key theme from the discussion was the emergence of wartime governance and local militarized economies, where control over humanitarian aid, smuggling routes, and service provision became central to political power. These dynamics illustrate how the war economy reinforced elite capture and deepened social divisions. Armed groups routinely exploit humanitarian access and civilian

displacement for strategic gain, further complicating efforts at reform or reconciliation.

Syria's civil society has faced extraordinary pressure. Participants noted that local councils, women's organizations, and community initiatives initially played key roles in providing services and articulating alternative governance models. However, sustained violence, repression, and donor-driven priorities have gradually weakened these structures. Gendered impacts were particularly severe, with women being disproportionately affected by violence, displacement, and political exclusion. As one participant noted, women's roles in peacebuilding and civic activism are often unrecognized or underfunded, despite their centrality to community resilience.

Syria's case underscores the collapse of the civilian-military binary in the context of total securitization. Participants warned that any future settlement must grapple not only with disarmament and power-sharing but also with rebuilding trust in governance institutions from the ground up. This erosion of centralized authority has not only fragmented the security landscape but also dismantled the structures necessary for civilian oversight, leaving governance in the hands of militarized actors driven by survival, patronage or foreign interests. The challenge is not merely technical; it is profoundly political and social, rooted in decades of authoritarianism, external intervention, and institutional decay.

Participants emphasized that Syria's crisis has moved beyond the challenge of reforming civil-military relations to a more fundamental question: how to reconstruct the very possibility of a civilian state. Syria's trajectory is a reminder that without meaningful accountability and inclusive political reconstruction, security institutions risk becoming permanent instruments of repression rather than guarantors of peace.

Summary of Workshop Discussions

This section synthesizes the proceedings of the two-day workshop held on 20–September 21, 2025, highlighting key themes, country-specific insights, and cross-regional comparisons that emerged during the two days. The summaries are drawn from the Arabic-language workshop notes and participant contributions and aim to reflect the dynamic and comparative nature of the dialogue.

A. Day 1: Conceptual Foundations and Shared Regional Patterns

1. Opening Reflections and Conceptual Tensions

The first day began with an opening session that framed the complexity of civil-military relations in the Arab region. Participants emphasized that these relationships are deeply shaped by the legacies of colonial governance, post-independence authoritarianism, and contested transitions. One speaker remarked, "Our militaries were not only born in authoritarian contexts; they have reproduced

those contexts across generations." This observation set the tone for the workshop's emphasis on institutional continuity, securitization and elite bargains.

Several interventions underscored the importance of conceptual clarity in understanding the military's role in politics, particularly the distinction between national defense, regime protection, and internal security. Participants emphasized that these categories are often conflated in the Arab region, leading to expansive military mandates beyond their constitutional roles. One speaker noted that, "The label of national defense becomes a justification for internal repression, while regime protection is framed as public security." This conceptual ambiguity has allowed militaries to step into political voids under the guise of safeguarding the nation, frequently undermining the democratic process. It was also noted that in many contexts, internal security functions, typically the domain of police or civilian agencies, are absorbed by military institutions, especially during periods of unrest or transition. This blurring of functions, participants warned, normalizes military involvement in civil governance and weakens the accountability structures necessary for democratic consolidation.

2. Defining 'Civilian': Competing Claims to Legitimacy

A major theme of the day centered on how to define "civil" in civil-military relations. Participants debated whether civilian actors should include only political parties and elected officials or also civil society, professional syndicates, and revolutionary grassroots committees. One participant from Sudan noted, "The military often uses civilian fragmentation as an excuse to delay the handover of power. But the question remains: Who represents the 'civil' in this equation?"

The debate grew more layered as participants explored the strategic use of military power by political actors. In some contexts, particularly Sudan, political parties have historically invited or welcomed military intervention to resolve political deadlocks or dislodge rivals. As one participant put it, "Coups don't always come from above –they are sometimes engineered in response to political party agendas or mass protest pressures." In Sudan's transitional context, the military has presented itself as stepping in to 'protect the revolution' or to respond to calls from the street, even as it consolidises its authority. This dynamic complicates efforts to construct a clear binary distinction between civilian and military domains.

