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SAYIGH, Yezid (2011) “Civil-military relations in the Middle East: patterns and implications for reform”, *Ponencia presentada en el X Seminario Internacional sobre Seguridad y Defensa en el Mediterráneo. Fuerzas Armadas y Transiciones Democráticas en el Mediterráneo*, organizado en Barcelona por CIDOB y Ministerio de Defensa el día 13 de Junio de 2011.

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# CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM

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## **Introduction**

National armed forces have taken varying stances towards the uprisings that have unfolded in several Arab countries since the end of 2010. In Tunisia and Egypt, the Army was the midwife of political transition; in the former it then retreated to the backstage, while in the latter it assumed power. The Libyan Army, for its part, quickly fragmented as some units defected to the rebel cause or stood on the sidelines, while others fought for Colonel Mu'ammār Qadhafi and his regime. In Yemen the Army remained unified, but several senior commanders openly warned President Ali Abdullah Saleh against suppressing the protests, deployed troops to protect the unarmed demonstrators, and eventually called on the president publicly to step down. The Syrian Army, in contrast, is believed to suffer low morale and some instances of defection among lower-ranking conscripts from poor regions of the country, but otherwise has remained overwhelmingly loyal to the regime, mirroring its cohesion during the bitter confrontations with the PLO in Lebanon and with the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1976-1982, culminating in the Hama massacre.

What has determined the stance of the armed forces in each case is the manner and degree of their institutionalization into authoritarian systems. Alfred Stepan's work on Latin America is pertinent here, specifically his distinction between the army in relation to the state – both as formal institutions exercising constitutional powers and obligations – and the army as a part of a political regime – where more informal and multifaceted or multilevel relations operate. Institutionalization in the Arab case can be seen in three main forms: the embedding of armies in power structures and ruling elites, their intertwining with police forces and internal security agencies, and their functioning as social welfare systems for core constituencies. Introducing and strengthening democratic control of armed forces requires awareness of these dimensions and a multi-pronged approach that addresses each of them. Transforming civil-military relations may not be the only route to achieving the parallel reform and democratic governance of the rest of the security sector (domestic policing and internal security), but is likely to make it easier.

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## Embeddedness in social structures and ruling elites

Throughout the Arab region, executive power is frequently concentrated in narrow networks of family members, senior bureaucrats, and business cronies. This both depends on, and is reflected in, the reliance of presidents and kings alike on family members to head key military commands, as is evident in the republican regimes of Libya, Syria, and Yemen and in the monarchic regimes of Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, armies are often built around, and shaped by, communal or regional loyalties, making their cohesion and effectiveness hostage to those loyalties. In Bahrain, for example, the monarchy has promoted a Sunni Muslim bias in the armed forces and the exclusion of the Shi'i Muslim majority of the population as a means of resisting domestic pressures for democratization. In fellow monarchy Jordan, a de facto policy of exclusion of Palestinians has been in place since the 1970 civil war, with the army instead representing the East Bank population, especially that of rural areas and the under-developed, tribally-based South.

To the East, the pre-2003 Iraqi Army contained a large number of Shi'i Muslim Arabs, including in ranking positions, but Sunni Muslim Arabs, especially and clansmen from Saddam Hussein's home town Tikrit and its region, predominated in the army-within-the-army formed by the Republican and Presidential Guards; since 2003 ethno-sectarian affiliation has been a primary determinant of whether or not Iraqis will join the Army, which regional brigades they enter, and whether or not they will obey commanders who are not from the same ethnicity or sect.

These patterns are also evident elsewhere. Tribal and regional alliances are both important in Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, to the extent that tribal relations may be said to have penetrated both the armed forces and the state. Sectarian identity remains central in Lebanon, where the army has undergone several models of separation and integration of units and the officer corps along sectarian lines. Sectarian and regional identities are no less important in neighbouring Syria: army personnel are drawn from all communities, with a natural preponderance of the majority Sunni Muslims in the general population, but minority 'Alawi Muslims dominate certain key units and commands, while senior Sunni officers are drawn heavily from the southern Houran region, to balance against fellow Sunnis from the main cities and the North.

Mutual distrust between ruling elites and certain communities helps explain the reliance on foreign personnel to fulfil military missions in some Arab countries. Bahrain has repeatedly recruited Sunni Muslims from other Arab countries and, reportedly, from Pakistan, to serve in its armed forces, so as to avoid recruiting Bahraini Shi'is. Libya has gone further, paying Lebanese and Palestinian parties to provide militiamen to help fight its border wars with Chad in the 1980s, training an Islamic Legion to operate in the Sahel and, more recently, to help defend the Qadhafi regime against the Libyan uprising. The lack of nationals willing to join the military in the small, affluent populations of the Gulf monarchies is another factor prompting the hire of foreigners: Kuwait relies heavily on *bidoon* (stateless) personnel, while in the UAE and KSA non-nationals on contract are mid-level officers, advisors, and Air Force ground crews.

