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THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY

Zoltan Barany

Zoltan Barany *is Frank C. Erwin, Jr. Centennial Professor of Government at the University of Texas–Austin. He is the author of* Building Democratic Armies: Lessons from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas *(forthcoming) and the coeditor of* Is Democracy Exportable? *(2009), which is to be published in Arabic next year.*

No institution matters more to a state's survival than its military, and no revolution within a state can succeed without the support or at least the acquiescence of its armed forces. This is not to say that the army's backing is *sufficient* to make a successful revolution; indeed, revolutions require so many political, social, and economic forces to line up just right, and at just the right moment, that revolutions rarely succeed. But support from a preponderance of the armed forces is surely a *necessary* condition for revolutionary success. Thus, close scrutiny of what determines that support (or its lack) is in order. Like any other large organization, a military and security establishment has institutional interests to safeguard and advance. Its decision—whether to back the regime, support its foes, or stay neutral until the dust settles—will depend on several factors.

My goals here are to explore how the armed forces of the Arab world have responded to the recent uprisings there, and why each national military has acted as it has. Questions about the uprisings' causes, the reasons for their failure or success, the power dynamics within opposition forces, or the directions that these polities might take going forward are outside the scope of my inquiry. My focus is limited to the military's role in the six Arab-majority states where considerable bloodshed took place: Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Aside from the tiny island kingdom of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, each of these countries was or is ruled by a sultanistic regime under the sway of a despot bound by no apparent term limits: Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Qadhafi, Bashar al-Assad, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and Ali Abdullah Saleh, respectively.

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If all regimes depend on the loyalty of their soldiers and police, sultanistic regimes do so with a particular immediacy born of their rigid authoritarianism and the constant need for naked coercion or its threat. The "sultans," who often come from a military or security background themselves, usually divide the armed forces into separate entities that must compete for resources and influence; they often command them personally or through trusted family members. Notwithstanding these commonalities, the six regimes' experiences ran the gamut from rapid collapse to robust survival. The roles played by the military likewise varied widely.

A large number of internal and external factors shape how an army responds to a revolution. How legitimate is the regime, in the eyes of the soldiers and top security officials as well as those of the general public? How do the armed forces relate to the state and civil society? Does each of the state's various armed organizations get along smoothly with the others and enjoy unity within its own ranks, or are "the guys with guns" divided against themselves by differences of ethnicity and religion or rivalries between ordinary and elite units, soldiers and police, and so on? Do the military and security services have civilian blood (whether recent or even decades old) on their hands?

In general, the stronger a regime's record of satisfying political and socioeconomic demands, the more likely the armed forces will be to prop it up. A state that pays its soldiers generously and otherwise treats them well will be better placed to receive their enthusiastic protection. Services that cooperate with rather than distrust one another, and that are free from internal cleavages (over regime performance, for instance), should likewise be more steadfast in defending the established order. An officer corps that has a record of extensive human-rights abuses is more likely to stick with the regime than to throw its lot in with the demonstrators.

The key external variables are the threat of foreign intervention, the impact of revolutionary diffusion, and the type and degree of education or training that officers may have received abroad. Clearly, the generals' decision to support or suppress an uprising will be affected by their calculations about whether foreign powers might intervene to save the regime or back the rebels. Waves of revolutionary fervor rolling in from abroad may affect not only the protesters but also those who are supposed to face them down. And officers who have participated in training or schooling abroad will probably view a potential invasion from overseas differently than those who have not had such exposure.

Naturally, the relative significance of these variables can and will vary from case to case. One country's generals may view the prospect of foreign intervention, for example, quite differently from the way in which their counterparts elsewhere would. Similarly, ethnoreligious differences within the armed forces may mean much in one country and little or nothing in another. Moreover, these factors may be reinforced

or weakened by circumstances that have a bearing on revolutionary outcomes in some contexts but not in others. The point is that to be able to form an educated guess regarding an army's response to an uprising, one must be familiar with the given context. There is no substitute for detailed, particular knowledge of a country and its armed forces.

