COMMENTARIES

Civil-Military Relations in the Arab-Majority World: The Impacts on Democratization and Political Violence

OMAR ASHOUR[*]

ABSTRACT *How did unbalanced civil-military relations affect democratization and political violence trends in the Middle East and North Africa? This article analyses why the "Arab Spring" failed to develop democratic control of armed state institutions. It outlines the strategic repercussions of such failure on the rising trends of political violence in the region, committed by both state and non-state actors. The article draws lessons from empirical, comparative and historical experiences and concludes with policy implications.*

Armed Politics in the Arab-Majority World

"We haven't seen the end of this yet… there is a coming parliament, it may ask questions, and I wonder what will we do about that … we have to prepare to confront this without negatively affecting us," said General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi to a group of military officers during a meeting.[1] The statement summarized the weariness of Arab militaries from elected institutional oversight. It reflects an environment in which the supremacy of armed institutions over other state institutions has been a legacy in the last six decades in most of the Arab-majority world. This legacy was briefly challenged during the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. But in most of the aforementioned countries, armed state institutions and armed non-state actors have reasserted their supremacy in an unprecedentedly violent fashion.

The saga of politicized, armed institutions in the Arab-majority world is not new. It manifested itself in a trend that started with Bakr Sidqi's coup in Iraq in 1936. The saga directly impacts national reconciliations, the functioning of state institutions, civil society, citizen security, democratization, and human rights. Within the "Arab Spring" countries, the prospects for social stability, and thereby economic

* University of Exeter, UK

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recovery, will remain bleak if the relationship between civilian and armed institutions are not redefined and the armed institutions gradually brought under the control of democratic rules of political competition.

The article argues that the future of democratization and political violence in the Arab-majority world can be strongly affected by reconfiguring civil-military relations. The article addresses the nature of the militaries in the Middle East and North Africa, and overviews a series of the critical issues hindering progress towards balanced civil-military relations in the region. It concludes with the impacts of unbalanced civil-military relations on democratization and political violence in the region.

Militaries in Arab-Majority States: Natures and Behavioral Impacts

To date, the militaries' involvements in the politics of the Middle East and North Africa have yielded at least four models: a "guardian" model, a "dominant institution" model, a "sectarian-tribal" model, and a "less-politicized" model. Turkey's military establishment prior to the reforms of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) represented the first model: an armed institution that believes that it created the modern Turkish state. It also believes that it gave Turkey its modern identify and that its mission is to protect that identity in a supra-constitutional fashion.[2] The second model, the dominant institution one, is represented by the Egyptian and the Algerian militaries. In that model, the army neither created the state, nor gave it its identity. However, it is an intact, independent institution that believes in its superiority compared to any other state institution or non-state entity, including elected bodies, civilian judicial ones, and political parties/groups. That superior armed institution has specific privileges, which usually include a package of economic benefits and at least a veto in high politics.[3] A third model is a tribal-sectarian one. Here, the armed institution enjoys the same benefits found in the "dominant institutional" model, but is controlled by a specific faction/subgroup within a religious sect or a tribal coalition. The latter model is exemplified by the Assad regime in Syria and the Qaddafi regime in Libya. A relatively less-politicized model exists in Tunisia; almost a unique case in the region. Here, the armed institution does not fit any of the above models. But guarantees to sustain Tunisia's relatively apolitical army still need fur-

ther developments. Coup-proofing measures, building a de-politicized professional identity, fostering the loyalty to the constitution as opposed to the direct commanders, transparency and oversight by elected bodies, and legal reform measures are all critical to maintain and enhance such a unique model.

