

The Armies in the ‘Arab Spring’

—Some Thoughts on the Civil-Military Relations—

Akifumi Ikeda

Eva Bellin, a leading political scientist on the contemporary Arab world, once argued the robustness of authoritarianism in the region as an outcome of the extraordinary capacity and will of the coercive apparatuses, the military in particular, to repress any sort of protestation from among the public.¹ She was astounded, together with most other analysts, as the phenomena known by the name of ‘Arab Spring’ unfolded and those deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes started stumbling one by one, with some of them being rapidly overthrown. Yet, she maintains the basic appropriateness of her previous arguments, as the variation in the uprisings and their consequences tend to confirm that the central insight, that is to say the coercive apparatus’ will to repress, determined the fates of those regimes.²

Moderate Cases: Tunisia and Egypt

In fact, relatively peaceful processes of regime change were seen in Tunisia and Egypt, where the armed forces remained at least politically neutral and/or

¹ Eva R. Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics*, 36 (2) (2004).

² Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism: Lessons of the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics*, 44 (2) (2012).

maintained a non-interventionist attitude towards the process and, by and large, refrained from violent repression against the mass protestations. In a way, it was a manifesto that the military is a national, professional and integrated institution which serves the interest of the nation and not that of the regime. However, at the same time, it could also be interpreted as meaning that the military turned its back against the regime which aimed at preserving its organizational integrity and/or vested interests.³ In Tunisia, the armed forces retreated to the backstage in a relatively early phase of the revolution, leaving the power to the newly organized Higher Committee to Protect the Goals of the Revolution. In Egypt, the military junta, which called itself the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, assumed power and tried to maintain control of the country as long as possible. Whereas in both cases the military endorsed and protected the process of regime change, the difference between the two might arguably derive from the sheer size and weight of vested interests of the institutions.

Under the dictatorial rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia was transformed into a police state. Ben Ali intentionally subordinated the Tunisian military to the impetuously enlarged security and intelligence forces. It was widely believed among senior officers that Ben Ali might have engineered a helicopter crash in 2002 which devastated much of the military's high command. When the December 2010 demonstrations erupted, there was no love lost between the regime and the military, and therefore the army sided with the demonstrators even to the point of opening fire against security and intelligence troops. All in all, the Tunisian military, largely cut off from the cloning networks of Ben Ali and his family, had few economic interests under its control.⁴

³ This kind of observation is, of course, not uncommon; see, for instance, David Silverman, "The Arab Military in the Arab Spring: Agent of Continuity or Change? A Comparative Analysis of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya," (APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper), and Daniel Steiman, "Military Decision-Making During the Arab Spring," *MUFTAH*, 29 May 2012, etc.

⁴ Yezid Sayigh, "The Tunisian Army-A New Political Role?," *The Cairo Review*,

In Egypt, the largest Arab country, the combined personnel numbers of the coercive apparatus (armies, domestic police, intelligence agencies, etc.) are said to be 1.8 million or more, which comprises a significant percentage of the active labor force of the nation. Egypt was also a police state, but the military retained supremacy against the Interior Ministry's various security and police forces. Unlike Tunisia's sub-50,000-strong military, the Egyptian military is the tenth-largest in the world. Egyptian military leadership has to maintain the social welfare systems for its massive personnel and their families. The old regime of Mubarak (and for that matter Sadat, too) responded to this burden by allowing the military to engage in certain commercial and economic activities, as a part of their coup-proofing strategy. Consequently, there emerged a 'military economy' parallel to the civilian one, with apparent comparative advantages such as an abundant supply of cheap labor, tax-free status and reduced import duties. In short, the Egyptian military had grown into a huge business conglomerate.⁵ The military existed in such a context not so much to fight for or serve national security interests as to support the vested interests in the regime, which were difficult to distinguish from the regime itself. Therefore, it was only natural that the military leadership cautiously calculated the risks involved and, detesting to commit double suicide with the president-for-life, abandoned the regime to preserve its vested interests.

Violent Cases: Syria, Libya, and Yemen

In Syria, the military remains as a protector of the regime, rather than the nation. It is true that the leadership under Bashar al-Asad made a strategic decision to undertake fundamental political reform and tried to broaden its power base,

31 Oct. 2011.

⁵ Sayigh, "Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt," (Carnegie Paper, August 2012).

satisfying some demands for change from below.⁶ However, the reforms were not intended to create fundamental change. The goal was to instill legitimacy in the system without altering the institutions that maintain the power of Bashar and the Alawi officer elite. This strategy appeared to have been successful up to the outbreak of 'Arab Spring'. Apparently, the Syrian leadership was confident regarding its secure grip on its military when the turmoil spread to Syrian soil. Initially, it seemed likely that Bashar would command, in large part, the loyalty of Syria's officer corps, and the officers seemed likely to maintain their own internal cohesion.⁷ However, as the upheaval grew prolonged and worsened, it became fairly clear that only a tiny part of the army, some of the best-trained and best-equipped units, were mobilized to suppress the civil uprising across the country by brute force, and the majority of the military units were ordered to stay in their barracks.⁸

