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## Arab armies: agents of change? Before and after 2011

BY  
Florence Gaub



## Chaillot Papers



EU Institute for Security Studies

100, avenue de Suffren

75015 Paris

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Director: Antonio Missioli

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# ARAB ARMIES: AGENTS OF CHANGE? BEFORE AND AFTER 2011

*Florence Gaub*

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CHAILLOT PAPERS *March 2014*

## **The author**

Florence Gaub is Senior Analyst at the EUISS where she works on the Middle East and North Africa and on security sector reform. In her focus on the Arab world she monitors post-conflict developments, Arab military forces, conflict structures and geostrategic dimensions of the Arab region.

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**Institute for Security Studies**

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# Foreword

We all tend to look at new occurrences through old lenses: it is a fact of life. Old lenses focus on those elements of the picture that appear most familiar but inevitably neglect or ignore those that are less so, thus missing the complexity of the whole picture. When the uprisings in the Arab world began three years ago, Europeans – and Westerners at large – at first invoked familiar language: the term ‘spring’ echoed 1968 Prague or, further down the road of history, *le printemps des peuples* in 1848 Europe (the ‘contagion’ effect). Neither precedent was particularly encouraging, as both were violently repressed – although those popular uprisings were eventually vindicated decades later.

Another recurrent comparison has been with 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, despite the different geopolitical backgrounds (no crumbling Soviet-type ‘empire’ in the MENA region). In retrospect, however, the analogy with 1989 appears useful when comparing the speed and scope of ‘regime change’ after the uprisings. In Central Europe, the pace of change accelerated as regimes toppled in one country and then another. In the Arab world, by contrast, the pace has become ever slower, from the lightning speed of the ‘Jasmine revolution’ in Tunisia to the protracted civil war in Syria – let alone the dogs that did not bark (as Sherlock Holmes might have put it) in Algeria and elsewhere, or the twists and turns that occurred even in the countries affected by the ‘Arabellion’ (as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* actually did put it). From 1989 onwards, transformation became work in progress in all Central European countries. Since 2011, each Arab country has taken a markedly different path, and inside a few of them the dynamics of change have hardly been linear.

Florence Gaub’s *Chaillot Paper* offers us a new and original pair of lenses through which to look. It delves into the history, the sociology, the economics and the politics of the different national armies in the Arab world, trying to explain both *la longue durée* of traditions and identities and *la courte durée* of tactical decisions. It sheds light on why certain developments have occurred (or not occurred) in certain countries. It helps us read a map full of crossroads, dead ends and roads less travelled. And it highlights factors that will have to be taken into account in order to put together a more reliable picture of our Southern neighbours, and to be better prepared to act – and react – in the future.

Antonio Missiroli

Paris, March 2014





# Introduction

Many aspects of the so-called Arab Spring came as a surprise: the mass demonstrations, the toppling of dictatorships, and indeed the timing. One of the most unexpected aspects, however, was the behaviour of the respective military forces.

Regarded until 2011 as being unequivocal supporters of the regimes in power, they were expected to crack down on the demonstrators with an iron fist. Decades of military dictatorships, *coups d'état* and wars had entrenched the notion of Arab armed forces as agents of coercion, not agents of change. But with one exception, the Arab armies did not live up to this expectation: they sided with the protesters or simply disintegrated. In Tunisia the military leadership played a key role in bringing about regime change; the Egyptian armed forces sided with protestors not once but twice, first facilitating and then aborting a democratic process; while Libya's army imploded. Only the Syrian army is prosecuting a civil war on behalf of its regime.

Not only were Arab military forces agents or at least facilitators of political change (for better or for worse): the regimes that were being challenged during the Arab Spring all had military origins as well. This was the case in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria (although President Bashar al-Assad originally had no military career, his father, Hafez al-Assad, did). While the reverse is not true – Algeria and Sudan, both regimes rooted in military power, did not experience large-scale upheaval in 2011 – and while the Arab Spring was not explicitly a revolt against military forces in politics, it still had a decidedly military component. Most importantly, it highlighted the fact that Arab armed forces have, and will continue to have, a political role that extends beyond their military function.

The Arab Spring has therefore marked a watershed in how Arab military forces are perceived: one way or the other, they have once again become the political actors they were prior to the 1970s, and as such they are unquestionably a force to be reckoned with. Before that, they were commonly perceived by Western analysts as agents of progress and reform: modernisation theory saw them as being in the vanguard of nation-building and welcomed the *coups d'état* which swept away the governments of Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Egypt following independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Almost every Arab country experienced the military meddling with politics one way or the other – hence their long history of involvement in matters beyond the military realm.

At that time, the main challenge Arab societies were facing was modernisation: many observers judged that the armed forces could play a positive role in this

## Arab armies: agents of change? Before and after 2011

process, uniting pluralistic societies, reforming autocratic systems and generally spearheading innovation in societies that were considered rurally backward, lacking a cohesive sense of national identity and incapable of reform from the bottom up. Seen as resistant to the idea of modern citizenship, such attitudes were considered obstacles to the formation of a nation.<sup>1</sup>

The armed forces were in a position to overcome such obstacles because, in the words of Samuel Huntington, 'they challenge the oligarchy, and they promote social and economic reform, national integration (...), they assail waste, backwardness, and corruption, and they introduce into the society highly middle-class ideas of efficiency, honesty, and national loyalty.'<sup>2</sup>

Although considered outdated today, this kind of thinking continues to permeate the perception, and indeed self-perception, of some of the Arab armed forces after the Arab Spring: it provides the backdrop for the involvement of the military in political affairs (such as in Egypt), and explains why the military felt empowered by society to act. Today, at a time of intense political confrontation between Islamist and secular forces, the military continues to display nationalist and modernist traits which place it closer to the secular camp.

As agents of the state, the Arab military forces continue also to be political agents post-2011. This is not new in itself: if anything, Arab armies have traditionally been agents of change. More often than not, Arab regimes were changed directly by the military or at the very least the military aided and abetted new regimes in their ascension to power – 2011 and 2013 being cases in point.

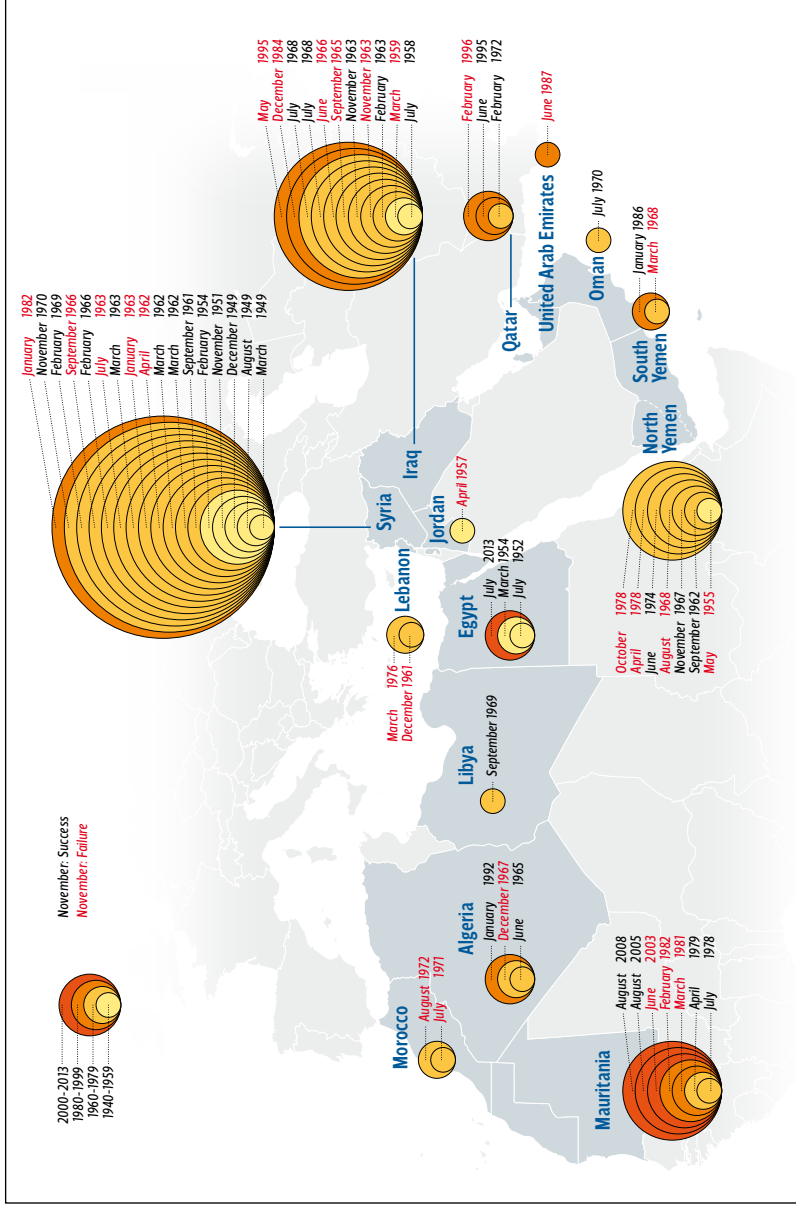
And there have been countless *coups d'état* in the Arab world: every decade since the 1940s has seen at least two *coups d'état* in an Arabic-speaking country, but it was in particular the three decades following World War II which saw such *coups* emerge as the norm rather than the exception. 55 attempts, half of them successful, took place across the region between 1930 and 1980; Iraq (where the first Arab *coup* after independence took place in 1936) and Syria turned out to be particularly prone to them, hence controverting the theory that *coups* are less likely to take place in plural societies. In other countries, such as Egypt or Algeria, the military and other state institutions were deeply intertwined to the extent that while no *coup* occurred for decades, the armed forces still exerted a powerful influence on the political process. Regime change in the Arab world often took place through a pattern of *coup* and counter-*coup*. A remarkable exception to this rule are the Gulf states, whose military forces have generally remained aloof from politics. Similarly, the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan have been able to contain their armed forces after attempted military *coups* in 1971 and 1957 respectively.

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1. William Gutteridge, *Military Institutions and Power in the New States* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964); Morris Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing Nations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Edward Shils, 'The Military in the Political Development of the New States', in John J. Johnson (ed.), *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

2. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 203.

Figure 1: Arab military coups – 1948 to the present



Sources for data: Eliezer Be'eri, 'The Waning of the Military Coup in Arab Politics'; The Center for Systemic Peace.

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At that time, military-orchestrated *coups* were often condoned not only by the respective populations but also by Western analysts who endorsed them as a necessary step towards modernity. In their view, in this transformational process the military served as a midwife because it had to, and would return to the barracks once its role as midwife was completed – a perception shared by the Arab officers themselves: as Gamal Abdel Nasser explained in his 1954 *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, ‘If the army does not move – who else will?’

