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*Arab Spring and Arab Armies: A New Framework for
Analysis*

Dr. Florence Gaub (NATO Defence College)

About the Author:

Florence Gaub is a researcher and lecturer in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Defense College's Middle East Faculty. Her areas of interest include the Arab world, military sociology, post-conflict reconstruction, and intercultural communication. Previously, she has served as a research fellow in the German Parliament, focusing on issues of defense, internal security, and development. She has also held positions with the French Defence Ministry's Research Centre in the Social Sciences of Defence (Centre d'études en sciences sociales de la defense), the Centre for Security Studies in Sarajevo, the Centre for Applied Policy Research in Munich, as well as with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research in New York, where she coordinated courses for diplomats posted at the United Nations. She has conducted extensive field studies in Lebanon, Iraq, Nigeria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. She has published several articles and two books on these topics, and has lectured widely with The NATO School, Oberammergau, Germany; Allied Joint Forces Command Naples; and several think tanks and universities in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Dr. Gaub graduated from Sorbonne University in Paris, France, and the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, Germany. She holds a Ph.D. from the Department of Political Science at Humboldt University of Berlin.

Contact details: Florence Gaub, NATO Defense College, Middle East Faculty

Abstract:

Considered integral parts of their respective regimes since the 1970s, Arab military forces had disappeared from academic studies by and large. During the uprisings now known as 'Arab Spring', they however reacted differently than expected – some sided with the regime in power, some fell apart, and some supported the call for change. While this came as a surprise for many analysts, it also created the incentive to rethink the way we study Arab military forces. This article proposes a new framework of analysis which combines the forces' state to the in- and outside in order to gain greater understanding of them.

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Introduction

The Arab Spring took many analysts by surprise – one of its most surprising features however was not the actual demonstrations, but the behaviour of the armed forces: as Arab armies had been classified since the 1970s as integral parts of largely repressive regimes, the support the military lent to the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as the disintegration of the Libyan military did not conform to this classification. If anything, it overhauled the established understanding of the Arab military in general, and offered the opportunity to rethink the analytical framework when studying the Arab, or other, armed forces.

The study of Arab armed forces had their heyday in history in the two decades following World War II. As governments succumbed to coups in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Egypt, the military came to be considered by Western social scientists as a vanguard of modernization and a possible antidote to feudal societies. The academic focus at the time zeroed in on the military’s

potential capacity to unite pluralistic societies, reform autocratic systems and generally trigger innovation.ⁱ It was argued that „the institutions of government (...), with which the new states have begun their sovereign careers are being resisted by the old societies which they must govern“, because these old societies are marked by rural backwardness, strong kinship ties, regional or ethnic loyalties. They therefore resist being turned into modern citizens and represent an obstacle to the formation of a nation.ⁱⁱ It was not surprising then that “[I]n these early stages of political modernisation, the military officers play a highly modernizing and progressive role. They challenge the oligarchy, and they promote social and economic reform, national integration (...), they assail waste, backwardness, and corruption, and they introduce into the society highly middle-class ideas of efficiency, honesty, and national loyalty.”ⁱⁱⁱ Huntington thus endorsed the highly politicised military as the bearer of modernisation, explaining military coups as a normal step towards modernity. He claimed that once the military accomplished its role as midwife, stable institutions would be established and the armed forces would naturally retreat into the barracks.

Such expectations of the military were hardly realized. By and large, Arab armies in power turned out to be disappointing. Not only did their modernizing impact proved to be limited, their experiences in managing governments were insufficient and their suppression of opponents brutal. Their strategic failure against Israel only added to the general perception of ineffectiveness. Even though the military in power civilianized itself eventually, shedding the uniform and taking on civilian titles, the armed forces in Arab political systems were subsequently considered an integral part of the regime structure and therefore supportive of the central authoritarian power.^{iv} Study of Arab military forces died down as a result of this rather static conception.

This assumption was challenged during the uprisings of 2011, when Arab military forces performed differently from what analysts had commonly expected. By and large, Arab armed forces did not act in the expected way: Egypt's and Tunisia's armies not only refused to act violently against its people, but facilitated regime change, while the police forces caused large-scale casualties (up to 846 in Egypt, 338 in Tunisia). In contrast to this, Libya's and Syria's armed forces, reputedly under iron-fist control and obeying to the regime, remained in parts functional but suffered significant disintegration and desertion, rendering them largely incapable of functioning properly. In sum, none of the Arab militaries confronted with the massive social dislocation behaved in the expected way, namely unequivocally standing by the regime and suppressing the uprisings. The Arab Spring hence raised anew the question of the role of military forces in the Arab world and how to study it.

