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## The Role of Armed Forces in the Arab Uprisings

Derek Lutterbeck

### I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As popular uprisings, demanding greater political freedoms and in several countries even regime change, swept across much of the Arab world, a crucial role has been played by the armed forces of these countries in confronting the pro-reform movements. Practically all Arab countries can be described as military-based regimes, where the armed forces have been at the core of the political system, even though the status and role of the military has varied significantly from one country to the next. Moreover, powerful military forces, as well as a robust security apparatus more generally, have been seen by many, as one, if not the main, obstacle to political reform and democratization in the region.<sup>2</sup>

However, military forces have responded quite differently across the region to pro-democracy movements, ranging from openness to protest movements, to internal fracturing, to firm support for the regime in power. These different responses, in turn, have been crucial in determining the outcome of the popular uprisings, and whether authoritarian leaders were eventually overthrown. The aim of this paper is to discuss the role the armed forces have played in six Middle Eastern countries, which have

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive study on this topic has been published as Lutterbeck, Derek, 2011: *Arab Uprisings and Armed forces: between openness and resistance. DCAF SSR Paper 2.*

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Cook, Steven A., 2007: *Ruling But Not Governing. The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria and Turkey* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007); Bellin, Eva, 2004: "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East. Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective", in: *Comparative Politics*, 36,2 (January): 139-157; Brooks, Risa, 1998: "Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes", *Adelphi Paper* 324, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

experienced large-scale pro-reform movements: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. In the first two countries, long-standing autocrats have been toppled after several weeks of massive demonstrations, with the armed forces adopting a (relatively) open attitude towards the popular uprising. In both Libya and Yemen, the pro-reform movement has led to a fracturing of the military and practically to a civil war, whereby in Libya the anti-Qaddafi opposition eventually prevailed over the country's regime. Finally, in Bahrain and Syria, the armed forces have violently suppressed the popular uprising while largely maintaining their unity, although Syria has seen at least some defections from its army. The paper also offers some initial reflections on the reasons behind the armed forces' different responses to the popular uprisings.

## **II. Tunisia**

The largest degree of openness, and indeed, even support for pro-democracy movements has been shown by the Armed Forces of Tunisia. When pro-reform movements erupted in Tunisia in December 2010, following the self-immolation of the fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian Armed Forces, from the outset, appeared to side with the protestors. In January 2011, the armed forces were called out to confront the rapidly swelling demonstrations, which had become increasingly demanding, not only in terms of economic and political reforms, but also regarding the departure of the country's long-standing ruler, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. However, when the army was deployed in different parts of Tunis, the soldiers, according to media reports, immediately fraternised with the demonstrators—in sharp contrast to the police, which by that time had already shot dead a significant number of protestors. Moreover, the army Chief of Staff, General Rachid Ammar, forbade his men from firing on the demonstrators, and in the streets of Tunis many demonstrators are said to have sought shelter from police gunshots behind the military's tanks and

armored vehicles.<sup>3</sup> Ben Ali, in turn, dissatisfied with the behaviour of the army, reportedly tried to sack General Ammar for insubordination.

The Tunisian Armed Forces and its leadership not only refrained from using force against the demonstrators, but even seem to have played a key role in ultimately pushing Ben Ali from power. While the exact role the army and its leaders played in the final days of the Ben Ali regime has not yet been fully clarified, there seems to have been a growing rift between the Armed Forces and the regime in the days before Ben Ali's downfall. In the end, it was said to have been General Ammar himself who pressed Ben Ali to leave the country, personally telling him that "he was finished"<sup>4</sup>.

### III. Egypt

A somewhat different response to anti-regime uprisings was shown by the Egyptian military. Even though the Egyptian Armed Forces ultimately also sided with the protestors against the country's ruler, when compared to their Tunisian counterparts, the Egyptian armed forces have generally been less open to the protest movements. When in response to the massive anti-regime demonstrations in late January 2011 the Egyptian armed forces were deployed in different parts of the country, not unlike the Tunisian army, they declared that the demands of the protestors were "legitimate", and pledged to "not use force against the Egyptian people".<sup>5</sup> As in Tunisia, there was fraternisation between

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<sup>3</sup> "L'armée tunisienne remporte le soutien populaire", *Magharebia* (28.1.2011).

