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Civil-Military Relations in the MENA Region: Past and Future¹

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Introduction

In 2019, protests swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, leading many experts and journalists to talk about the “second wave of the Arab spring.” From [Algeria](#) to [Lebanon](#), passing through [Sudan](#), [Egypt](#), and [Iraq](#), citizens took to the streets, like in 2011, to ask for more significant political reforms, democracy, social justice, and regime change. Similarly, regional military apparatuses played a decisive political role during the 2019 upheavals, just as they did eight years earlier. The armies’ responses to the protests and their behavior towards their respective regimes varied from one country to another. In Iraq and Egypt, the military harshly cracked down on protesters. In Egypt, more than [2,300](#) people were arrested over the first two weeks of the protests. In Iraq, thousands of people were arrested and tortured, while no less than [600](#) individuals were killed by the live ammunition and “smoker” grenades that security forces used against them.

On the other hand, in Algeria, the military refrained from using violence against protestors, while militaries in Sudan and Lebanon were more ambiguous, sometimes protecting demonstrators and sometimes attacking them. In both Algeria and Sudan, demonstrators called on the military to intervene and force their respective leaders to step down. Eventually, Presidents Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar Al-Bashir, who had spent twenty and thirty years in office, respectively, were forced by the military to abdicate. In each country, the military played a crucial role by pressuring the political class, and by sacking many top officials and putting them on trial. Such was the case for [Saïd Bouteflika](#), the brother of deposed President Bouteflika, and [Al-Bashir](#), both of whom landed in court. As for Lebanon, where protests erupted against the sectarian post-war political order, the military used significant violence when protecting key government institutions while also tolerating the protesters to maintain civil peace and allow for the political leadership to find a suitable political solution.

As in 2011, Arab militaries are playing a pivotal role in shaping the outcome of the 2019 popular movements. Civil-military relationships are being renegotiated in the MENA region. After Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria in 2011, the voices of dissent and the calls for change are now also heard in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. How did the military in the latter countries react, and what are the prospects for change?

¹ This publication follows a conference entitled “[Civil-military Relations in the MENA Region](#)” organized by the KAS Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean, in Tunis on March 2, 2020.

2011: Arab Militaries at the Center of Politics

While Arab militaries have always played a significant role in the MENA region politics, their prominence in domestic affairs and their level of interventionism varied from one country to another and from one period to another. History played an essential role in shaping military interventionism in the region: Arab militaries were at the forefront of the wars of independence to liberate their countries from colonialism in the 1950s-1960s; they participated in the socio-economic development that took place following independence in the 1960s-1970s; and they mounted takeovers with coups d'état throughout these periods.²

Patterns of armies' interventionism and their intensity were also influenced by internal and external variables. Internal variables included the size of the military, its level of professionalism, corporate interests, institutional culture, and self-image, as well as the military's social background and intra-security apparatus competition. External variables involved the legitimacy of the president and his actions, the effectiveness of political institutions, security threats, foreign actors, and the need to recapture social prestige and material resources after a military defeat.

These numerous variables must be considered in unison in order to convey the wide range of military responses employed amid the 2011 uprisings. Depending on these variables, militaries responded in [five different ways](#) during the 2011 uprisings: some armies were loyal to the regime in power but accepted a change in top leadership and refrained from using violence against protesters (Tunisia and Egypt); some fractured (Libya, Syria, Yemen); some remained loyal to the ruling regime and employed high levels of violence to repress protesters (Iraq, Bahrain); some played a limited role because other security forces were marshaled to repress demonstrators (Algeria, Morocco, Jordan); and some played a limited role because the protests themselves were either minimal or non-existent (Qatar and the United Arab Emirates).

