The Role of the Military in Arab Transitions

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Before 2011 and the social uprisings against authoritarian rule, armies in the Arab world were said to be crucial institutions of authoritarian regimes. This vital role, however, was not clearly defined and Arab armies remained black boxes difficult to open, until their return to the limelight in 2011. Although the central element that shook regimes was the mass mobilisations in public spaces and their domino effect across the Arab world, armies have played an essential role, either refusing to shoot at protesters, thereby playing the role of midwife to the transitions, or remaining loyal and taking part in repression, and hence allowing the survival of incumbent regimes.

From Background Actors to Forefront Political Actors amidst Mobilisations

Arab polities were ruled by authoritarian regimes, whose main features were: the exclusive control of executive positions by a small elite, which might hail from the military; the co-optation of new elites, in the form of economic elites from the 1990s and 2000s that promised modernisation and reform, crony entrepreneurs, new technocrats, etc.; and a strategy of managing/silencing all social demands with particular emphasis on the use of fear, whether effective (repression) or symbolic (stemming from the potential use of repression). Day-to-day authoritarian governance was based on the crucial role of the Interior Ministry and its many security services or *mukhabarat*. Authoritarian Arab regimes were much more like "securitocracies" (*mukhabarat* states) than military regimes in the strict sense – with the general staff ruling the country.

The military is said to be the backbone of such authoritarian regimes. Although there were military interventions on behalf of regimes, this has mostly been the exception rather than the rule. The military has maintained a "quietist" posture in Arab regimes, remaining loyal, but drawing a fine but essential line between the military as an integral part of the regime – and some officers played crucial roles in some regimes – and the military as an institution of the State. The army has positioned itself as a symbol and a guardian of the State, displaying a firm nationalism and taking action in emergency situations. Regimes displayed numerous "coup-proofing" and control devices within the military, offering rapid promotions to command positions, favouring alleged loyalists and keeping a close watch on promotions in the officers corps. In Tunisia or in the Gulf, the small size of the military was an insurance for the regime against military interference. This was a long-term trend in the Gulf that was compensated by US protection and the outsourcing of many security functions to Pakistani or Jordanian individuals (mercenaries) or entire units, organised in planned rotations. In Libya, the Gaddafi regime has striven for 42 years to destroy the army, in order to control it and annihilate any possibility of an officer manoeuvring the army to rival its own power networks – as the young colonel had done in 1969 with a handful of "free officers," mirroring the Nasserist model.

The flip side of "quietist" armies for regimes is keeping these strong corporatist actors satisfied. By closely observing what is happening inside their armies, regimes have been very careful to look after both the military's corporate requirements, such as large budgets or modernisation and social welfare programmes, and the private interests of their officer

corps. The military in all cases has been wedded to the status quo. In some cases, as exemplified by Egypt (but also in some ways in Jordan and Saudi Arabia), the military has engaged in substantial economic activities, building a military economy in Egypt with military for-profit enterprises, military ventures in reclaiming land and tourist projects, etc. But the military has remained a closed and secretive actor, keeping its distance from the day-to-day practices of authoritarian rule and displaying a kind of strictly controlled, expanded professional autonomy.

In other cases, such as Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, regimes have made major structural adjustments inside the officer corps, said to be a move aimed at bringing the armed forces into politics. In Bahrain there is a Sunni bias (either directly through the recruitment of Sunni officers, or indirectly with adjunct foreign Sunni forces); in Yemen following reunification the Northern hegemony has strong presence in the Yemeni armed forces, with a special role for the Saleh family and tribal elements (Hashed confederation, Ahmar family); and in Syria there is the unwritten rule that every combat unit should be under the command, officially or less directly, of an Alawite officer (often with close links to the President or his family).

The thunderstorm of 2011 in the "calm" landscape of authoritarian rule took the form of mass social mobilisations in public spaces. While terminally ill regimes remained in politics, societies, particularly the far more numerous younger generations, became active and opened to the outside world using new information and communication technologies. This situation was a kind of "stress test" for regimes and their security services. Rage among the population and its subsequent mobilisation was fuelled by repression and the widespread circulation of images of the wounded or dead on You Tube and Facebook. Security services, consisting of police and heavily armed anti-riot units, attempted to violently quell mass demonstrations with live ammunition and snipers, and were overwhelmed by the numbers of protesters. Regimes decided to step up the repression and try to involve the military to help deal with the situation.