It also underscores how defining 'civil' is not just a theoretical issue; it directly affects the legitimacy and outcomes of transitional arrangements and whether power-sharing frameworks can succeed without being co-opted. Participants noted that in countries like Sudan, the military often justified its political role by claiming to respond to public demands or party alliances, thereby blurring the line between military intervention and civilian agency.
This question is particularly relevant in the Sudanese and Tunisian cases, where post-uprising transitions brought multiple civilian actors with competing visions and constituencies to the table. The debate revealed how power-sharing frameworks

can be derailed when the civilian bloc lacks unity or institutional leverage. InTunisia, the post-2011 transition produced a fragmented civilian landscape rather than a unified civilian bloc. Security sector reform quickly became controversial, marked by divisions between political parties and segments of civil society, as well as open confrontation between human rights organizations demanding accountability and police unions resisting reform. These competing claims to civilian legitimacy blurred the boundary between civic advocacy, political authority, and security sector interests, weakening civilian leverage over security institutions and complicating efforts to establish effective oversight.

As a result, participants stressed the importance of both conceptual clarity and institutional coherence in defining the civilian component of civil-military relations.

3. International Actors and Security-First Frameworks

The role of international actors has emerged as a deeply contested aspect of civil-military relations across the region. Participants debated the extent to which foreign governments, multilateral organizations, and international NGOs reinforce militarized governance under the banners of stability, counterterrorism, or peacebuilding. Many agreed that although international engagement often comes with the rhetoric of supporting civilian oversight, the reality on the ground frequently tells a different story.

The Libyan participant argued, “External actors say they support civilian oversight, but in practice, they fund the same armed groups that prevent it.” This sentiment was echoed across several national contexts, where international programs designed to strengthen state institutions inadvertently empowered authoritarian or militarized elites. In Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen, foreign security assistance and military training have often bypassed civilian institutions entirely, reinforcing parallel chains of command and marginalizing democratic actors.

In Sudan, participants described how international peace processes, such as those supported by the UN and regional organizations, often focused on power-sharing among armed factions, excluding the broader civil society. This reinforced the perception that holding a gun, not democratic legitimacy, was the fastest path to a seat at the negotiating table in the peace talks. One participant warned that, “By negotiating with warlords and militias, donors risk legitimizing the very structures that undermine civilian authority.”

In Tunisia, international actors, particularly the EU and UN agencies, played a central role during the transition in shaping security sector reform through technical assistance and capacity-building programs that prioritized counterterrorism, border control, and institutional professionalism. Several initiatives were launched to improve police accountability and proximity—including community policing projects, human rights training, and internal disciplinary mechanisms.

However, these externally supported efforts remained largely technocratic and weakly institutionalized, as they avoided confronting entrenched power relations within the internal security sector and were constrained by fragmented political authority, leaving security governance vulnerable to post-2021 regression.

Moreover, participants raised concerns about the influence of Gulf states, Russia, Turkey, and Western powers in shaping military hierarchies and political settlements through arms transfers, economic patronage, and political endorsements. These dynamics were particularly evident in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where proxy conflicts have turned militaries into extensions of foreign influence.

There was a consensus that international actors must re-evaluate their roles in transitional contexts. Rather than security-first strategies that prioritize short-term stabilization, participants called for approaches rooted in accountability, inclusive governance, and long-term capacity building for civilian oversight institutions. As one participant concluded, “The international community must decide whether it wants to support democratic transitions or just manage conflicts. It cannot do both at the same time.”

4. Patterns of Authoritarian Adaptation

Breakout discussions then focused on patterns of authoritarian adaptation, exploring how regimes across the Arab region reinvent themselves to maintain control in the face of domestic unrest and of international scrutiny. The military and ruling elites have become adept at reshaping legal and institutional frameworks to preserve their dominance under a veneer of constitutionalism. Participants observed that these adaptations included declaring repeated states of emergency, amending constitutions to expand executive powers, and framing opposition as an existential threat to national unity.

Examples from Egypt, Syria, and Sudan illustrate how authoritarian regimes have mastered the use of transitional periods to consolidate rather than relinquish power. One participant remarked, “Transitions are no longer moments of vulnerability for authoritarianism; they are moments of reinvention.” In Egypt, the military-backed government used post-2013 constitutional amendments to institutionalize military autonomy and suppress dissent. In Syria, even as state authority fragmented, the regime used the language of anti-terrorism to justify military rule and suspend political freedom.

Participants also pointed to the use of state-controlled media, legal harassment, and anti-corruption campaigns as tools for consolidating control while claiming to uphold reforms. In Tunisia, the post-2011 transition was marked by resistance to reforming the legal framework governing the state of emergency. Despite constitutional debates and civil society demands, Decree No. 78-50 of 26 January

1978 regulating the state of emergency remained in force and continued to underpin exceptional security powers. The repeated renewal of emergency measures normalized exceptional governance, a trajectory that culminated in the July 2021 state of exception and was further reinforced by the 2022 Constitution's expansion of presidential authority over security institutions. These strategies allow militarized regimes to maintain the illusion of civilian governance while entrenching coercive rule.