<sup>4</sup> "L'amiral Lanxade : C'est l'armée qui a lâché Ben Ali", *Le Parisien* (16.1.2011) ; "Tunisie : L'armée a lâché Ben Ali", *Le Monde* (16.1.2011) ; International Crisis Group (2011, April 29). *Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne*, Middle East/North Africa Report 106. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/moyen-orient-afrique-du-nord/afrique-du-nord/Tunisia/106-popular-protests-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-iv-tunisia-way.aspx>:11.

<sup>5</sup> "Military Calls Egyptian People's Demands "Legitimate"", *AFP* (31.1.2011).

the soldiers and the protestors, and some military officers even joined the demonstrations on Cairo's Tahrir square.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, compared to the Tunisian military, the Egyptian armed forces have overall been less firmly behind the protestors, and have shown more support for the country's ruler, Hosni Mubarak. The International Crisis Group has summarised the role of the Armed Forces during the Egyptian uprisings as follows:

*“Throughout the protests, the army played a consistently ambiguous role, purportedly standing with the people, while at the same time being an integral part of the regime they were confronting. It found itself almost literally on both sides of the barricades”.*<sup>7</sup>

The Egyptian Armed Forces' more limited openness to, or support for, pro-reform movements was evidenced, for example, when after the first week of protests, armed Mubarak supporters riding on camels and horses charged into Tahrir square and attacked the pro-democracy protestors there. Even though several demonstrators were reportedly killed by pro-Mubarak thugs, the army units present on the square did not intervene, instead calling upon the protestors to leave the square and go home.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, even though throughout the demonstrations, the Egyptian Armed Forces consistently acknowledged the legitimacy of the protestors' demands, the position of the military seemed to swing more strongly in Mubarak's favour when, in a series of televised speeches from early February onwards, the President offered some concessions to the demonstrators, including a pledge

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<sup>6</sup> “15 Egypt army officers join protestors”, *Reuters* (11.2.2011).

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group (2011, February 24). *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, Middle East/North Africa Report 101. Available at : <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/101-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-i-egypt-victorious.aspx>: 16.

<sup>8</sup> “Violence flares in Cairo square”, *Aljazeera* (3.2.2011).

not to stand in the next presidential elections, and a transfer of some of his powers to the recently appointed Vice President. While the protestors were not satisfied with these concessions, and the demonstrations only continued to grow in size, the army repeatedly called upon the pro-democracy activists to go home and resume a normal life.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the Egyptian Armed Forces, compared to the Tunisian military, have thus shown a more ambivalent attitude towards the anti-regime movement, and have been more reluctant to clearly distance themselves from the country's leader, it seems that, as in Tunisia, it was the military leadership which in the end convinced the President to step down. In Egypt, as well, according to many accounts, there was a growing rift between the army and the President in the final days before his resignation, and top military commanders are said to have urged the President to leave office.<sup>10</sup> On February 11<sup>th</sup>, only one day following Mubarak's public vow to serve out his current term of office, he resigned and handed power to the "Supreme Council of the Armed Forces".

#### **IV. Libya**

Again a different response to pro-reform movements was shown by the armed forces of Libya, where the popular uprisings have resulted in a fracturing of the military apparatus, and practically to a civil war. On the one hand, when the protests began in February 2011, parts of the Libyan army defected relatively quickly to the opposition. In the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, which became the stronghold of the rebels, defecting army units are said to have overpowered pro-regime forces and driven them out of the city.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, other elements of

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<sup>9</sup> "Egyptian army backs Hosni Mubarak and calls for protestors to go home", *The Guardian* (11.2.2011).

<sup>10</sup> "Egypt's army helped oust President Mubarak", *BBC News* (19.2.2011); "Analysis: Military coup was behind Mubarak's exit", *Associated Press* (11.2.2011).

