“The Man on Horseback”:
The Role of the Military in the Arab Revolutions and in their Aftermaths, 2011-2015

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INTRODUCTION:

ARAB MILITARIES AND THEORIES OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

The uprisings that took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria in 2011 highlight the critical role of the ‘man on horseback’ – the military establishment – in situations of political transition such as authoritarian breakdowns and revolutionary ruptures.1 Not surprisingly, this revived interest in the study of the armed forces in the Arab world after two and half decades of virtual neglect. More recently, analysts and experts studying the Arab uprisings have either noted or devoted considerable space to the roles of Arab militaries in these events, as two observers remarked: “after a half century of relative scholarly quietude, the widespread popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa are drawing scholars of Middle Eastern civil-military relations back to explain this watershed moment.”2 Arab militaries did not necessarily act in the manner that had been expected of them: to repress without hesitation in support of the incumbent regime. The responses varied. Furthermore, given these ruptures, it was inevitable that the ‘post-rupture’ situation in each country would witness attempts to redefine military relations vis-à-vis the state and society.3 However, in none of these countries have we witnessed a return to post-crisis situations. They are all unstable – with three of them in situations of unequivocal civil war – and this means that we can hardly talk about ‘normal’ civil-military

1 This monograph is the foundation for a book length study on Arab civil-military From the Barracks to the Square: Civil-Military Relations in the Arab World relations and which will be published in 2016.
relations or a new relationship between the security sector and the society of which it is a constituent part.

This paper first analyses the reactions of Arab militaries to the revolutions in the following six countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Specifically, it seeks answers to the question of why the military acted in the manner it did during the revolutionary crisis in each country. Second, the paper briefly explores the security forces’ behavior in the post-revolutionary period in each country. The trajectory of each country was distinctly different in the aftermath of revolution. For example, in Tunisia the military withdrew once the incumbent regime fell. Its professional detachment from the political process, however, is endangered by the security situation in the country. In Egypt, the military overthrew a democratically elected government that was led by Islamists and of whose agenda it proved extremely wary. Both Libya and Yemen descended into protracted civil wars. In Syria, the government and its military continue to fight a host of enemies well into 2015 against whom they are showing material and psychological fatigue. Little is heard of the role of the military in Bahrain after it crushed the uprising with outside help.

In a work dealing with the dynamic and unfolding situations in those highly unstable countries, several problems present themselves of which two affect the study most profoundly. First, in some instances accurate or sufficient data is hard to come by. For example, there is very little on the Bahraini military and security forces in contrast with the enormous literature on the Egyptian military and security apparatus. Furthermore, open source analysis using journalistic sources and social media requires looking at several sources and reaching an intuitive conclusion of which source best explains an event or situation. Second, because of the dynamic situation on the ground in all of the countries under consideration, something written today could be overtaken by events (OBE) tomorrow.

**History and Theory**

It is instructive to begin with some historical background. For 400 years until the end of World War I, most of the Arab world was part of the formidable Ottoman Empire and Arabs could join the Ottoman military. However, it was not until the era of reforms – known as the Tanzimat – undertaken to stem the steady political and military decline of the empire that Arabs the Ottoman army in large numbers as officers and enlisted men. Contrary to popular belief that they abandoned the empire at the first sign of trouble in 1914 and joined the enemy, they for the most part served honorably and patriotically in defense of the empire.4 It was their service in the Ottoman military that exposed them to modern nationalist thinking and ideas which could have boded ill for the empire had it survived World War I, but which were to cause problems for European colonial powers after World War I and for post-colonial regimes after World War II.5

The second colonial era in the Middle East was ushered in when Britain and France acquired the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Local armies were essentially entities set up by the colonial powers for purposes of internal security and pacification of the local populations, particularly obstreperous tribes, which resented the

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intrusion of centralizing governments. These colonial pacification forces were generally poorly equipped and ill trained, much to the chagrin of young nationalist-minded officers. In the case of the French colony of Syria, the personnel were recruited primarily from the ethnic and sectarian minorities rather than from the dominant communal groups. These colonial armies were neither designed to fight external wars – that was the job of the colonial power – nor were they configured to play a role in economic modernization and development of their respective countries.

Following World War II, many Arab colonies gained their independence. Not very long after followed a spate of coup d’états by officers disgruntled by everything in their country: envy of and distaste for the decidedly ‘unprofessional’ senior officer corps, by the state of the nation, by the slow pace of meritocratic promotion, by the perceived subjugation to ‘neo-colonial’ powers, and lastly by poor Arab military performance against the new state of Israel in 1948. One of the earliest studies – if not the first – on the role of the Arab militaries appeared in 1953 after the 1949 coup in Syria and the 1952 military revolution in Egypt. Written by political scientist Majid Khadduri, the study posited that since many forms of political ideologies and organizations seemed to have failed, the Arabs were looking elsewhere for leadership – “toward the army.”7 For two decades after the end of the colonial era, (i.e.1952) until the mid-1970s, the military establishments of the Arab world were studied in detail.8 Academics were intrigued by the alleged potential shown by the military as an institution for modernizing and developing their respective countries. American and British sociologists and political scientists in the late 1950s and early 1960s were at the forefront of arguing about the modernizing potential of militaries in the Third World.9 When it became obvious that Arab militaries had done nothing to modernize their societies, academics and policy-makers became more interested in understanding the motivations behind the military taking over the state.10 The study of civil-military relations witnessed the emergence of a robust theoretical literature on why militaries engage in coup making and on the measures taken by the rulers to prevent them from doing so.11

The 1960s and early 1970s constituted the heyday for the study of militaries in the Third World.12 Following the ‘civilianization’ of governments from the mid-1970s, the

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study of civil-military relations in the Arab world faded. Indeed, ‘the man on horseback’ was no longer seen as a critical element in the make-up of regimes. There was a focus on how authoritarian regimes used the security services – intelligence, police and paramilitary organizations – and extensive systems of patronage to keep the military out of politics. The resilience or robustness of authoritarianism in the Arab world was underpinned by the police, security and intelligence services. Suddenly beginning in 2010, authoritarianism did not seem so robust in the Arab world when rumblings of discontent turned into a torrent of revolutions in 2011.

Arab countries have certainly witnessed considerable internal ferment and violent changes in government since the post-colonial era. The overthrow of governments by so-called progressive ‘free officers’ in many of the countries between the late 1940s and early 1970s were not mass revolutions. Several years ago, Ellen K. Trimberger developed the notion of ‘revolution from above’ to describe the progressive policies of radical officers who imposed drastic socioeconomic reforms on society. This is different from a mere coup d’état by officers – which is a ‘mechanistic’ change in government often undertaken to protect corporate interests or get rid of the incumbent for various often vague reasons such as failure to protect the national interest. The Egyptian revolution of 1952 was a military takeover by a group of young and middle-ranking officers; the fact that it gained popular support does not negate the fact that it was a ‘revolution from above’ by a small group. The same can be said of subsequent ‘revolutions’ in Iraq, Syria and Libya. The only mass revolution to have occurred in the Arab world until the Arab uprisings was the Algerian war of national liberation from France, which was also a social revolution. What, then is a revolution? A social revolution, involves the direct participation of the masses and profound transformations in the relations between classes. “Revolution is the sex of politics,” said the American writer H.L. Mencken. He is right; revolutions have excited the imagination of intellectuals and political activists since the monumental French Revolution of 1789. As two of the leading political scientists and intellectuals of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt and Fred Halliday, put it, war and revolution shaped that century. However, while war has been prevalent in the Arab world, mass revolution seems to have arrived late to it.

Beginning in January 2011, a wave of popular protests swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and led to the rapid demise of the Bin Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt; a more prolonged ordeal in Libya and Yemen; and continued confrontations in Bahrain and Syria. The uprisings were caused by a host of political and socioeconomic factors, which afflicted Arab regimes. Intelligence services seem to have

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16 Considerations of space do not allow me to address extensively the issue of what a revolution is or discussions of whether the Arab ‘uprisings’ were failed revolutions.

17 For more details of social revolutions, see the seminal work by Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).