A cross-cutting theme was the symbolic performance of the law. Regimes often manipulate electoral processes, parliamentary oversight, and anti-terror laws to cloak authoritarian consolidation in the language of democracy. This institutional mimicry not only confuses international observers but also weakens domestic calls for reform by blurring the lines between legal continuity and autocratic rollbacks. Participants warned that without structural safeguards, such mimicry risks creating hollow democracies where militarized power persists behind civilian façades.

5. Securitized Citizenship and Marginalization

Participants also introduced the concept of securitized citizenship, in which access to state protection, resources, and political rights is unevenly distributed along ethnic, geographic, sectarian or ideological lines. In such contexts, national belonging becomes conditional, awarded, or denied based on perceived loyalty to the regime or proximity to centers of power. This securitized logic transforms the state from a guarantor of rights to an arbiter of suspicion.

Multiple examples from different countries were presented to illustrate this phenomenon. In Sudan, participants cited how security forces used racial profiling and disproportionate violence in Darfur, South Kordofan, and the Blue Nile regions, treating these peripheries as security threats rather than equal parts of the polity. The targeting of resistance committees and youth-led protest groups in Khartoum and beyond further exemplified the regime's strategy of criminalizing dissent through a securitized lens.

In Tunisia, socio-economically marginalized communities—often concentrated in historically neglected interior regions—were subjected to coercive policing, particularly during episodes of social unrest, while politically oppositional groups have faced sustained securitization through surveillance, legal pressure, and repression following the concentration of executive power, particularly prior to 2011 and after 2021. This reflects a form of securitized citizenship in which access to protection and rights varies according to socio-economic position, political alignment, and perceived risk to public order.

Libya offers a more fragmented version of securitized citizenship. Armed groups and rival authorities often distribute access to security and services based on tribal affiliation or political alignment. Citizenship is not only stratified but also negotiated through networks of militia control, creating localized regimes of protection and punishment.

Participants emphasized that these dynamics are not anomalies but rather structural features of how militarized regimes govern. Securitization is used not only to suppress dissent but also to redraw the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within the nation-state. As one speaker put it, “In many parts of the region, citizenship has become a security status rather than a legal right.” This has serious implications for democratic reform, as it entrenches unequal access to justice, weakens social cohesion and erodes trust in state institutions.

Recognizing and dismantling the securitized frameworks of citizenship, participants argued, is essential to building inclusive and accountable systems of governance. It requires not only reforming security institutions but also reimagining the relationship between the state and its most marginalized communities.

6. The Political Economy of Military Power

The final panel of Day One addressed the political economy of military power, focusing on how economic control by military and security institutions enables them to consolidate their authority and resist reform. Participants noted that across the Arab region, militaries have become powerful economic actors, operating businesses, controlling state resources, and managing procurement systems that bypass civilian oversight.

In Egypt, participants discussed how the military’s economic empire has grown significantly since 2013, extending into sectors such as construction, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and retail. Military-owned enterprises enjoy preferential access to government contracts, tax exemptions, and protection from judicial scrutiny. As one Egyptian participant noted, “The military economy is not just a business empire, it’s a system of reward and coercion,” used to discipline civilian elites and co-opt key economic actors. These entanglements distort market competition, undermine private sector growth, and centralize economic power in the hands of unelected officials.

In Sudan, the legacy of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) was highlighted as a case where the security sector operated commercial entities spanning agriculture, mining, and banking. Participants described how these ventures were not only used to finance repression and intelligence operations but also to build parallel economies that insulated the security elite from democratic pressure. Even after GIS was formally disbanded, its successor institutions retained many of its assets and networks, complicating efforts at civilian oversight and financial transparency.

Libya’s economic landscape was presented as an extreme example of militia-based resource capture. Armed groups aligned with rival governments control fuel smuggling, border checkpoints, and local taxation systems. Rather than a centralized military economy, Libya has witnessed the emergence of a fragmented war economy in which militias exchange territorial control for financial rent and

political influence. These informal revenue streams allow armed actors to maintain autonomy from state institutions while serving as brokers of power in negotiations over peace and governance.

Participants emphasized that the political economy of militarism is not limited to material gain; it is instrumentalized as a mechanism of regime survival, elite reproduction and institutional shielding. Military enterprises are often protected by national security exemptions and secrecy laws that render them invisible to public audits or parliamentary reviews. The opacity surrounding defense budgets, procurement contracts, and military-run companies creates legal gray zones in which corruption thrives.