<sup>11</sup> "Libyan unrest spreads to Tripoli as Benghazi erupts", *Reuters* (20.2.2011).

the Libyan military, and in particular its most elite units, fought the anti-regime movements with little, if any, restraint. The so-called Khamis Brigade, which was commonly considered the country's best equipped and trained military force, and which was commanded by the Libyan leader's youngest son, Khamis Qaddafi, was at the forefront in fighting the opposition. After rebel forces initially succeeded in moving westwards from Benghazi, bringing a number of towns under their control, they were subsequently thrown back by the Khamis Brigade.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is often argued that without the western airstrikes which began on 19 March 2011, Qaddafi's much better trained and equipped troops may well have succeeded in re-capturing even the city of Benghazi.

It is worth noting that pro-Qaddafi forces have not refrained from using even their heaviest weaponry, such as aircraft and tanks, against the rebels as well as civilians. Moreover, Qaddafi reportedly also unleashed foreign mercenaries from sub-Saharan African countries such as Mali, Niger and Chad, against the uprising. Certainly, this explains the high death toll which the unrest in Libya has exacted, when compared to the uprisings in Tunisia or Egypt. In the latter, the number of deaths, during the anti-regime demonstrations, are estimated in the hundreds, whereas as many as 30,000 people are thought to have died during the upheavals in Libya.

In the end, however, after a six months long bloody civil war, and despite the initial superiority of Qaddafi's forces, the opposition succeeded in turning the military balance in its favour. In August 2011, rebel fighters gained control of the Libyan capital Tripoli, and in October 2011 Qaddafi himself was captured and killed in a last stand-off between pro and anti-Qaddafi forces in the former Libyan leader's hometown of Sirte. With the killing of Qaddafi, his more than 40-year rule has effectively come to an end.

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<sup>12</sup> "Khamis Qaddafi takes the offensive", *Intelligence Online* (17.3.201):1.

## V. Bahrain

When pro-reform movements spread to the Gulf state of Bahrain, they were met with yet another type of response from the country's armed forces. In Bahrain, demonstrators have come mainly from the country's Shiite majority population, which has called not only for democratic reforms and respect for human rights, but also for an end to the discrimination suffered by Shias in all sectors of public life.<sup>13</sup> However, Bahrain's security forces have shown fierce opposition to pro-reform movements, and have forcefully suppressed the pro-democracy uprising. The government crackdown on protestors began in mid-February, when security forces surrounded the demonstrators on "Pearl Roundabout", which had become the centre of the protests. Many of the demonstrators were reportedly still asleep when the security forces started firing rubber bullets and tear gas at them, killing at least four protestors.<sup>14</sup>

Protests subsequently escalated, as did the regime's response to them. In the following days, demonstrators blocked entry into parliament as well as Manama's main financial district. In order to contain the growing unrest, Bahrain's leadership requested support from the Gulf Cooperation Council. In response, some 1,000 soldiers were dispatched by Saudi Arabia, together with an additional 500 police officers by the UAE to suppress the protests. Reinforced by these additional troops, Bahraini security forces have been successful in clearing the square; however at the costs of further deaths.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group (2011, April 6). *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt*, MENA Report 105. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iran-gulf/bahrain/105-popular-protests-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-iii-the-bahrain-revolt.aspx>: 6.

<sup>14</sup> Katzman, Kenneth (2011, March 21). *Bahrain: Reform, Security and US Policy*, CRS Report for Congress. Congressional Research Service. Available at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>: 6.

<sup>15</sup> "Bahrain: 'Thirty-one protestors killed, 600 arrested', since February, group says", *AKI* (14.4.2011).