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been taken by surprise, possibly because they had grown used to quiescence from the Arab masses or because they were so focused on keeping tabs on Islamists. Once the masses came out into the streets in large numbers, the police, security, and paramilitaries – the first-line of defense of authoritarian Arab regimes – proved incapable of putting down the upheavals because they were ill-prepared to deal with the magnitude of the crisis. A country is then thrust into that delicate state, which some analysts have referred to as the revolutionary situation or revolutionary moment, characterized by the massive erosion of the incumbent’s legitimacy (who is still in power) and the gaining of legitimacy by the opposition forces (who are not in power) and yet both seem incapable of tipping the balance by themselves.19

Enter the army. The military’s status and relationship to the ruling elite and the wider society prior to a revolution explains the institution’s stance during the course of a revolution. Traditionally, the roles of militaries during the course of revolutions have not received as much attention as the roles of classes or oppositional social movements.20 This is strange as revolutions succeed or fail largely due to the actions or non-actions of this armed component of the state; or as British historian Simon Montefiore, put it: “once the crowds are in the streets, the ability to crush revolutions depends on the ruler’s willingness and ability to shed blood.”21 And wherein does this ability reside but in the coercive apparatus of the state? Indeed, “armies are the key to unlocking a revolution’s potential,” said an observer of the unfolding events in the Arab world.22

Armed forces play a key role in revolutions either by violently opposing them, staying ‘neutral’ (which is tantamount to taking sides with the revolution), breaking up into pro and anti-revolutionary units, or coming over en masse to the revolutionaries. Many years ago Katharine Chorley and Hannah Arendt addressed this topic separately and academically in two minor classics. Armed insurrection, writes Katharine Chorley, “is the classic method of making a revolution, and... it is bound to imply a clash with professionally trained troops equipped with all the gear of scientific warfare. History shows that, in the last resort, success or failure hinges on the attitude that the armed forces of the status quo government will take toward an insurrection.”23 Hannah Arendt wrote that “generally speaking, we may say that no revolution is even possible where the authority of the body politic is truly intact, and this means, under modern conditions, where the armed forces can be trusted to obey the civil authorities.”24 Leon Trotsky, a direct participant in a revolution wrote:

the fate of every revolution at a certain point is decided by a break in the disposition of the army. Against a numerous [...] military force, unarmed or

19 I have derived this notion and built upon it from Jesse Paul Lehrke, “A Cohesion Model to Assess Military Arbitration of Revolutions,” Armed Forces and Society, published online, (January 2013): 4.
almost unarmed masses of the people cannot possibly gain a victory. But no deep national crisis can fail to affect the army to some extent. Thus, along with [...] a truly popular revolution there develops a possibility [...] of its victory."25

The great American sociologist and political scientist, Charles Tilly (recently deceased), identified the “leading elite’s loss of control over the military instrument as a decisive revolutionary factor.”26 One of the leading contemporary observers of Arab civil-military relations has also stressed the key role of Arab armies in the revolutions that began in 2011.27

If the revolutionaries succeed in overthrowing the incumbent regime in relatively short order and without too much bloodshed, what happens next? Does the military step aside and allow the revolutionaries to articulate and implement their vision of a new society – be it a democracy or be it an Islamic state? In Tunisia, the military stepped aside once the overthrow of the incumbent regime had been consummated. Or does the military intervene in the political process for a wide variety of reasons, including protecting the corporate interests of the military or supposedly for the protection of the national interest as it did in Egypt, thus acting as an obstacle in the path of transition to democratic politics? If the revolutionaries do not succeed in overthrowing the incumbents (the counter-revolutionaries) they then become subject to the enormous power that the state can bring to bear on them through the use of a still cohesive and intact security services and military machine. Bahrain managed to stymie revolution as its military remained intact and received support from overseas. If the revolutionaries manage to withstand the withering power of a still intact regime and succeed in organizing themselves politically and militarily into a recognizable organization and then fight back (with international support), the result is a civil war as each side seeks to turn the balance of power in its favor. This is what happened in Syria. If the armed revolutionaries ultimately take over, it would only be possible if the armed forces of the incumbent regime have collapsed or factionalized. When the armed revolutionaries take over the remnants of the state, they are no longer the armed revolutionaries but the rulers and one of their first tasks is to restore the coercive apparatus to the state. This has been easier said than done in some cases. The post-revolutionary state of relations between the new state and the armed forces is also worth exploring briefly.

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Tunisia

Tunisia was a quite sleepy backwater in Arab politics until it paved the way to revolution in 2010. Under its two post-independence leaders – Habib Bourguiba and Zein El Abdin Bin Ali was a socially progressive state but was by no means a democracy. However, it was neither a military nor military-backed regime, as Tunisia’s military had no role in the founding of the state. 28 Founding father Habib Bourguiba was forced to create a more solid military to defend national security and sought to control it based on a clear separation between political and military powers. 29 This separation was reinforced after a failed military coup in 1962, and Bourguiba restricted the army’s power. In 1968, he gave the paramilitary National Guard (technically a civilian force) oversight over the army—and this arrangement generated a long-standing antagonism between the two forces ever since. 30 When Zein El Abdin Bin Ali seized power in 1987, he transformed Tunisia into a police state, relying on the hastily quadrupled ranks of the security and intelligence forces in the Interior Ministry to maintain his rule. 31 While the Tunisian armed forces comprise a total of 35,000 soldiers — by far the smallest in North Africa — the country was estimated to have between 130,000 to 150,000 police officers which was same number as France, a country with five times the population. 32 Under equipped, poorly trained and neglected by the regime, the regular army was kept busy on border control and supervising development projects such as road and bridge construction and building pipelines to bring water to residential areas. The army was excluded from political power, and the government purged officers who harbored political ambitions. 33 In 2002, it lost 13 officers, including Abdelaziz Skik, chief of staff of the ground forces to a mysterious helicopter ‘accident’ at Medjez el-Bab near the Tunisian-Algerian border. Officially ruled an accident due to weather conditions (though the conditions were superb) many suspected – incorrectly as it turned out – that the regime wanted to rid itself of potentially troublesome officers. 34

By 2010 much of Tunisia’s progress was proving to be a façade. 35 The country was a mess and much of it was of Bin Ali’s making. Opposition groups and the public often spoke of endemic corruption among the Tunisian ruling elite which were amply and starkly detailed by the confidential reports written by the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and made public during the WikiLeaks scandal. Disgruntled Tunisians referred to Bin Ali and his wife’s

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family, the Trabelsis, as the “quasi-mafia” or a ‘royal family.’ The Bin Ali clan had a hand in every aspect of the neo-liberal economy, be it duties on imports and exports, media, Internet providers, telecoms, banks, shopping centers or property development. Furthermore, while the coastal regions were doing well, the interior of the country was stagnant and the people growing increasingly frustrated.

The spark that started the revolution was the 17 December 2010 suicide of a young man, Mohammed Bouazizi, who publicly self-immolated after being harassed by the police for being an unlicensed fruit vendor. Surprised by the popular discontent that flared up, Bin Ali did not give in. Infuriated, he ordered the police to attack the demonstrators with deadly force. When the police began to shoot into unruly crowds, the soldiers refused to participate in the bloodshed. General Rashid Ammar, a professional artillery officer trained in Turkey and France, and Chief of Staff of the Tunisian army orchestrated the downfall of Bin Ali.36 He forbade his men from firing on the demonstrators and issued a strong warning to the police on January 13 telling them that if they did not stop shooting people, he would order the army to retaliate against the security forces. The Tunisian Army is a conscript force and most conscripts are from economically depressed areas and thus most likely shared the protesters grievances.37 The Tunisian military sided with the demonstrators, and opened fire on Tunisian security and intelligence troops. They organized security cordons, in an attempt to create a barrier between the police and protesters. Soldiers publicly ordered the police to stop the killing. This did not have the desired effect, and Rashid Ammar allegedly contacted Bin Ali directly and made it clear that the president had to leave as soon as possible to avoid a bloodbath. Ammar is also reported to have offered him a narrow time-slot of only three hours to leave by plane. Bin Ali prudently left; and the regular army speedily dispatched the remnants of pro-Ali security forces in firefights.