Major disruptions to the aforementioned models have developed in the last few decades. Such developments challenged the dominance of the armed establishment. Sudan (1985-1989) and Algeria (1989-1992) initiated developments in the second half of the twentieth century. This was followed by major shifts in civil-military relations and in the nature of the Iraqi military after the American-led occupation in 2003. More critical developments occurred during the Arab-majority uprisings, optimistically termed the "Arab Spring," in which military dominance in various forms was challenged by pro-change forces, both reformists and revolutionaries. During the uprisings, the different natures of the militaries affected their political behavior quite significantly. In Egypt and Tunisia, the military is an institution and its leadership was able to keep it intact, as such, in times of uprisings and upheavals. By 2013, the military in Egypt, belonging to the dominant institution category, needed however to reassert its supremacy over politics. The Tunisia military did not. In Syria, Libya and Yemen, the military institutions fractured in times of crisis mainly, but not exclusively, along ethnic, tribal and regional lines.

Civil-Military Relations and Political Violence in the Region

A combination of arms and religion or arms and hyper-nationalism in most of the Arab-majority world has proven to be the most effective mean to gain and maintain political power. Votes, constitutions, good governance and socio-economic achievements are secondary means and, in many Arab-majority countries, relegated to cosmetic matters. Therefore, in a regional context where bullets keep proving that they are much more effective than ballots and where eradication is perceived as more legitimate political strategy than compromise, the prospects of sustaining non-violent politics become gloomier.

Arab-majority uprisings have given scholars and policy advisors several important context-related lessons, mainly about how changes within political environments can affect the militarization of politics. The success of mainly unarmed civil resistance tactics in bringing down two authoritarian regimes in Tunisia (2010/2011) and Egypt (2011) briefly undermined the belief among violent radicals; that armed action is the most effective (and in some ideologies the most legitimate)[4] mean of effecting political change. However, the transformation of the nature of the uprisings in Libya and Syria in 2011 and onwards, and the regional developments in Iraq (during and after April 2013) and in Egypt (during and after July 2013) have led to different conclusions: soft power and civil resistance tactics have their limits and

to pursue real change, hard power is necessary. These conclusions among many youth activists have been capitalized upon by groups such ISIL and other like-minded organizations. In such an environment, radicalization, recruitment and ideological frames supportive of armed militancy are more likely to grow, survive and expand in response to unbalance civil-military relations.

In the context of the democratic political transition that Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen partly witnessed between 2011 and 2013, a few critical policy-relevant observations can be deduced regarding political violence and civil-military relations. First, almost all of the de-radicalized, once-armed non-state actors upheld their transformation from armed to unarmed activism. Organizations such as the Egyptian Islamic Group (IG) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and factions and individuals from the Egyptian al-Jihad organization, have not only turned into civilian political parties, but have also participated in elections, constitutional crafting and mainstream political compromises. In 2011, the IG for example held internal elections, asked its members to fill out party registration forms, held anti-sectarian violence rallies, and issued joint statements for peaceful coexistence with the Coptic Church of Assyut.[5] "We were finally capable of taking revenge from the state security officers who tortured us. Instead we chanted *silmiya* (peaceful)," said Muhammad Abbas in July 2011.[6] Abbas was a former member of the IG's armed wing,

An old woman beging one of the military man to stop the military intervention against the protestors at Rabia square in Egypt, as result of which approximately 6000 people lost their life.

STRINGER / AA PHOTO

a graduate of the infamous Khaldan training camp in Afghanistan, and a veteran of multiple battles against the Soviet army. However, despite this notable shift away from violence, the IG's stance on constitutional liberalism did not change much. For example, the IG still denies the right of specific minorities and women to run for presidency. And in general, ultraconservative ideologies, such as Salafism, partly shape the worldview of the organization.

Transitions from armed to unarmed activities are unlikely to be sustained unless there is a thorough process of reforming the security and the military sectors. The reform process should entail changing the standard

operating procedures (SOPs), training and education curricula, leadership and promotions criteria, as well as oversight and accountability by elected and judicial institutions. The violations enacted by the security and military sectors, and the lack of accountability to address such violations, have been major contributors to the sparking and sustaining of armed radicalization, not to mention the Arab-majority uprisings where the brutality of the security sector was a significant cause. Moreover, the supremacy of the armed over the elected and the judicial has created a political context in which bullets are more significant than ballots and laws as a method for attaining political power. Such a context, where political violence is legitimated in various forms and consistently proves effective is not likely to lead to democratization in any form.