During the 2011 Arab Spring, in **Egypt**, the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) forced President Hosni Mubarak to step down and switched their support to the protesters. In **Tunisia**, the Tunisian Armed Forces (TAF) abandoned President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled the next day to Saudi Arabia. Later, Tunisia became the first country in the MENA region to transition to a constitutional democracy. But in 2014, Egypt elected the former Minister of Defence, Field Marshal Abdul Fattah el-Sisi, as president, and he bolstered the military's power through the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) ever since. SCAF had already overthrown the first democratically elected Egyptian president, Islamist Mohamed Morsi, in 2013, and had systematically targeted the Muslim Brotherhood and its members. Since May 2019, some amendments to the Egyptian constitution have given the armed forces [greater influence](#) over the state. One such amendment, Article 200, provides the army with the right to impose its own interpretation of "greater national interest." As a result, the military has more ascendancy than all other government institutions and political actors in the country. It can, for instance, prevent a civilian from becoming president if they deem that his election is against "national interest."

In the cases of Libya, Yemen, and Syria, the militaries fractured as a result of numerous defections that took place in their ranks. In **Libya**, the army was split between Muammar Qaddafi's supporters and his rivals. Eventually, in late 2011, Libyan rebels ended Qaddafi's forty-two-year rule, with the help of airstrikes led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since then, Libya has been a quagmire—a country in perpetual civil war and, more recently, a proxy conflict between foreign powers such as Russia and Turkey, who, among others, are working to [shape](#) the future of the OPEC member state.

² According to Eliezer Be'eri, there were 37 coups and attempted coups by Arab officers from 1936 to 1967. See Elizer Be'eri (1970), *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, New York: Praeger.

Fracturing also happened in **Syria**, where sectarian and social identities played a crucial role in the defection of Sunnis at the mid and lower ranks of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) during the first years of the uprising. Since then, the regime has survived with backing from its armed forces, which have dragged the country deep into a war that resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century. Similarly, in **Yemen**, splits occurred between military personnel, especially after the violent crackdown on [March 18](#), when at least 40 people were shot by snipers in Sanaa. Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar was the first among many to [defect](#) and order his troops to protect the protesters. The Yemeni protest movement was also endorsed by the secessionist Southern Movement as well as by the Houthis, a group of Shia rebels who fought six wars with President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government. Some Yemeni tribes pledged their [support](#) to Saleh while others remained [loyal](#) to the new regime. Eventually, Saleh agreed to step down after he signed a deal brokered by the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC) to come back four years later, in 2015, allied with Houthi fighters. However, cracks emerged in the alliance, and Saleh was eventually [killed](#) in Sanaa on December 4, 2015, by Houthi rebels. Like Libya and Syria, Yemen has, since 2011, been decimated by a civil war and foreign proxy wars that have led to a terrible famine that could become one of the [worst](#) in living memory.

Another type of response to the 2011 uprisings involved loyalty to the ruling regime alongside the use of violence against anti-government protesters. In **Bahrain**, the Sunni royal family, Al Khalifa, was supported by the military, the internal security forces, and Gulf Cooperation Council troops to [subdue](#) the predominantly Shia-led protests. Similarly, in **Iraq**, despite the smaller scale and scope of protests, security forces responded by using violence against protesters and thereby suppressing demonstrations. Finally, despite protests in **Algeria**, **Morocco**, and **Jordan** in 2011, militaries in those countries did not intervene at all. This is because other security forces, mainly the police, were marshaled to contain the protests, and no military intervention was needed on the ground.

2019: Civil-Military Relations and Prospects of Change?

When comparing the different military responses to the 2011 and the 2019 uprisings, the common denominator remains that civil-military relationships are more about power struggles—and who holds the reins of power—than they are about security and defense. The second wave of the Arab uprising in 2019 is a case in point and a useful metric for the evolving patterns of civil-military relations in the region. In **Algeria**, the military was disloyal to President Bouteflika and refrained from using violence against protesters. Algeria is an excellent example of a problematic relationship between civilians and the military. While it is true that the level and intensity of military interventionism by the People's National Army (PNA) in politics fluctuated throughout its history—with direct interventions in 1988 and 1992—it is also true that all Algerian governments have been accountable to the military because the PNA remained the real locus of power. Its political interventionism has been conditioned by a combination of its corporate and economic interests, structural changes, and competition among the politico-military elite for the control of oil revenues. Besides, the military also weighs the costs of its interventionism on its cohesion, organizational capabilities, and institutional reputation.