The military acted in the manner it did because there was no organic link between the military and the regime. The former could detach itself from the neo-patrimonial regime when the going got tough for the incumbent. In the aftermath of the revolution, the army refused to exert pressure on the political system. General Ammar underlined that the army would “remain faithful to the constitution and their actions would remain within that framework.”38 Tunisia underwent democratic elections that brought the Islamist Ennahda Party into power. This did not elicit any adverse reaction or alarm on the part of the military establishment. It is clear, however, that what the army seeks is a balance between itself and the national security apparatus tasked with maintaining domestic law and order.39

Even though the military eschewed direct interference in the political process despite the tensions between it and the Islamists when they were in power, it has increasingly found itself involved in trying to stave off violence by militant Islamist groups. The situation of low-level violence that the Tunisian military has had to deal with over the last three years has been neither a pleasant nor successful one to date. The Tunisian army

is not equipped or trained for the type of hit and run tactics and use of improvised explosive devices used by the militants. It does not seem particularly happy about this situation but it is not clear that would propel it into the political process. Demands for more and better equipment have been its approach to date.40

Egypt

The Egyptian military was the bulwark of the republican system established by junior officers in 1952 following the overthrow of the monarchy.41 It was heavily involved in the political process in the period between 1952 and 1967 with disastrous results for Egyptian military readiness vis-à-vis enemy Israel.42 Even though its direct influence in politics had waned after the 1967 defeat, when it decided to focus on developing its professional fighting capabilities, it continued to remain the silent power behind the state.43 The most relevant connection between the army and political power has been its control over the presidency: all Egyptian presidents – until Mohammed Morsi’s election to the presidency in 2012 – had been from the army and therefore chosen by the military elite. The army detached itself and its personnel from close encounters with civilian society by building military cities and bases far away from urban areas in the desert. It built up a huge economic and military construction infrastructure that provided consumer and military goods. No one knows how large this military commercial complex is, but it has been estimated at 10-40 percent of GDP.44 The senior command wishes to protect this complex. The army eschewed a direct role in internal security affairs and made its views known to the civilian elite that this was not its primary mission. Nonetheless, it did not hesitate to crush two significant challenges to the republic on two occasions when the police and paramilitary forces proved inept.45

As the revolution in Egypt unfolded in mid-January 2011, the government imposed a curfew, which the masses defied and the security services could not enforce. The regime struggled to parry the growing movement by offering concessions. These offers proved too little, too late. Mubarak and his inner circle adopted a survival strategy that was typical of an authoritarian system under pressure: undertake cosmetic liberalization measures in order to stay in power. The regime found itself backed into a corner with the security forces, namely the police and Central Security Forces unable to suppress the teeming masses in Tahrir Square. They proved unable to contain the situation even through the novel tactic of emptying prisons and allowing criminals to run riot in the hope of frightening people back to their homes.46 When Mubarak proved to have no arrows left in

his Ministry of Interior ‘quiver,’ he was forced, in the felicitous phrase of Hazem Kandil, “to summon his gravediggers,” the army, in order to restore order.47

The army was faced with a difficult situation. The Egyptian army adopted a more ambivalent attitude towards the pro-reform movement that can be explained by its stronger relationship to the system in place.48 Contrary to popular perceptions, the military was not on the side of the people from the beginning of the revolution. The people in Tahrir Square developed this narrative because they wanted to see the army in that light, and more importantly, they wanted the army to see itself in that light. This strategy of appealing to the moral stature of the armed forces made it very difficult for the military elite to take a stand decisively in favor of the regime despite the senior officers’ biases towards a president who, after all, was the source of resources and patronage.49 To be sure, they had gotten disconcerted by their declining influence within the regime over the years as Mubarak cultivated a class of crony capitalists, ignored the army’s corporate interests and political advice.50 However, these were not reasons to overthrow him.

The military’s emergence from the shadows allowed it to see the extent of the crisis facing Mubarak firsthand. From the perspective of the senior officers the president had changed from being an asset to becoming a liability; in short, the regime of Mubarak was threatening the system from which the army had long benefited. At this juncture the senior officers must have told Mubarak that he had no choice but to step down. The senior officers were not going to order the military to do a “Tiananmen Square” and violently clear central Cairo of the revolutionaries, particularly in light of reports that junior and mid-ranking officers sympathized with the demands of the protestors. Any protracted involvement of the military in suppressing the people posed the danger of military fracture. Moreover, such a distasteful job was not part of the army’s ethos; it had never developed a doctrine for internal security, as had a number of Latin American militaries in the 1960s and 1979s. Unsurprisingly, the army high command issued a declaration on January 31, 2011 that the army was not going to use force to disperse the people. Mubarak had two choices: either intensify repression, which was a losing proposition as the military was not going to be a part of it, or step down. The military emerged openly on the political scene for the first time in decades, declaring that it would guarantee a democratic transition according to a constitutional plan framed by Mubarak.

On February 11, Mubarak resigned from office and formally handed power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a ‘shadowy’ body of the 19 most senior officers of the armed forces. The military’s one-year rule in Egypt until elections were held in 2012 was marked by violence and instability. By taking over power, the military was not taking charge of or making a revolution; it came to power to forestall the deepening of the revolution. Following Mubarak’s removal some officers argued openly that it would have been ‘beneficial’ if the Egyptian military had the political power and leeway of the Turkish of some two decades ago; that is, the power to intervene in the political process actively should politics evolve along lines the officer corps did not like. Some wanted the right of

intervention and of the protection of its privileges enshrined in the revised constitution. In the post-Mubarak period the military tried its best to manipulate the political situation in its favor. Two issues particularly concerned it: a) the political and socioeconomic direction of the country; b) the maintenance of its professionalism and corporate interests.51

The military did not trust any of the political forces in existence. It recognized that the Muslim Brotherhood was the strongest force in the country after the revolution. For much of the time between its founding in 1928 and Egypt’s 2011 revolution, the Brotherhood was forced to work in the shadows during the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. It made a brief comeback under Anwar al-Sadat and was repressed by Mubarak, though it made considerable inroads in consolidating its power in civil society. Mubarak’s downfall revealed the Brotherhood as the only well organised and broadly based force in politics. In the parliamentary polls in late 2011, it captured 47 percent of the seats. Morsi’s victory in 2012’s presidential election was a modest overall success for the Brotherhood – he received only 52 percent of the vote in the two-person run off – but this was enough to allow the movement to see itself as the voice of post-Mubarak Egypt.

Mohammad Morsi’s short tenure as President was a contentious one. Though some would still give Morsi the benefit of the doubt, after all, he had been in office only one year before his abrupt removal and thus could not have performed miracles, he was unable to overcome the mutual suspicions between him and the armed forces and he proved feeble in power. The removal of Morsi from office by the coalition was a result of a coup d’état following protests that were instigated by frustration with Morsi’s yearlong rule, in which Egypt faced economic issues, energy shortages, and serious national security and diplomatic crises.

Post-Mubarak Egypt was unstable and Morsi needed to keep the army and police happy. However, the senior officer corps has an ingrained and visceral dislike of the Muslim Brotherhood for a number of reasons. First, there is the residual secular orientation of the officer corps despite the increased “Islamization” of the country and the rise of religious observance within the officer corps itself. Second, the officers fear that the Islamists in power would push Egypt along a revolutionary and revisionist path with regards to domestic, regional and international relations; this the officer corps does not want and cannot afford to see take place. Third, the officer corps was fearful of the machinations of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists among the lower ranks of the armed forces. The army command remained suspicious of the intentions of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood and opposed to their policies, which involved alleged attempts to infiltrate the army and indoctrinate it into the ideology of the Brotherhood. The command was also unhappy with criticism from leaders of the Brotherhood, including Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie, concerning the military’s role in politics and previous support for the Mubarak regime.52

Morsi’s mishandling of the political affairs of the country alienated much of the electorate and made him the target of the army, already none too happy about his ascent to power. His efforts to centralize power in his hands alarmed the army because it feared he would turn on them eventually. It worried the opposition and the people who had

participated in the revolution: we did not overthrow a dictator in order to bring another one into power they said. Morsi issued an arbitrary decree making him and his constitution-writers immune from judicial oversight. The Morsi government pushed through a hastily drafted constitution to a national referendum despite criticism from all other parties, and the referendum went Morsi’s way. His smug self-righteousness and perceived arbitrary behavior alienated that part of the large part of the electorate that had merely voted for him because they did not want could his colorless challenger, a former air force general from the ancien regime. When the people made their displeasure known in the streets, Morsi ordered the army to impose curfews in key cities on the anniversary of the January 25, 2011 Revolution. The army refused much to Morsi’s displeasure. The high command believed that Morsi wanted the army to repress the people so that their ire turns from him onto them. There was some truth to this belief, however, it was also clear that Morsi had no faith in the still totally disorganized and demoralized police and security forces that had not yet recovered from the revolution of 2011.