A new framework for Analysis

Until now, military sociology has struggled with the appropriate framework for analysis; as it tends to divide the study of armed forces into micro- and macro-level, it fails to grasp in this particular case the whole dimension of Arab armed forces which face significant social and political challenges. Yet any discussion about the role of the armed forces in a given society must take both internal and external characteristics of the military into account as explanatory variables, combining the societal with the institutional level. Because although the armed forces are an organisation with its own procedures and tasks, they are also an agent of the state and therefore take a particular place in the latter's structure as well as in society. As such, they sit at the intersection of society and state, and are determined by its relationship to state and society. Its internal functioning and ultimately its capacity to fulfil its tasks are dependent on the trust state, as well as society put into it.

As we study the military as an organization, special attention should be paid to its exceptionalism both to inwardly, as well as to the outside. Not only does the military and its (sometimes theoretical) monopoly of violence symbolize the state like no other governmental institution, it is also, internally, a profession very different from others. Its fusion of occupation and profession makes for very specific outlooks, attitudes, socialization, identity formation as well as structures, procedures and rules of conduct that we do not find elsewhere. Ignoring this aspect will result in an only partial understanding of the military, and in this particular case of the Arab armed forces' behavior during the Arab Spring.

Studying the armed forces solely on one or the other level will therefore give us only an incomplete picture. A different framework is needed to study the position of the military in politics and society, especially during times of considerable political tumult. As other state institutions, the military represents the meso level where state (macro level) and society (micro level) interact, and its role is therefore by default a societal, and in some instances a political one. These are the two levels of analysis military sociology needs to grasp.

The societal level analyzes the position the military has within a wider social system, how it is connected to other societal bodies (such as the government), what is its image and so forth. Crucial questions related to this level are, for instance, whether the military represents, in society, the regime in power or the state as such; how was its role in the state conceived; and on what societal narrative the armed forces can, or cannot rest. An armed forces which is seen, and sees itself, as an agent of the state, for instance, will have very little difficulty dissociating itself from any given government if necessary, for example, as in the case of Egypt. A military institution representing a particular regime, however, will connect its own survival to the regime and question and hence act as such, as was the case of Libya. An armed force can therefore be

loyal to a particular regime or a state / nation. In the latter case it will not act against civilians as it understands the civilians as the source of its power, and as the ultimate sovereign empowered to change the regime. In the former case, the institution identifies with the regime and sees this not only as the element to protect, but also as the source of its own power. In this rationale, the civilian is seen as a potentially threatening factor to the regime, and therefore the armed forces' existence.

This dimension is however coupled with a second level of analysis, the micro-level pertaining to the internal dimension of the armed forces. The internal state of the military is not only an expression of the regime's or state's perception of its societal role, but will also have an effect on how the armed forces will act in times of crisis – which will then influence its societal role. The scale to measure the internal state of armed forces against is the professional one. Professionalism in the armed forces is more than mere adhesion to certain codes of conduct; in the armed forces, profession and occupation merge into one, which explains the intense personal effect working in the armed forces can have on the individuals serving in it. Aside from technical aspects, professionalism in the armed forces describes the extent to which an institution and its staff adhere to a certain value system containing meritocracy, hierarchy, collectivism and to some extent nationalism. Questions of cohesion, leadership, professionalism and command structure might strike some as technical yet will ultimately decide whether a military force will be able to execute its mission as tasked. An unprofessional and non-cohesive armed force will find it difficult to fight any battle, but will also struggle with making the distinction between state and regime at the macro-level. As an armed force relies on a clear vision of its mission, a blurred perception of the latter will affect cohesion and as a consequence, desertion and disintegration will take place. By the same token, underdeveloped professionalism levels are

more likely to result in violence against civilians. A particular point of interest here is cohesion as one of the most important indicators of professionalism.

Morale, élan, esprit de corps or cohesion all encompass “the bonding together of members of an organization/unit in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and the mission.”^v Cohesion can hence be measured best at the smallest unit level, where troops live and fight together. The organization’s function in this context is to not only provide these units with a purpose, but also with a structure which allows for cohesion. Such a structure generally de-emphasizes the individualism of the soldier, allows for extended maintenance of a certain group formation in order to give time for bonding experience and pursuit of common goals. Furthermore, leadership plays a crucial role in the fostering of cohesion as it is the bond between officers and soldiers which will transmit norms, organization objectives and values down to the smallest units.^{vi} A military institution seeking cohesion will thus “use a unit rotation system rather than individual replacements, emphasizing personnel stability within units; (...) prohibit soldiers from belonging to autonomous groups with possibly deviant norm; (...) reduce centralized, bureaucratic control over the good things in the soldier’s life and give control of these to the immediate leaders of the individual soldier.”^{vii} (e.g. pay, promotions, leaves). Cohesion is a variable that is difficult to measure positively, while its absence is measured easily by disintegration and desertion. It is therefore a crucial element in establishing the professionalism of an armed force.