In Arab officer reasoning, be it in 1952 or 2013, armed forces act because societal conditions force them to do so, not because the institution particularly enjoys political involvement. The notion that the army is the only institution capable of liberating their respective countries socially and nationally echoes through virtually all ‘Communiqués No. One’, such as that issued by General Al-Sisi in July 2013: ‘As the Armed Forces cannot just turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the movement and call of the Egyptian people, they have invoked their patriotic, and not political, role.’

By and large, *coups* waned as a phenomenon in the Middle East after the end of the 1970s. But the notion that the armed forces had withdrawn from politics was an illusion: their absence was in fact largely the result of the regimes’ successful ‘*coup-proofing*’, i.e. the reduction of military capacity and incentive to stage *coups*. Since the military had become unpopular in the 1970s due to largely inefficient modernisation policies and the continuous defeats against Israel, leaders who had come to power on the back of military *coups* sought to superficially distance themselves from the military by shedding their uniforms.

The holding of elections in these countries solidified military rule and gave it a veneer of legitimacy. In 1956, four years after the *coup* that brought the Free Officers to power in Egypt, their members – which included future President Anwar al-Sadat – resigned their military commissions and Gamal Abdel Nasser became head of state following a referendum. Hosni Mubarak traded in his Air Marshal uniform for civilian attire the day he succeeded Sadat after his assassination by Islamist army officers in 1981. Similarly, Syria’s President Hafez al-Assad formally left the air force eventually, just as Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi left the army. However, it should be noted that, despite Saddam Hussein’s predilection for appearing in military uniform, he never actually served in the Iraqi armed forces – although he came to power with their help.

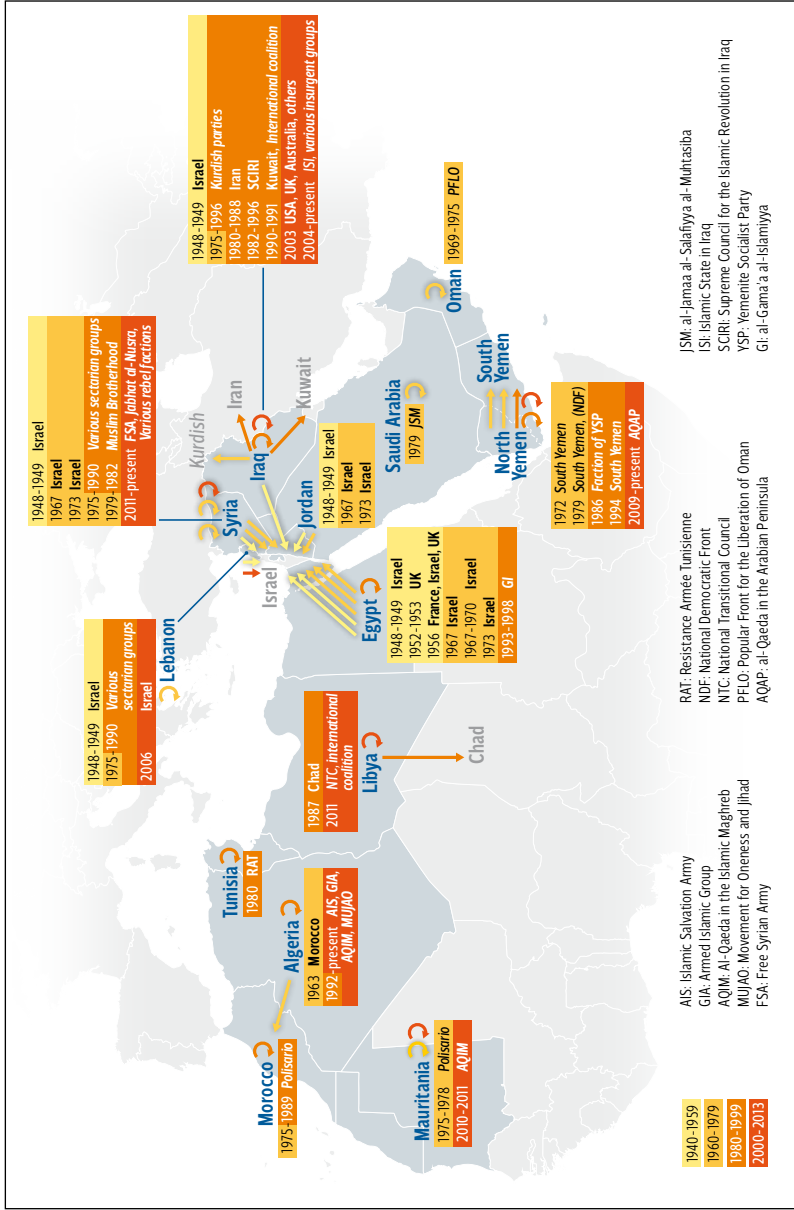
By and large, such ‘civilianisation’ of military regimes led to a blurring of lines between the armed forces as an institution and the regimes in power, and the widespread perception that the former were an integral part of the latter, supportive of the central authoritarian power. But the events of 2011 have shown that the relationship between regime and armed forces was more complex than that. Regimes born out of a military context proved to be remarkably stable – until 2011, none of those who had come to power prior to 1980 had been overturned from within. Given this rather static state of affairs, in the 1980-2011 period Middle East specialists did not devote much attention to the study of the Arab armed forces.

While in retrospect the Arab Spring should perhaps not have been entirely unexpected, given the regimes' poor economic performance, record of human rights abuses and military defeat, there is still an element of surprise: the reactions of the armed forces in different Arab countries to the 2011 events were quite divergent. Libya's military, thought to be a ruthless war-fighting machine, largely melted away; the Egyptian as well as the Tunisian armed forces sided with the protesters against a regime presided over by a former officer; the Yemeni military split into two, while only the Syrian armed forces remained faithful to the regime, despite rumours of disintegration due to their multi-confessional nature.

In sum, only one of the Arab militaries confronted with the massive social dislocation unleashed by the Arab Spring behaved in the expected way, i.e. unequivocally standing by the regime and suppressing the uprisings. The others facilitated regime change either actively or passively, and in Egypt assumed an even more direct role. In all cases, the armed forces were, and remain, the kingmakers, whose support is essential for rulers to hold onto, or accede to, power. But what drives these forces? Why do they choose to act, or not act, under certain political conditions? When do they have the capacity to act, and when is it that they do not?

While these questions are fundamental, they relate to the specific circumstances pertaining to the military in the post-2011 environment: how come the armed forces seem to possess the casting vote between secular and Islamist forces on the road to democracy? More puzzlingly, what is it that these forces stand for in the eyes of the populations in their respective countries – if it was modernity in the 1950s and 1960s, what is it today?

Figure 2: Major conflicts involving Arab armies – 1948 to the present



Sources for data: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO); Uppsala Conflict Data Program.

## CHAPTER 1

# Understanding Arab armies

As a research topic, armed forces in general and Arab ones in particular are rather tricky. Not only are military institutions notoriously secretive, their rather opaque and complex functioning, procedures and mechanisms are not always easily understood by civilians. To further complicate matters, little research was carried out on Arab military forces following their defeat in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, reducing the pool of knowledge even further.

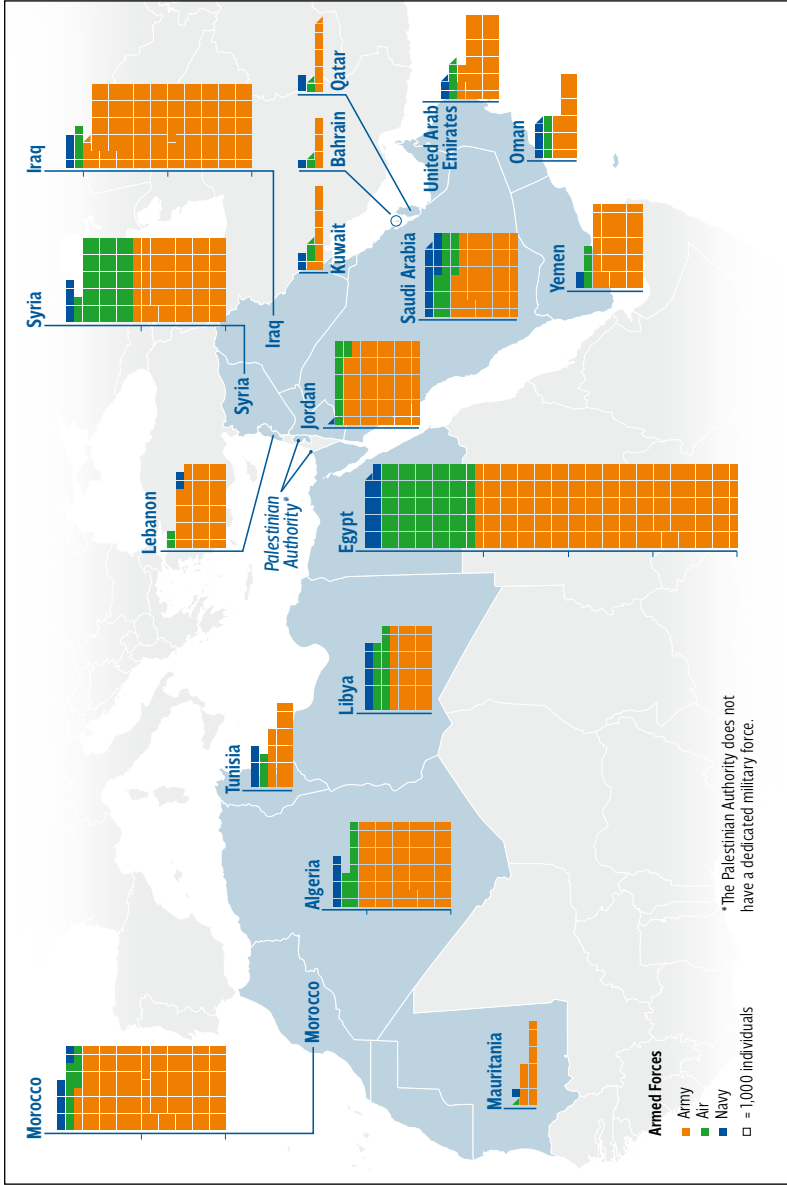
In essence, armed forces need to be understood as entities that have two distinct dimensions: they are organisations on the one hand, and they are agents of the state on the other. While the latter aspect is immediately transparent and easy to understand, the former is much more elusive. But in order to gain a clear idea of the purpose, capacity and motivation of an armed force, both dimensions need to be taken into account – not only because they are related, but because taken together they will give us a clearer understanding of why, and how, a military organisation will – or will not – take on a political role.

Whether an armed force can act (or not) depends entirely on the room for political or social manoeuvring that society grants it; but whether it is actually capable of doing so depends entirely on its internal organisational dimension – in other words, its external/societal dimension defines the military's *purpose*, while its internal/institutional dimension defines its *capacity to fulfil this purpose*.