Morsi’s woes were not only political and constitutional. During his campaign Morsi had made sweeping promises of economic growth. During his 12 months in office he implemented virtually none of his promised economic reforms or initiatives. The main economic indicators worsened markedly as indicated in: growing government debt and the crushing cost of borrowing money, its borrowing cost, the dismal state of foreign reserves, and rising unemployment. Morsi borrowed from the rich Arab countries of the Gulf, which allowed him to hold at bay popular discontent over the worsening socioeconomic situation. However, this ‘Band-Aid’ allowed Morsi to put off the day when he would be forced to implement the profound economic reforms and cutbacks in government spending that would open the door to more aid and investment. Morsi was also unable to take the decision to lift the subsidies on basic services and goods, which he knew would result in substantial increases in the price of such goods with potentially serious embarrassment for him.

The national security policies of the Morsi government alarmed a significant element of the elite, most importantly the senior officer corps. The religious and sectarian dimension of Morsi’s policies was inconsistent with the strategic thinking of the army on national security issues. The army was dismayed by the Cairo’s support of the idea of Islamic jihad against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. Morsi announced this policy stance with great fanfare in June 2012, and the government turned a blind eye to Egyptians going as foreign fighters to fight in the jihad against Damascus. It intensified to encouraging Egyptians to join the armed rebellion against the Syrian regime. The Egyptian officer corps considered the encouragement of Egyptian involvement in a jihad against the Syrian regime as having a serious and negative on impact national security when Egyptian foreign fighters returned, as was the case with the ‘Egyptian Afghans’ who fought Soviet forces in Afghanistan. These veterans had contributed to the Islamist terrorism of the 1990s, which killed and wounded thousands in the 1990s.53 Closer to home the onset of rapprochement with the Islamic resistance movement Hamas in Palestine, which controls the Gaza Strip and regularly engaged in armed conflict with Israel armed was viewed with alarm by the senior officer corps. The army has always viewed Sinai Peninsula, which has a border with the Gaza Strip, as an Achilles Heel or ‘soft underbelly’ of Egyptian national security. This

53 Concerning these security issues see Mona El-Kouedi, “The Curious Case of the Egyptian Armed Forces,” NATO Defence College Research Report (July 2013): 1-4; also discussions with Egyptian security officials during my trip to Cairo in May 2015 as part of an American delegation headed by Glen Howard, President of The Jamestown Foundation.
belief was reinforced by the worsening security situation in the Sinai following Mubarak’s overthrow when forces were withdrawn from the peninsula to deal with the chaos in the heartland.

The worsening domestic and national security situations – not helped by Morsi’s actions and policies including misconduct and mismanagement – turned the army against Morsi completely. The growing popular fury against Morsi helped the army in its decision to get rid of him. The army sees its main missions as the preservation of the territorial integrity of Egypt and the maintenance of security and stability at home. The commander of the armed forces, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi threatened military intervention on January 29, 2013 if the situation in the country did not get better. People began to see the writing on the wall against the Morsi government. In April 2013, people began to circulate a petition calling for the resignation of Morsi. A movement – called Tamarod (“Rebel”) – emerged in the spring of 2013 and gathered considerable grass-roots support. Massive protests against the government propelled the army to intervene in the political process. Al-Sisi issued Morsi a 48-hour ultimatum to accept the demand of protesters for presidential elections. He refused and the army overthrew him on July 3, 2013. Sensitive to the people’s reluctance to see a military government in power, the officer corps stressed that an interim government of civilian technocrats would run the country. The real power behind the scenes was the army, but the technocrats ran the country in preparation for presidential elections in 2014, which were won by Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, who had by then retired from the army in order to run for the presidency.

It remains to be seen whether President Sisi can restore Egypt’s political and socioeconomic health, restore the rift between different groups, and promote desperately needed economic reforms. The army’s role under the Sisi presidency has been most prominent in two distinct domains: the economic arena and internal security. The military’s penetration of the economy has increased now that the capitalist cronies of Mubarak are no longer there to resist the efforts of the senior officer corps in that direction. Furthermore, neither public opinion nor the legislature is capable of challenging the legitimacy of the Egyptian military’s enormous military-business empire. The army, now in government with international support, is increasing its economic power and is free to impose the conditions it deems suitable. This has all been made possible with the help of an increasing number of foreign political allies, global investors and multinationals.54 In the meantime, the government does little for the small and medium-sized enterprises that are burdened by too many taxes and an economic environment that is stacked against them. The average Egyptian employee is burdened by dire economic circumstances.

The military’s energies are also taken up with the deteriorating situation in Sinai and fears that militant activity there could migrate into Egypt’s heartland in a significant way.55 The problems of the Sinai Peninsula have been longstanding: underdevelopment and poverty of the local inhabitants, but the Egyptian state has resolutely turned a blind

55 Discussions with senior Egyptian government officials, intelligence personnel and military officers in Cairo at the office of the National Security Council, the General Directorate of Intelligence, and members of the SCAF at the Ministry of Defence, May 2015; see also “Brothers outlawed – Egypt’s struggle with increasing insurgent attacks,” Jane’s Intelligence Review, Vol.26, No.2 (1 February 2014); “Harsh Muslim Brotherhood treatment drives supporters toward insurgency,” Jane’s Intelligence Weekly, (26 March 2014).
eye to these problems. Furthermore, it had little interest in or information about the people living there. Sinai mattered only strategically as a buffer against the Islamists in Gaza and against Israel. A logical policy on the part of the state would have been to strength this buffer by improving the lot of the people and the infrastructure. It did not and it was surprised when terrorist attacks began in the first decade of the 21st century.\textsuperscript{56} An attack on the towns of El-Arish and Sheikh Zuweid on October 24, 2014 resulted in the deaths of 30 soldiers.\textsuperscript{57} This led the Egyptian government to implement more draconian measures designed to stifle criticism and public dissent, whether in mainland Egypt or the Sinai itself. The government ramped up its harsh ‘kinetic’ or enemy-centric counterinsurgency operations, which are designed to capture or kill enemy combatants hiding among the population, rather than focusing on military and non-military measures designed to separate the population from the violent groups. In this context, on October 29, 2014 the government enacted measures to seal the Sinai from the troublesome Gaza Strip by declaring a buffer zone along the border with Egypt and that all homes and businesses lying within that buffer zone would be razed to the ground by the end of the year. The terrorists continued with their attacks; on January 29, 2015, the most deadly group, Jami`at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis launched almost simultaneous attacks on ten separate security installations and military bases in Sinai. The development of relations between the major Islamist terrorist group in Sinai, Jami`at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, and so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (‘Daesh’) further alarmed the authorities.\textsuperscript{58}

It is not clear that the Egyptian national security apparatus is capable of dealing successfully with the internal security problems in the short-term. It suffers from some debilitating weaknesses from the politico-strategic to the operational and tactical levels. The army doesn’t ‘think counterinsurgency,’ which along with counterterrorism – the domain of the demoralized and ill-equipped paramilitary forces and police – are what the country needs to think about. If you do not think much about counterinsurgency, this means that you are not capable of learning it. The Egyptian army has a conventional warfare mindset; this is not unique to it. Many armies detest counterinsurgency (COIN) and are resistant to it. However, when they are faced with it, they are forced to ultimately learn how to do it. Currently, despite what they say to outsiders about implementing a COIN strategy in Sinai, the reality on the ground where they are constantly attacked by more innovative and mobile Islamist terrorists and where the local population is more and more alienated shows that the Egyptians are lying to themselves more than to outsiders. The military needs a profound education in the subtleties of COIN as Egypt continues to face a deterioration of the situation within and around its borders.