The PNA has had a long history of political interventionism. Its predecessor, the National Liberation Army (NLA), fought French colonialism and liberated Algeria in the 1960s. The PNA participated in Algeria's socio-economic development in the 1970s, contained the nationwide protests in the [1980s](#), and protected the country's territorial integrity in the [1990s](#). During that period, the military took control, and it is only in 1999 that the men in uniforms left the seats of power and returned to their barracks. The military reached a "[pacted transition](#)": in exchange for ceding political power to a civilian authority led by Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the PNA received guarantees for its autonomy and its budget, and above all [full amnesty](#) for members of the security forces who were accused of human rights violations.

When the [peaceful](#) popular movement erupted on February 22, 2019, President Bouteflika refused to leave and insisted on organizing presidential elections to secure a fifth term. The military—led by Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaïd Salah—eventually intervened to force the ailing president to step down. The military's decision to shift its loyalty was based on a [rational calculus](#). It was costlier to remain loyal to an already politically and physically weakened president—whose legitimacy has been seriously undermined since his third term—than to shift its loyalty. With Bouteflika gone, Abdelkader Bensalah was appointed as interim president at the head of a caretaker government, and the military started a series of arrests and trials against top-officials, business tycoons and individuals close to Bouteflika.

Algeria's military has [piloted](#) the political transition to broaden its weakened domination over Algeria's political elite, and it has safeguarded its corporate interests and its autonomy. The army kept Algeria's constitution while promising some amendments and held presidential elections on December 12, 2019. By putting president Abdelmadjid Tebboune in the presidential palace, the civilian leadership has undoubtedly accepted a deal with the military institution. The latter has guaranteed complete discretion on its corporate interests, mainly on its budget and how it is allocated (acquisitions, recruitment, training, career planning, retirement plans). Also, it kept control of the fate of its leadership (no legal prosecution except for those from its ranks that the military itself decides to put on trial). Besides the corporate interests, there are private ones related to some ruling generals, who moved into the private sector and [enriched](#) themselves during the Bouteflika years.

This pacted transition also dispenses the military from handling demands for reforms and the burden of the imminent socio-economic [crisis](#) that is likely to hit Algeria, which the civilian side will have to deal with. However, Algerians have not been fooled by the military's move; they have continued, until the outbreak of the coronavirus, to protest every Friday, and the popular movement showed high resilience with no signs of abating. For a majority of demonstrators, elections have not been fair but instead staged by the politico-military leadership in order to bring to power a president whose job is to preserve the leadership's intertwined interests. The military is risking being seen more and more as an agent of stagnation and domination in the service of a disavowed leadership.

With the coronavirus outbreak and coinciding [lockdown](#), this perception is likely to be consolidated as authorities are taking advantage of confinement measures to [stifle](#) voices of dissent and to put an end to the popular movement. Regardless of whether the "*Hirak*" [popular movement]—which has been calling for a "civilian state and not a military state"—will be able to survive, one thing remains certain: the Algerian military is not ready to accept the principle of civilian oversight.

Similarly, in **Sudan**, the Armed Forces (SAF) were disloyal to the president, pushed him out, and sided with the people to eventually reach a power-sharing deal. The SAF has a history of siding with the people in times of political crisis. Such was the case in 1964 and 1985, against the military governments of Ibrahim Abboud and Jaafar Numeiri, respectively. As a result of those coups, multi-party governments were born, even if they were short-lived. Still, the SAF's political interventionism was conditioned by the group's economic interest and its hold on the strategic resources of a country trapped in conflict since its independence in 1956.