One of the main reasons why recent Middle Eastern and North African events took so many observers by surprise was the sheer opacity of these countries, especially their military establishments, to outsiders. Gathering reliable information about our six states is extraordinarily difficult. In just a three-page span within her latest book, Sarah Phillips, one of the few Western academics who can claim to be an authority on Yemen, qualifies her assertions about Yemeni military affairs with phrases such as "a point of great contention," "shrouded in secrecy," "notoriously inaccurate self-reported statistics," "extremely vague," "an unknown quantity," "casting further doubt on the reliability of any figures presented," and "accurate figures are still impossible to obtain."[1] Analysts from the U.S. intelligence community who study Tunisia, the most open of these states, were nonetheless baffled by the unexpected course of events there. It is hard not to be sympathetic to the researchers; until recently these regimes seemed so well entrenched and their armed forces so dedicated that, as one expert put it slightly over a decade ago, "even the most professional militaries of the region would not hesitate to intervene in politics to try to maintain the status quo."[2]

Some commentators seeking to find patterns among the Arab uprisings suggested that they failed in countries where rulers told the military to open fire, but triumphed in places where rulers could not stomach killing citizens.[3] That suggestion is incorrect. In our six cases, *every* ruler ordered his military and security agencies to suppress protests by force (including lethal force). In some cases, the generals said yes; in others, they said no because they calculated that their own and their country's interests would be best served by regime change. Our six states can be grouped into three categories defined by how the regular military—as distinct from special elite units and security detachments—responded to the revolt. In Tunisia and Egypt, the soldiers backed the revolution; in Libya and Yemen, they split; and in Syria and Bahrain, they turned their guns against the demonstrators. What explains the disparities?

Siding with the Rebels: Tunisia and Egypt

Tunisia was the country where the wave of unrest began, in mid-December 2010. When it became apparent that the police and security forces would not be able to stop the quickly spreading street demonstrations, President Ben Ali unleashed gangs of thugs and his elite Presidential Guard against the protesters. He also ordered General Rachid Ammar, the army chief of staff, to deploy troops in support of the regime's

security detachments. General Ammar rejected this order and was soon placing his men between the security units and the protesters, thereby effectively saving the revolution and forcing Ben Ali into exile. Why did Ammar act this way?

Although Egypt's generals also opted to back the uprising, their road to that decision was by no means as clear and straightforward as the path that Tunisia's senior soldiers trod.

Ben Ali's predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, had deliberately kept soldiers out of politics during his three decades as president (1957–87), even banning them from joining the ruling party. Although in 1978 and 1984, the army answered the government's call to restore order following civil disturbances, the generals resented being told to assume police functions and were happy to have their men return to barracks as soon as the crises had passed.[4] Ben Ali, a police-state apparatchik who overthrew Bourguiba bloodlessly in 1987, continued the policy of keeping the armed forces on the political sidelines. Unlike most other North African armies, Tunisia's had never even attempted a coup, had never taken part in making political decisions, had never been a "nation-building" instrument, and had never joined in economic-development schemes. Ben Ali kept it a small and modestly funded force focused on border defense.[5]

Ben Ali's Tunisia was a police state. As in many other sultanistic regimes, it was a place where the regular military found itself overshadowed by far larger, more amply funded, and more politically influential security agencies run by the Interior Ministry. In order to counterbalance the close professional ties that had developed between Tunisian security agencies and their French counterparts, Ben Ali sent many of his military officers for training in the United States, where some were exposed to programs on the principles of civil-military relations under democracy. Undistracted by politics and despite its meager budget and equipment, the Tunisian military in time came to rank among the Arab world's most professional forces. With its comparatively disadvantaged status and its officers' disdain for the notorious corruption of the presidential clique, the military had no special stake in the regime's survival and no strong reason to shoot fellow Tunisians on the regime's behalf. As soon as Ben Ali found himself forced to turn to the soldiers as his last resort, he was doomed.

Although Egypt's generals also opted to back the uprising, their road to that decision was by no means as clear and straightforward as the path that Tunisia's senior soldiers trod. For the first two-and-a-half weeks of the uprising in Egypt, the country's military elites hedged their bets. The top brass worked quietly to advance its position in the government while some army units were actually detaining

and abusing protesters or enabling the police to assault them. Troops themselves never actually fired on the people, however, nor did the army prevent demonstrators from filling Cairo's Tahrir Square.[6] When security agents and President Mubarak's loyalists unleashed extensive violence on February 2, whatever credit his regime still had with the people was shattered, and the soldiers went over to the side of the rebels. The generals concluded that Mubarak's mix of concessions (agreeing not to seek reelection or have his son succeed him) and repression (the February 2 attacks) had failed, and that rising violence and disorder would only hurt the military's legitimacy and influence. Thus, on February 10, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed control of the country and, the next day, persuaded a reluctant Mubarak to resign and head for internal exile.

This was a less predictable outcome than the one in Tunisia, for several reasons. To begin with, Egypt's armed forces have long been privileged in a way that Tunisia's never were. Although Cairo's Interior Ministry security *apparat* began bulking larger in the 1970s, much as did Tunis's,[7] the Egyptian military remained a key part of the support base for Mubarak (himself an air force general) and never came under opposition or media criticism.