Cross-cutting insights included the observation that militarized economies entrench patronage systems that are resistant to reform. They create vested interests in the status quo, making demobilization or restructuring economically and politically costly. In some countries, participants noted that senior military officials retire in executive positions within state-owned enterprises or political institutions.

B. Day 2: Accountability, Reform Pathways, and Institutional Reimagination

On the second day of the workshop, the focus shifted from conceptual framing to practical exploration of reform strategies, accountability mechanisms, and institutional redesigns. The focus was on how Arab states (whether post-authoritarian, post-conflict, or hybrid) can confront entrenched military dominance and rebuild the frameworks for democratic governance and civilian oversight.

Participants engaged in sessions centered on four interrelated themes:

1. *Truth-Seeking and Transitional Justice*

Participants engaged in a thorough examination of how transitional justice mechanisms can both support and complicate the reform of civil-military relations. Truth commissions, reparations programs, institutional vetting, and legal accountability were discussed as potential pathways to restructure the balance of power between civilian actors and security institutions. However, participants emphasized that such mechanisms are highly contested in post-conflict and transitional contexts, where security actors often remain powerful stakeholders with the capacity to obstruct, delay or instrumentalize justice initiatives.

In Sudan, for instance, participants highlighted how transitional justice became a point of contention between civilian and military leaders during the transition period following the 2019 revolution. While victims of past atrocities demanded justice for war crimes in Darfur, South Kordofan, and elsewhere, military leadership sought to limit exposure and deflect responsibility. The military's control over key sovereign institutions, including the judiciary and prosecution services, makes it difficult to

initiate meaningful accountability. A Sudanese participant observed, "Justice is not just delayed here; it is structurally denied. The institutions responsible for past abuses still hold the keys to legal redress."

Tunisia's post-revolution Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD) offers an important case study. Although initially empowered to investigate human rights violations committed between 1955 and 2013, including abuses by security forces, the Commission faced sustained resistance from police unions, political elites, and segments of the public who viewed it as a divisive body. Participants noted that while the IVD produced a comprehensive report and made significant symbolic contributions, its recommendations were largely ignored. The Tunisian participant noted, "Our problem wasn't the lack of documentation -it was the absence of political will to act on what we already knew."

In Egypt, transitional justice was bypassed in favor of securitized narratives that prioritized regime continuity and counterterrorism. The post-2013 political environment delegitimized transitional justice discourse, branding it as a threat to national unity and security. Participants reflected on how the erasure of transitional justice from the political agenda entrenched impunity and normalized state violence, closing off avenues for civic healing and institutional reform.

The discussion also explores the limitations of truth commissions when they are disconnected from broader reform strategies. Several participants expressed concerns that transitional justice processes are sometimes isolated from institutional change, becoming symbolic gestures rather than vehicles for transformation. This is particularly true when commissions are poorly resourced, lack enforcement mechanisms, or are undermined by amnesty laws and elite bargains. As one participant emphasized, "We don't need more truth commissions, we need truth that leads to justice and reform."

A key takeaway was the importance of integrating transitional justice into broader civil-military reform agendas rather than treating it as a standalone process. This includes linking truth-telling to institutional vetting, reparations to structural changes, and legal accountability to civilian empowerment. Participants also called for victim-centered approaches that prioritize the voices of marginalized communities –especially women, youth, and ethnically targeted groups– who have historically borne the brunt of military violence and repression.

The session concluded with the recognition that, while transitional justice is often constrained by political realities, it remains an essential tool for confronting the past and shaping a more accountable and democratic future. Its success depends on the timing, societal consensus, and institutional alignment. Without it, the shadows of militarized repression are likely to haunt even the most well-intentioned transitions. Participants discussed how transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth commissions, reparations programs, and institutional vetting, can serve as

entry points for reforming civil–military relations. However, these processes face significant hurdles when security institutions retain power and resist scrutiny. In countries such as Sudan and Tunisia, calls for truth-seeking have often been delayed or watered down by political compromises. One Sudanese participant remarked, "Justice has become a bargaining chip in transition negotiations, not a right for victims." In Tunisia, the Truth and Dignity Commission faced resistance from security institutions, while in Egypt, transitional justice was largely bypassed in favor of counter-terrorism narratives.

2. Oversight Mechanisms and Civilian Control

Participants engaged in an in-depth discussion of the central role of oversight mechanisms in regulating the powers of military and security institutions, particularly during transitional periods. A consensus emerged that effective oversight is not merely a legal formality but also a political and institutional necessity. Participants noted that meaningful civilian control requires a combination of institutional architecture, access to information, political will, and public pressure to be effective.

