

**Arab Revolutions and Armed Forces:  
Between Openness and Resistance**

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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 of the armed forces has varied significantly from one country to the next. Moreover, powerful militaries, 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>1</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. The aim of this paper is to discuss the role the armed forces have played in four Middle Eastern countries, which have experienced large-scale pro-reform movements: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain. In the first two countries, long-standing autocrats have been toppled after several weeks of massive protests. In Libya, as of mid-2011, the country's leader, Muammar Qaddafi although still in power, lost control over large parts of Libya's territory to rebel forces. In Bahrain, finally, while facing severe challenges to its rule, the regime still seems relatively secure. The paper also offers some initial reflections on the reasons behind the armed forces' different responses to the popular uprisings.

**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, seemed to side with the protesters. In January 2011, the armed forces

were called out to confront the rapidly swelling demonstrations, which were increasingly demanding, not only, economic and political reforms, but also the departure of the country's long-standing ruler, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. However, when the army was deployed in different parts of Tunisia, the soldiers, according to media reports, immediately fraternized with the demonstrators—in sharp contrast to the police, which by that time had already shot dead a significant number of protesters. Moreover, the army Chief of Staff, General Rachid Ammar, forbade his men from firing on the demonstrators, and in the streets of Tunisia, many demonstrators are said to have sought shelter from police gunshots behind the military's tanks and armoured vehicles.<sup>2</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 final 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>3</sup>.

## **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 protesters against the country's ruler, compared to their Tunisian counterparts, the Egyptian armed forces have generally been less open to the protest movements. When in late January 2011 the Egyptian armed forces were called out in different parts of the country, not unlike the Tunisian army, they declared that the demands of the protesters were “legitimate”, and pledged to “not use force against the Egyptian people”.<sup>4</sup> As in Tunisia, there was fraternization between the soldiers and the protesters, and some military officers even joined the demonstrations on Cairo's Tahrir square.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, compared to the Tunisian military, the Egyptian armed forces have overall been less firmly behind the protesters, and have shown more support for the country's ruler, Hosni Mubarak. The International Crisis Group has summarized 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>6</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 protesters 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 protesters to leave the square and go home.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, even though throughout the demonstrations, the Egyptian Armed Forces consistently acknowledged the legitimacy of the protesters' 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 not to stand in the next presidential elections, and a transfer of some of his powers to the recently appointed Vice-president. While the protesters were not satisfied with these concessions, and the demonstrations only continued to grow in size, the army repeatedly called upon the protesters to go home and resume a normal life.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the Egyptian Armed Forces, compared to the Tunisian military, have thus shown a more ambivalent attitude towards the protesters, 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>9</sup> On February 11<sup>th</sup>, only one day after Mubarak had publicly vowed to serve out his current term of office, he resigned and handed power to the "Higher Council of the Armed Forces".

## **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-type of situation. 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 has become the stronghold of the rebels, defecting army units are said to have overpowered pro-regime forces and driven them out of

the city.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, other elements of the Libyan military apparatus, and in particular its most elite units, have fought the anti-regime movements with little if any restraint. The so-called Khamis Brigade, which is commonly considered the country's best equipped and trained military force, and which is commanded by the Libyan leader's youngest son, Khamis Qaddafi, has been at the forefront in fighting the opposition. After rebel forces initially succeed in moving westwards from Benghazi, bringing a number of towns under their control, they were subsequently thrown back by the Khamis Brigade.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is often argued that without the western air strikes, which began on 19th 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. Certainly, this explains the high death toll which the unrest in Libya has thus far exacted, compared to the uprisings in Tunisia or Egypt: as of mid-2011, the number of deaths was estimated at some 10,000. Moreover, Qaddafi reportedly also unleashed foreign mercenaries from sub-Saharan African countries such as Mali, Niger and Chad against the uprising.