## Intertwining of the agencies of coercion

The second main aspect of the institutionalization of national armed forces into authoritarian systems is their intertwining with other coercive agencies of the state: the police, intelligence services, and other internal security forces. Most Arab states maintain numerous, and large, agencies tasked with the maintenance of public law and order, fighting crime, and asserting regime control. To take the most prominent cases for which relatively reliable data is available: the Egyptian Ministry of Interior has 1.4 million employees (police, armed security forces, border guards, informers), while its Saudi counterpart has 750,000; Tunisia has 120,000 internal security personnel; the Political Security Organization in Yemen has a strength of 150,000, and it is only one among several agencies engaged in internal security and policing; and the reconstructed (internal) Iraqi Security Forces have 415,000-600,000 personnel of all types. In most of these cases, internal security forces outnumber the armed forces by a wide margin.

Intertwining has been driven almost entirely by regime protection. It is evident, for example, in assigning the army a constitutionally defined role in undertaking an internal security role, in addition to its main mission of external defence. At the same time, measures taken from the 1970s onwards to protect regimes against military coups d'état – coup-proofing – resulted in a proliferation of intelligence agencies that were initially set up to monitor the army, and then to monitor each other. Massive increases in oil revenue and in the circulation of various forms of capital and rent within the region made this possible, contributing, predictably, to further massive expansion in the number of people employed in the military and internal security sectors. This went hand in hand with increases in military pay, especially for the officer corps, a range of generous allowances and subsidies (food, housing, consumer goods), and continued heavy spending on procurement and infrastructure.

Regime protection also prompted the formation of paramilitary internal security agencies, often fielding heavy weaponry. The Ba'th Party's Popular Army and Fedayeen Saddam provided this role in pre-2003 Iraq, as did the more heavily-armed and professionally-trained *sary al-dif* (Defense Companies) and *sary al-Sir* (Struggle Companies) in Syria. Libya's Revolutionary Guards were intended to perform a similar role, as do the more tightly-organized Security Battalions, which appear to have spearheaded the Qadhafi regime's counter-attacks during the present conflict. This is mostly a phenomenon of republican regimes, but the National Guard in Saudi Arabia arguably performs the same function in a monarchic setting. What also distinguishes most of these paramilitary formations is that they have often been commanded by close male relatives of state leaders.

The 'war on terror' has further militarized internal security, again blurring the distinctions between external defence, public law and order, and regime protection and consequently between national armed forces and domestic police and intelligence agencies. In numerous Arab countries, new police units have been created or old ones retooled for counter-terrorism: SWAT teams, commando-type Special Forces, and dedicated counterterrorism battalions. These units answer to a variety of constitutional or de facto authorities – in some cases coming under ministries

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of interior, in others under parallel structures reporting to state leaders, whether directly or indirectly – dividing in effect along factional or partisan allegiances.

Most countries moreover already have paramilitary gendarmeries, which historically have been used to pacify and police rural areas. Such forces number 60,000 in Algeria and 50,000 in Morocco, while virtually the entirety of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces are in fact gendarmes rather than police. Jordan created an independent General Directorate of Gendarmerie in 2008, and even the non-state Palestinian Authority and Kurdish Regional Government have transformed former guerillas into armed constabulary units with US training.

The intertwining of national armed forces and domestic police and intelligence agencies has several implications. First, it reveals the hybrid nature and purposes of the state's coercive apparatus: the military and internal security spheres are rarely demarcated clearly. This complicates establishing civilian control or democratic governance of either. The implication of armies in internal security and regime protection may have adverse effects, however: some armies evince unease over the excesses of internal security agencies and of predatory presidents-for-life. Outright distaste was apparently a factor in the role played by the Tunisian army in evicting President Zine al-Abdin Bin-Ali in January 2011. Armies may also desire to reduce the confusion of roles with militarized domestic security and intelligence agencies and curb and the latter's autonomy, as occurred in Brazil's *abertura*. For these and other reasons, armies may endorse controlled transition to more liberal politics.