A core concern raised was the weakness or absence of parliamentary oversight in many Arab states. Even where parliamentary security committees exist, they are often excluded from reviewing military budgets or operations under the pretext of national security. This lack of access severely restricts the capacity of elected civilian actors to challenge military autonomy in the region. In Egypt, for instance, participants noted that the military budget is only reviewed by a closed subcommittee with no public reporting, reinforcing the opacity and elite insulation. Similarly, in Sudan's transitional period, the Sovereign Council had no effective mechanism to oversee the military's financial or strategic decision-making, which significantly contributed to the coup. In Tunisia, the weakness of oversight mechanisms stemmed less from their formal absence than from their systematic obstruction in practice. Prior to 2021, police unions emerged as powerful veto players, actively resisting parliamentary scrutiny and undermining judicial oversight through public pressure, non-cooperation with investigations, and mobilization against accountability measures. After July 2021, however, while the political influence of police unions declined, parliamentary authority and judicial independence were weakened, significantly reducing the capacity of both institutions to exercise effective oversight over security forces.

Participants also discussed the structural limitations of ombuds institutions, audit bodies, and national human rights commissions, many of which are deliberately under-resourced, politically compromised, or lack enforcement authority. In Libya, a participant emphasized that " the institutions meant to oversee the military are themselves fragmented or co-opted. Even when they exist on paper, they cannot access the spaces controlled by militias." This reflects a broader challenge in conflict-affected states, where the monopoly on violence is fragmented and oversight bodies have no jurisdictional coherence.

An important thread in the discussion was the invisibility of intelligence and security services in oversight frameworks. Participants noted that in many countries, these agencies operate in legal gray zones and are unaccountable to parliaments or the judiciary. The need to bring internal security services, especially intelligence agencies, under democratic control was stressed repeatedly. The Tunisian participant explained, "The police have become the most visible face of the state in marginalized communities. If we can't control them, the whole idea of civilian oversight is meaningless." The post-2021 erosion of judicial independence has been central to the consolidation of securitized governance in Tunisia. Rather than relying on overt military intervention, executive authority has increasingly been exercised through legal and quasi-legal mechanisms that normalize exceptionalism. The expanded use of military courts to try civilians, the prosecution of political opponents and activists under anti-terrorism and cybercrime legislation, and the weakening of administrative and constitutional review have all contributed to embedding security power within the legal system itself. This dynamic has transformed the judiciary from a potential check on securitization into a key enabler of it, blurring the boundary between legality and coercion. Tunisia's experience demonstrates how civil–military relations can be reconfigured through law, allowing authoritarian practices to advance under the appearance of constitutional continuity.

Several participants emphasized the potential of civil society and investigative journalism to act as informal oversight mechanisms in environments where formal channels are blocked. In countries such as Tunisia and Sudan, watchdog groups, independent media, and legal aid organizations have played key roles in exposing abuse and demanding transparency. However, these actors often operate under intense pressure, surveillance, and legal restrictions, especially when confronted with entrenched security interests. A participant from Syria remarked, "In some contexts, a blog post is more powerful than a parliamentary hearing, but it also puts the writer at risk."

The session also explored international benchmarks for oversight, including UN guidance on civilian control and regional examples where security sector accountability was improved through joint parliamentary-civil society commissions. Participants expressed interest in hybrid models that combine legislative scrutiny with public engagement, particularly in settings where the parliament is weak or compromised.

Ultimately, the discussion revealed that the effectiveness of oversight depends on a broader political settlement. When military elites are part of the ruling coalition or when transitional arrangements grant them veto power, oversight mechanisms risk becoming symbolic or ineffective. Several participants noted that in transitional contexts, early constitutional design is critical for embedding robust oversight tools. Without this, reform processes become reversible, and oversight institutions remain at the mercy of political expediency.

Participants concluded that while institutional design matters, oversight must be backed by mobilized constituencies, legal authority, and cultural shifts that challenge the normalization of military secrecy. One participant summarized, "Transparency isn't just about laws; it's about who gets to ask questions, and who gets to demand answers." The workshop emphasized the need for functional oversight bodies (such as parliamentary committees, ombuds institutions, and independent auditors) that can challenge military institutions' autonomy. However, participants noted that even when such bodies exist on paper, they are frequently underfunded, politically constrained, or denied access to security budgets. A Libyan participant noted, "You cannot have oversight without access. And in our case, access is controlled by militias." In Syria and Yemen, where institutions have collapsed, participants argued for bottom-up models of oversight through local councils and civil society.