## The cradle of the state: loyal to state or regime?

What distinguishes armed forces from other armed groups such as militias is their affiliation to the state – not only are they sanctioned to use violence to defend the state, their soldiers are *in extremis* ready to give their lives for it. The key feature of the military is therefore not *what they do*, but *who they are doing it for*. In essence, a military force will – and has to, if it is to function properly – build its core sense of purpose and identity around this loyalty. The very *raison d'être* of the armed forces is rooted in the defence of *something* – be it the state, the nation or a particular regime. It is never free-floating.

Figure 3: Composition of Arab armed forces



Source for data: International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 2013*.



Where armed forces have indeed defended the state successfully (in a war of independence, for example), that connection is even stronger. In such circumstances, the very existence of the state depends on the military. Hence the armed forces come to be regarded as the ‘cradle of the state’.

In the Arab world, this applies to several states; mostly under European or Ottoman occupation, they had to fight for independence either militarily or politically. The armed forces played a role in this process either by taking up arms (as did the Algerian *Armée de Libération Nationale*) or by mounting political resistance to foreign domination (as the Egyptian Free Officers did) or by being disobedient – as in the case of Lebanon, where military officers refused to join the fight against the Free French in 1941, declaring their loyalty to Lebanon and its government only.<sup>3</sup> In a fourth case, as happened in Iraq in 1932, the military was the first state institution to be created and therefore symbolised the state as such. In all of these cases, the armed forces represented not just the state, but its emancipation from centuries of foreign occupation – what distinguished them from Ottoman forces or the French *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* was therefore not staff or equipment, but their professed loyalty to a certain state and nation.

In order to understand where an Arab military force is situated on the political map of a given country, one needs to look at its historical role in state-formation, and at what symbolism has attached to the army as a result. These elements determine how the military are seen, how they see themselves, and how they relate to other societal actors, such as the government. Crucially, one needs to determine whether the military represents, in society, the regime in power – i.e. a specific government – or the state as such, and what role it plays in terms of the larger societal narrative.

An armed force which is seen, and sees itself, as an agent of the state, for instance, will have very little difficulty in dissociating itself from any given government if necessary, as in the case of Egypt for example. A military institution representing a particular regime, however, will connect its own survival to the regime and act accordingly, as has happened in Syria. An armed force can therefore be loyal either to a particular regime or a state/nation. In the latter case it will not act against civilians as it regards the civilians as the source of its legitimacy, and as empowered with the ultimate sovereignty to change the regime. In the former case, the institution identifies with the regime (or conflates state and regime) and sees it not only as requiring its protection, but also as the source of its own power. In this rationale, the civilian is seen as a potentially posing a threat to the regime, and therefore to the armed forces’ existence.

The way state, society and military force relate to each other will determine other elements as well, such as recruitment. By means of self-selection and specific methods of recruitment, the composition of the armed forces reflects not only

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3. Sami Rihana, *Histoire de l'armée libanaise contemporaine*, Vol. 1, *Les origines : la légion d'Orient et les troupes auxiliaires du Levant 1916 – 1926* (Beirut: Editions Visa, 1988), p. 241.

to what extent a state trusts certain segments of society, but also how the latter relate to the state in question. Higher and lower recruitment rates of one ethnic or confessional group compared to others can – in addition to economic factors – express the relationship between state and society, a process termed ‘ethnic security mapping’.<sup>4</sup>

By and large, the military institution is held in rather high regard by the populations of Arab countries. 71% of Arabs profess to trust the armed forces, 47% trust the government, and 36% their countries’ legislative bodies.<sup>5</sup> While the reasons differ from one country to another, the comparatively positive image is largely the result of the armed forces being seen as neutral, non-corrupt, nationalist and historically tied to the state as such.

## **The school of the nation: professional or politicised?**

But the armed forces are not just a mythical carrier of nationalism: first and foremost, they are an organisation – granted, an exceptional one given its status and mission, but still an organisation. How this organisation functions internally is not only an aspect that is generally not very well understood, it is also the key factor which will determine whether an armed force actually *can act* cohesively. The yardstick by which to measure the efficient internal functioning of the armed forces is therefore neither its manpower nor its weapon systems but its *professionalism*, defined as the skill, good judgment, and behaviour that is expected from a person who is trained to do a job well.

Professionalism in the armed forces consists of more than mere adhesion to certain codes of conduct. It is a combination of:

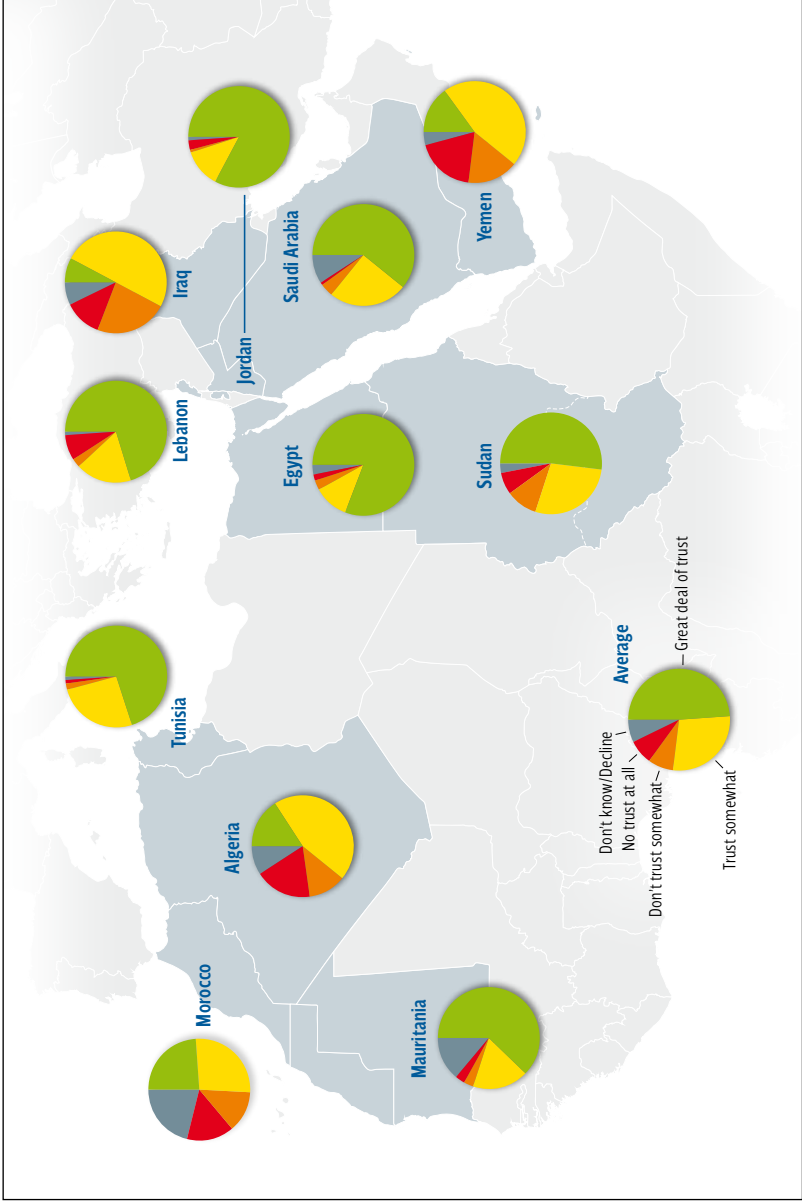
- expertise (which entails the management of violence)
- clientship (i.e. responsibility to its client, which might be society or the state)
- corporateness (ie. group consciousness)
- ideology (i.e. the so-called military mindset).

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4. See Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies* (London: Penguin, 1980).

5. See Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, ‘The Arab Opinion Index 2011’, available at <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/5083cf8e-38f8-4e4a-8bc5-fc91660608b0>.

Figure 4: Trends in public opinion showing levels of confidence in their countries' armies



Source for data: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

The latter two components, corporateness and ideology, are more crucial than the first two to operational military functioning: they facilitate cohesion underpinned by a certain value system which contains meritocracy, hierarchy, collectivism and to some extent nationalism.<sup>6</sup> The one element which stands at the core of military professionalism is *cohesion*.

The role that the armed forces can have in fostering an *esprit de corps* and sense of collective identity is deliberately exploited by some states for nation-building purposes, hence for example ascribing a civic function to the army as the ‘school of the nation’ via conscription.

Morale, élan, *esprit de corps* or cohesion all encompass ‘the bonding together of members of an organisation/unit in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and the mission.’<sup>7</sup> The organisation’s function in this context is to not only provide these units with a purpose, but also with a structure which allows for cohesion. Such a structure generally de-emphasises the individuality of the soldier, and creates a sense of group identity in order to facilitate bonding experiences and the pursuit of common goals. Furthermore, leadership plays a crucial role in the fostering of cohesion as it is the bond between officers and soldiers which will transmit norms, organisation objectives and values down to the smallest units.

A military institution seeking cohesion will thus ‘use a unit rotation system rather than individual replacements, emphasizing personnel stability within units; (...) prohibit soldiers from belonging to autonomous groups with possibly deviant norm; (...) reduce centralised, bureaucratic control over the good things in the soldier’s life [e.g. pay, promotion, leave] and give control of these to the immediate leaders of the individual soldier.’<sup>8</sup> Cohesion is a variable that is difficult to measure positively, while its absence can easily be measured by disintegration and desertion rates. It is therefore a crucial element in establishing the professionalism of an armed force and shall in this study be the main criterion by which military professionalism may be judged.

Weak cohesion will have several severe consequences for the armed forces’ performance both in war and peacetime. In conflict, a non-cohesive force will face disintegration (defection of whole units) as a worst-case scenario and desertion of individual soldiers in less dramatic cases. In peacetime, a non-cohesive and therefore unprofessional force will have generally low levels of discipline as a result of weak leadership. It will be politicised to the extent that its original mission is distorted, and its clientship unclear. As an armed force relies on a clear vision of its mission, a blurred perception of the latter will affect cohesion and result in disobedience, desertion and disintegration in times of crisis.

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6. See Amos Perlmutter, *The Military and Politics in Modern Times: On Professionals, Praetorians and Revolutionary Soldiers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 9.

7. John H. Johns et al., *Cohesion in the US Military* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1984), p.9.

8. Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985), pp. 10-12.

A regime might weaken its armed forces in two ways: either by portraying the armed forces as a pro-regime militia rather than as a national institution, or by limiting its resources and internal capabilities in order to reduce its threat potential. This is particularly the case in states which have experienced attempted or successful *coups d'état* and seek to protect the regime from being toppled via a strategy of 'coup-proofing' – it is here that the nexus between internal military features and external societal factors becomes particularly clear, since a negative relationship between regime and military institution will adversely affect the latter's performance.