The generals were able to make up for their waning political clout, moreover, with growing economic involvement in everything from housewares and military-gear production to farming and tourism. The revenue from these enterprises goes straight to the military's coffers and is disbursed without state oversight. We can sense the importance of these business endeavors by noting that Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who chairs the SCAF and heads the Defense Ministry, also runs the Ministry of Military Production. Military officers directly profit from the army's business endeavors through relatively high salaries plus preferential treatment in medical care, housing, and transport. And, of course, the armed forces also reap US$1.3 billion every year in military aid from the United States.

So why did the Egyptian army decline to save Mubarak's regime? First, military elites despised Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and putative successor. A businessman, Gamal headed a faction of what might be called "state entrepreneurs" who, like him, were dedicated to exploiting his family's status and his ruling-party post in order to profit from the liberal economic reforms of the past decade.[8] Second, the top brass were growing anxious about youth alienation and spreading Islamist radicalism, as well as economic malaise and stagnation. Third, Egypt's soldiers, like Tunisia's, were not pleased to see the regime leaning on—and sluicing ever more privileges to—a large police and security apparatus that in Egypt is thought to have employed as many as 1.4 million people. Finally, Egypt's conscript army has so many ties to society at large that, even had the generals been willing to shoot dem-

onstrators, many officers and enlisted men would probably have refused to obey such an order.

Divided Loyalties: Libya and Yemen

Although Yemen is far poorer than oil-rich Libya, the two states share many similarities, including low levels of institutional development and towering corruption. Independent public institutions are not to be found. Libya has not had a constitution since 1951. It has no formal head of state (Qadhafi was nominally the "supreme guide" of what he saw as a large clan), its parliament was symbolic, and Qadhafi had decades to sap its governmental institutions (the military included) in order to bolster his highly personalized brand of rule.[9] Corruption is rampant in both countries, but the government in Sana'a "makes even the Karzai regime, in Afghanistan, seem like a model of propriety."[10]

Tribal affiliations, of relatively little consequence in Tunisia and Egypt, are of foremost importance in Yemen and Libya. Saleh and Qadhafi gave most positions of trust, including key military and security commands, to their own tribesmen and close relatives: Both named sons and nephews to head various security agencies and choice military units. In each country, but particularly in Libya, the military and security establishment was divided into numerous organizations that had little contact with one another. The regular military was ostensibly charged with the external defense of the country while the security forces were supposed to protect the regime, though in practice ensuring regime survival was the main mission of *all* these forces.

Soon after protests began, President Saleh cut taxes, hiked food subsidies, and vowed to raise civil-service pay. More important, he promised not to extend his rule beyond 2013 and not to permit his son Ahmed—the commander of the elite Republican Guard—to succeed him. The crowds, initially dominated by students, were not satisfied with these concessions and demanded that Saleh immediately resign. The ensuing violence, and particularly the killing of 52 protesters by security forces on March 18, galvanized the opposition and divided the armed forces.

The biggest loss for the regime was the defection of General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Saleh's tribesman and longtime ally who had distinguished himself over the past decade by fighting Huthi separatists in the north. A dozen generals joined Ahmar. They included the southerner Abdallah al-Qahdi, who had recently been cashiered for refusing to use force against peaceful demonstrators.[11] Although the defense minister insisted that the military was still faithful to Saleh, many ordinary soldiers either went over to General Ahmar and the opposition or simply deserted. To keep his hold on power, Saleh relied on the better-equipped and -trained Republican Guard, Central Security Forces, and elite army units, whose loyalty he retained.

Qadhafi's response to the revolt against him in Libya was to unleash his half-dozen or so paramilitary organizations against his opponents.[12] The security units rather than the regular military were the regime's first line of defense for good reasons. After Lieutenant-Colonel Qadhafi seized power in a bloodless 1969 coup, his fellow army officers attempted to remove him from power four times (most recently in October 1993). Not surprisingly, Qadhafi deliberately neglected the military and gave priority treatment to parallel elite and paramilitary forces, most of them newly established and commanded by his relatives.