Essentially, this approach combines the institutional view of Huntington’s *Soldier and the State* and the systemic perspective of Janowitz’ *The Professional Soldier*. As the former emphasised internal characteristics in order to depoliticize armed forces, the latter argued that the military, as part of a social system, will always be politicized to some extent.^{viii}

One of the few areas of study where these two levels of analysis meet is the phenomenon of coup-proofing. While coup-proofing is a technique to prevent military forces from staging a coup, it is a very clear expression of the nexus existing between internal military features and external societal factors. Aimed at minimizing the possibilities of small groups leveraging the system to stage a coup, it encompasses a set of procedures such as a) the exploitation of individual loyalties or identities 2) the creation of paramilitary structures 3) the establishment of security agencies which monitor the loyalty of the military 4) the focus of expertness in the military and 5) the financing of such measures.^{ix} The target of these measures is particularly the leadership, as it is the officer corps which initiates the overwhelming majority of coups. States applying coup-proofing measures use internal features of the armed forces to ensure a certain place of the military in society at large. It is hence a deliberate mechanism meddling with the micro-level for macro-level purposes.

When combining these two levels of analysis, essentially four options are possible as outlined below. Whereas the general assumption located most Arab forces in the cohesive / regime-supporting camp, the spectrum of possibilities is far wider, which ultimately explains the armed forces' behavior during times of social dislocation.

Table 1: Situating Arab armed forces in social context

	Cohesive	Non-cohesive
Allegiance to state	Egypt Tunisia	Iraq Lebanon
Allegiance to regime	Bahrain Algeria	Libya Yemen

Of course any armed force can migrate from one box to another due to political events, training programs and changes in the geopolitical context. Perceiving the Arab military institutions as statically assigned to one category has proven wrong when anticipating their behavior during the Arab Spring.

As the study of Arab forces has favored individual cases over comparative ones, a comprehensive analysis to the military institutions of this region has been lacking. Yet while the question of area studies in social sciences remains an open debate, the insights gained from a regional comparison are applicable to other regions as well. The attempt here is not to reduce Arab armed forces to one single analytical object, but to offer a comparative framework which in turn produces more general results. The four ideal types emerging from this framework are to be understood in a Weberian abstract sense – no absolute categories exist, but advance the general understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Four Ideal Types

In the following section, we will describe the four types according to the two axes of analysis, namely the societal as well as the internal. The first type in this is the armed force which is loyal to a state rather than a certain regime and is cohesive internally. From a normative point of view, this corresponds to the Western model of an armed force aloof from politics but militarily capable. In this setting, the military is seen, and sees itself, as an embodiment of the state and / or nation; often it has played a crucial role in the formation of the state or is at least portrayed to have done so. A good example for this is the Egyptian military, which not only ousted the monarchy in 1952 but also managed to end the defense treaty with the United Kingdom. It was therefore seen as the true founder of an independent and fully Arab Egypt. Although damaged by the defeat against Israel in 1967, the return of the Sinai Peninsula after the war in 1973 was largely seen as a victory. The Egyptian military therefore assumed, internally, a position which was seen as above petty politics yet dedicated to Egypt as a nation.

The case of Tunisia is similar albeit different on crucial elements. The Tunisian military has never been involved in any military action since the country's independence; in contrast to other Arab armed forces, it has remained aloof from politics. The real or perceived distance both Egypt's and Tunisia's forces maintained from politics allowed them in times of social unrest to choose a side to stay on, and to be seen credibly, by the population, as a neutral agent between people and regime.

Towards the inside, this type of military force benefits from a certain level of trust from the political side and is therefore allowed to maintain its military capacity in accordance with its mission. This entails limited personnel rotation, regular training at all levels, provision with

appropriate equipment and ammunition as well as a solid command structure and limited politicized meddling with promotions and appointments. In times of crisis, this force is therefore militarily capable to not only execute orders, but to act cohesively. Institutional resilience in a situation of conflict is maintained because of internal standards. Both the Tunisian as well as the Egyptian force were, with exceptions, largely allowed to maintain these standards as they were not seen, by the political level, as a potential threat. This is not to say that politicization did not take place, but it was not sufficient to affect the armed forces' capacity as well as image in society. This ideal type therefore has the largest room of maneuvering available in times of crisis, as it is not only institutionally capable but also politically able to choose.