## VI. Yemen

In Yemen, the popular uprising has resulted in a situation somewhat similar to the one observed in Libya, i.e. a fracturing of the armed forces and practically a civil war, even if the war in Yemen has thus far remained a relatively low intensity conflict. As in Libya, the most elite units of the Yemeni military have shown strong opposition to the pro-reform movements, which started gaining momentum from early 2011 onwards. In March 2011, the Yemeni army raided Sanaa's University Campus, where demonstrators had been camping, using live ammunition and killing at least one protester.<sup>16</sup> In another massive demonstration a few weeks later, soldiers opened fire on the protestors, reportedly killing 46 and wounding hundreds.<sup>17</sup>

However, and again comparable to Libya, the Yemeni military has effectively splintered when confronted with the popular uprising, with at least some of its elements siding with the opposition. Shortly after the government's violent crackdown on the demonstrations, several senior commanders of the Yemeni army defected to the anti-regime movement. The most high-level defector has been General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Head of the Yemeni army in the North West, who according to some sources is President Saleh's half-brother.<sup>18</sup> In March 2011, General Mohsen announced that he would join the revolution and deployed troops and tanks of his 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division in Sanaa, in order to protect the protestors against government forces.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group (2011, March 10). *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution*, Middle East/North Africa Report 102. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iran-gulf/yemen/102-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-II-yemen-between-reform-and-revolution.aspx>: 6.

<sup>17</sup> "Yemen in Crisis: A Special Report", *Stratfor* (21.3.2011).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> "Army splits in Yemen, Crisis escalates", *Stratfor*, 21.3.2011.



On the other hand, the Yemeni defense minister declared that, despite these defections, the army was still behind the President, and would defend him against any “coup against democracy”.<sup>20</sup> Only minutes after General Mohsen rallied behind the protestors, the Yemeni Republican Guard also deployed tanks at strategic locations in the capital, including the President’s residence, the ministry of defense and the central bank.<sup>21</sup> Fighting between pro and anti-government forces escalated sharply after Saleh repeatedly rejected peace deals put forward by the GCC under which he would leave office. Since May 2011, there have been regular violent clashes between forces loyal to President Saleh on the one hand, and General Mohsen’s troops and tribal militias on the other, over control of government buildings in Sanaa as well as elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> In early June 2011, President Saleh himself was severely wounded in a rocket attack on his presidential palace and was flown to Saudi Arabia for treatment.<sup>23</sup>

## VII. Syria

Syria is another Arab country which has experienced a rather broad popular uprising against the regime. Compared to other countries in the region, pro-reform movements have however been slower to gain momentum, and at least until late 2011, have remained more limited in size.<sup>24</sup> When it comes to the response of

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<sup>20</sup> “Top army commanders defect in Yemen”, *Aljazeera*, 21.2.2011.

<sup>21</sup> “Yemen showdown looms as army loyalties divide”, *The Guardian* (22.3.2011); and “Top army commanders defect in Yemen”, *Aljazeera* (21.2.2011).

<sup>22</sup> “Five killed in shelling near Yemen tribal chief home – source”, *AFP*, 24.5.2011; and “Heavy clashes erupt in Yemen capital, 21 dead”, *Reuters* (24.5.2011).

<sup>23</sup> “Yemen: Injured President Saleh heads to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment”, *The Guardian* (4.6.2011).

<sup>24</sup> International Crisis Group (2011, July 6). *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People’s Slow-motion Revolution*, Middle East/North Africa Report 108. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/files/middle%20east%20north%20africa/iraq%20syria%20lebanon/syria/109%20popular%20protest%20in%20north%20afric>

the Syrian armed forces to the anti-regime movement, the Syrian case most closely resembles the one of Bahrain; as in the latter case, and somewhat in contrast to Libya or Yemen, the Syrian military (as well as the country's other security forces) has forcefully cracked down on the popular uprising, without a splintering of the armed forces, although there have been some defections.