Yet an efficiently *coup*-proofed armed force comes at a military cost, as the features which enable a military institution to stage a *coup* are also those necessary to perform well operationally. As a consequence, a military force that has been deliberately weakened by the state/government will be ineffective and disintegrate in times of crisis, unable to defend regime, nation or state.

The internal state of the military is therefore not only an expression of the regime's or state's perception of the role it plays in society, but also affects how the armed forces act in times of crisis – which will in turn influence that role. The conditions in which the military are allowed to operate will give indications about a number of non-military aspects, such as the relationship between the regime and the military, and the regime's threat perception, and make it possible to forecast how this force will act in times of crisis.



## CHAPTER 2

# Four models of military forces

When we combine internal aspects of professionalism with external ones (see table below), we will find that there are essentially four types of armed forces: those that are cohesive and loyal to a state; those that are not cohesive but are equally loyal; those that are cohesive but attached to a particular regime; and those that are not cohesive and equally attached to a certain regime. Cohesiveness essentially translates into *capacity* to act; allegiance to a state translates into *societal acquiescence* for the military to take such action. Where the two come together, an armed force is able and allowed to interfere in a situation of crisis. Where they do not, the result is an ineffective force incapable of acting and devoid of public backing.

**Table 1: Situating Arab armed forces**

	Cohesive	Non-cohesive
Allegiance to state	Egypt Tunisia	Iraq Lebanon
Allegiance to regime	Syria Algeria	Libya Yemen

The advantage of this two-dimensional approach is that it explains not only whether an Arab force will be allowed to act, but also whether it will actually have the necessary capacity to do so. Of course, it is not to be understood in a static way – any armed force can migrate from one box to another.

Also (even though the title of this publication may appear to suggest otherwise), not all Arab forces are alike. A comparison is warranted for a number of reasons: Arab forces share a geopolitical, historical, cultural, political and linguistic background; in addition, past studies of Arab military institutions have tended to focus on individual armies rather than take an overarching comparative approach. As a result, a comprehensive analysis of the armed forces of this region has been lacking. The four ideal types emerging from this framework are to be understood in an abstract conceptual sense – absolute categories do not exist, but they do advance the general understanding of the phenomenon in question.

The forces studied here are those which have, in the past, played a political role in the history of their respective states with particular regard to political change. States which have experienced little to no change, such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco or Jordan, and where the armed forces have played little to no political role, have therefore not been included.

## **The Western standard**

The most surprising feature of 2011 was the fact that neither the Egyptian nor the Tunisian military sided with the respective regimes in power in the repression of the demonstrations. Ultimately facilitating political change, the armed forces were seen as obedient to the people rather than the regime they ostensibly served, and thereby corresponded to a Western ideal of a professional (and therefore highly cohesive) military force.

The ideal type of military force in Western political systems is usually highly professional, loyal to the state as a concept rather than to a particular regime, part of the executive branch and as such neutral. This model of an armed force is aloof from politics while being militarily capable: it tends to be seen, and to see itself, as an embodiment of the state rather than of a regime; furthermore, it has often played a crucial role in the formation of the state or is at least portrayed as having done so. According to our two axes of analysis, this force is highly professional in terms of its internal organisation and functioning, while externally aloof from politics.

Although normatively a European model, examples of this type of army do exist in the Arab world as well – if not entirely in practice then at least in terms of rhetoric and perception. While Europe's armed forces have moved to post-modern concepts of small, highly technological and even more specialised military organisations since the Revolution in Military Affairs,<sup>9</sup> the Arab version of the 'Western standard' is in reality stuck somewhere between modernity and post-modernity, but aspires to the same principles of professionalism.

In a situation of major social and political upheaval, such as the Arab Spring, this force will be able to distance itself from the regime in power, and will have the social and political capital to do so. Its survival is not connected to the regime, and it has sufficient societal backing to make its distance from the regime visible. Most importantly, it is cohesive enough to do so.

Two cases which correspond to this type are the armed forces of Egypt and Tunisia, as demonstrated by their behaviour in 2011.

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9. The Revolution in Military Affairs is a concept focusing on modern technology's impact on warfare and the resulting organisational changes of the armed forces; it gained particular traction after the end of the Cold War.



## Egypt

When the Egyptian military chose not to defend President Mubarak, it did so not only because it had the institutional motivation and capacity to do so, but also because it was a credible actor in the eyes of the protestors. This is largely the result of the role it has played in modern Egyptian history: it can trace its existence back to the nineteenth century when Egypt emerged under Muhammad Ali Pasha, fought two wars against Ottoman forces and staged a *coup* in 1878 which subsequently led to the Anglo-Egyptian war and British occupation. The sense that Egypt is – in contrast to some of its neighbouring states – an old state created by itself rather than by colonial powers is embodied in the armed forces. The military's war against Israel in 1948, the 1952 *coup* which toppled the monarchy, and the subsequent removal of 80,000 British troops from the Suez Canal zone all credited the military with the restoration of Egyptian sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> The popularity of Colonel (later President) Gamal Abdel Nasser blurred the lines between military nationalism and pan-Arab rhetoric even further.

Egypt's narrative of statehood and independence is therefore strongly intertwined with the armed forces – a link further embodied in the role the military has played since the *coup* of 1952, be it by its involvement in politics to differing degrees under three successive heads of state (all of whom had originally served in the armed forces), by it serving as a platform for the assassination of President Anwar Sadat by two fellow officers in 1981 (incidentally during a military parade), or by its active role in the toppling of first President Mubarak in 2011 and then President Morsi in 2013.

In practice, however, the armed forces' degree of political involvement varied at different points in time. Under both Presidents Sadat and Mubarak it was actively sidelined from politics, which contributed to its image as a neutral arbiter and embodiment of statehood, and which allowed it to function as a professional military organisation.

At the institutional level, the ideal type of a modern European professional force separate from civilian life served as a model when the Egyptian military was created under Muhammed Ali Pasha and remained as the standard to be aspired to – it also became a political necessity for every leader who sought to curtail challenges emanating from its ranks. In fact, the military's involvement in politics since 1952 had effectively weakened it institutionally, and was seen by President Sadat as one of the main reasons for its 1967 defeat against Israel. Purges of officers suspected of planning counter-*coups* or being sympathetic to different political visions affected morale, and led to a blurring of lines between political and military decision-making, affecting areas such as strategic assessment, senior appointments, leadership as well as command and control.<sup>11</sup> Recognising this interplay, Sadat

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10. Ahmed Abdalla, 'The Armed Forces and the Democratic Process in Egypt', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 4, October 1988, pp. 1452-66.

11. Risa Brooks, 'An Autocracy at War: Explaining Egypt's Military Effectiveness, 1967 and 1973', *Security Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, July-September 2006, p. 400.

decided to refocus the army on its original military tasks. The establishment of a clear chain of command, the separation of political and military decision-making as well as transparent information sharing were introduced at his instigation. This explains the swift improvement in the state of the military which enabled it to perform much better during the 1973 war with Israel and ultimately enabled it to regain the Sinai.

In 1974, Sadat took the professionalisation of the forces a step further with the publication of his *October Working Paper*, in which he laid out the idea of a 'state of institutions'. The educational levels of officers were dramatically improved – the number of officers who were university graduates rose from not even 1% of officers in 1967 to 70% in 1994 – while military conscription became more selective. The switch from Soviet to American aid further facilitated the modernisation of the institution. In addition, Sadat took steps to remove military officers from politics – 22 out of 26 governorships were held by military personnel in 1964, a number which had been reduced to just five by 1980, while the number of cabinet members with a military background was reduced from a third to a tenth. As such, the Egyptian armed forces were only partially co-opted into both the Sadat and the Mubarak regimes, and consequently adopted a position of non-interference in domestic political matters, such as during the 1977 food riots or the mutiny of the Central Security Force's recruits in 1986.

Under Sadat, the Egyptian armed forces were transformed from the institution that had led the revolution to one subordinate to the civilian authority of the state. The withdrawal of military personnel into self-contained cities specially constructed to accommodate them was emblematic in this respect. However, this subordination came with conditions and was never total. The military enjoyed autonomy in terms of budget and management, and handled America's annual aid stipend directly, without civilian mediation.<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s, it was allowed to have an expanding role in economic activities well beyond its military remit, and its chiefs of staff continued to play a political role in successive government cabinets. The army therefore continued to be a source of concern for both Presidents Mubarak and Morsi, who sought to limit its political role by frequently rotating officers. This culminated in Morsi's dismissal of the entire military leadership in 2012.

Due to its preeminent place in Egyptian history, its partial distance from domestic politics and its professionalism, the Egyptian military therefore assumed, internally, a position which was seen as above petty politics yet dedicated to Egypt as a nation and state. At the internal level, it was allowed in return for keeping its distance from politics to function according to professional military criteria, largely based on meritocratic principles, to have full control over recruitment and training and maintain its cohesion. In 2011 and 2013, it was therefore both capable of acting, and had sufficient social backing to do so.

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12. Philippe Droz-Vincent, 'Le militaire et le politique en Egypte', *Monde arabe, Maghreb Machrek*, July/September 1999, no.165, p. 18.

The army's toppling of President Morsi after weeks of mass demonstrations in 2013 was strongly motivated by nationalist sentiment: the Muslim Brotherhood's pan-Islamic dimension, and its ties to Hamas in particular, stood in stark contrast to the military's Egypt-centred nationalism and secularism. In that context, the Egyptian military sees its 2013 move not as a breakthrough *coup* (one which changes the political system, such as the Iraqi *coup* of 1958) but rather as a guardian *coup d'état*: one which removes a corrupt, inefficient or incompetent government. Afterwards, the armed forces intend to return to their barracks, provided that their two goals – to maintain their institutional freedom as well as their position as symbol of Egyptian nationalism – are met. The likely election of General Sisi as President will ensure both, and guarantee continuity for Egypt's military as the protector of Egypt, symbolised in the advertisement displayed on many Cairo houses in 2011 depicting a soldier holding a baby, with the slogan: 'the army and the nation are one'.

## Tunisia

Similar traits can be found in the Tunisian armed forces. As in Egypt, the military seeks to trace its origins back to pre-colonial times in the nineteenth century. Tunisia's tenth ruler, Ahmed Bey, headed the armed forces during his father's reign and later embarked on a large-scale project to reform and professionalise the army. Considered the founder of the modern Tunisian military, Ahmed sent officers to be educated in France, established a military academy, modernised the army's equipment as well as infrastructure and increased the total number of the armed forces to 27,000 troops.

The advent of French colonial rule spelt the end of this force, and its remnants were integrated into the French-colonial *Armée d'Afrique* in 1881. Applying the Tunisian military conscription law of 1860, France drafted Tunisians into the force and used it during World Wars I and II as well as in other military campaigns.<sup>13</sup> In addition, an all-Tunisian force existed, the Beylical Guards, who served a largely ceremonial function.