## **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>12</sup> However, Bahrain's security forces have shown fierce opposition to pro-reform movements, and have forcefully suppressed the pro-democracy uprisings. The government crackdown on protesters 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 protesters.<sup>13</sup>

Protests subsequently escalated, as did the regime's response to them. In the following days, demonstrators blocked the entry of 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, Saudi Arabia dispatched some 1,000 soldiers and the UAE 500 police

officers 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>14</sup>

### **Explaining the Armed Forces' responses to the popular uprisings**

In the four countries under analysis, the armed forces have thus played a key 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 protesters, seemingly well entrenched regimes, or at least their leaders, have been forced from power, 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 remained in charge.

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 relationship 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 four 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 compared to other Arab countries, as its first leader after independence, Habib Bourgiba, was not a military officer but rather a lawyer who did not allow for a prominent political role of the army. 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 on the country's internal security and intelligence agencies as his power base and instrument for suppressing internal dissent.<sup>15</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 protesters 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 protesters, and made it unlikely that it would use force against the demonstrators.<sup>16</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 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>17</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 protesters against the president. Moreover, the army in Egypt is also a conscript army, 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 is the presence, in addition to the regular military, of a multitude of highly ideological security forces, which are intimately tied to the Libyan regime.<sup>18</sup> Libya's most elite security force, which is also considered the main military instrument of the regime, as already mentioned above, is commanded by Qaddafi's youngest son, Khamis. On the other hand, Libya too has conscription based forces, the so-called People's Militia, although their military effectiveness might be 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 led to a fracturing of the Libyan military apparatus when confronted with the popular uprisings.

Finally, 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 Armed Forces and Bahraini society can be described as weak, as the country's Shiite 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 forces in order to change the demographic balance in Bahrain.<sup>19</sup> The intervention of foreign security forces, as mentioned above, has also played an important part in suppressing the popular uprisings in Bahrain.

Overall, the two factors mentioned above—the armed forces' relationship 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 four 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—whereby in some cases, in Libya in particular, they have “pulled” the military in opposite directions. Needless to say that a more comprehensive analysis would require the consideration of additional factors, such as for example external pressure on the military, as well as further cases. What seems clear, however, that the armed forces have played, and will continue to play, a key role in the dramatic transformations which are currently taking place in the Arab world.



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## Endnotes

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- 3 '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, *Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne*, Middle East/North Africa Report N° 106, 29.4.2011, p. 11.
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- 5 '15 Egypt army officers join protesters', *Reuters* (11.2.2011).
- 6 International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?* (Middle East/North Africa Report N° 101, 24 February 2011)16.
- 7 'Violence flares in Cairo square', *Aljazeera* (3.2.2011).
- 8 'Egyptian army backs Hosni Mubarak and calls for protesters to go home', *The Guardian*, 11.2.2011.
- 9 '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).
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- 11 'Khamis Qaddafi takes the offensive', *Intelligence Online* (no. 637, 17.3.2011)1.
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- 13 Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security and US Policy*, CRS Report for Congress (21.3.2011)6.



14 'Bahrain: 'Thirty-one protesters killed, 600 arrested', since February, group says', *AKI*, (14.4.2011).

15 Camau and Geisser, *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourgiba à Ben Ali* (Paris : Presses de Sciences Politiques, 2003); International Crisis Group, *Soulèvements populaires en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient (IV): La voie tunisienne* (Middle East/North Africa Report N°106, 28.4.2011).

16 Global Security, Tunisia : 'Conscription', available at: [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/conscription.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tunisia/conscription.htm)

17 Robert Springborg, 'Military Elites and the Polity in Arab States', *Development Associates Occasional Paper*, (No.2, 1998).

18 Hanspeter Mattes, *Challenges to Security Sector Governance in the Middle East: The Libyan Case* (Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Conference Paper, 2004).

19 Rannie Amiri, 'Monarchy vs Democracy in Bahrain', *Islamic Insights* (13.9.2010).