3. Institutional Design and Security Sector Reform

This session explored the design of institutions tasked with reforming and restructuring the security sector, focusing on how political transitions can (or cannot) recalibrate the power relations between military and civilian authorities. Participants underscored that security sector reform (SSR) is rarely a neutral or a technocratic exercise. Instead, it is shaped by competing interests, entrenched power networks, and historical grievances that often go unaddressed in the reform blueprints.

A dominant theme in the discussion was the failure of externally driven SSR programs to achieve sustainable outcomes. Participants criticized these efforts for treating reform as a checklist of procedural steps (training, legislative amendments, vetting) rather than addressing militarism's political and social roots. In contexts such as Egypt and Sudan, SSR initiatives introduced during or after transitions were limited to technical restructuring. They ignored the embedded hierarchies, parallel chains of command, and informal patronage systems that defined how power operated.

A participant from Tunisia remarked, "You cannot reform a system you do not understand politically. Reforming institutions without changing who controls them is just painting over cracks." The participant emphasized that post-2011 security sector reform efforts failed largely because they treated reform as a technical exercise, while leaving intact entrenched power relations—most notably the growing influence of police unions—which have acted as key veto players against accountability and institutional change.

This sentiment resonated with Libyan participants, who described how donor-led SSR frameworks failed to engage with militia dynamics and the informal governance structures that emerged during conflict. Participants argued that when SSR is disconnected from broader political and constitutional reforms, it risks entrenching the structures it seeks to change.

Another critical theme was the lack of inclusivity in the SSR design. Women, youth, ethnic minorities, and civil society actors are often excluded from reform dialogues, even though they bear the brunt of insecurity and are central to protest movements and transitional mobilization. A participant from Sudan noted, “The same generals who ran the prisons are asked to design the police. Where is the justice in that?” This echoes broader concerns that SSR often reinforces elite bargains rather than empowering communities to define their own security needs.

Participants also highlighted the importance of timing and sequencing in SSR. Rushing reforms during fragile transitions without clear political mandates or institutional readiness can trigger backlash or collapse. Simultaneously, delaying reforms until 'stability' returns often means that security institutions become further entrenched and resistant to change. A key recommendation was to embed SSR in early transitional frameworks, linking it to constitutional design, peace agreements, and budgetary reforms that institutionalize civilian leadership over armed forces.

The role of military-run businesses and institutional immunity was discussed as a major obstacle to reform. In Egypt, participants noted how military enterprises operate autonomously, shielded by national security exemptions. In Sudan, efforts to reform the military's economic holdings sparked tensions within transitional bodies, with civilian leaders demanding financial transparency and military leaders resisting scrutiny. Participants emphasized that dismantling these economic monopolies is not only a matter of equity but also of strategic necessity, since financial autonomy allows security actors to bypass legislative control and maintain parallel governance.

Participants concluded that institutional design must be context-specific, inclusive, and anchored in democratic accountability. This requires more than legal drafting or donor support; it requires mobilized political will, transitional justice integration, and persistent societal pressure. As one Libyan participant summarized, “You cannot build democratic oversight on undemocratic foundations. If the reform doesn’t redistribute power, it’s not reform, it’s repackaging.” Security Sector Reform (SSR) has emerged as a contested terrain. Many participants criticized donor-driven SSR programs for being overly technical and detached from the political realities. In Egypt and Sudan, SSR efforts were often limited to cosmetic restructuring or training programs, while core questions regarding civilian leadership, command structures, and military-owned businesses were ignored. A participant from Tunisia argued, "You can’t reform the police with a PowerPoint presentation, especially when the police still answer to the same political patrons." The discussion highlights the need for inclusive design processes that prioritize democratic principles, public trust, and accountability.

A. Institutional Legacies and Enduring Military Autonomy

Across the Arab region, the legacy of colonial rule and post-independence authoritarianism entrenched military institutions in positions of extraordinary autonomy. These legacies have shaped not only the architecture of state institutions but also the political culture in which they operate in. In countries such as Egypt and Sudan, the military has historically served as both a symbol of national identity and an instrument of executive power. Participants highlighted that in Egypt, the military's involvement in statecraft dates back to the Free Officers Movement, while in Sudan, it traces back to the repeated military coups since independence.

This legacy is not merely symbolic. It is institutionalized through constitutions that exempt military budgets from civilian review, laws that limit judicial oversight, and informal arrangements that grant the military veto power over transitions. These institutional features produce what one participant called a "sovereign enclave", a domain where the military is functionally above the law. In Tunisia, while the military has remained largely apolitical, internal security forces have exercised significant power, especially during and after political crises. Syria, on the other hand, represents a case in which the military and intelligence apparatus has been indistinguishable from the ruling regime, entrenching authoritarianism through a deeply embedded security state.