When Sudanese protests broke out in April 2019, the armed forces stepped in and put an end to President Omar Al-Bashir's [30-year rule](#). However, this posture of siding with the people did not endure. Following Al-Bashir's ouster, senior generals from the SAF, along with the National Intelligence and Security Services and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—a paramilitary group composed mostly of *Janjaweed* militia groups—formed a Transitional Military Council (TMC). After failing to reach an agreement with the opposition regarding the interim government's composition, the TMC [ordered](#) a brutal crackdown on peaceful pro-democracy protesters. The [June 3 massacre](#) led to the deaths of [100](#) people. Fearing its disarmament and prosecution by civilians and a subsequent weakening and potential

dissolution, the army favored coercion—an option [masterminded](#) by the RSF, which has been [bolstered](#) through the years by foreign powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Nonetheless, the Sudanese population remained mobilized and faithful to its rejection of military rule. The pro-democracy movement was united and cross-cutting, including men and women, Islamists, and secularists, as well as diverse ethnic groups (Arab, Beja, Fur, Nuban). This made it harder for soldiers to repress the movement, since their identification with these groups was substantial. As a result, after eight months of upheaval, a [power-sharing agreement](#) was reached in August 2019 between the TMC, represented by its deputy chief, Mohamed Hamdan Davalos, and the (civilian) Alliance for Freedom and Change represented by Ahmed Al-Rabie.

A joint military-civilian Sovereignty Council was created to [share power](#) for three years until elections are to be held. The council is composed of eleven members, including five chosen by the TMC, five picked by the main opposition coalition, and one agreed upon by both sides. Power will shift between the military and civilians, with a military leader heading the council for the first twenty-one months, followed by a civilian for the remaining eighteen months until democratic elections are held.

While many [praised](#) this positive achievement, questions remain about the capacity of the agreement to fulfill a democratic transition if the military retains control and refuses to cede power to civilians. For instance, both sides agreed on an independent investigation into the June 3 massacre. While all evidence and testimonies collected after the massacre point to the same perpetrators, there is uncertainty as to whether the military is willing to allow an independent inquiry that would eventually hold it accountable for the events.

The very composition of the Sovereignty Council casts doubts about the military's willingness. The council named [Mohamed Hamdan Dagaló](#), also known as "Hemeti," the head of the [RSF](#)—which was responsible for the massacres in Khartoum and conflict zones in Southern Kordofan ([Darfur](#))—as vice-chair of the Sovereignty Council. This position is likely to make him immune from accountability for the atrocities committed under his command. There is also concern regarding the choice for the military to lead in the first twenty-one months, and about its readiness to surrender power following that period.

As for **Iraq**, the military played a limited role because other security forces effectively suppressed the popular movement that started there in October 2019. The Iraqi army remains fragmented, with high-ranking officers shifting allegiances to the highest political bidder. The military is still dependent on the most influential political factions instrumentalizing them in their quest for power.

The army's recent submissiveness stands in sharp contrast with past patterns. From the inception of the modern Iraqi state, the army imposed itself as the repository of national identity and the embodiment of state sovereignty. The military took control of the political arena under the monarchy (1921-1958). During this period, the military organized numerous military coups, starting in 1936 with the first putsch in the Arab world. Top-ranking officers became highly politicized, purging political opponents as well as allies, and eventually overthrowing the monarchy in 1958 to become the country's sole rulers.

However, due to the inability of the officers to overcome their internal divisions, political instability became a central feature of military rule. This pattern ended when the Baathists seized power in 1968. Until the end of his rule, Saddam Hussein applied coup-proofing strategies, exploiting the army's institutional weaknesses and internal divisions, while also utilizing repression, corruption, and various paramilitary structures (*Mukhabarat* and the Republican Guard) to keep the military in check.