For national narrative purposes, Tunisia's armed forces prefer to emphasise their pre-colonial history: in order to be a symbol of nationalism, they need to see themselves as the heir and successor of Ahmed Bey's original institution.

As Tunisia did not have to fight a war of independence, its forces therefore could not create a societal narrative in which they could emerge as the 'midwife' of Tunisian independence; however, during the seven years between the granting of independence and the completion of French withdrawal, the military clashed with French troops on a few occasions. In 1958, Tunisian units surrounded a French garrison in Remada, in the country's far south, pressuring the French troops to

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13. Ministry of National Defence, Tunisia, *The Tunisian Armed Forces* (Tunis: Alif – Les Editions de la Méditerranée, 1996), pp. 69-77.

evacuate the base: the incident resulted in a week-long clash involving aerial bombardments. In 1961, a similar incident occurred in the port city of Bizerte, where France maintained a naval base. The confrontation resulted in over 600 casualties and France's complete military withdrawal two years later.

Although a comparatively small incident, the Bizerte crisis helped create a heroic aura around the Tunisian military as the defender of the state. In the decades following independence, the armed forces supported Egypt during its war with Israel in 1973 with one unit and were deployed to Congo, Rwanda and the Ivory Coast as part of the United Nations' blue helmet missions.

Under its first president, Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia established civil-military relations modelled on European ideas: military officers were prohibited from political association, the defence minister was always a civilian, and when Ben Ali became interior minister in 1986 he was the first career officer to become a member of the cabinet. A 1962 conspiracy involving a number of officers only reinforced Bourguiba's latent distrust of the military and strengthened his resolve to keep the armed forces deliberately removed from internal politics. In order to do this, he created several police and security services to form the state's coercive apparatus – just as in Egypt. On occasion, the military was deployed in support of the police, for example during the 1978 and 1984 bread riots.<sup>14</sup>

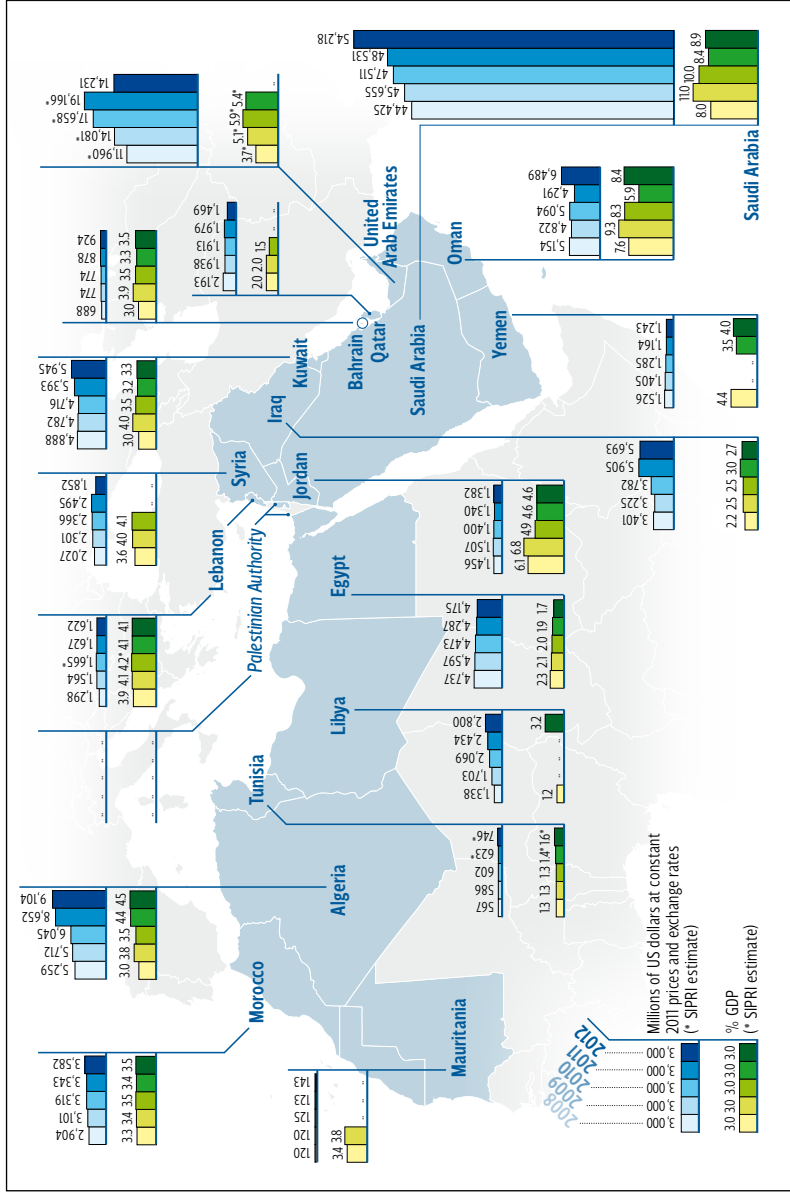
Overall, however, the military was not seen as a repressive agent of the regime – in fact, its distance from the ruling power was such that the death of the previous Chief of Staff and 12 other senior officers in a helicopter crash in 2002 was rumoured to have been ordered by Ben Ali. Due to its small size, limited role in Tunisia's state-formation and aloofness from politics the armed forces did not acquire the same indirect influence in political matters as did its Egyptian counterpart; nor did it venture into economic endeavours. Indeed, the army's posture of non-interference in politics was such that it was sometimes dubbed 'la Grande Muette'.

Once Ben Ali seized power in 1987 – with the help of two fellow graduates from the French Saint Cyr military academy, Commander of the Presidential Guard Ben Ammar and Chief of Staff Es-Cheikh - he embarked on a professionalisation programme designed to distance the armed forces further from politics. As in the case of Egypt, the military was allowed to maintain a certain level of professionalism although it was rather underfunded with a mere 1.4% of GDP under President Ben Ali – one of the lowest military expenditures in the region. It also embarked on a comparatively large cooperation programme with the United States designed to modernise its equipment and support its training; in 2011. It received \$18.7 million – although this is a comparatively small sum, it is considerable in the context of Tunisia's very limited resources. Over 4,600 of Tunisia's military personnel have received training in American educational institutions, which amounts to 13% of the forces in total.

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14. L.B. Ware, 'The Role of the Tunisian Military in the Post-Bourguiba Era', *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1, Winter 1985.

Figure 5: Arab military expenditure



Source for data: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

## **Arab armies: agents of change? Before and after 2011**

The forces were generally subject to little personnel rotation, conducted regular training at all levels, received appropriate equipment and ammunition and disposed of a solid command structure. Politicised meddling with promotions and appointments was limited. Educational standards for its officer corps were high. In times of crisis, this force was therefore militarily capable to not only execute orders, but also to act cohesively. Institutional resilience in a situation of conflict was maintained because of internal standards.

It is this distance from politics and its reputation for professionalism which gave the Tunisian military the room for manoeuvre it needed in early 2011, when President Ben Ali called on the armed forces to suppress demonstrations after weeks of riots. The fact that he called on the military to intervene so late in the day revealed his hesitancy in involving the armed forces in an internal matter.

The military's Chief of Staff, General Rachid Ammar, allegedly refused to intervene against the demonstrations, and went on to declare publicly that the army would protect the revolution. In this statement, the Tunisian military went further than their Egyptian counterparts. Ammar subsequently became Tunisia's most revered political figure. The fact that he was welcomed, as the only representative of the state, at the funeral of the murdered opposition leader Chokri Belaid in February 2013 is a clear sign of the positive image of the military as being aloof from politics, and as a symbol of the Tunisian state at large. Since then, Tunisia's armed forces have facilitated the country's democratic process by securing elections and engaging in an increasingly violent confrontation against Islamist terrorism in the country's desert south; its operational tempo has increased almost fivefold since 2011. Accused of having mishandled the anti-terrorist operation, General Ammar had to resign in summer 2013, only to fuel rumours that he would run for president in the next elections.

Both the armed forces of Egypt and Tunisia share a number of features which allowed them in 2011 to facilitate regime change: their relative aloofness from politics meant that they were not seen as agents of the regime; both played a valued role in the formation of their respective states, and were allowed to maintain military standards necessary for effectiveness and cohesion. The armed forces not only had the necessary societal backing to act as a neutral agent between people and regime, but also the institutional capacity to actually do so. In this sense, both forces correspond to the ideal type of a moderately depoliticised force in a highly politicised context.

## The symbolic institution

Armed forces which deliver little in military terms are usually seen as serving no purpose at all. This disregards the fact that a military institution can perform well at the societal level even though it may be struggling institutionally, such as in Iraq or Lebanon. Another example would be the Palestinian National Security Forces which emerged from the Oslo Accords.

This type of force enjoys a rather high level of prestige and emotional attachment with society, as it either played a role in the process of state formation, or serves as a projection screen for societal desires, e.g. for unity. Although such an armed force is hampered by its internal shortcomings, it nevertheless possesses considerable political capital reflected in consistently high public approval rates in spite of poor military performance.

### Lebanon

The Lebanese armed forces, while militarily limited not only in terms of equipment but also of manpower, are widely considered as the symbol of Lebanese national unity. A fragmented society containing 18 different sects, the state of Lebanon came into being in 1943 based on the National Pact – an unwritten agreement among the main Lebanese communities which lays the foundation of Lebanon in eight agreed points. These include the distribution of the state's highest posts according to confessional affiliation (the President is always a Christian Maronite, the Prime Minister always a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of Parliament always a Shiite Muslim, the Chief of Staff always Druze and the Deputy Prime Minister always a Greek Orthodox). The agreement recognises Lebanon's Arab (instead of Western) affiliation while refuting pan-Arabist ambitions. Lebanon's existence is therefore based on a sensitive balance of ethno-sectarian ambitions which have clashed on several occasions, most famously during Lebanon's 15-year civil war. In this fragile context, the armed forces have embodied, and continue to embody, the possibility of Lebanon as a united and independent state.

The military itself came into being when the country gained its independence, and was built on Lebanese units of the French colonial *Troupes Spéciales* used mainly for internal security purposes. In 1941, a number of its officers refused to fight on behalf of the Vichy government against the Free French, declaring their loyalty to Lebanon and its government only. This incident was seen as the seminal event upon which the Lebanese military later built its myth.

Similarly, its successful (and only) battle against Israeli forces in 1948 contributed to the national narrative of a highly symbolic force capable of fighting – when allowed to do so. Since then, the story of the Lebanese military has largely been one of passivity. In the large-scale demonstrations that took place in 1952 against President Bishara Khury, in 1958 against President Camille Chamoun's

pro-Western policy or in 2005 against the Syrian occupation, the Lebanese army remained neutral and refused to act against the population. During the civil war years, it was deliberately held back from the fighting by the government in order to prevent its disintegration.

