

# The Securitization of Political Rule

## Security Domination of Arab Regimes and the Prospects for Democratization

Among the more interesting features of the current wave of uprisings and protests sweeping the Arab world is the general absence of the armed forces from regime efforts to defeat popular challenges to autocratic rule. Even in Libya, where the

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revolt has taken an unambiguously military character and the Qaddafi regime is additionally confronted with foreign intervention, the regular army has not emerged as a prominent actor.

Where senior officers have played a significant role, such as in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, they have acted to remove rather than preserve the rulers who appointed them. Not because they have come to reject the politics and interests of existing leaders, but – in a classic act of regime preservation – despite sharing the same worldview and remaining part and parcel of extensive patronage networks established over many decades.

There is no single or simple explanation for this reality. To the extent we can generalize about a collection of disparate entities, however, it has much to do with the development trajectory shared by many Arab states since achieving independence in the aftermath of the Second World War.

### Military Coups d'État

From the 1950s until the 1970s, actual or attempted regime change was a fairly common phenomenon throughout much of the Arab world – certainly if compared with the decades since. In sharp contrast to the mass movements of 2011, the primary agents tended to be armed revolutionaries leading national liberation movements and military officers seizing power through coups d'état. Over time, this created a reality where military establishments were either in effective control of the state, or gained enormous power and influence on account of their role in combating foreign adversaries and domestic insurgents. In the context of the Cold War, furthermore, both the United States and Soviet Union sought to bolster the militaries – and favored officers – in their respective client states, which further contributed to their enhanced role in governance and decision-making.

Thus when monarchs were overthrown in Egypt, Iraq, Yemen and Libya they were invariably replaced by military rulers. It is equally telling that the Ba'ath Party's assumption of power in Syria in 1963 was consummated by its Military Committee rather than civilian wing, and produced a succession of military strongmen. The Ba'ath's ascension in Iraq – first in 1963 and then again in 1968 – was similarly led by a general, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr.

As the dust of the post-independence transformations began to settle, the role of the military underwent significant changes. By the end of the 1970s, virtually every Arab state was either ruled by an officer, or a monarch weighed down by medals who had survived a succession of coup attempts and/or armed



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rebellions. Acutely aware – often on account of personal experience – that a military career provides excellent positioning for political leadership, rulers engaged in determined and largely successful efforts to neutralize their armed forces, particularly the officer corps and elites among them such as the air force. Thus political activity by parties within the military was banned, officers were prohibited from

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maintaining (unauthorized) party affiliations, and the senior ranks were filled by trusted associates rather than proven professionals.

Simultaneously, Arab regimes became increasingly autocratic and narrowly-based, with political hegemony in many cases exercised to an ever greater degree on a tribal, familial, sectarian and/or geographic basis. While it would be overly simplistic to characterize Syria under the Asads as an Alawite regime or Saddam's Iraq as a Tikriti one, in both cases the Ba'ath Party was reduced to little more than an ornamental patronage network shorn of a meaningful role in political life.

For such rulers, conscript armies that reflected the demographic realities of society rather than of ruling elites were as much a threat as an instrument of unfettered control, and considered particularly unreliable when it came to confronting widespread domestic opposition. In this sense, these regimes were fundamentally different than either the archetypal Latin American military junta, or the one-party states of the Soviet bloc. For Arab autocrats, furthermore, the drive for unchallenged authority became particularly acute as they entered into their twilight years and began preparing succession plans that

made an absolute mockery of any constitutional or informal restraints – including death – on their powers.

### National Security, Regime Security

Although population control had always been a priority for Arab regimes, the above developments – as well as growing socio-economic hardship and disparities resulting from the introduction of neo-liberal policies – served to consistently reduce tolerance levels for dissent and opposition. National security became indistinguishable from regime security, particularly with the end of the Cold War and beginnings of Arab-Israeli normalization. The establishment of praetorian guards recruited from primary regime constituencies, and of intelligence and police forces with widespread powers, was of course nothing new, but reached levels that were entirely unprecedented even in comparison with previous standards.

Indeed, during the past several decades, it was above all the intelligence agencies (*mukhabarat*) that became the arbiters of political life, in turn enforced by special police units such as the recently disbanded State Security Division in Tunisia and Egypt's State Security Investigation Service. In effect, there has been a perceptible shift in power from the Ministry of Defense to the Interior Ministry.

Military establishments, to be sure, retain significant – particularly economic – influence and remain at the nexus of state patronage networks. But their role in governance and decision-making has clearly declined in relation to that of the domestic security apparatus. If in 1970 it was the Defense Minister and Chief of Staff who tended to be the most familiar figures, by 2010 their visibility and public presence had largely been appropriated by the Minister of Interior and head of intelligence.

The influence of the traditional high command has additionally suffered a relative decline within the armed forces, this time at the hands of various national, presidential, republican and royal guards. Such formations typically comprise cohesive units recruited

from the leader's core constituency, are often commanded by his sons or other close relatives, and enjoy massive advantages in terms of

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resources, equipment, training and privileges. It is these units that often form the only serious fighting forces in various Arab states.

The primary beneficiaries of these shifts have been the domestic security establishments and multiple agencies they have spawned. As their manpower and resources have mushroomed to unprecedented levels, they have come to pervade virtually every aspect of national, civic and in many cases even personal life. They have also had a deeply corrupting impact on society as a whole.

On the one hand, they operate entirely outside the law, with a free hand to do whatever they please, whenever, however and to whomever they choose, and do so without even a semblance – or pretense – of transparency or accountability. With maintaining law and order their ostensible *raison d'être*, domestic security agencies derive their power precisely on account of their license for lawlessness.