With the 2003 US occupation and the dismantling of the Iraqi army, the situation changed drastically. The US sought to build a small and professional army under firm civilian control. This was embedded in the

2005 Iraqi constitution that established, in theory, a balanced framework for civil-military relations. [Article 9](#) of the new constitution stated clear objections to any kind of military interference in political affairs, instituted parliamentary oversight on military matters, and strictly limited military jurisdiction to crimes of a military nature committed by members of the armed forces.

In practice, things were different. Iraqi armed forces and security architecture witnessed a gradual loss of the state monopoly on violence and the use of force as well as a loss of the army's cohesion and effectiveness. This led to the humiliating desertion and defeat of the Iraqi Army in Mosul in June 2014 at the hands of the Islamic State organization. Meanwhile, the security sector witnessed a hybridization with the incorporation of a plethora of Sunni and Shia armed militias on which the state relied to exert its control. This hybridization was accompanied by a "privatization" of the armed forces. Each political faction used co-optation and corruption to carve out a niche for itself within the regular armed forces, which led to the politicization of officers in line with the logic of *"he who owns the security forces, owns the politics."*³ These patterns were best exemplified in the way Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki (2006-2014) dealt with the armed forces. Al-Maliki used the armed forces to arrest his opponents and tighten the grip of his political party, *Hizb Al-Da'wa*, on power. He also relied on Iraq's Special Forces whose status has remained ambiguous since their creation and training by the Americans. These highly trained forces are, to this day, directly attached to the Prime Minister's Office through the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), a body that has no formal legal basis. During the Arab spring (2011), when widespread protests broke out in Baghdad and in the Sunni areas west and north of the capital, the Special Forces proved instrumental in crushing the revolt.

As in 2011, the military in 2019 largely remained a spectator to the violent repression of protesters that resulted in the death of [600](#) individuals and injury to thousands. In October, a massive popular movement shook Iraq, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis marching to demand an end to the ethno-sectarian political system and corruption, and to ask for social justice. During the demonstrations, neither the army nor the Special Forces got involved in the violent crackdown that ensued and was endorsed—if not [orchestrated](#)—by the government of Adel Abd Al-Mahdi. The repression was blamed on what protesters referred to as "the third party," an opaque constellation of pro-Iran Shia militias officially referred to as the *Hashd al-Shaabi* [Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF], which was set up in 2014 to fight the Islamic State organization.

The PMF are part of the state security machinery. The forces are theoretically under the supervision of the prime minister, who is also the commander in chief of armed forces, and they receive state funds. Nonetheless, the PMF have not surrendered their autonomy, and their chain of command remains separate and opaque. Their relations with the regular armed forces are tense and marked by rivalry and mutual distrust, with the PMF often accusing the higher echelons of the army and the CTS of being American agents. At the same time, the PMF are also a major political force within the country and hold the largest parliamentary bloc. They therefore maintain significant influence when it comes to choosing a prime minister and forming a government.

Although military coups and the myth of the strongman emerging from the ranks of the military are ingrained in the Iraqi national imagination, it is unlikely that Iraq will revert to this pattern that has long dominated its modern history. Today, the Iraqi armed forces mirror the fragmented state of Iraqi politics and society, making it, therefore, ["hard to trust anyone in uniform."](#)

³ The analysis on Iraq was based on an interview conducted with Dr. Loulouwa Al-Rachid on Skype on April 2, 2020.

Conclusion

In the MENA region, the role of the armed forces varies from country to country and from period to period. As seen above, their restraint or interventionism depends on several internal and external factors. However, in all MENA countries, the relationship between civilians and the military is neither constructive nor resilient, making it difficult for both sides to adapt to changing conditions in the region and to provide security in an already tumultuous environment. The military is, in most cases, superior in terms of roles, autonomy, structure, and coherence. As such, it is sometimes challenging for the civilian side to have control over the military and fully cooperate with them, especially as political institutions are weak and internal threats high.

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