Libya

Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi came to power through a military coup in 1969, overthrowing the Sanusi monarchy that Western powers set up in 1952 after the territory had been liberated from the control of Fascist Italy.59 The monarchy formed a small regular army, which it sidelined in favor of the Cyrenaica Mobile Forces that was dominated by the Bra’assa tribe allied to the ruling elite.60 King Muhammad Idris used the Cyrenaica Defense Force (or Eastern Regional Force) as a tool to ensure the continuity of the monarchy in power.61 Moreover, the tribes of Cyrenaica – the stronghold of the Sanusiya sect – enjoyed considerable autonomy because of the trust that the monarchy had in them.62

Gaddafi stemmed from the G’hous clan of the originally Berber Gaddafi tribe from the region of Wadi Tlel near Syrte. Under Gaddafi, the Libyan regime continued with and deepened the defunct monarchy’s bifurcation of the armed forces into two distinct groups: the regular army whose chief task it was to defend the country against external threats and the regime’s praetorian apparatus which was dominated by members of his tribe and tribes allied with him.63 In his quest to reduce the threat from the armed forces to his power, Gaddafi fragmented it to such an extent that it did not represent a cohesive force. Although some of the young officers of the revolution of 1969 like Abdel Fattah Yunis and Suleiman Mohammad Obeidi came from Cyrenaica, Gaddafi tended to distrust the Cyrenaicans and reduced their presence in the armed forces and security services. When the revolution erupted in March 2011, Gaddafi was forced to rely on the loyal praetorian units commanded by family members. Libya’s military, which was estimated to have 75,000 personnel, lacked the discipline and professionalism to remain intact.64 Furthermore, it had many mercenaries who had no emotional attachment to the Libyan people. The unraveling of the military also had its roots in the country’s strong tribal culture.65 Each of the main tribes was represented in the military and when a tribe went over to the revolutionaries, its foot soldiers in the military followed.66 Gaddafi retained the Praetorian Guard units, which were commanded by his closest cronies and sons. These units were better equipped than the regular military and secondly most of the Libyan military’s heavy weaponry was in the west, not the east; hence the various units that defected in the east – Cyrenaica- came over to the revolution without too much in the way of heavy weaponry.

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65 Ibid.
The rebels’ rag-tag army did poorly in the early stages; in March 2011 Gaddafi loyalists halted a seemingly euphoric advance westward toward Tripoli in its tracks.67 The fragmentation and collapse of the Libyan army should, ideally, have been to the benefit of the revolutionaries; it was not because the regime’s Praetorian Guard, which was made up of several units under the control of Gaddafi’s cronies and sons, remained intact. The international community’s diplomatic and military cover provided the rebels with the wherewithal to win against Gaddafi in the end. This cover – which incidentally was the reason behind the civil war’s length – allowed them to train a more potent army and help improve their morale considerably. The air strikes by NATO forces attrited Gaddafi’s elite units by destroying armor and heavy weaponry and this helped level the ‘playing field’ on the ground between regime and rebel forces.

Libya emerged from civil war without a recognizable army. In the aftermath of the civil war, one of the most pressing, if not the most, is for a new government to re-establish the state monopoly over the instruments of coercion by abolishing the myriad militias and creating a new national army.68 Given that the state in post-Gaddafi Libya does not have the wherewithal to impose itself on society, it is unsurprising that clashes between militias and the government as well as among militia units have occurred on a regular basis. The militias are better armed than the small force that the transitional government has at its disposal. The government did not know how to reconstruct an effective national army that would come under civilian control; it simply lacked the capacity and expertise to engage in wholesale security sector reform and it was clear that it needed the help of the outside world to develop a military from scratch. The Libyan government needed to collect the thousands of small arms still in the country, demobilize the militias and integrate those who wish to become professional soldiers into the embryonic army. It required foreign expertise to train the new army and to develop a curriculum for training the officer corps in the ‘proper’ civil-military relations and the rank and file in civic nationalism.

Libya needed to develop a cadre of civilian strategic and military experts and civilians who would have oversight of the military budget and of its requirements.69 This is a long-list of things to do; it is evident by the bloody clashes between various militias and between militias and government forces that the government had neither the resources nor the will to do them and that the international community – particularly those countries that helped the revolutionaries win – had neither the interest nor willingness. The weaknesses of the post-Gaddaﬁ Libyan state, best exemplified by a lack of an effective military under government control, has contributed to the fragmentation of the country, the rise of independent militias, and the resurgence of violent Islamist terrorist organizations.

Yemen

The popular uprising in Yemen beginning in February 2011 took the form of peaceful protests led by youth groups motivated by the Egyptian revolution that was still in full swing. As violence erupted in Sana’a, Yemen’s President Saleh began making concessions from the very beginning. On February 2, he announced that he would step down at the end of his current term, would not run for the presidency, and would not transfer power to his son at the end of his term. To further placate the opposition, he dismissed several provincial governors, and announced a referendum on a new constitution before the end of the year. These concessions, however, did not ease the growing pressure demanding the toppling of his regime. The escalation of popular protests in Yemen began to draw in large numbers of opponents to the Saleh regime throughout Yemen. These people collectively formed the largest group joining the protests after the Friday, March 18 massacre of demonstrators in Taghyir Square (Square of Change) when over fifty people were killed. Public pressure on Saleh, who appeared to be gradually losing elements of his power, continued in the form of resignations from the party, government, parliament, and diplomatic missions. He also lost support from the tribes allied to him when they declared their loyalty to the revolution after recurrent visits to Taghyir Square. This put the president on the defensive, to the point that news spread throughout Yemen and abroad on March 23 that a transitional agreement had been reached in which the powers of the president were to be transferred to the vice president, and from him to a Presidential Council, and that Saleh was going to step down in a matter of hours. On Sunday March 27, the Yemeni opposition announced that negotiations on the transfer of authority had been halted, and the next day Saleh announced that he would remain steadfast in the face of the ongoing protests, stating that he had the support of a majority of the country’s population. This announcement coincided with a request by the General People’s Congress (GPC), the ruling party, which called on Saleh to remain in power until the end of his term in 2013. Thus, attitudes hardened once again in the face of a process of peaceful political transition, sparking fears of another scenario that could lead to conflict and division within the country.

The factors that led towards conflict and dissent within Yemen were also present within the armed forces. Civil-military relations in Yemen have been established over the past century on a paradoxical foundation: some armies and units have been strengthened by tribal and family patronages to protect and enforce a weak central government, but the army has also been considered as a potential threat to the government. The popular uprising in Yemen resulted in a split of the armed forces and clashes that extended to the entire country between multiple factions within all layers of civil society, resulting in a civil war. President Saleh was a former military officer and the armed forces were the main pillar of his regime.70 In Yemen, the civil-military relations are based on and within the context of a tribal state, which is less important in Libya and marginal in Syria.71 The power of tribes within the army and the state as well as the role of the army in the political decision-making process have been established over the last century from the reign of Imam Yahya (1905–1948), who created the first Yemeni armies (two regular armies and

72 Imam Yahya was first Imam of the Zaydi sect in 1905 and then Imam of Yemen in 1926.
the so-called Jaysh al-Barani or the Tribe Army), to Saleh’s tribal and family network, via a succession of coups d’état resulting in the perpetuation of military and tribal influences over the state. A clear gap was created between the “elite” and the “common” armies. The appointment of military and security commanders on the basis of family affiliation to ensure personal loyalty to the president was a characteristic of the pyramid of power in Yemen. During the revolution of 2011, for example, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh - the former president’s son – was commander of the influential Republican Guard and Special Forces, and Khalid Ali Abdullah Saleh – another of the president’s sons – was commander of the Mountain Troops Armored Division.