When anti-regime protests gained momentum in a number of Syrian towns during the latter half of March 2011, these were violently suppressed by the Syrian military, as well as the country's other security forces. A common strategy of the Syrian army in dealing with the demonstrations has been to use tanks and snipers to keep people off the streets. According to defecting soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch, troops sent to towns experiencing anti-regime demonstrations and unrest were usually told by their superiors that they would be fighting foreign infiltrators, religious extremists and terrorists. When the soldiers encountered unarmed protestors, they were nevertheless ordered to open fire on them. These defectors also reported that secret service agents were usually deployed alongside soldiers to ensure that they would follow orders, and that soldiers who would refuse to shoot protestors would themselves be executed by their superiors.<sup>25</sup>

It is worth noting that the Syrian regime has also been using increasingly heavy weaponry to suppress the uprising.<sup>26</sup> In June 2011, the Syrian army for the first time deployed helicopter

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a%20and%20the%20middle%20east%20vi-the%20syrian%20regimes%20slow-motion%20suicide%20arabic.pdf (in Arab).

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Defectors Describe Order to Shoot Unarmed Protestors" (9.7.2011).

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group (2011, July 13). *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow Motion Suicide*, Middle East/North Africa Report 109. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/109-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-vii-the-syrian-regimes-slow-motion-suicide.aspx>: 11-12.

gunships equipped with machine guns to disperse pro-democracy protests in the town of Maarat al Numaan, killing numerous people.<sup>27</sup> In August 2011, the regime even mobilised the navy to quell the uprising, shelling the Mediterranean port city of Latakia from warships deployed off the Syrian coast.<sup>28</sup> The overall death toll which Syrian security forces' suppression of the uprising thus far has caused, has been estimated by UN officials at more than 3,000.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as a result of the government crackdown, at least 20,000 Syrians are thought to have fled across the border into neighboring Turkey and Lebanon.<sup>30</sup>

As already suggested above, there have been at least some defections from the Syrian armed forces (in contrast to Bahrain), and there have even been reports of the creation of a so-called Free Syrian Army, composed of military units which have turned against the Assad regime.<sup>31</sup> However, commentators close to events in Syria have suggested that despite growing numbers of defections from the Syrian army, these have so far remained relatively limited, and have thus far not been able to mount a serious challenge against the Assad regime and its security forces.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Helicopters open fire to disperse Syrian protestors", *Reuters* (10.6.2011).

<sup>28</sup> "Tank, navy attack on Syria's Latakia kills 26: witnesses", *Reuters* (14.8.2011).

<sup>29</sup> "UN says death toll in Syrian uprising tops 3,000", *Associated Press* (14.10.2011).

<sup>30</sup> "Five babies born in Syrian refugee camps in Turkey named 'Recep Tayyip'", *Today's Zaman*, 3.7.2011; and "Lebanon hosting nearly 4,000 Syrian refugees: U.N", *The Daily Star (Lebanon)* (17.9.2011).

<sup>31</sup> The Free Syrian Army has its own Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/freesyrianarmy1>.

<sup>32</sup> International Crisis Group (2011, July 13), art. cit. 6; "In Syria, defectors form dissident army in sign uprising may be entering new phase", *Washington Post*, 26.9.2011; "Army storms Rastan as defections rise in Syria", *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 28.9.2011; and "Syrian army battles defectors in rebel town as 11 more protestors killed", *The Guardian* (2.10.2011).

## VIII. Explaining the Armed Forces' responses to the popular uprisings

In the six countries under analysis, the armed forces have thus played a key role not only in confronting the pro-reform movements, but ultimately also in determining the outcome of these popular uprisings: in those countries where the armed forces (ultimately) sided with the protestors, seemingly well-entrenched regimes, or at least their leaders, have been forced from office, whereas in those countries in which the armed forces, or at least their most important elements, have stayed loyal to the regime, the rulers have managed to hang on to power, or—as in the case of Libya—have only been overthrown with the help of outside assistance.

How can the different responses by military forces to the pro-democracy uprisings as described above be explained? Without attempting to offer a comprehensive explanatory framework, it seems that at least two factors seem crucial: first, the connection between the armed forces and the regime in power; and second the relationship between the armed forces and society at large.