Related to transitions away from political violence and security sector reform is the process of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR). The politicization of such a process and its failure in Libya and Yemen in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution and Yemeni uprising have led to the rise of multiple armed non-state actors, a phenomenon that has exacerbated political violence in both countries. DDR is inherently connected to SSR. Most armed non-state actors in post-conflict environments will refuse to disband and demobilize if no mutual trust or guarantees have been obtained from the official armed institutions and armed state actors. This is especially the case when the latter has been traditionally above oversight, accountability and law. The untouchable status of the state armed institutions is among the reasons for de-escalation failures in places like

Egyptian soldiers detaining protesters near Cairo's Tahrir Square on December 16, 2011.

AFP PHOTO / MOHAMMED ABED

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Derna (eastern Libya), Sinai (northeastern Egypt), and Southern/Southeastern parts of Yemen, where armed actors representing the authorities are deeply mistrusted due to historical violations and impunities.

Civil-Military Relations and Democratization in the Region

The Egyptian coup of 2013 certainly posed a setback for balanced civil-military relations. Regionally, the message sent to the rest of the Arab-majority world, including Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and beyond, is that only arms guarantee political survival, not the constitution, not democratic institutions and certainly not votes. The supremacy of the armed over the elected created a political context where state and non-state violence matter more than votes for attaining and remaining in power. Such a context, where political violence is legitimated in various forms and consistently proves effective, is unlikely to lead to democratization in any form. This fact may have signifi-cant implications for political behavior and social attitudes towards political violence, thus affecting security matters, national reconciliations, and human rights.

No democratic transition is complete without targeting the military's abuse and ending its impunity, with effective and meaningful elected civilian control of both the armed forces and the security establishments. So, in addition to reconfiguring civil-military relations, a thorough process of reforming the security sector is essential. The violations of the security sector, and the lack of accountability to address such violations, have been major contributors to sparking and sustaining armed radicalization and non-state political violence. Jihadism and Takfirism were both born in Egyptian political prisons in the 1960s, where torture by state agents ranged from a systematic daily practice in some periods to a selective-but-widespread practice in others, a state of affairs that is not that different from today's Egypt.[7]

Regarding civil-military relations, extreme political polarization between the "Arab Spring" pro-change forces (whether reformists or revolutionaries) has led to an increased reliance on the military as an "arbiter" and a "savior." Political polarization per se should not lead directly to military dominance. Diversity in the political spectrum, heated debates, intense arguments and general differences of opinion should be celebrated as gains of the pro-democracy uprisings. This freedom of opinion and expression

should be aimed for in non-"Arab Spring" countries. However, some of the ramifications of polarization in the "Arab Spring" countries have negatively affected civil-military relations. One of the consequences of the extreme polarization is the politicization of the military and the security by rival politicians. On talk-shows, political figures would call for security sector reform and civilian control to be implemented and for police/military brutality to end. At the same time, the very same political figures would praise generals known for their support of brutal tactics, when they crackdown on their political rivals. As shown in other comparative cases, ranging from Argentina to Indonesia, the unity of political forces on the very particular demands of de-politicizing the military and imposing civilian control over the armed forces is the key for the success of a democratic transition. Polarization works directly against such unity of demands.