Yemen’s political elite has sought to ensure the army’s loyalty through direct familial allegiance. In the final analysis, this did not help much when the revolution erupted in 2011. Forces within the regime itself brought about the collapse of the system. A large number of army officers supported the revolution, seconding their demands from the regime and declaring their protection of the protesters on March 20. General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (Ali Mohsen), Saleh’s half-brother and commander of the North and West military districts and of the 1st Armored Division, was the second most powerful figure in Yemen.73 Ali Mohsen defected with eleven military commanders after the dramatic events of March 18 during which more than fifty peaceful and unarmed protesters were shot dead by Saleh’s security forces.74 A large number of politician figures from the influential al-Ahmar family (not related to Ali Mohsen) followed their leader the Sheik of Saleh’s own Hashid tribal confederation, Sadeq al-Ahmar into opposition. Ali Mohsen and Sadeq al-Ahmar both opposed publicly the succession of Saleh’s son to the presidency.75 The succession issue was the principal reason for Ali Mohsen and the al-Ahmar family’s defections, and the events of the March 18 were an “honorable excuse.” Those two major defections were the tipping point that turned the Yemeni uprising into a civil war. A part of the regular army was therefore supporting the protestors and running its own agenda: the mobilization of Mohsen’s 1st Armored Division in the streets of Sana’a, which reduced the pressure against the Houthi rebels in the north, who then wrested control of major cities in the Sa’ada and Hajjah governorates.76 The defections of General Mohamed Ali Mohsen, Commander of the Eastern military zone, and General Faisal Rajab and General Thabet Nasser al Jahori, both in charge of the Aden Zone, allowed the Southern Movement and AQAP to extend their influence in and control over the Southern governorates.77 Rebel forces composed of professional soldiers, organized rebel groups, tribal forces estimated at over 20,000 men in arms78 and a potent local terrorist organization in the shape of an Al-Qaeda affiliate attacked the remnants of Saleh’s forces.79 The military’s desertion of the regime accelerated shortly thereafter: officers and units joining the ranks of the revolution

73 Ben Smith, “Yemen on the brink of civil war?” House of Commons Library Standard Note 5998 (9 June 2011).
also included the head of the Eastern Military Sector, General Mohammad Ali Mohsen (the president’s cousin), General Hamid al-Qashaibi (head of the 310th Brigade in Umran province), and General Saif al-Baqari (head of the Central Military Sector). The regime’s direct reaction was announced in Defense Minister Mohammad Nasser Ali’s speech on March 21 in which he proclaimed the army’s support for President Saleh in the face of “any coup against democracy.”

The loyalists could not cope with the accelerating rate of defections and simply did not have the manpower to reverse the tide. The writing on the wall forced Saleh to sign a power-transfer agreement known as the “Riyadh Agreement,” brokered by the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council on November 23, 2011. On February 11, 2012, Abu Rabbuh Mansur Hadi was elected president, replacing Saleh. Hadi had to grapple with a plethora of challenges, including a thoroughly broken country, separatist and autonomist movements in the north and south, and a rise in Salafist movements associated with Al-Qaeda. Hadi had little to no control of the army and security forces that had either unraveled or whose remnants were in the hands of supporters of the former ruler.80 The deal did not end the violence since it offered Saleh and his family immunity for the crimes they committed; it did not involve all parties of the opposition and did not force the new President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Al-Hadi to remove Saleh’s son and others dominant figures of the Saleh’s network from their positions of power. Moreover, some of the protesters criticized the influence of Saudi Arabia over the agreement, knowing that the Saudis never wanted a strong central government in Sana’a. Although parts of Yemen’s military helped to bring about political change in 2011, they have played no decisive role in the burgeoning Houthi insurgency and the intervention of Arab countries in the disintegrating country. Yemen’s air space is now under the complete control of Saudi Arabia, and its military bases have been taken over by Houthi rebels or are being obliterated along with innocent civilians by the Saudi Air Force and their allies. In the remote regions, terrorists aligned with Al-Qaeda have seized military bases, equipment and weaponry that once belonged to the Yemeni army.81

The total collapse of the Yemeni army has led one leading analyst of contemporary Arab civil-military relations to pose the relevant question: what has happened to the Yemeni army.82 Any notion of a professional army dedicated to the twin missions of ensuring the security of the country against both external and internal enemies did not exist in the Yemen of Ali Abdullah Saleh. The entrenchment of cronyism, nepotism and the extension of traditional kinship ties into what was ostensibly a modern force were factors that ensured that any post-revolutionary rebuilding of the armed forces would be enormously difficult. Saleh tried to build up the military because he needed it to fight centrifugal forces within Yemen. Clearly, this instrument also required control measures over it so that it would not get involved in the political process. However, unlike the richer Arab countries, which had the financial wherewithal and organizational structures to build modern infrastructures of surveillance over the armed forces, Salah had to resort to more

tried traditional measures. During his regime, military appointments were made on the basis of personal ties or tribal affiliations and not on the basis of the training and skills of the officers. Tribal politics are part and parcel of Yemen’s social makeup, but Saleh’s export of tribal ethos into the armed forces ensured that structures and procedures within the armed forces would be distorted and incapable of resulting in a professional force that protect the borders and ensure security within the country. Tribes used the military to bolster their positions and secure patronage, which resulted in massive corruption and nepotism. The Riyadh Agreement highlighted the need for restructuring the Yemeni army and emphasized that the Hadi government must “integrate the armed forces under unified, national and professional leadership.”

Two committees were set up with much fanfare to make recommendations on security sector reform. On 6 April, President Hadi released a list of new political and military appointments. He removed Saleh’s half-brother, General Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar, from the Air Force command. He was made assistant to the Defense Minister. Hadi also removed Tareq Mohammed Saleh, Saleh’s nephew, from command of the Navy, as well as many other key players entrenched in Saleh’s decades old network. Over the past year, four of the five military districts commanders have been removed from their positions. Only Major General Ali Mohsen kept his position as commander of the Northwestern district. Hadi’s attempts to rebuild and re-structure the Yemeni army were hindered by strenuous opposition at the center by remnants of the former regime and more importantly by the fact that his presidency itself was overcome by a host of disasters buffeting Yemen following the downfall of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The greatest threats to Yemen’s stability are the national and self-determination ambitions of separatists in the north and south of the country, both of which prompted foreign intervention. In the north, Yemen is facing a widespread Shia revolt led by the Houthis concentrated in Sa’da province. The spark that ignited the armed struggle in 2004 was the killing of Hussein al-Houthi. By 2009, the conflict had become full blown, to the point that Yemen embarked on a scorched earth operation against rebel cells in the north. The fighting spilled over into Saudi Arabia as the rebels crossed the border, capturing several villages and killing Saudi soldiers. The Houthi attack on its territory pulled the Saudi army into the fighting. In early November 2009, while the Yemeni army was fighting rebels in the south, the Saudis attacked from the north in a classical Pincer Move. For three months, the Saudis, equipped with the very best weapons the West could offer, worked to quell the uprising deep in Yemeni territory. In 2010, as the result of international pressure, the warring sides signed a ceasefire agreement.

The Houthi rebellion was reignited in 2011 when the rebels exploited chaos generated by protests and the transfer of army units from Sa’da province to Sana’a, to seize control of large tracts of land along the Saudi border. In February 2014, the sides agreed to a ceasefire. Elements among the Houthis expressed fierce opposition to the division into provinces as outlined by the regime. The Houthis say that their region, Sa’da, has been

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84 Mohammed Ghobari and Mohammed Mukhashaf, “Yemen sacks Saleh half-brother in shake-up, son remains,” Reuters (6 April 2012).

included in a province that has no significant natural resources and no access to the sea. The Houthis view this as an intentional attempt on the part of the central government to damage their ability to develop economically and undermine their power. Unsurprisingly, it was not long before violence between Sana’a and the Houthis broke out again, the result of which was the ongoing civil war currently taking place and involving a host of outside powers. The Houthis seized Sana’a in September 2014 and overthrew Hadi. In the absence of an effective Yemeni army to confront them and aided by remnants of the army that despised Hadi, the Houthis swept southwards towards Aden. It was not long before Yemen’s ability to solve its domestic problems were removed from its hands and the country and its people found themselves helpless spectators in a war involving regional powers.
CHAPTER 3: THE ETHNO-SECTARIAN MILITARIES: BAHRAIN AND SYRIA

Bahrain

Bahrain is the only Arab monarchy so far to have experienced the full effects of the Arab uprisings. It is ruled by the Al-Khalifa family and is politically dominated by a Sunni Arab minority that makes up 30 percent of the population. The majority of the population is made up of Shia of Arab and Iranian ancestry who feel that the state has discriminated against them politically and economically. Despite a number of reforms since Sheikh Hamad’s assumption of power in 2002, political discontent amongst large sections of Bahraini society remains. This was reflected in the aborted uprising of 2011.