Armies Thrown Unwillingly into Politics

The variations observed in the military reactions to the regimes' call for repression raised questions regarding the military "will" to enter into this situation. It has been asked of the military in the past – in Egypt (albeit lightly) in 1986 and in 1997, in Jordan in 1996 and 1998, and repression has been deployed on numerous occasions in Saudi Arabia in the petrol-rich Shiite region. The difference in 2011 was the level of social mobilisations through peaceful mass demonstrations. Using life-threatening violence would have tarnished the military's image, pushing it into a situation of authoritarian day-to-day policing – something the military is always reluctant to be involved in – and would have endangered discipline, creating rifts between the rank and file and high officers or even among the officers themselves.

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In Tunisia, the Chief of Staff refused to shoot at protesters. The small, legalist army, that resented the role of the corrupt Executive and its hugely expanded police and security forces, took action to protect public infrastructures, but refused to exert repression. It thereby quickly pushed Ben Ali towards the exit and ended up with the power in its own hands.

In Egypt, however, the huge Egyptian military and founder of the new regime in 1952, passed from Nasser to Sadat and then to Mubarak, would certainly have a say in any regime change. With chaos mounting, police disappearing before mass demonstrations, and tanks and troops being deployed, the army was the *de facto* ruler. The military leadership to whom Mubarak once belonged remained ambiguous for a time to give the President every opportunity to stay in power. But with protesters remaining mobilised (and shouting "the army and the people are one hand") and threatening to flock to the presidential palace, the army acknowledged the "legitimate demands" of the protesters and ousted President Mubarak. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took power.

In Libya, the weak military fell apart on the first days of the uprising, with some units joining rebels in Benghazi and others remaining loyal to the Gaddafi regime. The latter units were special brigades and paramilitary militia (inside or outside the army), under the direct control of Gaddafi's sons, members of the Gaddafa tribe or close allies.

In other cases, where the relations of the military with regimes are much more "organic" (where regimes have engineered the officer corps to link the military to the regime through bonds of family, confession, or ethnicity), the military leadership is more likely to consider using force against unarmed civilians in the name of regime survival. In Bahrain, the military, whose officers and rank and file are predominantly Sunni, was engaged in repression against mass mobilisations, presented by the regime as Shiite demonstrations (in a country with a majority Shiite population and a Sunni ruling dynasty). In Yemen, the security apparatus was also engaged in repression, but with mobilisations keeping apace and demonstrators confronting repression predominantly with non-violence. This led to the deployment of more and more army units – and not just special units close to President Saleh and his family. Subsequent fractures within the army led to heavyweights of the Saleh regime siding with demonstrators, such as general Ali Mohsen, the key commander of an armoured division, and the Ahmar family, whose combatants were essential in the 1994 reunification war against Southern dissidence. In the early days of the Syrian uprising, the regime relied on elite units, said to be wholly staffed by Alawite loyalists, and paramilitary Alawite militia (*shabihha*). However as revolution spread to more and more cities, the regime turned to a broader swath of the military, sparking defections by Sunni officers or by the rank and file (mainly Sunni conscripts, due to demographic reasons), which went on to form the nucleus of the Syrian Free Officers, and then the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Armies in Transitional Settings

The essential problem in 2012 is the abyssal political void left by the authoritarian rule and the latter's ability to fracture, enfeeble, and disintegrate the political capabilities (parties, associations, etc.) of any given society. There are three models of transition in motion in the Arab world, each one implicating the military in one sense or another.

First, there is the model of the reinstitutionalisation of politics, with important variations and difficulties across cases. In Tunisia, the tradition of civil society (activists, jurists, trade unionists, human rights activists, university teachers, journalists, etc.) and state bureaucracy (which although corrupt, was not eliminated by the authoritarian powers, thus raising the question of "cleaning" the administrative apparatus of elements from the former regime that are still largely in place) has been able to quickly reestablish institutions and channel the transition through parliamentary elections and constitutional processes. Obstacles and pitfalls remain prominent, yet the proper conduct of the transitional (civilian) authorities and commissions of the landmark elections of October 23 2011 signals an important step towards the rebirth of an organised political life taking precedence over the street politics that toppled the Ben Ali regime. And the military has indicated its strong willingness to return to the barracks whatever the results of elections: it has played a crucial logistical role in securing electoral processes, but has refrained from any political appetite, maintaining a strong apolitical and legalist role under the guidance of its Chief of Staff (who is nearing his retirement in 2012, but whose successor will not be very different).