Once the uprising broke out, the regime tried to guarantee the regular military's obedience by giving out cash and making threats, by purging commanders who hesitated to use their guns against the rebels, and by holding the families of unit commanders as hostages. Suspecting disloyalty, Qadhafi dismissed his brother-in-law Abdallah Senoussi from his post at the head of the secret service, and kept top army general Abu Bakr Yunis Jabr under house arrest from the beginning of the revolt.[13] Even so, the army and air force units based in and near Benghazi and Tobruk in eastern Libya defected more or less in their entirety, while large segments of units stationed in Kufra, Misrata, the Western Mountains, and Zawiya deserted as well.[14] In order to compensate for the resulting shortage of loyal troops, Qadhafi allegedly brought in mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and Latin America.[15] Soldiers who continued to fight against the rebels reported that their officers lied by telling them that they were being sent to put down not domestic rebels, but foreign-inspired terrorists.[16]

The divisions in the Yemeni and Libyan armed forces reflected the many and deep-seated divisions in their respective societies. Although the bonds of tribe and kinship do not override every discord, as General Ahmar's example shows, they are tremendously important in determining military attitudes. In addition, coercion and bribery played a role in persuading some segments of the Libyan and Yemeni armed forces to stay with the regime. The threats and bribes were necessary because, as the many defections and desertions show, major segments of the armed forces entertained doubts about the legitimacy of these regimes. Significant external factors included NATO's bombing campaign against Qadhafi, Tripoli's isolation by the international community in general, and the efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council (a group that Yemen has long been eager to join) to ease Saleh out of power.

By mid-2011, both countries were in a state of civil war, with their militaries still split and the outcome of the fighting uncertain. After months of fighting, the poorly organized rebels were still unable to take Tripoli and other Qadhafi strongholds in western Libya, despite continuing combat support from NATO. On 15 July 2011, the United States joined more than thirty countries in officially recognizing the rebel leadership, the Transitional National Council, as Libya's legitimate govern-

ment. Nevertheless, Qadhafi appeared as determined as ever to fight on, and held out till late August.[17] The situation in Yemen, meanwhile, remained inconclusive. In June, President Saleh was flown to Saudi Arabia to receive medical treatment after being severely wounded in a rocket attack during clashes between his troops and tribal fighters. In Saleh's absence, the combat between government and opposition forces—the latter made up not only of army defectors and tribal soldiers but also, most worryingly, al-Qaeda fighters—has continued unabated, and an end to the hostilities seems remote.

Sticking with the Status Quo: Bahrain and Syria

Although Bahrain and Syria are widely differing countries with widely differing military establishments, the regime in each reacted similarly to large-scale demonstrations. Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, Bahrain's monarch, and President Bashar al-Assad, Syria's dictator, both offered a mix of financial concessions and reform vows. When these "soft" measures failed to diminish the size and intensity of the protests, both rulers turned to a "hard" strategy based on force. Their militaries backed them strongly—albeit for different reasons in each country. In Bahrain, moreover, that backing took on a regional quality when Sheikh Hamad's appeal to the Gulf Cooperation Council resulted in the arrival of five-hundred policemen from the United Arab Emirates plus a thousand Saudi troops who came rumbling over the 25-kilometer King Fahd Causeway in armored vehicles.[18]

The Bahraini military is of modest size (the island kingdom has only 1.2 million people) and must contend with several institutional rivals. Many oil monarchies keep their armies small and build up competing security agencies in part out of mistrust, but also in order to satisfy the ambitions of various ruling-family members and to keep different family factions in balance.[19] Bahrain's soldiers are well taken care of: They enjoy good pay, up-to-date weapons, and top-notch training. Still, given the more lucrative career alternatives available, military service is not especially prestigious in Bahrain, and the monarchy has resorted to hiring qualified officers and sergeants from abroad to keep the forces adequately staffed.

The key thing to grasp about the Bahraini military, however, is that it is *not* a national army. Rather, it is a fighting force of Sunni Muslims who are charged with protecting a Sunni ruling family and Sunni political and business elites in a country that majority-Shia Iran has officially claimed as a province since 1957, and where about three of every four or five people are Shia. Bahrain's Sunnis dwell in constant fear of Iranian influence among local Shias, who are barred from sensitive jobs and live under suspicion of wanting to seize power at the first opportunity. Bahrain has no conscription precisely because its ruling elites do not want

Shias bearing arms and receiving military training. It is hardly surprising, then, that Bahrain's Sunni army speedily confirmed its allegiance to Bahrain's Sunni monarchy by suppressing the overwhelmingly Shia revolt that began on 14 February 2011.