Participants emphasized that these legacies are difficult to dislodge because they are often perceived as guarantees of stability and continuity of the state. As one participant remarked, "In many Arab states, the military is not just part of the regime; it is the regime." The consequence is a structural imbalance that undermines attempts at democratic transition and civilian control in the country.

B. Institutional Legacies and Enduring Military Autonomy

The structure and design of transitional governance frameworks were identified as critical variables in shaping civil-military dynamics. In contexts such as Sudan and Libya, transitional arrangements emerged from negotiations between armed actors, political parties, and international mediators. These arrangements frequently resulted in ambiguous power-sharing structures that preserved military prerogatives under the guise of democratic reform.

In Sudan, the transitional agreement of 2019 formalized a power-sharing arrangement between civilian and military actors through the Sovereign Council. While initially hailed as a breakthrough, participants noted that the lack of enforceable oversight mechanisms and the continued dominance of military leaders over key ministries ultimately led to the October 2021 coup that ousted the government. One participant noted, "The transition was built on a handshake, not a contract. And when the handshake ended, so did the transition."

Similarly, in Libya, transitional governance has often relied on elite bargains between armed groups and political figures, creating a fragmented state structure with multiple centers of power. This has made it nearly impossible to create a unified security sector or impose consistent oversight. Tunisia, while relatively successful in its transitional phase, encountered difficulties in reforming the security sector due to bureaucratic inertia and the political influence of police unions.

Participants emphasized that successful transitional frameworks require clear timelines, enforceable legal structures and meaningful civilian representation. When these elements are absent, transitions risk being co-opted by entrenched military interests.

C. The Militarization of the Economy

Military institutions across the region have developed vast economic empires that shield them from civilian oversight and provide them with leverage over political elites. This militarization of the economy is a defining feature of contemporary civil-military relations.

In Egypt, the military operates a sprawling network of enterprises that span construction, agriculture, transportation, and manufacturing. Participants noted that these enterprises not only distort markets but also reinforce political loyalty, as access to contracts and economic privileges is tied to regime support. The Egyptian participant remarked, "We don't just have a military economy; we have a military state."

In Sudan, the former NISS and military controlled key sectors such as gold mining, banking, and telecommunications. Even after the NISS was dissolved, its successor institutions retained significant economic power, making financial reform one of the most contentious issues in the transition.

In Libya, militias operate localized war economies based on smuggling, extortion, and infrastructure control. These revenue streams enable them to resist integration into the national forces and undermine state authority.

Participants emphasized that dismantling military economic monopolies is essential to democratic transition. This includes auditing military budgets, subjecting enterprises to civilian regulatory frameworks and redirecting profits toward public services.

D. Securitization and the Fragmentation of State Authority

Another regional pattern is the proliferation of security actors (military, police, intelligence, and paramilitary forces), which has fragmented state authority and blurred the lines of accountability. Participants referred to this as the "securitization of governance," wherein security concerns override civil rights and democratic processes.

In Tunisia, the growing influence of the Ministry of Interior and police unions has led to increasing securitization, especially in marginalized interior regions. Participants noted that despite Tunisia's democratic progress, the security sector remains unreformed and is resistant to civilian oversight.

In Libya, the security landscape is dominated by militias aligned with different political factions, each claiming legitimacy and access to state resources. In Syria, the regime's reliance on multiple security and paramilitary forces, including foreign-backed militias, has fractured the state into zones of influence controlled by competing armed actors.

This fragmentation has created legal vacuums, encouraged human rights abuses, and undermined prospects for national reconciliation. As one participant put it, "When everyone carries a gun, no one carries responsibility."

E. Civilian Fragmentation and Disputed Legitimacy

Participants emphasized that weak, fragmented, or co-opted civilian actors often contribute to the persistence of military dominance. In many cases, civilian parties lack coherent policy agendas, institutional depth, or public trust. This creates a vacuum that militaries are willing to fill.

In Sudan, the transitional period was marred by tensions among political parties, technocrats, and revolutionary committees, all claiming to speak for the civilian component. This lack of unity enabled the military to present itself as a more stable and cohesive force.

In Tunisia, prior to 2021, fragmented party politics and recurrent reliance on technocratic governments weakened the authority and effectiveness of elected institutions, while segments of civil society and non-elected experts were increasingly drawn into advisory and governance roles, blurring the boundary between civic advocacy and political authority and contributing to contested civilian legitimacy.

In Egypt, the post-2013 environment saw the systematic dismantling of independent political actors, creating a de facto one-party state under military tutelage.