In Egypt, however, the military holds the power through the SCAF – which maintains a certain corporatist coherence, though there are divergent views inside it and rumblings from lower-ranking officers regarding the SCAF's behaviour. The SCAF acts in a very paternalistic way, but has regularly indicated that it will not stay in power, but rather return power to a civilian-elected government, although without offering much room for manoeuvre for a civilian political system to emerge. This context, where the military holds (transitional) power until a civilian-led political system emerges, is a new challenge. The military did not rule under Mubarak – this was the responsibility of the Executive, the Ministry of Interior and its repressive apparatus. The military had been depoliticised and was fundamentally a background pillar of the regime that remained in the shadows. Since 2011, however, the military has been brought fully into the limelight. The SCAF is concerned above all with a return to stability and normalcy that may allow it to return back to the shadows far away from politics. The generation of officers in power in the SCAF are not particularly geared towards politics: they are the product of decades of authoritarian rule that entailed a mixture of professionalism based on performance, modernisation and a strong corporate identity, along with cronyism, patrimonialism, preferential treatment of some high officers close to the

regime, and a strict apolitical stance. They are not, therefore, the most likely of actors to fully understand the importance of change in the Egyptian polity. The military leadership – like other (civilian) actors in Egypt now vying for power – knows that it is at a kind of crossroads, a critical juncture, where the rules of the game/system are to be redefined for the future. Now, though, it has no clear roadmap, and wields an iron fist whenever it feels threatened. The military is eager to maintain an influential role, albeit behind the scenes, in the Egyptian system. It therefore has to negotiate (or impose) its level of autonomy and its future role in Egypt with emerging civilian actors, as illustrated by the debates on civilian actors overseeing the army. Debates are tense (at the time of writing) with a loaded agenda for 2012: constitution writing and presidential elections.

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The key to moving forwards in a highly volatile transition is moderation. It must be seen as a learning process for the competing actors, namely learning how to cooperate and accept others by exchanging words and arguments, and not bullets and violence. Involved in this process are: the military on the one hand, which holds the power and retains some legitimacy (the famous slogan in January 2011, "the military and the people are one hand", *al-jaisch wa al-chaab ayad wahida*) but is strongly criticized for its day-to-day governance of the country; the revolutionary forces and liberals on the other hand, who have instigated and led the revolutionary movement, but lost parliamentary elections in November 2011-January 2012, though they retain a potential to mobilise people in a country whose socio-economic problems have not been addressed by the provisional government and its military backers (SCAF); and, finally; the Muslim Brothers who have a strong hand in electoral and constitutional processes (rivalling the Salafists from the Al-Nour Party).

Secondly, there is the Libyan case, where the State's lack of a monopoly of force is a fundamental problem – until March 2012, the Ministry of Defence had no funding to rebuild a nucleus of armed forces, due to the transitional authorities' inability to make decisions. The crux of the problem is related to the way the Gaddafi regime was toppled. The international protective umbrella put forward by Security Council Resolution 1973 helped resolve Libya's protracted conflict between the Gaddafi regime and the National Transitional Council (NTC). The agenda shifted from the initial "responsibility to protect" (and the NATO imposition of a no-fly zone) toward a mainly "offshore" intervention bordering on "regime change" – no massive foreign (especially Western) intervention on the ground was envisioned after the precedents of Iraq and Afghanistan, but NATO aerial bombings, the use of special forces from Britain, France, Jordan, Qatar and UAE, and arms deliveries and funding were essential elements to tip the balance towards the Libyan rebels. Hence, the "military logic" on the ground has gained a strong say over the "political logic." The early-constituted NTC was an important focal point for the Libyan February 17 uprising and performed well in terms of gaining broad international recognition and funding, but it never acted as a government or a unified political wing for the social Libyan rebellion against authoritarian rule. The "military logic" was based on fragmented local rebellions and *ad hoc* military groupings. The end-result is a fragmentation of the security field with 125,000 to 150,000 young revolutionary Libyans (*thuwwar*) in arms and groups consisting of dozens to a few hundred militia operating in the country – with a process of dissolution and reconsolidation based on local dynamics and a few groupings (the National Army in Benghazi, the Tripoli Military Council, the Western Military Council, based in Zintan, the Misratan Military Council, etc). Some fighting has occurred since the end of the Gaddafi regime and the concerns of civil war have been raised by senior Libyan officials at the beginning of 2012. Libya's situation, however, is different from that of Somalia, where the country is at risk of destruction and plunder by the militia. In Libya there are countervailing forces to the destructive potential of the "military logic" based on fragmented militia. There is a desire among young Libyans, who constitute a large majority of the population, to rebuild the country. They are demanding responsibility, based on the idea that ordi-