The conditions of the armed forces are somewhat different in Syria, although there too sectarian identity has figured in the military's decision to stand firm behind Assad's Baath Party dictatorship and to inflict massive violence in its defense. The Syrian officer corps has been dominated by members of the minority Alawite sect[20] at least since 1955, when Alawites began to control the military section of the Baath Party.[21] The Assad family—Bashar succeeded his father Hafez as president after the latter's death from natural causes in 2000—also hails from the Alawite community. Tensions between majority Sunnis and Alawites, a traditionally disadvantaged group of hill-country origin that makes up about 15 percent of Syria's population of 23 million, are of long standing. To the extent that there is sectarian peace, it is uneasy, and the threat of coercion is never far from the surface. In February 1982, the Assad regime met the establishment of a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold among Sunnis in the city of Hama with a fierce heavy-weapons assault that lasted for more than three weeks and is believed to have killed tens of thousands.[22]

The Syrian military has some combat experience and is, by regional standards, a capable fighting force. It has done well by the regime and, unlike the Libyan and Tunisian armies, has not had to accept de facto second-place status behind other security formations. To help keep soldiers loyal, the Assad regime permits them a degree of economic involvement. As is common among armies of authoritarian states, the Syrian military is heavily politicized; loyalty to the regime often outweighs skill or professional merit in determining who gets promoted.

Since March 2011, the army has been using tanks and other heavy weapons against largely unarmed protesters, slaughtering hundreds as unrest continues. Although there have been isolated reports of desertions and even fighting among the troops, the military is highly unlikely to turn against the regime, for several reasons.[23] The mostly Alawite top brass considers the rule of Assad and the Baath Party to be legitimate, officers enjoy a privileged position in Syrian politics and society, and the opposition—disorganized and fragmented as it is—would be highly unlikely to improve the military's lot. Moreover, the army's involvement in past episodes of brutality such as the Hama massacre counsels against trying to switch sides. Hence Syria's soldiers, regrettably, have continued to do the dictatorship's dirty work.

Events in the Arab world during 2011 have been consistent with the contention that how a military responds to a revolution is the most reliable predictor of that revolution's outcome. When the army decides not to back the regime (Tunisia, Egypt), the regime is most likely doomed.

Where the soldiers opt to stick with the status quo (Bahrain, Syria), the regime survives. Where the armed forces are divided (Libya, Yemen), the result is determined by other factors such as foreign intervention, the strength of the opposition forces, and the old regime's resolve to persevere.

It is harder to feel sanguine about democracy's prospects in Egypt, not least because of the prominent political and economic roles that the armed forces have traditionally played there.

"Successful" regime change—whether it leads to democracy, an Islamic republic, or socialism—needs, at the very least, the acquiescence of the armed forces. In what direction can we expect future civil-military relations to shift in the Arab states? The evolution of civil-military relations is likely to mirror developments in the overall political sphere. Just as a genuine transition to democracy is somewhat likely only in Tunisia, there is reason to feel the most optimistic about the place which that country's armed forces will find in its emerging, post–Ben Ali polity. After the dictator fled, General Ammar found himself easily the most popular figure in the land and could have expected widespread support had he seized a political role.[24] His clear decision to stand back and let a civilian government assume genuine control and responsibility should earn him lasting respect and will (one hopes) serve as a beneficent example for the future.

It is harder to feel sanguine about democracy's prospects in Egypt, not least because of the prominent political and economic roles that the armed forces have traditionally played there. The military's full withdrawal from politics is hard to imagine given the weight of tradition, the interests that the army feels it has at stake, and the absence from the scene of any cluster of political forces capable of both preventing disorder and governing in a manner acceptable to the high command. The likelihood of the military's departure from the economic sphere is even more remote—too many officers have too much to lose in an immediate material sense.[25]

Some analysts have suggested that Turkey can provide a model for Egypt to emulate, but I disagree.[26] Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's staunchly secular vision of a modern state is unlikely to take root in contemporary Egypt. For realistic Egyptians, it seems to me, post-Suharto Indonesia is the example to aspire to.[27] Over the past twelve years, Indonesia's traditionally powerful military has gradually withdrawn from politics and has been successfully subordinated to democratic civilian control by mostly skillful political elites. The one major flaw in Indonesian civil-military relations is the armed forces' continued economic participation. This problem has been difficult to solve—and, under the circumstances, would be politically unwise to press—given the lack of state resources

to compensate the military for the revenue they would lose. In any case, Indonesian generals use a large part of the proceeds from their enterprises to pay for operational expenses that the state's meager defense budget fails to cover.

The prospects of anything resembling democracy arising in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen appear dim, as does the outlook for democratizing their civil-military relations. In fact, I expect the nexus between the governments of Bahrain and Syria and their armed forces to become even closer, because events in those two countries have reminded the political elites there of just how much they rely on the loyalty of their troops. What sorts of polities (and militaries) will eventually emerge from the civil wars in Libya and Yemen is difficult to foretell, although the intensive political and military involvement of Western democracies on behalf of the rebels holds out some hope for Libya's future. Yemen, an enigmatic place at the best of times, has already descended into quasi-anarchy. The solution to Yemen's puzzle, once again, is going to be in the hands of those who carry the guns.

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