### The Police State: Security Agencies as Political Actors

While justifiably notorious for torture, disappearances and the violation of virtually every right that has ever been codified, the activities of security agencies are hardly limited to rounding up dissidents and rolling up opposition networks. With loyalty and obedience rather than professionalism and integrity as their criteria, they also vet judges and generals, appoint editors and university deans, fix elections and determine legislation, control the

media in all but name, regulate political parties and unions and non-governmental associations, and even compose Friday sermons. If in some states they exercise heavy-handed and visible influence over seemingly trivial aspects of public life, in others they are comparatively unobtrusive but no less in control, functioning just as powerfully as the ultimate arbiters of the permissible and the forbidden. In practice, the *mukhabarat* is also the chief justice, speaker of parliament, prime minister, mayor, university president, editor-in-chief and even chief cleric. At the end of the day, none of the latter are able to contradict the domestic security establishment's recommendations and remain in function, while even seasoned autocrats neglect the considered opinions of their security chiefs at their own peril. It is seemingly in the very nature of the national security state that nation, state and citizens become the playthings of the security establishment – its functions not unlike that of the electorate in democratic entities.

Domestic security agencies also exercise a deeply corrupting influence at a more fundamental level. Rather than limiting their activities to monitoring, infiltrating and neutralizing real or perceived threats to their definition of security, they as a matter of policy seek to recruit every living being within their realm, the primary purpose being domestication rather than operational support. In a region where certificates of good conduct and security clearances are typically required for even the most innocuous bureaucratic procedures – such as obtaining a passport or business license, joining the civil service or entering university – the opportunities for recruitment are pervasive and exploited to the maximum. Producing more (generally genuinely worthless) information on colleagues, friends, family and strangers than could be processed by a bank of supercomputers, the practice serves to inform the public that it is being constantly monitored – and informed upon – at close quarters. So far as the *mukhabarat* is concerned, only a citizenry that fears betrayal at the hands of the

closest of relatives, friends and colleagues is sufficiently trustworthy.

Thus the Arab national security state in the Arab world is – quite literally – a police state. Even where elected parliaments and other manifestations of democratic practice exist, these remain subordinate to the writ of the security establishment. Rather than operating under government or parliamentary oversight, it is such agencies that exercise oversight over the executive, legislative and judicial authorities. Accountability is provided to, not by the *mukhabarat*.

### Reconfiguring Arab Security Regimes: Foreign and Domestic Priorities

As with so many other features of the contemporary Arab state, the rise of the domestic security establishment reflects foreign as much as indigenous priorities. Indeed, the West has as a rule preferred Arab states with robust internal security forces to those with strong militaries – and acted accordingly. With ‘renditions’ just one case in point, its closest and most symbiotic relationships are typically with the *mukhabarat*; in the 20th century air force generals were the men to cultivate, in the 21st it is the Omar Suleimans and Muhammad

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Dahlans of the region who are the favored partners, interlocutors, and political successors. Ian Henderson, better known as the Butcher of Bahrain, is in this broader context no more than a particularly pernicious and visible case study.

The reconfiguration of Arab security regimes in recent decades has ironically also emerged as a point of weakness in recent events. While intelligence agencies can be very adept at bludgeon and blackmail, and play a key role in

neutralizing cells and even networks, they are simply not equipped to defeat mass rebellion. In Tunisia and later Egypt, they were basically overwhelmed by a sea of humanity and lacked the resources to turn the entire country into a prison. In both cases, furthermore, the regular army – rightfully concerned that its institutional coherence could not survive the required bloodbath should it come to the aid of the beleaguered ruler – refused to deploy.

Although more difficult to demonstrate, the inflexibility of domestic security agencies and their extreme aversion to reform of any kind also helped set their subjects on a more revolutionary path. Domestic rebellions have a way of strengthening the role of security forces in decision-making, and (at least initially) of bolstering the authority of their most hard-line elements. To Bin Ali and Mubarak’s misfortune, Tunisia and Egypt appear to have been no exception in this regard.

### New Civil-Military Relations or Military Domincance?

The military’s pivotal role in enabling the transition (and in Egypt of controlling it), while motivated by regime preservation rather than transformation, may nevertheless inaugurate a new era of military dominance. At the very least, the combination of military influence and popular agitation has dealt the domestic security establishment a massive body blow from which it is unlikely to recover any time soon.

Similarly, in Yemen and Libya, the role of defending the right of perennial leaders to serve until eternity fell to elite units, while the regular military was plagued with mass defections. But like all patterns, it would be simplistic to see it as a rule or law of nature that will necessarily be replicated throughout the Arab world.

Arguably, deposing dictators is the easy part. The months and years ahead will see perhaps even more monumental struggles to ensure that one autocrat is not replaced with another. In this equation, the litmus test is not going to be free and fair elections, because these can be held under any variety

of constitutional arrangements. Instead, it will be in the realm of the security sector that the future of the region and its individual states

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will be decided. Key questions are whether forces such as the Egyptian *mabahith* (State Security Investigation Service) are not only disbanded, but also not resurrected in a new guise; whether domestic security doctrines are revised to emphasize national security rather than regime maintenance; and whether the relevant agencies are transformed into genuinely accountable organs on the basis of parliamentary and judicial oversight.

The most important battle is however likely to involve civil-military relations. Will the armed forces be able to instrumentalize their new-found power and prestige to once again take control of the ship of state, or will they successfully be transformed into instruments controlled by and answerable to democratically-chosen or otherwise representative leaderships? While it is far too early to intelligently speculate on this matter, the Egyptian case – of indisputable strategic significance for the entire region – suggests that those who overthrew Mubarak are keenly aware of what is at stake and determined to press their case. Only if they succeed will the slogan “The People and the Army are One” make the transition from ambition to reality.