Libyan armed forces were seemingly fragmented when faced with the civil uprising and almost disintegrated over the course of the revolt. These developments proved that the Libyan army was organized to protect the late dictator Mu'ammar Qadhafi's personal interests and kinship, rather than to defend the nation, despite the fact that it had an impressive arsenal for a small country, with more than 4,000 tanks and other armored vehicles and 400 combat aircraft. The result was a chaotic civil war between certain tribal units loyal to Qadhafi, including a considerable number of neighbouring African mercenaries and rebel militias with a large number of army defectors. The fact that Libya's new interim government has not succeeded in unifying those militias so far is clear evidence that there was no basic infrastructure for the Libyan national army.⁹

⁶ David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (Yale University Press, 2012).

⁷ Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Hoover Institution Press, 2012).

⁸ Sayigh, "Hurting Stalemate in Syria," *Commentary*, 31 January 2012.

⁹ Wolfram Lacher, "The Libyan Revolution: Old Elites and New Political Forces," in *Protest, Revolt and Regime Change in the Arab World*, ed. Muriel Asseburg

Yemen's case is less clear and more complicated.¹⁰ Ali Abdullah Saleh and his family gave up their power in exchange for immunity and allowing a peaceful, democratic transition from his 33-year rule. The military, which was divided during the protests and brought the country to the brink of civil war, was to be restructured and integrated. However, this process has proven more challenging than expected and has led to great tensions in the country. The situation is further complicated by an old triangle of rivalry that sparked the fighting among the government, the powerful tribal Ahmar family, and a war-lord-like powerful military commander who is unrelated to the Ahmar tribe and who has since defected to the opposition. The fight with the Qaeda militants, which has intensified during the upheaval, further detracts from the country's democratic transition.

Common Background

The military role in the recent upheavals, thus, differs from country to country. However, an interesting common denominator among these countries is the fact that the political role of military officers has been transformed over the last few decades, although the military establishments remain powerful and the officers are still playing powerful roles in forming internal political systems.¹¹ Up to 1970, they took part in continual wars against neighboring countries or against Israel and effectively intervened in other countries' affairs. The developments since the 1970s accompanying a certain wave of political reforms, however, prove that the military establishments in these countries have become far distanced from politics, and they no longer occupy the same position as in the past. Previously, with

(SWP Research Paper, 2012).

¹⁰ Iris Glosemeyer, "Yemen Without Ali Abdallah Saleh?," in *Protest, Revolt and Regime Change in the Arab World*, ed. Muriel Asseburg (SWP Research Paper, 2012).

¹¹ Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (Adelphi Papers, 1998), 324.

abundant armed coups-d'état and direct military governments, the military officers regarded themselves as spearheads of the people, speaking for the interest of their nation. The core agenda for them at the time was social justice or redistribution of wealth, prompted by anti-colonialist ideologies. Over the past few decades, as neo-liberal economic policies have become deeply embedded and as external threats have dramatically diminished, the military officers have clearly retreated from politics and willingly accept 'civilian control' in return for their institutional interests, such as preservation of budgets and other material benefits. At the same time, political parties and other political groups emerged during this period in these countries, and the influence of legislative and judicial institutions in the regimes has increased. In many cases, the role of civil society organizations and public opinion has escalated in public life. As neo-liberalism penetrates into societies, business circles as well as religious and ethnic minorities are encouraged to form their own lobby groups, whereby the components of the political regimes become highly complicated. Thus, the militaries have turned into internal interest groups working inside the regime, and their roles in politics were gradually but dramatically transformed by the early 21st century.

An Issue of 'Civil Society'

So, what is the difference between Tunisia and Egypt on one hand and Libya, Syria and Yemen on the other? What turned these countries' fates either toward a relatively smooth transition of power or toward civil war? One explanation from civil-military relations is to account for the difference by the permeation of civil society.¹² The theoretical framework of civil-military relations is indeed designed to analyze and understand the triangular power relations among the regime, the military, and the civil society. Each individual case reveals the manner and degree of the institutionalization of the armed forces into authoritarian systems. However,

¹² For the theoretical framework, see Brynen, Korany, and Noble, ed., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Vol. 1, Theoretical Perspectives* (Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1955).

many Middle East and North Africa (MENA) observers (particularly in Japan) have identified the civil-military relations in the Arab world as those between the regime and the armed forces, such as the coup/no-coup dichotomy. The net result is that there remain a number of blind spots regarding the role of civil society. This seems to be particularly true in the MENA region as the assumption in classic military sociology literature that civil society and the military occupy clearly demarcated spheres is not necessarily applicable in this region. In any of the five countries mentioned above, the boundaries between the two are blurred at best, or intermingle with each other. Typical examples include informal militias in civilian clothing such as Shabiha in Syria, Baltagiya in Egypt, Balatija in Yemen and so on. Even within the frameworks of the regimes, the military tends to be intertwined with other coercive agencies of the state such as the police, intelligence services and other internal security forces. The extent to which the military remains largely intact and separates itself from the other intertwining bodies is dependent upon a number of factors, but the decisive element depends on the awareness of the (senior) officer corps, i.e., is the fundamental purpose of the national armed forces to defend the borders against external foes or to preserve the political power of particular domestic parties?