## Social welfare

The above underlines the extensiveness of military and security employment. This reveals a central social welfare function: governments use military employment to shield core constituencies from the impact of deepening economic liberalization and privatization. As the latter processes have accelerated, the proportion of populations living at or below the poverty line has grown in many countries, reaching 40 per cent in Jordan, for example. Military (and security) employment ensures that core social constituencies that provide regimes with crucial support – military manpower, police and intelligence personnel, and civil servants – are relatively protected. It does not offer its beneficiaries affluence by any means – indeed it does not even provide full protection against declining living standards as economies privatize and modernize – but it slows and cushions the worst impacts as growing numbers of their compatriots experience widening income disparities and descend into poverty.

The scale of the social welfare function is evident from the combined personnel numbers of armies and domestic police and intelligence agencies: 2,000,000 in Egypt, 850,000 in Iraq, over 200,000 in Jordan, 950,000 in Saudi Arabia. These figures represent significant percentages of national labour forces, even more so of active labour forces, which are directly subsidized by the state. The figures also point to the importance of military and security employment for household income in a large number of families in every country. This form of social welfare

complements, and overlaps with, others: much of the financial burden of maintaining large armies and domestic police and intelligence agencies is obscured by accounting for it under the budgets of other ministries, such as health, housing, and finance (for pensions). Military social welfare may even spawn its own patronage systems: the Saudi Arabian Ministries of Defense and Civil Aviation, Ministry of Interior, and National Guard, which are all headed by royals, function as “states within the state”, each with its parallel security forces and parallel infrastructures in housing, education, and health.

Maintaining these systems imposes a growing, and for many countries unaffordable, burden on public finances. A number have responded by allowing the army to engage in commercial and economic activities. In Egypt, for example, the army has developed what is often described as an “economic empire”, legally sanctioned by the state. It runs factories, producing everything from ovens and clothing to tires and vehicles, manages hotels and tourist resorts, and operates bakeries. Initially the services and goods produced were intended for army rank-and-file only, but over the past two decades they have been increasingly on offer to the civilian market. The army now competes directly with the private sector in the economy, taking advantage of its abundant supply of cheap labor, tax free status, and reduced import duties, while retaining all its profits, ostensibly to improve conditions for its rank-and-file.

In Syria, on the other hand, the army is known to have been involved for decades in black market activities on a massive scale: especially during its long deployment in Lebanon in 1976-2005, but also across the borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan. Tolerance of illicit economic activity has been a means both of compensating for inadequate budgets and low pay, and of integrating senior commanders into regime networks. Yemen offers a third example, in which the president and his close family control the country’s largest economic conglomerate through the military pension fund of the army, maintaining large stakes in diverse areas of production, services, and external trade.

In all these cases, the army may resist reforms that threaten to curb or end its economic activities, whether directly or through privatization of state assets and services from which it derives rent or market access. Indeed, it is more than likely that armies will resist coming under formal, routine audit by the cabinet, parliament, or ministries of finance, let alone withdrawing from the civilian economy altogether. There is a paradox: the army desires domestic stability so that it may remain outside politics, yet will seek to guarantee its budget and protect its private economy. Though not an issue in wealthier Arab countries – such as the GCC petro-monarchies – where armies have little autonomy and do not engage in independent economic activity, wider attempts to separate political decision-making power from economic ownership may generate new tensions and challenges, with knock-on effects for civil-military relations. In general in the region, protection of budgets and social welfare may determine the attitude of armies towards democratization, while possibly also leading to divergence and fissures within armies along lines of seniority of rank, generation, and models of professional formation and socialization, and the associated factor of external relations (i.e. the sources of training, doctrine, and normative values).

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## Conclusion: Political attitudes and roles

Whether armies support peaceful transition, revert to repression, or fragment will be key to their ability to maintain or develop their professional and corporate identities in the aftermath. This is moreover highly contingent on their readiness to accept readjustment of their institutionalization into state systems; specifically the manner in which this is pursued by other actors, its pace, and the nature of any compromises that are negotiated. It is most likely that the decisive pressures, whether in support of transition and renegotiation of civil-military relations or in opposition to them, will come from the ground forces which are not only the largest component of national armed forces, but also, due to their dependence on conscripts or recruitment among lower-income and lower-skilled social sectors, the most affected by pressures on living standards and pensions and consequently the most vulnerable to the same socio-economic factors that drive the popular uprisings. Senior commanders are very sensitive to this, as the Egyptian army's role in the ouster of Hosni Mubarak demonstrated graphically, but this is not, in itself, any assurance that the military as a whole will ultimately throw its lot in with democracy movements. A new status quo is just as likely to emerge, combining elements of *ancien regimes* with the more conservative wings of opposition movements, in which 'stability' is prioritized, something most external powers are also likely to favour. Bringing about genuine democratic governance of armed forces, not to mention genuine reform within the military itself, still requires a protracted political struggle on multiple levels.