In those countries where there has been a close link between the armed forces and the regime, the military has been more likely to oppose the protest movements, whereas in countries with a weak relationship between the armed forces and the regime, the former have shown more openness to, or even support for, anti-regime movements. Similarly, in countries where there has been a strong organic link between the armed forces and society, the military has been less likely to oppose and use force against protest movements, whereas a weak connection between the military apparatus and the population has resulted in a stronger response against anti-regime uprisings.

The six cases discussed above, seem to confirm the relevance of these two factors. Beginning with *Tunisia*, it can be argued that there has traditionally been a rather weak link between the regime and the armed forces. Indeed, in contrast to practically all other

Arab countries, Tunisia can hardly be described as a military-based regime. Already at the moment of independence, the military played a much less significant role in Tunisia when compared to other Arab countries, as its first leader after independence, Habib Bourgiba, was not a military officer but a lawyer who did not allow for the army to attain a prominent political role. Even Bourgiba's successor, Ben Ali, although having the rank of a general and coming to power through a (bloodless) coup, once in power sought to limit the political influence of the armed forces as much as possible, not least out of fear of a (further) military takeover. Whereas the armed forces have been kept away from political power, Ben Ali relied mainly on the country's internal security and intelligence agencies as his power base and instrument for suppressing internal dissent.<sup>33</sup> Having been relatively sidelined by the country's leadership, it is thus hardly surprising that the Tunisian Armed Forces were quick to side with the protestors against the regime once the protests erupted. In addition, the fact that the Tunisian army is a conscript army, where the majority of conscripts are drawn from economically disaffected areas, certainly contributed to its identification with the grievances of the protestors, and made it unlikely that it would use force against the demonstrators.<sup>34</sup>

Turning to the *Egyptian* case, the Armed Forces have traditionally maintained a much stronger relationship to the regime. All Egyptian presidents, since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952, have come from the armed forces, which has *de facto* played the role of the "kingmaker" in Egypt. Even though the political role of the army has been reduced in the aftermath of Egypt's defeat in the six-day war, it has remained the backbone of the regime, in particular through its intimate relationship with the all-powerful presidency. Moreover, the Egyptian Armed Forces

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<sup>33</sup> Camau, Michel; Geisser, Vincent, *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourgiba à Ben Ali* (Paris : Presses de Sciences Politiques, 2003);

International Crisis Group, 2011, Apr. 29, art.cit.

<sup>34</sup> Global Security, Tunisia. Conscription". Available at:

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/conscription.html>.

are also an extremely important economic actor, controlling a vast array of enterprises ranging from arms production, to infrastructure development, consumer goods and tourism.<sup>35</sup> Given its stronger relationship to the regime, compared to the Tunisian Armed Forces, the Egyptian military has thus also been somewhat less open to the pro-reform movements, even though it too ultimately sided with protestors against the President. Moreover, also in Egypt the army is a conscript force, a fact which certainly acted as a restraining factor when it came to the potential use of force against the demonstrators.

*Libya* represents a more complex picture, given the highly fragmented nature of the Libyan security apparatus. A distinctive feature of the Libyan armed forces was the presence, in addition to the regular military, of a multitude of highly ideological security forces which were intimately tied to the Gaddafi regime.<sup>36</sup> Libya's most elite security force, which was also considered to be the main military instrument of the regime as already mentioned above, was commanded by Qaddafi's youngest son, Khamis. On the other hand, Libya too had conscription-based forces, the so-called People's Militia, although their military effectiveness was probably largely symbolic. Having thus both military forces which are very closely tied to the Qaddafi regime, as well as forces based on conscription with—presumably—a certain anchoring in Libyan society, has resulted in a fracturing of the Libyan military apparatus when confronted with the popular uprisings.

In *Bahrain*, the Armed Forces are also very strongly connected to the country's regime. Indeed all of the most important positions within the Armed Forces are held by members of the ruling Khalifa family. In addition, the relationship between Bahrain's

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<sup>35</sup> Springborg, Robert, 1998: "Military Elites and the Polity in Arab States", *Development Associates Occasional Paper*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Mattes, Hanspeter, 2004: "Challenges to Security Sector Governance in the Middle East: The Libyan Case", Paper for the Workshop on 'Challenges to Security Sector Governance in the Middle East', Geneva, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 11-13 July.