Two key factors account for the resilience of the Al-Khalifa dynasty. First, the government believed that it could rely on the effectiveness and loyalty of the armed forces and internal security apparatus in quashing any domestic challenge. The Shias have little or no representation in the armed forces, which are overwhelmingly Sunni. Some Shia are to be found in administrative and clerical positions within the armed forces and police; but they have no presence in the combat arms or the intelligence branches of the small Bahraini Defense Forces which are key to the defense of the ruling elite.86 Hence, there was little likelihood of the Bahrain armed forces going over en masse to the largely Shia revolutionaries. Furthermore, the Bahraini armed forces and internal security services have a large number of foreign-born nationals – mainly Arabs from other countries and Pakistanis – who would presumably have no sympathy for the revolutionaries.

Second, the international environment provided al-Khalifas with considerable support for their continuation in power. The ruling elite is correct in its view that they can rely on both physical and moral support from other monarchies in the GCC such as Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Between 1500-2000 Saudi and Emirati troops crossed the causeway from Saudi Arabia into Bahrain in a well-orchestrated show of force on March 14, 2011 that was designed to send a message to the revolutionaries and to the region. Moreover, these troops helped to stiffen the resolve of Bahrain’s troops.87 Saudi Arabia, in particular, is the heart of Arab counterrevolution and has played an important role stemming the revolutionary tide in Bahrain which, if successful in overturning the Al-Khalifas, would provide the Islamic Republic of Iran, the leading Shia power in the world, with a stunning success in the Gulf region.88 After the ‘loss’ of Iraq to the Shias, Saudi Arabia cannot countenance another Shia victory on its doorstep, just across from its oil-producing eastern province which is also home to Saudi Arabia’s own disgruntled Shia-minority. Saudi Arabia has even suggested a form of union with Bahrain defined by common security and defense policies. Though other Arab monarchies have not warmed to this idea, it seems that hardliners within the al-Khalifa dynasty strongly support it.

88 Toby Craig Jones, “Saudi Arabia versus the Arab Spring,” Raritan: A Quarterly Review 31, 2 (Fall 2011): 43-59. It looked askance at what happened in Tunisia and in Egypt. However, its support for revolution in Syria can be explained by both ideological and geopolitical factors. First, it hopes for the overthrow of an ideologically unsavory sectarian regime of the Alawites. Second, its overthrow would deprive Iran (Saudi Arabia’s main bugbear in the region) of an important Arab ally and presence in the heart of the Arab world.
Syria

In early 2011, Damascus watched the unfolding events in Tunisia and Egypt with indifference or even with barely concealed glee as the regimes fighting for their lives were Western ‘puppets.’ Things began to look different in mid-March 2011 when violence broke out in Deraa. The situation began to unravel thereafter with the outbreak of large-scale violence in other cities in April 2011; the regime struck back hard and brutally.89 In contrast with Yemen and Libya, the Syrian military has cracked down on the protestors without a total splitting of the armed forces or massive defections at the outset of the revolution. The initial structural cohesion of the Syrian armed forces may be explained by two major factors. First, there is the importance of the military and the security forces in the political pyramid of power. Hafez al-Assad (Bashar’s father) was a military officer who relied on the army and the Ba’ath party as the main pillar of his regime.90 Bashar al-Assad had no military background but was promoted to the position of general; the highest rank within the military, prior his election as president highlighting the importance of the army in the power structure.91

The second factor that can explain the regime repression and the support of the majority of the soldiers is the sectarian aspect of the Syrian regime. An estimated 100,000 Alawites work in the various and overlapping security services which they also control. Tens of thousands more serve in the regular army, which is composed of seven divisions. The most important is the fourth division, which was commanded by Maher al-Assad, Bashar’s brother (who also ran the smaller elite presidential guard). The fourth division is the ‘heaviest’ and largest unit in the Syrian Army with 40,000-50,000 men, all Alawite, and is armed with the most sophisticated Russian military equipment. It has been the regime’s strike force in trying to root out the rebels from key cities such as Aleppo. The Syrian military has been hit by defections by individual dissidents, and not by a split within the entire military.92 These isolated dissidents cannot deliver a strong message to the regime. The sectarian make-up of each military unit prevents the Sunnis from acting together (but not Alawites, as the fourth division demonstrates). The sectarian factor is also illustrated by the regime shadow state in the shape of unofficial paramilitary units. These form the battalions of the shabbiha and the irregular forces. The shabbiha emerged in the 1970s and are made up of people from the countryside, and probably criminals freed at the start of the revolt. In towns along the Mediterranean coast, local shabbiha gangs are said to run protection rackets, weapons- and drug-smuggling rings, and other criminal enterprises. Membership of the shabbiha is drawn largely from President Assad’s minority Alawite sect. In late March 2011, the shabbiha appeared to have come to the aid of Assad when major

89 Clement Hoges, Samiha Shafy and Bernhard Zand, “Syria’s Neighbors Fear Regime Change,” Der Spiegel, (5 March 2011).
anti-government protests erupted in Latakia, as well as the nearby towns of Baniyas and Jabla.

There is the ‘asabiyya (the strong social cohesion) of this formerly despised and ill-treated ‘Alawi minority whose sons are now in power.93 In contrast with Tunisia and Egypt, the fate of the Syrian military and security services are intricately tied with that of the regime. Certain key divisions of the military have been used in quashing the revolution and have not shown any signs of disintegration. Assad still enjoys tacit backing from a fair proportion of Syrians. The very brutality of his crackdown has, ironically but perhaps deliberately, bolstered loyalty among minorities that together make up a third of Syria’s 23m people.94 Heavy-handed government tactics have served to implicate the Alawites as a whole; raising fears of retribution should the regime fall.

The international arena has had an impact on the war’s trajectory. The Syrian revolutionaries only started to get covert sustained international support either in late 2011 or early 2012. While it is not clear who is helping them – although all evidence points to Turkey and the U.S., France, Britain and Arab Gulf countries – the command, control and communications of the rebels improved by mid-2012. This new situation has enabled the rebels to begin inflicting significant casualties on the military and the security forces. However, this was not enough to turn the tide against the regime for a wide variety of reasons. First, there has been the impact of the support provided to the Syrian regime by the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Lebanese Shia movement and guerrilla organization, Hezbollah. This support partly explains the turn of the tide in favor of the regime in 2013. Second, the continued determination of the Syrian military to fight, despite defections, was another factor on keeping the Rebels at bay until early 2015 when the pressure on the Syrian forces increased. Third, what helped the regime maintain itself was the ‘fear of the alternative’ that existed among the various ethno-sectarian communities. Many Alawites, Druze, Christians, and Sunnis resist the regime, but they stick by it because of their fear of the Islamist extremists’ ideology and what they could do if they took over. The behavior of Islamist militants on the ground in Syria and Iraq reinforces their fears.

After two years of being on the defensive due to the resilience of the Syrian regime – briefly discussed above – by mid-2015, the situation on the ground began to change in favor of the armed opposition. In spring 2015, the rebels scored a number of remarkable victories in the northern and southern parts of the country. This was a reflection of better training, improved morale, and most important of all, better command, control and coordination among the various competing factions. After its stunning defeats in spring 2015, a series of reports began pointing to the factors behind the erosion and partial collapse of the Syrian military. The decline of the military was reflected in the increase in desertsions, families hiding or encouraging their sons to flee ahead of military call-ups and ageing equipment that is increasingly unsuitable for operational use.95 The most alarming symbol of the military’s collapse was its slow but steady transformation into a patchwork

One of the best discussions of the current balance of power in Syria is Charles Lister, “Why Assad is Losing,” Foreign Policy, (5 May 2015), http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/05/05-assad-los…
CONCLUSION: “EVERY REVOLUTION IS REVOLUTIONARY IN ITS OWN WAY.”97

Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, opens one of his masterpieces, Anna Karenina, with the sentence: “Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Authoritarian regimes are all very similar; when an authoritarian regime breaks down the trajectory of its collapse is peculiar to it. In the felicitous words of Arab specialist Bassam Haddad the “basic heterogeneity” of the cases must not be underestimated: “Egypt is not Tunisia, and both are not Libya. All three are removed from Yemen, Bahrain and Syria.”