Participants argued that civilian cohesion, legitimacy, and capacity are essential for counterbalancing military power. This includes building coalitions, developing policy expertise, and establishing public credibility through effective governance.

F. The Influence of International Actors

The role of international actors is a double-edged sword. While foreign governments, international organizations, and donors often provide critical support for transitions, they can also entrench militarized elites through selective engagement with certain factions.

International donors and organizations (including the EU and UNDP) invested heavily in Tunisia's security sector through training, equipment, and governance programs. These interventions prioritized stability, border control, and counterterrorism over democratic accountability. Mechanisms intended to enhance oversight—such as independent complaints bodies or ethics committees—were never fully established, often due to resistance from the Ministry of Interior and police unions. As a result, international assistance inadvertently contributed to reinforcing existing power structures rather than transforming them.

In Libya, participants criticized international peace efforts for legitimizing militias by including them in power-sharing arrangements. In Sudan, foreign aid has sometimes bypassed civilian ministries, empowering security actors who control logistics and territorial access.

Security cooperation programs, particularly in counterterrorism and border control, often reinforce authoritarian practices by channeling resources directly into military and intelligence services. Participants noted that international actors must reorient their strategies toward long-term institution building, civilian empowerment, and conditionality based on rights-based benchmarks.

As one participant put it, "The world says it wants democracy, but it keeps funding guns."

G. Gender, Race, and the Geography of Military Control

Finally, participants highlighted how civil-military relations are shaped by intersecting inequalities based on gender, race, and geography. Security institutions often reproduce societal hierarchies, marginalizing women and minorities, both within their ranks and in the populations they police.

In Sudan, racialized violence in Darfur and other peripheries is carried out with impunity by security forces. In Tunisia, residents of the interior regions face harsher policing and fewer protections than those in coastal cities.

In Tunisia, harsher policing practices are more closely linked to socio-economic marginalization than to geography alone, disproportionately affecting poorer and politically marginalized communities, many of which are concentrated in interior regions.

In Egypt, the securitization of urban poor neighborhoods reflects classist and gendered assumptions regarding security threats.

Women are almost entirely excluded from decision-making in security institutions. They also face targeted violence, especially when engaging in activism or protests. Participants stressed that without addressing these inequalities, civil–military reform would reproduce the very injustices it seeks to overcome.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The workshop concluded with a reaffirmation of the urgent need to reconceptualize civil-military relations in the Arab region, not as a technical issue of institutional design alone, but as a deeply political, historically rooted, and socially contested field of struggle. Participants agreed that while the contexts differ significantly from one country to another, the patterns of military entrenchment, institutional fragmentation, and civilian marginalization are widely shared among them.

A central takeaway was the importance of moving beyond reform rhetoric toward a meaningful structural transformation. This includes not only drafting new constitutions or restructuring ministries but also fostering civic cultures, rebuilding public trust, and investing in inclusive leadership. There was a broad agreement that:

- Transitional justice must be linked to institutional reform and not isolated as a symbolic gesture.
- Oversight mechanisms must be both formal and informal, engaging parliaments, civil society, the media, and international partners.
- Security sector reform must be rooted in local context, politically feasible, and inclusive of women, youth, and historically marginalized communities.
- Civilian coalitions must be supported to develop unified strategies, policy depth and credibility.
- Donors and international actors must align their assistance with democratic principles and condition aid on transparency, inclusivity, and accountability.
- Gender and racial equity must be mainstreamed into all reform and governance processes, ensuring that security institutions reflect the societies they claim to protect.

The workshop also highlighted the need for sustained dialogue among stakeholders across borders, disciplines, and institutions. It is not sufficient to identify what is broken. The challenge is to co-create the tools, norms, and power shifts necessary for a more democratic, equitable, and accountable civil-military future.

The insights generated in the framework of the AACL Regional Working Group on Civil-Military Relations in the Arab Region will serve as the basis for continued engagement, research collaboration and regional networking. As several participants noted, the path forward will be difficult, but sustainable transformation is only possible through collective analysis, learning, and solidarity.

Endnotes

(i) This report was authored by Abdelkhalig Shaib, a Sudanese lawyer and member of the American and New York Bar Associations, who was the Facilitator of the AACL Regional Working Group on Civil-Military Relations in the Arab Region, as well as its expert on Sudan. It built on input provided by RWG members Jinan Limam (Tunisia), Mozn Hassan (Egypt), Asma Khalifa (Libya), and Rim Turkmani (Syria). Zeinab Elrayah contributed with notetaking during the RWG meetings and workshop.

The Arab Association of Constitutional Law

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