Condemned to watch the country fall into disarray, the armed forces suffered from desertion and partial disintegration, and finally got involved in the final years of the conflict against first the Syrian military and then the Christian *Forces Libanaises*. Following its reconstruction after the war the army became the symbol not only of Lebanese nationhood in general but of Lebanese peace in particular. Its image as a national state institution contrasted with that of the militias – while the latter were seen as the embodiment of sectarian rule, the armed forces came to symbolise the Lebanese state which re-emerged after the long years of conflict. The integration of militia fighters into the institution, while limited in scope, contributed to its image as the guarantor of post-conflict peace and to restoring the legitimacy of the state's monopoly of violence.

Because it comprises members from all Lebanese sects and has remained largely aloof from politics the military not only represents the Lebanese population but also peaceful cooperation – an important feature in a notoriously divided country. In a 2001 opinion poll, 41.7% of Lebanese declared that they trusted their state and its institutions, while 75.3% declared that they trusted the Lebanese armed forces – numbers that have remained roughly the same for the military but have decreased sharply for the government ten years on, with 71% trusting the former and 5% the latter.<sup>15</sup>

This professed trust stands somewhat in contrast with tactical realities: the Lebanese military coexists with Hezbollah who launched rocket attacks against Israel in the 2006 war; it is not securing Lebanon's borders properly, effectively facilitating the flow of weapons and fighters in and out of Syria, and has witnessed the country's occupation by both Israeli and Syrian forces. The public esteem which it enjoys can therefore not be ascribed to its military performance, but stems from its high symbolic value as the embodiment of Lebanese unity.

Although this type of armed force enjoys a rather high symbolic status in society, the fragmented multi-confessional nature of the latter weakens the military internally; this is not so much the result of the army's multi-ethnic makeup itself, but rather of the promotion, appointment and recruitment of personnel according to sectarian criteria, creating discontent within the ranks of the army and affecting cohesion. The Lebanese armed forces recruit Christians and Muslims into the officer corps in equal numbers, ignoring Lebanese demographic realities or even application rates from different communities. The post of Commander traditionally goes to a Maronite Christian (and has served three occupants as a springboard to the

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15. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 'The Arab Opinion Index 2011', available at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/5083cf8e-38f8-4e4a-8bc5-fc91660608b0>. See also map on p. 17.



presidency, another Maronite slot), and a multi-confessional council monitors the ethno-sectarian balance in the institution. The religious-sectarian dimension therefore plays an important role in the military, hindering the application of meritocratic principles and hollowing out the command structure on occasion.

The armed forces have undergone some reform since the end of the civil war, improving this aspect to some extent. Previously structured along religious lines, the armed forces consisted of quasi-monoethnic brigades impeding institutional cohesion and therefore facilitating disintegration in times of crisis. After 1990, the forces were reorganised, leading to units that were more diverse in terms of their ethno-sectarian composition. Rather complex procedures were introduced designed to prevent sectarian bias when making appointments to command posts, ensuring equal religious representation at all military levels.

In spite of the rather strong influence of non-military (i.e. sectarian) criteria on military procedures, an important ideology is deeply ingrained in the Lebanese armed forces that shields the military to some extent from rampant politicisation. Its first Commander-in-Chief, Fuad Shehab, upheld the notion of an armed force aloof from politics, a vision that is not only shared by the vast majority of military personnel but consistently taught in its academies. Shehabism has become the backbone of the Lebanese Armed Forces' ideology and allows the military to abstain from involvement in the rather messy Lebanese political landscape. In this sense, it corresponds to a Western model of an armed force remote from politics – internally, it is nevertheless harmed by constant sectarian interference with its internal procedures, with its leadership having to exercise vigilance to ensure that no single ethno-religious community ends up controlling the military.

Although Lebanon was not directly affected by the 2011 events, it has to manage the fallout from the war in neighbouring Syria. The armed forces are the only bulwark the country has against increasing sectarian violence. As a result, there have been renewed public calls to insulate the military from over-politicisation, reflecting Lebanese concerns about the resurgence of another violent conflict.

## Iraq

The Iraqi armed forces resemble their Lebanese counterpart in a number of aspects, although their role in Iraq's state-formation was more significant, if not to say decisive. They may therefore have only temporarily withdrawn from the political arena, and might resume a political role in the future. Famously created as the first institution of the newly independent state of Iraq in 1932 by King Faisal, the army took on a political role as early as 1936 when it succeeded in replacing Prime Minister Yasin al-Hashimi. After a series of *coups* and counter-*coups*, the military toppled the monarchy altogether in 1958. Four *coups* later, it facilitated the ascent of the Baath party.

Although instrumental in bringing Saddam Hussein to power, the military suffered under his rule: regular purges of military officers suspected of planning *coups*,

strategic errors during the war with Iran and systemic *coup*-proofing all led to a situation where the Iraqi army was not an agent of the system, but rather one of its victims. Hussein himself distrusted the military to the extent that not only did he create numerous parallel security institutions, but when he launched the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 it was spearheaded by units of the elite Republican Guard rather than by the army.<sup>16</sup> The distinction between the regime and the state, and their respective relations with the armed forces, was not grasped by the United States, who following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 disbanded the military which it regarded as an agent of the Baath regime. Seen by many Iraqis as an attempt to dismantle the state as such rather than the regime, the move created a sense of humiliation and contributed to a feeling of resentment and later resistance. Not surprisingly, the reconstruction of the armed forces from late 2004 onwards was greeted positively by the Iraqi population, with 70% of Iraqis declaring in 2009 that they felt secure when seeing the Iraqi army in their neighbourhood, rating it especially high (85%) when compared to other groups, such as militias, tribes, US Forces etc. Since American withdrawal and the slow deterioration of Iraqi security, this number has declined to 58% in 2011 (compared to 26% expressing trust in the government).<sup>17</sup>

As the Iraqi military came to symbolise a new state not universally accepted by some of its citizens who feel disenfranchised, its facilities and personnel became the target of insurgents in post-conflict Iraq. That being said, the Iraqi armed forces are still popularly regarded as embodying the nation rather than as an agent of its current regime; their role in Iraqi history is not just limited to the domestic political scene as they also participated in wars with Iran and Kuwait and on two occasions against international coalitions. In 1988, Iraq's military was the fourth-largest armed force in the world, with 1.7 million people mobilised. The experience of war means that the military has come to occupy an even more prominent place in the national consciousness.

The Iraqi armed forces paid an institutional price for their involvement in politics, however. Systematically weakened internally by the Baath regime who feared the military's potential to exert political influence, the army fought several wars with chaotic command structures, politicised appointments, regular executions and highly erratic strategic decisions. Absurdly, Saddam Hussein was the first civilian to establish control over an armed force notorious for its involvement in politics. As a result, the forces are still not trusted by the post-2003 regime.

Rumours of *coup* attempts – such as the one leading to Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi's indictment in 2011 – have been rife ever since the military had to recall senior officers from the previous armed forces who now make up 70% of the corps (and who were overwhelmingly Sunni before 2003). Such rumours are perhaps understandable in a country which has experienced 13 *coups* (both successful and aborted ones) in the 80 years of its existence. Regardless of whether these

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16. Ibrahim al-Marashi, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (Routledge: London, 2008)

17. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 'The Arab Opinion Index 2011'. Available at: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/5083cf8e-38f8-4e4a-8bc5-fc91660608b0>.

concerns are founded in reality, the Iraqi military continues to be regarded with suspicion by the government who seeks to curb the army's political influence by reducing the resources allocated to it and weakening it internally. In addition to this distrust, the situation is exacerbated by rival sectarian communities vying for influence in the military.

This has internal repercussions: a force which is appreciated by its people but not by its government will be constrained not only in terms of equipment and resources, but also in terms of training and, perhaps most importantly, in terms of appointments. In order to offset the high proportion of pre-2003 officers in the corps, political appointees were hired without the necessary experience but with the political backing of the government. Since his appointment as Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki has extended his grip on the security sector not only by personally appointing senior officers, but also by creating the post of Commander-in-Chief for himself although it does not exist in the constitution. He also created a parallel command structure which gives him direct access to provincial military units, bypassing the Ministry of Defence's chain of command and control.<sup>18</sup> As a result of these tactics and procedures, the military's internal affairs are in disarray, rendering the institution rather ineffective and ill-equipped to deal with the currently imploding security situation.

Although the Iraqi armed forces have escaped a Lebanese-type scenario where their structure would be subjected to a sectarian quota system, they are not entirely free from confessional and ethnic meddling. The constitution's article 9 declares that 'The Iraqi Armed Forces and Security Services will be composed of the components of the Iraqi people with due consideration given to its balance and its similarity without discrimination or exclusion.' Although it is not specified whether this will be enforced by a quota system or otherwise, the subsequent political interference by the government in the military's structure and procedures does affect its cohesion and its command autonomy.

This type of armed force, although highly valued by its people and occupying an important role in the state's national historical narrative, is overall limited in its capacity to execute orders. Its importance therefore rests not in its military capability, but in its emotional and symbolic value as an embodiment of the state and nation. Although this force disposes of considerable political capital, it is unlikely to be able to translate it into actual political involvement any time soon: for this to be possible, its internal structures would require a degree of cohesion it does not possess at this point.

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18. Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), pp. 117-29.

## The Arab classic

Until the events of 2011, most Western analysts believed Arab forces to correspond to this type of force: closely attached to the regime, and conflating regime and state in its self-perception. Although often involved in the formation of the state, this type of military institution does not necessarily seek the preservation of the state as such but a certain version of it. In this model, the force's connection to the regime is so strong that differentiation between regime and the state is not possible; as a consequence, demonstrators acting against the regime will be perceived as constituting threats against the state. Although the military's narrative is a national one, it is *de facto* one largely determined by a certain version of the nation, and therefore the regime. In contrast to the Egyptian model, this type of military force is usually to be found in a single-party system or identifies so closely with one party that very little space exists for other actors to emerge. When challenged, it tends to respond with force.

### Algeria

An example of this type is the Algerian National Popular Army, whose origins are in the *Armée de la Libération Nationale* which fought against French colonial rule. The establishment of Algeria as an independent state is seen as the paramount achievement of this force, an achievement it translated into political capital once it transformed itself from a guerrilla organisation into a regular military force. It sidelined the civilian wing of the liberation movement only three years after independence when it ousted President Ben Bella; it replaced him with Defence Minister Houari Boumédiène (who subsequently was faced with two *coup* attempts himself) and upon his death in 1979 with another army colonel, Chadli Bendjedid. Most high-ranking political positions in newly independent Algeria were earmarked for men with military backgrounds<sup>19</sup> – a fact which disgruntled certain sections of society and fed, in the first multi-party elections in 1990 and 1991, into the rise of the *Front Islamique du Salut*.