Weak democratic institutions that failed to contain the political polarization and limit political conflict to the institutional realms have been another factor that has negatively affected unbalanced civil-military relations. In addition to the weak mandate of these institutions, their limited knowledge, and lack of experience in civil-military relations and the security sector reform requirements among stakeholders, have been an additional source of weakness. For example, the lower house of the Egyptian parliament (the People's Assembly), elected following the January 2011 uprising, was dissolved by the SCAF following

a Constitutional Court verdict that deemed parts of the electoral law unconstitutional in June 2012. The Upper House (the Consultative Council) was dissolved following the military coup of July 2013. What became clear in the dissolution is the big gap between the revolutionary demands of eradicating torture, ending impunity and reflecting transparency, and the limited knowledge of how to translate such demands into policies and procedures of security sector reform.[8] A general understanding of such limitations in Tunisia led the government and the Ministry of Interior to collaborate with an international organization and several security sector reform experts as early as July 2011.[9] In Egypt, similar attempts were foiled; most notably an attempt by the presidential establishment in the fall of 2013, that sought international assistance.

A final note has to be mentioned here: the impact of regional and international sponsors on Arab militaries' decision-making is major. Although the article did not analyze and assess such an impact, it should be noted that support for democratic control of the armed forces among democracies was negligible in 2011-2013, compared to the regional support for authoritarianism. This state of affairs had some similarities with the eighteenth-century European monarchies rallying to put an end to the French Revolution, which challenged a dominant regional status-quo. In an attempt to defend a regional status-quo whose main feature is authoritarianism, several Arab regional actors did

not perceive a balanced civil-military relations and security sector reform processes, as well as any meaningful democratization process, as beneficial to their interests. Rather, they viewed these prospects as threats to their regimes' security and stability. As a result, most of the pro-status-quo forces in Arab-majority uprising countries had strong, wealthy and aggressive regional backers. For that reason, status-quo forces were able to bolster their stances, morally, logistically, and financially, as well as by intensive propaganda campaigns of deception and misinformation. On the other hand, most of western and regional democracies were hesitant to commit to, or to assist in, a time-consuming, resource-draining, no-holds-barred conflict for civilian control of the armed forces. This stance on the part of the international community differed from the support granted to Eastern European transitions during the "third wave" of democratization; the lack of such support weakened most of pro-change and pro-reform Arab forces. ■

Endnotes

1. See "Sirri wa Khatir: Al-fariq al-Sisi wa Niyyat al-'Askar lil Saitara 'Ala al-'Ilam wa Hurriyat ma Ba'd al-Thawra" [Secret and Dangerous: Team Sisi and the Military's Plan to Control the Media and Freedoms after the Revolution], posted by Mohammed Salah, (2 October 2013), retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OI6iL3VpyM.

2. Omar Ashour and Emre Ünlücayakı, "Islamists, Soldiers and Conditional Democrats: Behaviors of Islamists and the Military in Algeria and Turkey," *Journal of Conflict Studies,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter 2006), pp. 104-132.

3. Yezid Sayigh, "Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt," *Carnegie Papers,* (August 2012), retrieved from http://carnegieendowment.org/files/officers_republic1.pdf.

4. See for example "Post-Jihadism and Ideological De-Radicalization," Zaheer Kazimi and Jeevan Doel (eds.), *Contextualizing Jihadi Ideologies*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

5. Assyt is a southern Egyptian city, where the organization has significant presence.

6. "'A'da' al-Jinah al-Musallah lil Jama'a al-Islamiyya yaftahun lil Shorouk 'asrarihim (Members of the Armed Wings of the Islamic Group Reveal Their Secrets to al-Shorouk), *Al-Shorouk*, (2 April 2011), retrieved from http://www.bilakoyod.net/details10566.htm?print=1.

7. Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Rash of Deaths in Custody," *HRW Reports*, (21 January 2015), retrieved from http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/21/egypt-rash-deaths-custody.

8. This conclusion is based on Omar Ashour's observations, interactions and meetings with MPs involved in SSR initiatives (from both the upper and lower chambers) between February 2012 and April 2013.

9. Ali Larayedh, (Former Interior Minister of Tunisia), Conversation with Omar Ashour, Geneva (22 November 2012).