Armed Forces and Bahraini society can be described as weak, as the country's Shi'ite majority population is totally excluded from the Armed Forces, and only Sunnis may serve in the military. Moreover, in Bahrain the share of foreigners in the country's security forces is reportedly very high—according to some reports the regime has deliberately recruited Sunni foreigners into the country's security agencies in order to change the demographic balance in Bahrain.<sup>37</sup> The intervention of foreign security forces, as mentioned above, has also played an important part in suppressing the popular uprisings in Bahrain. Being intimately tied to the country's regime and having only a very weak connection to society at large, the Bahraini Armed Forces have thus shown fierce opposition to the pro-reform movement.

The case of *Yemen* is overall similar to the one of *Libya*. As in *Libya*, the most elite units and most senior positions of the Yemeni armed forces are closely connected to the regime in that they are firmly in the hands of President Saleh's family or tribe. The Republican Guard, for example, which is Yemen's most elite military force, is commanded by Saleh's son Ahmed, whereas his nephews control the security forces charged with protecting the capital and the regime. Similarly, the Yemeni air force is headed by a half-brother of the President.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, and again comparable to *Libya* (and in contrast to *Bahrain*), at least some elements of the Yemeni military can be said to be rather well-anchored in Yemeni society. This is indicated not only by the use of general conscription in Yemen, but also by the relative importance of tribal militias. This has resulted in a situation similar to the one observed in *Libya*: while Yemen's most elite military units have violently suppressed the uprising, other elements of the country's military have sided with the opposition against the regime.

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<sup>37</sup> Rannie Amiri, 2010: "Monarchy vs Democracy in Bahrain", *Islamic Insights* (13.9.2010).

<sup>38</sup> International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution*, Middle East/North Africa Report art.cit.: 15; and Hill, Ginny, 2008: "Yemen: Fear of Failure", Chatham House Briefing Paper 08/03. Chatham House. London.: 3.

Finally, *Syria* shows many similarities with the case of Bahrain, although differences can also be observed. Also in Syria, the Armed Forces are closely connected to the regime in that they are firmly controlled by the Alawite minority from which the Assad family hails. Thus, while Alawites make up only around 12% of the Syrian population, they account for 70% of career soldiers of the Syrian armed forces. The imbalance is even more pronounced in the officer corps, where between 80% and 90% are estimated to be Alawites.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the country's most elite military units are exclusively Alawite, and are commanded by close relatives of Assad. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Syrian army is more strongly connected to society at large, than is the case in Bahrain. This is manifest in the use of general conscription in Syria (in contrast to Bahrain), the fact that Syria does not seem to use foreign soldiers (at least not to the extent of Bahrain), and in that the sectarian bias of the Syrian military is not as pronounced as in Bahrain. As a consequence of this stronger relationship between the Armed Forces and society, Syria (in contrast to Bahrain) has seen at least some defections, even if these have so far remained limited in scale.

Overall, the two factors mentioned above—the armed forces' connection to the regime and their relationship to society at large—offer at least some insight into the responses of military forces to pro-reform movements. In the six countries discussed above, these two factors seem to have played an important role in shaping the armed forces' responses to the popular uprisings—i.e. their degree of openness or resistance to the pro-democracy movements. It is worth noting that in several cases, such as in Libya, Yemen and to a lesser extent in Syria, these factors have “pulled” the military in opposite directions, thus leading to a fracturing of the armed forces or—in the case of Syria—at least to defections. While the responses of Arab armed forces to the popular uprisings have thus varied widely across the region, what seems clear is that they have played, and will continue to play, a

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<sup>39</sup> Zisser, Eyal, 2001: “The Syrian Army: Between the Domestic and the External Fronts”, in: *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 5,1: 119.



key role in the dramatic transformations which are currently taking place in the Arab world.