Under authoritarian rule, the armed forces tend to build up a special, informal relationship with an all-powerful autocratic ruler. In some cases, certain communities based on religious sects, ethnic kinships, or regional bonds tend to dominate particular military commands, positions or units. The armed forces relate very differently to civilian power where the civil society more or less permeates. Thus in Tunisia and Egypt, the decision of the senior military commanders to abandon their presidents-for-life allowed quick transfers of power and cut short bloodshed.

Islamist Civil Society?

Difficulties with the civil society issue in the MENA region, however, lie at least

partly in how to deal with the Islamist movements.¹³ By the word ‘civil society’, if we are talking about middle class associations of professionals, do we include political Islamic groups such as Ikhwan Muslimin in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia? In those and other Arab countries, the regime has often acted to limit or suppress civil society while simultaneously attempting to appropriate an Islamist discourse. In the process, the regime tends to lend momentum to Islamist movements that have a broader base in society and therefore enjoy a transparent interest in fostering political liberalization, if not democracy itself. It seems that, although those Islamist movements did not start or initiate the uprisings of the Arab Spring, the attitudes of the military turned out to be more neutral or distanced from the regimes where the Islamist movements were embedded in wider political, economic and social systems and generally regarded as a sort or part of civil society.

In addition, the experience of confrontation between the regimes and those Islamist movements in the last few decades contributed somewhat to the political maturity on the part of the Islamists. Apparently in Tunisia, and to a lesser extent in Egypt as well, the main-stream Islamists seem to have allowed the army to balance emerging political currents and social forces, thus assuring orderly transitions. Ikhwan Muslimin and Ennahda, it would seem, learned the historical lesson under the old regimes that the crucial factor for success is to invest their vast intellectual, social abilities and resources in building a solid popular base focused on socioeconomic issues that are of general interest to the citizens. The precedence for what is plainly political brings those Islamists into an inevitable confrontation not only with a largely secularist youth, which was the real driving force of change, but also with the armed forces that are seeking assurances for their core institutional interests.

¹³ Azza Karam, ed., *Transnational Political Islam: Religion, Ideology, and Power* (Pluto Press, 2004).

Extent of Institutionalization

This brings up the issue of institutionalization.¹⁴ Under the authoritarian regimes throughout the Arab world, the military elites are largely intermeshed into the establishments through intermeshing with ruling family members (be it kings or presidents), senior bureaucrats and business cronies, and they formulate 'class' interests, so to speak. Moreover, those militaries are generally accompanied by, and closely associated with, other coercive apparatuses, as mentioned earlier. Military and security hybrid amalgamation is another characteristic that is present. Finally, the combined personnel numbers of such an amalgamation reveals that military and security employment demands a massive social welfare system and sufficient financial resources to support it. Countries affordable with rents (i.e., petroleum, gas, etc.) might have little fear. However, such countries as Tunisia, Egypt and Syria where access to outright rents is limited and the burden is beyond national public finances find solutions by allowing the military to go into business, be it as formal engagement in commercial and economic activities thus forming 'military economies' parallel to civilian ones or informal involvement in massive and lucrative black markets. Institutionalization of the military in the Arab world seems to be an outcome of the functional equation of the following variables: class consciousness of senior officers, the extent of amalgamation, and the degree of economic autonomy. Hence, in Libya and Yemen, the military has split or fragmented as a result of insufficient institutionalization, whereas in Tunisia and Egypt it remains intact and demonstrated more or less a high level of professionalism. The Syrian case needs more close and careful verification, but it seems that the military adhered to regime protection not because of a lack of institutionalization but because institutionalization went hand-in-hand with the black market and the underground economy and thereby built up an adamant institutional interest to preserve the incumbent regime.

¹⁴ The term 'institutionalization' here follows the usage of Jack A. Goldstone, "Introduction: Bridging Institutionalized and Non-institutionalized Politics" in *States, Parties, and Social Movements*, ed. Goldstone (Cambridge University

In retrospect, the Tunisian military had little to lose when it came to siding with the massive protesters on the streets, and the Egyptian military had many concerns about being put 'in the same boat' as the stumbling regime. The Syrian military, at least the pivotal segments of it, retains a strong sense of being a beneficiary of the incumbent regime and decided that it may 'as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb'.

The militaries of Libya and Yemen were unable to crystallize and distinguish their own institutional vested interests with the regimes in the midst of civil disturbances.

At any rate, the escalation of violence presages a more radical change, whereas the former regimes' informal arrangements to maintain the prerogatives of the militaries are no longer sustainable even in the cases of relatively moderate transitions of power. Thus, it is becoming increasingly clear that the civil-military relations in those countries need to be renegotiated in some way or another.

Press, 2003).