The Algerian military, itself a force built around values of nationalism, socialism and, to a certain extent, secularism, saw political Islam as a fundamental threat not only to itself, but to Algeria at large. It aborted the political process, returned the state to military rule under General Liamine Zéroual and embarked on a decade-long violent conflict against Islamist forces. This experience has left the Algerian officer corps – and considerable parts of society – convinced that Islamism as a political force poses an existential peril to the state. Vindicated by events such as the 9/11 attacks, the radicalisation of the Syrian opposition and President Morsi's authoritarian constitutional declaration in November 2012, the Algerian armed forces see Islamism as the main threat to the region.

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19. William B. Quandt, *Revolution and Political Leadership: Algeria, 1954 – 1968* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), p. 110.

The experience of violent conflict and the posture of war maintained by the Algerian military shielded the country from serious regime challenges in 2011. Regime change in Algeria will happen either with the cooperation of the armed forces, or not at all.

The conflation of regime and military is visible also in terms of the internal workings of the army. It enjoys the trust of the government and therefore is allowed to function properly in military terms. Although significantly politicised, this process is so complete that it does not divide the armed forces internally – rather, the entire army is staunchly attached to the regime, which explains its lack of differentiation between state on the one hand and regime on the other. Budgetary and organisational arrangements for training, deployment, rotation, equipment and salaries are all adequate for an efficient armed force and therefore permit the institution to act decisively and cohesively in times of internal crisis as in the 1990s.

Interestingly, the Algerian military's operational theatre is *in country*: it is constitutionally banned from deployment outside the national territory, and therefore by default has an exclusively internal role. Its mindset is a mixture of French military ideals (the result of a large French-trained component in its officer corps) inspired by professionalism and nationalism conceived as the hallmarks of a modern military force, and Soviet doctrine. The Algerian officer corps is seen, and sees itself, as a highly professional force.

When confronted with Islamic extremism and civil war in the 1990s it proved flexible and responded with the swift creation of a 'special force' command dedicated to the 'execution and coordination of anti-subversive actions' which would unite units from both the army and the intelligence services in the most comprehensive way. Its founder, General Mohammad Lamari, would move on later to become the armed forces' Chief of Staff and launch a major crackdown on the terrorist structures – in the absence of counter-insurgency experience, the violent reprisals conducted by the army would lead to more violence in the immediate term, however.

The military efficiency which allowed for such rather unusual power clusters is proof of the fact that the Algerian armed forces were not subjected to constraints due to government anxiety about their potential political role and were therefore able to structure, plan and act according to military considerations. In an almost extra-constitutional way, the top commanders of the forces would meet regularly in conclave-fashion, circumventing civilian decision-makers to discuss what tactics to use against the Islamists. It was the military leaders who eventually negotiated a truce, finally bringing an extremely bitter and violent conflict to an end. Since then, the Algerian military has embarked on an equipment modernisation programme, while maintaining its strong emphasis on cohesion and professional criteria for its personnel.

While it has managed to reduce terrorist activity, it is still challenged in the Sahel zone by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and in 2010 joined forces with Niger, Mauritania and Mali in establishing a joint military headquarters located in the southern Algerian town of Tamanrasset. But the problem is far from being contained: the Algerian military's operation against a terrorist group which attacked a gas facility and took foreign workers hostage in January 2013 led to the death of 39 hostages and 29 kidnappers. Subsequently, this led to the restructuring of the Algerian defence intelligence system, largely held accountable for the hostage crisis and its outcome, and the dismissal of several high-ranking officers. The incident turned the international spotlight on the Algerian army and raised doubts about its counter-insurgency operations techniques. That notwithstanding, the Algerian military is closely intertwined with the regime: it is militarily capable and enjoys the regime's trust (the latter being a necessary precondition for the former) – all the while being subordinate to President Bouteflika who has fired high-ranking officers on a number of occasions, imposing his rule when necessary. Although the military is influential and an important part of the regime, it does not wield ultimate power and should not be identified with the regime itself.

### Syria

In this respect, the Algerian military resembles the Syrian armed forces, certainly one of the most operational Arab armies. Syria has not only fought Israel on three occasions and occupied Lebanon militarily for almost 30 years, it is currently fighting a civil war on behalf of the Assad regime. Born, like its Lebanese counterpart, out of the units of the French *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*, the Syrian military has played a very active political role in the history of the state. Twelve *coups* in not even 30 years established the military as the main vehicle of regime change after World War II. The last successful *coup* was conducted in 1970 by Hafez al-Assad, a former air force officer and defence minister at the time, and the father of Syria's current President Bashar al-Assad.

More than in any other Arab country, the conflation of regime and state is almost total in Syria. As in Algeria, the armed forces form the backbone of the regime but are not synonymous with the regime. The ruling regime has always been aware that the military's strength is essential to its survival and it has therefore never sought to curtail the army's operational capacities. Due to the military's history of changing sides, however, it does not symbolise national unity in the same way that the Egyptian military does. Its battles with Israel, and the regime's strong pan-Arab narrative, have anchored it in the national psyche to some extent, but it symbolises the state as such only in a limited way. Its symbiotic relationship with the regime, on which it confers legitimacy, meant that Bashar al-Assad, the current President of Syria, had to switch to a military career at the rather advanced age of 29 once he was selected to become his father's successor in lieu of his deceased brother Bassel (who, unsurprisingly, had chosen a military career

in the Special Forces, preparing him for the presidency). Given the way in which the regime, armed forces and state are so closely intermeshed, the military will always be willing to defend the regime as its own survival is connected to it – as its role since the beginning of the Syrian civil war has shown.

Overall, the conflation of armed forces and regime has been beneficial for the Syrian military when it comes to its internal functioning – in contrast to Libya for instance. Originally hampered by its multiple fractures along political and ethno-religious lines – until 1970, Syria faced fierce battles between pan-Arabism, Nasserism, Baathism and Arab socialism which permeated the military as well – the armed forces were depoliticised and streamlined to some extent under Hafez al-Assad in particular. Since Syria's armed forces needed to be militarily effective given its state of war with Israel and the desire to regain the Golan Heights lost in 1967, the regime could not afford to weaken the military as a potential threat. Controlling the armed forces while maintaining its efficiency was therefore a difficult task which the regime managed through a combination of careful monitoring and ethno-religious staffing of key posts.

Once Hafez al-Assad came to power, he embarked on a large-scale professionalisation programme. Refocusing the military's mission around issues of external security, internal security became a matter for intelligence and security services only. In 1972, the dismissal of a number of senior officers based on performance (rather than political) criteria introduced meritocratic principles, whose application Assad encouraged throughout the force. Cohesion in particular improved as much as battle effectiveness as a result. The efficacy of this system can be gauged from the comparatively low level of defections the military has experienced in its three-year confrontation with the Syrian rebel forces.

While it is true that about 3% of soldiers have defected, none of the higher-ranking generals have done so. Defections occur largely at the junior officer and soldier level, and at any rate are a normal phenomenon during a war – the American army experienced a defection rate of 2% in 2006, a number it considers within historical norms. More importantly, desertions from the Syrian military have tended to take the form of limited, individual cases rather than the defection of entire units. Such large-scale desertions can entail the collapse of the military structure, but this has not been witnessed in Syria so far although the military is prosecuting a particularly bitter and violent war against its own people. This means that cohesion is comparatively strong and points to a high degree of military professionalism – especially considering the fact that two-thirds of general officers are not Alawites, the sect to which the President belongs.

In spite of his awareness of the importance of having an armed force free to operate according to high military standards, Hafez al-Assad did not falter in his determination to *coup*-proof the Syrian state. The methods he used in this regard continued to impair military effectiveness, for instance during the 1973 war: e.g.

the practice of frequently rotating senior officers in order to prevent the creation of power bases; reluctance to deploy predominantly Alawite units to avoid their loss as important pillars of loyalty in the armed forces – all decisions which made no military sense. Decision-making also remained highly centralised.

Overall, both the Syrian and Algerian militaries were less remote from the regime circles than their Egyptian counterparts; both still managed to retain a level of professionalism and cohesion not common in an armed force which is *coup*-proofed and therefore by default somewhat impaired in terms of its military effectiveness. This is feasible because the object of loyalty of either force is the regime itself rather than the state as such, or because the regime has succeeded in conflating the two in ideological terms. This means that in a crisis situation the armed forces are militarily capable to execute orders, but their commitment is to the regime and not the people. In the years since 2011, both the Algerian and the Syrian armed forces have therefore acted as a deterrent to regime change.

## **The failed force**

The fourth type of armed forces in the Arab world combines internal disarray with a close connection with the regime that impacts negatively on public perception. In this model, as in the former one, the military is intimately connected to the ruling regime and consequently identified with it. As a result, the armed forces are seen as agents of the regime and are aware of the mostly negative repercussions in terms of society's image of them. In society, the armed forces therefore do not enjoy prestige pertaining to their role in a state formation process or as symbols of unity – they embody only the regime with its advantages and disadvantages and therefore resemble more a militia than an armed force in the classical understanding of the term. At the same time, this type of armed force is extensively weakened institutionally: it is exposed to extensive *coup*-proofing strategies due to the regime's distrust of the forces, or suffers from a chaotic context which is detrimental to its military capabilities – either way, it will not be militarily capable. As a result of its professional incapacity due to its potential threat to a regime, all the while being conflated with that regime, it will have neither societal nor leadership backing. It can thus be considered a failed force altogether since it will melt away in times of crisis, and will have no effective political role.

The Libyan as well as Yemeni armed forces exemplify this. Both forces were subject to intense internal stress throughout 2011, but as an institution neither managed nor attempted to influence the situation to their advantage. This paralysis was largely the result of their internal disarray and the external lack of societal approval.



## Libya

In the case of the Libyan military, this was connected to the distrust that, over decades, both King Idris and Colonel Qaddafi professed for the very concept of the state and its institutions. Although the army was constituted after independence by veterans who had fought Italy during its occupation of Libya, it never managed to gain the King's trust or credentials as 'midwife of the Libyan nation' – in part because Libyan nationalism followed rather than preceded independence. But if there was an institution which had formed a sense of Libyanness, it was the army officer corps which subsequently developed the necessary cohesion to form a political platform.

The *coup d'état* of 1969, led by 12 junior officers, empowered the military as a political agent, albeit only temporarily. The army gained in size and financial support, while the *coup* leaders formed a collective head of state in the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, the group's leader, quickly came to dominate the theoretically consensual decision-making process, and eventually sought to marginalise not only his 11 co-conspirators but the armed forces at large, given their threat potential. Following a first purge of officers – every officer above colonel rank and all those suspected of being loyal to the monarchy – the armed forces were hit even harder after a *coup* attempt in 1975, led by two members of the RCC. As a result, 22 officers were executed, and the RCC itself disbanded.<sup>20</sup> In spite of the deliberate and unremitting weakening of the armed forces, challenges to Qaddafi's regime continued to emanate from the military. Several thousand officers were arrested and a number executed in the 1980s for having planned a *coup*, leading to riots in several army barracks. In 1985, Colonel Hassan Ishkal, the military governor of Surt, was executed for disagreeing with Qaddafi over the role of the Revolutionary Guards within the armed forces. In 1993, another attempted *coup* failed.