nary people are able to pick up the pieces left by the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, rebuild their country (even from scratch) and find the solution to Libya's problems. Militia in Libya assume local security, most of them have no ideological agenda but are locally affiliated. The challenge for new Libyan authorities is to rebuild a genuine monopoly of force (demilitarisation, demobilisation, disarmament) with the rebuilding of a central military and police force. And the challenges that Libya face are almost unique in the sense that for four decades Gaddafi systematically ensured that there would not be a single military force (and no central government).

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Thirdly, there are cases where the predominantly peaceful social uprising against authoritarian rule gives way to a "mutually-damaging stalemate" between a mobilised society that is still protesting in the streets and a resilient regime benefiting from a loyal army's willingness to exert repression. In these cases, the military is the central focus, and the opposition must aim to increase defections (*inshiqaq*) in the security apparatus and fragment the coercive/repressive power of the regime – this strategy is also premised on a fierce propaganda war between both sides. The "military logic" becomes essential, and there is a risk that it might veer towards civil war if the regime manages to hold onto its security apparatus.

In Yemen, an assassination attempt in June 2011 forced President Saleh to leave the country and spend some time in Saudi Arabia, while the President's sons and nephews continued to exert power in his absence. Subsequently, amidst Saleh's procrastinations to stay in power, a mutually-damaging stalemate arose between two armed power centres: the remnants of Saleh's security forces controlled by the Saleh family on the one hand, and defected army units, tribesmen loyal to the Ahmar family and Islah-controlled militia on the other. Violent clashes and a context of persistent, peaceful social mobilisations against Saleh rule in Yemeni cities paved the way to a compromise between Yemeni political forces as a way out of continued conflict. Saleh belatedly signed the Gulf Cooperation Council (CCG) plan (with Western backing) for political transition, opening a process that led to a power-transfer with his vice-President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, elected as President in February 2012. Yet, the restoration of the fractured security sector, especially the army, remains one of the most important and controversial issues in post-Saleh Yemen. Saleh spent 34 years building his networks and combining the tribes and the State in the army apparatus, and his absence has created a lawlessness which has allowed Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to gain footholds in the country.

In Syria, where the opposition is relying on the gradual strengthening of the FSA through defectors, and the regime is trying to preserve coherence in the security forces and their potential for repression, "military logic" has not given way (at the time of writing) to a political solution. Negotiations between the two sides are not on the agenda, due to a mutual lack of confidence, and neither is an international intervention along the lines of the Libyan model (see above), which was blocked in the Security Council by Russian and Chinese vetoes in February 2012. This situation has led to an increased militarisation of the popular uprising, which maintains some of its initial features of peaceful mass social mobilisations, and a looming threat of civil war. The conflict is taking on an increasingly sectarian taint and there are increasing regional interventions in favour of one side or another (Iran, Hezbollah vs. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey).

The military in the Arab world is once again at the centre of political dynamics, but not like in the army-led coup d'états of the 1950s and 1960s. In 2012, a lot depends on the military. It must either adopt the role of guardian or be reconfigured, in those cases where it has fallen apart, for transitions in the Arab world to progress toward the consolidation of new systems following the social uprisings against authoritarian rule in 2011.