What can we learn from the role of the military in the ‘Arab Spring’?

Each of the six cases is sui generis and the behavior of each army has been shaped by the characteristics of military power in each state, by the idiosyncrasies and contours of the political and socioeconomic environments in each country, and by the impact of the outside world on the course of each revolution. Nonetheless, we can make some generalizations that seem to be quite solid for the six cases.

First, a regular military establishment that is not linked organically to the regime may not defend it when serious political crisis hits. A state is a set of institutions, of which the armed forces constitute a part. A ruling regime, however, is a network of people tied to one another by links of patronage, family, tribal, ethnic or sectarian connections. These connections may or may not include the military. In Tunisia the military had no organic links to the Bin Ali regime; but it did believe that its duty was to uphold the state and to protect the people. However, in Egypt, the situation was more complex. At one point, the officer corps was very much linked to the regime precisely because it was the force behind the emergence of the republican system. These links became frayed particularly during the last decade of the Mubarak regime. It would be wrong to assume that the senior command would have wanted to see the overthrow of the republican system established in 1952 which had enshrined the military’s preeminence and for which the military is fighting to maintain even now in the post-revolutionary era.

Second, tribally penetrated militaries are by definition linked to the ruling regime. However, those in power will tend to promote officers from their own tribe or allied tribes to the officer corps, creating a gap between the commanders and the foot soldiers who are often from tribes or regions removed from the centers of power. The penetration of the military by the tribes also has the effect of disconnecting it from the population at large. In Libya the political insignificance and structural weaknesses of the regular military, the existence of a parallel military force in the shape of the ‘elite’ units and mercenaries under Gaddafi henchmen and relatives, and the salience of tribalism were all important factors to consider in the trajectory of the revolution and civil war. The situation in Yemen bears

some similarities with that in Libya, particularly as it pertains to the salience of tribalism within the armed forces and within society generally.

Third, ethno-sectarian minority regimes like those of Bahrain and Syria are hard to overthrow. This is a paradox because they are assumed to be weak since they rest on narrow foundations and should present no difficulty for revolutionaries with mass [ostensibly majority] support. On the contrary, minority regimes go down hard. Precisely because they rest on such narrow foundations, the efforts to which they go to maintain power are extraordinary. The situation in Syria is not unique; in 1991 the Sunni-minority regime of Saddam Hussein fought and won a desperate civil war against Kurdish insurgents in the north and Shia ones in the south after its conventional military was obliterated by the United States and its allies in Desert Storm. Saddam Hussein used its overwhelmingly Sunni elite Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard divisions to crush the uprisings. There is an international element in ensuring that minority regimes are able to maintain themselves in power. Syria is supported by Iran, which has provided the Asad regime with support and aid; however, the constellation of forces arrayed against the Asad regime is slowly but surely turning the tide. In Bahrain, the regime looks like it is going to stay in power for the indefinite future because of the international forces arrayed on its side.

Fourth, we cannot ignore the impact of the outside world on the trajectories of the Arab revolutions. It is a historical fact that revolutions have had a considerable impact on the outside world. This has been pointed out a long time ago by the Tunisian sociologist, Elbaki Hermassi, who wrote of the "demonstration effect" of revolutions beyond their borders and of course, by the political scientist Stephen Walt, in his Revolution and War. Countries feel threatened when their neighbors or strategically important states undergo massive sociopolitical upheaval. They intervene either to prop up the incumbent or at times, even to accelerate and consolidate the process of change in the hope of a rapid return to normality. Thus the outside world certainly has a demonstration effect on the trajectories of events, including revolutions, within countries. The impact of the outside world can be seen in support for the revolutionaries or counter-revolutionaries by foreign powers or by non-state actors with a stake in the outcomes of revolutions in neighboring countries or strategically important ones. Though data in a number of cases is still quite tenuous and uncertain – Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen – it is clear that the outside world has had an impact on the revolution’s success in Libya and can explain the failures of revolution in Bahrain and Syria. With conspiracies and rumors rampant in the region, it is difficult to effectively trace whether France, the United States, and Saudi Arabia had serious impact on the trajectories of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Yemeni revolutions respectively. And if they did, how effective was that influence in compelling the incumbent to take leave of the levers of power in his respective country? In the cases of Libya, Syria, and Bahrain, the situation is more clear-cut simply because outside intervention was evident in the shape of the impact on the ground. Foreign intervention allowed the Libyan rebels to recoup and fight back; effective support by Russia, and intervention on the ground by Iran and Hezbollah allowed the Syrian regime to survive. In the case of Bahrain, the determination of the Gulf Cooperation Council to avoid the collapse of one of their own to a majority from a religious sect of which they were frightened, was instrumental in keeping the Al-Khalifas in

power. This is not to mention the strategic aspect in their deliberations, which was that the downfall of the Al-Khalifas would have been a tremendous victory for Iran the Shia state, and a country with a longstanding dubious historical claim to the island.

A revolutionary situation emerges in a country as a result of accumulated grievances on the part of the population and might tip into violent political contestation against the state. However, whether a revolution succeeds or not depends on the response of the state’s coercive apparatus. The response of the armed forces is itself dependent on its relationship with the existing regime, its socioeconomic status, its ethno-sectarian and regional make-up, and on its links with patron states which provide it with arms and training, and which may or may not influence its ideas on civil-military relations. The armed forces could support the incumbent regime wholeheartedly, it could declare neutrality (which is tantamount to supporting the revolution), go over to the ‘people,’ or splinter into opposing groups, with some units supporting the regime and some supporting the revolutionaries.

None of the revolutions in the Arab world have succeeded if we define success here not merely as return to ‘normalcy,’ but in establishing a better system that reflects the aspirations of the people who had undertaken the revolution. To say that success is equated with the democracy, security sector reform, and the establishment of the rule of law as well as the implementation of socioeconomic reforms might seem like the imposition of a ‘partisan’ Western narrative on the events of 2011. However, this is what many of the people wanted – some of the language and words in the media and placards might have not been familiar to Western audiences -- even if unscrupulous and totalitarian political groups had also jumped on the bandwagon. True in four of the countries the incumbent dictators were overthrown and this either with the help of the military or because of its collapse. The post-revolutionary trajectories of each of the Arab countries that had undergone revolutionary hiatus since 2011 have also been vastly different and none can be said to have been happy to date. Tunisia was the only country that seemed to have re-established a sense of normality, but one that was vastly better than under the police state of Ben Ali. Inclusionary politics seemed to be the name of the game; and the army went back to the barracks. This normality may not last long. Tunisia is buffeted by Islamist violence within its borders and unfortunately for it, it borders Libya a country in chaos. The armed forces have demanded better equipment and more training to deal with the situation. Libya was helped along in its revolution and was then left alone to become a failing state. The national government has no ‘national army’ to enforce the writ of the state and the country is clearly fracturing along regional lines. In Egypt, the army removed its blessings from a regime from which it had benefited for years, but which had become a threat to its privileges and stability. It overthrew another president, the first civilian one, a year later. Much of the blame for that event lies with that president and his entourage. The current regime in Egypt is a ‘national security’ state that is strongly supported by outside powers and buffeted by worsening internal socioeconomic and security problems. Bahrain has defeated its revolution to date. In this it had the help of its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council and the use of mercenary security forces that had no sympathy for the revolutionaries. As the Sunni-Shia schism in the region widens things may get worse in Bahrain again. However, as long as the Gulf Arab countries remain stable and committed to Bahrain’s defense – as is the U.S., which in 2015 decided to start selling the Bahrain Defence Forces weapons again and the security forces remain solidly loyal – it is inconceivable that the incumbent regime will be overthrown. Syria and Yemen do not control their own destinies at present. In Yemen, there is also no longer a national army.
The efforts to rebuild the military following the revolution failed because the government was weak. It was faced with the structural peculiarities of tribal and regional power centers entrenched within the military and with sectarian, terrorist, and separatist forces that either taxed the military or were more proficient and better armed. In Syria a smaller weary army buffeted by desertions and increasing death toll has had to be buttressed by a wide variety of pro-government proxy forces and militias.

Several decades ago Mao Zedong pointed out that a revolution is not a ‘picnic.’ The unhappy events following the Arab revolutions of 2011 have certainly proven the validity of this dictum.

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