As the regime needed the military while at the same time fearing it, the army was handsomely equipped and funded, but not allowed to function properly in military terms (with the exception of some units the regime deemed critical for its survival). Its image in society reflected this rather schizophrenic approach: neither revered nor distrusted, it was sandwiched between a society and a regime which both essentially rejected it.

Heavily controlled by the Revolutionary Guards, the armed forces were supposed to represent a regime which did not trust it enough to perform effectively as an armed force. This was particularly visible during Libya's war with Chad (1978–1987), where the military's dismal performance in battle was the direct result of the regime's systematic *coup*-proofing strategies: they were not allowed to train with live ammunition, to conduct military exercises above company level, or to coordinate the efforts of artillery and infantry units.

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20. Florence Gaub, 'The Libyan Armed Forces between Coup-proofing and Repression', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1 April 2013.

## Arab armies: agents of change? Before and after 2011

When the Libyan war began in 2011, the armed forces had not ever been used for regime protection: in contrast to the Revolutionary Guards and the police, the army was kept removed from riot control, and therefore not trained for such a purpose. It therefore reacted broadly to the conflict in three distinct ways: *individual exit* as individual soldiers deserted, *collective exit* as units disintegrated *en masse* in order to join the rebel forces, and *loyalty* as some units remained in the armed forces to crush the revolt. Not surprisingly, those units which remained militarily capable were those which had been allowed to maintain military capacity in terms of training, equipment and command structure.

These units were mostly in the 32<sup>nd</sup> brigade under the command of Colonel Qaddafi's son Khamis, thus benefiting from their commander's close relationship with the regime and enjoying high levels of trust. The scale of desertion, however, exceeded the rate of desertion in the Syrian army by far: four months into the conflict, the Libyan military had shrunk to about half of its original size. There were broadly speaking three reasons for desertion in the Libyan case: the actual *location* of the unit, which might or might not offer the individual soldier safety; the individual soldier's *opinion* of the conflict and/or the regime; and the *cohesion* (or lack thereof) of the unit in question. These were all indicative of how fragile the regime's hold on the armed forces had become. Lastly, a small number of units joined the rebel forces' fight against the regime.

In military terms, the Libyan armed forces therefore failed on all fronts in 2011: they did not protect the regime, showed very little cohesion, morale or leadership, and were not capable of siding with the uprising either. As a logical outcome of its internal disarray and broken loyalty towards a regime which mistreated it, the military had been weakened by Qaddafi to the extent that it could and would not protect his rule.

Internally, the armed forces were a victim of the regime as much as they were its agent: regular executions of officers because of alleged *coup* attempts, the creation of a climate of fear within the forces, awarding promotions and assignments based on tribal affiliation, and centralised structures discouraging individual initiative all combined to undermine the professionalism of the army. Furthermore the frequent rotation of officers in particular prevented the establishment of cohesive ties between leadership and enlisted personnel. As a result of these tactics, the Libyan armed forces suffered tremendously in terms of cohesiveness, and therefore also in terms of war-fighting capacity. Ultimately, the armed forces' reaction to the large-scale social unrest was determined by institutional variables which had been created by the regime.

## Yemen

A very similar structure can be found in Yemen, where the armed forces played a crucial role in politics without however gaining the status of 'midwife of the nation'. This was in part the result of the separate historical tracks the two Yemens followed until their unification in 1990: while the North gained independence from

the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the South only won its independence from Great Britain in 1967. Similarly, the two armed forces inherited different structures. North Yemen's ruler, Imam Yahya, created a professional force in the early nineteenth century. Inspired by Turkey, a standing military was created and young tribesmen recruited as soldiers and officers.

The latter, sent to Iraq and influenced by Egypt, soon saw a political role for themselves; *coup* attempts in 1948 and 1955 against the imamate were foiled, but a third one in 1962 led to its overthrow and an eight-year civil war. Once the war ended with the monarchy's defeat, factions from within the military continued to play a political role by ousting the first two presidents. None of North Yemen's five presidents ascended to power without the armed forces' support. Ali Abdullah Saleh, an officer turned military governor who came to power in 1978, continued as president, chief of staff and commander-in-chief of the unified Yemen until 2011. As one of his first official acts, Saleh promoted himself to colonel (much later to the rank of field marshal) and ordered the execution of 30 officers suspected of having conspired against him. He continued to see the military as a potential threat, and began to appoint family and tribe members to key posts throughout the security sector.

The role of the armed forces was somewhat different in the South which became a socialist republic. Based on Soviet doctrines and limited in personnel, the Southern military played no real political role comparable to the armed forces in the North.

Both forces were united in 1990. Southern units were deployed to the North and vice versa, but neither side was completely willing to relinquish control over their former army. As a result of ongoing disputes, both sides signed an agreement in 1994, which provided for the entire restructuring of the newly united Yemeni forces: a highly professional, depoliticised army holding the monopoly of violence and based on meritocracy. But the disagreements between the two sides continued, leading to the eruption of a civil war a few months later.<sup>21</sup> Although the Northern military defeated the South, this does not imply that it is the strongest political actor in Yemen.

In spite of their prominent role in Yemeni politics, the armed forces remained weak – both in military and in social terms, where they were constantly bypassed by tribal structures. Military ranks have no authority unless bolstered by an influential tribe: communication lines follow tribal lines, not command structures. Normal military functioning is virtually impossible under such circumstances. Consequently, in 2011, a similar scenario to Libya was played out. The First Armoured Division under Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar followed him; other troops defected to simply go home; while other units, headed by President Saleh's family members, defended the regime.

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21. Khaled Fattah, 'A Political History of Civil-Military Relations in Yemen', *Alternative Politics*, Special Issue 1, November 2010, pp. 25-47. Available at: [http://www.alternatifpolitika.com/page/docs/Kasim\\_2010\\_Ozel\\_Sayi\\_1/Tam\\_Metin/Khaled\\_FATTAH.pdf](http://www.alternatifpolitika.com/page/docs/Kasim_2010_Ozel_Sayi_1/Tam_Metin/Khaled_FATTAH.pdf).

In a highly tribalised political structure such as Yemen's, marked by distrust towards any force capable of toppling the regime, the military was hardly ever allowed to function professionally, which explains its diverse reactions to the 2011 events. Except for a brief period between 1967 and 1974 under presidents Eryani and Hamdi, the latter a lieutenant colonel himself, where an attempt was made to professionalise the army, the military was deliberately weakened and marginalised. Once Saleh came to power, it was not just politicised but effectively tribalised and became pervaded with a network of patronage and nepotism. In addition to making appointments based on loyalty rather than competence, from the 1980s onwards Saleh allowed military appointments to become avenues to personal enrichment.

One particular phenomenon was the creation of fictional staff – 'ghost soldiers' – whose pay was pocketed by officers, greatly inflating the official number of military personnel. Consequently, the army never managed to establish itself as a promoter of a national agenda but as a vehicle to ascend to power. In fact, it resembled more a tribal militia than an armed force.<sup>22</sup> The politicisation of the armed forces was particularly salient during the first three years after unification, when multiple command structures, hostility in the officer corps and disagreement over promotions and recruitment resulted in extensive political bickering. In 1993, Chief of Staff al-Bashiri, himself a Northerner, resigned over a dispute with the defence minister, a Southerner, concerning the promotion of officers.

This continued after the war was over. Appointments to posts was more often than not based on personal and tribal affiliations rather than qualifications; parallel security structures were created in order to keep the military in check, and training levels were maintained at a low level. Morale and cohesion were best in those units which took part in the many multi-divisional campaigns fought against the Houthis under General Ali Mohsen – very likely because military considerations in those outweighed tribal ones. Not surprisingly, President Saleh's estrangement from General Mohsen a few years before the Arab Spring contributed to units loyal to the General moving against Saleh in March 2011. Just as in the Libyan case, the armed forces neither had the cohesiveness to act in support of the regime or the people, nor the necessary political capital to choose.

In an attempt to remedy the disastrous internal state of the Yemeni military, the country has embarked on a reform programme designed to detribalise and re-professionalise it. In April 2013, interim President Hadi removed Saleh's most important appointees (including General Mohsen) and announced a large-scale reorganisation of the military. Whether he succeeds in changing the military's decades-old posture in Yemen's political landscape remains to be seen.

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22. Michael Knights, 'The Military Role in Yemen's Protests: Civil-Military Relations in the Tribal Republic', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013.

# Conclusion

There are altogether nineteen Arab military forces, eight of whom by and large maintain a posture of aloofness from politics. The remaining eleven, however, do play a decidedly political role in their respective countries, for better or for worse. While the events of 2011 highlighted those cases in which armed forces have effectively assisted or impeded regime change, they also served to draw attention to the fact that the long absence of Arab forces from the political sphere does not imply their actual removal from politics.

Instead, Arab forces continue to play a role beyond their military purpose even in those states which did not experience large-scale unrest in 2011. The involvement of the military in politics is perceived with deep suspicion by rulers in Arab states, such as Jordan for example, which regard a powerful military as posing a threat to their stability. In societies which are highly polarised and politicised, the military is seen as being part and parcel of the secular-nationalist camp and therefore hardly a neutral agent of the state.

Arab military forces will, by and large, continue therefore to act as political agents. This does not necessarily imply direct involvement in politics, but they accompany change in one way or another. Such a stance is in part the result of the army's institutional outlook, but is in part also due to the highly unstable and politically volatile environments in which they operate.

This in itself has policy implications for those who seek to engage with the Arab world. The removal of the armed forces from politics is, by default, a long-term goal for the EU and for international donors: according to a World Bank study,<sup>23</sup> it took the fastest states 17 years to relegate armed forces to their defence role only. Successful attempts at neutralising the political role of armed forces always take into account the two key dimensions of the military, the societal as well as the institutional dimensions.

Addressing the issue at the societal level will therefore require an approach which acknowledges the role these forces play beyond their primary military function. Armed forces act not only because they can, but also because other social actors cannot (or will not) act. A solution to the question of the involvement of the military in politics always includes the civil society in which they are embedded.

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23. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2011), p. 11.

## **Arab armies: agents of change? Before and after 2011**

In addition to this, focusing on the institutional dimension of the armed forces provides a good starting point. First and foremost, the military is an institution seeking to accomplish its core task – the protection and defence of the state. Assisting it in becoming a professional organisation will ultimately result in its gradual removal from politics, and the establishment of safe and sound civil-military relations.