The second ideal type has the societal image in common with the first one but suffers to the inside from dysfunctional mechanisms. This type of force enjoys a rather high emotional attachment with society, as it either played a role in the process of state formation, or serves as a projection screen for societal desires, e.g. for unity. Although this armed force is hampered by its internal shortcomings, it nevertheless enjoys considerable political capital. This is for instance the case for Lebanon or Iraq: the Lebanese armed forces, while militarily limited not only in terms of equipment but also of manpower, is considered widely as the symbol of Lebanon at large. Because it comprises members from all Lebanese sects and has remained largely aloof from politics it not only represents the Lebanese population but also the possibility of peaceful cooperation. Its unity stands in stark contrast to the often divided political landscape and is appreciated by the Lebanese population. Similarly, the Iraqi armed forces, albeit somewhat limited in military terms, symbolize Iraq as a nation. Created before the very state of Iraq itself, the military truly represents the classical cradle of the state. As the Iraqi military came to shape the nation's political destiny via numerous political interventions, the fate of the state became

closely intertwined with that of the armed forces. Its disbandment in 2003 by the United States was therefore perceived as humiliating. Its reconstruction was translated into a high level of trust among the Iraqi population, with 70% of Iraqis declaring feeling secure when seeing the Iraqi Army in their neighborhood, rating it especially high (85%) when compared to other groups, such as militias, tribes, U.S. Forces etc.^x

This type of armed force will be limited politically when it comes to action inside the country against a certain section of society; since the military represents the nation and its unity, forceful action would translate into political bias. As a result, the Lebanese armed forces were never allowed to act during the Lebanese civil war, and repeatedly chose to refrain from intervening against demonstrators in 1952, 1958 as well as 2005 although the government ordered it to do so, hence strengthening its attachment to nation rather than regime.

Yet this political capital does not necessarily translate into a militarily capable force. A force which is appreciated by its people but not by its government will be constrained not only in terms of equipment (Iraqi recruits receive two bullets per year to train), but also in terms of training, and most importantly, in terms of appointment. The heavy politicization of both the Lebanese and the Iraqi forces due to a quota system which allots posts to certain ethnic and / or religious groups interferes with the meritocratic principles the military is generally built on – hierarchical structures generally need meritocracy in order to be acceptable. The weakening of the forces to the inside is therefore not so much the result of its multiethnic makeup, but rather of the appointment and recruitment of personnel according to non-military criteria, creating discontent and affecting cohesion. As a result, this type of armed force will be limited in its cohesion and its capacity to execute orders.

The third type of armed force corresponds to the stereotype held until 2011 about Arab armed forces: tightly attached to the regime, it conflates regime and nation in its self-perception. Although often involved in the formation of the state, such as the Algerian armed forces, this military institution does not seek necessarily the preservation of the state as such but a certain version of it. This is particularly visible in the Algerian military's intervention into politics in 1991, when elections projected to bring an Islamist party to power were cancelled. In this model, the forces' connection to the regime is so strong that differentiation between regime and nation is not possible, and demonstrators acting against the regime will be perceived as threats against the state or nation as such. Although the military's narrative is a national one, it is de facto one largely determined by a certain version of the nation, and therefore the regime. Another example of such an armed force is the Bahraini case, where internal security forces crushed protests in 2011 directed against the ruling family.

Precisely because of the strong attachment to the regime, this armed force will enjoy the trust of the government and therefore be allowed to function properly in military terms. Although politicized significantly, this process is so complete that it does not divide the armed forces internally – rather, all of the force is engulfed in a positive process of regime attachment, which explains its lack of differentiation between nation and state on the one, and regime on the other hand. Training, deployment, rotation, equipment and salary are all suitable for a rather capable armed force and therefore permit the institution to act decisively and cohesively in times of internal crisis.

Lastly, the fourth ideal type of armed forces in the Arab world combines internal disarray with a negative regime-connection. In this model, as in the former one, the military is connected to the ruling regime and consequently seen as such. However, the differentiation between regime and

nation is more pronounced both on the societal as well as the internal military level. As a result, the armed forces are seen as agents of the regime and are aware of this mostly negative image. In society, the forces therefore do not enjoy images pertaining to its role in a state formation process or as symbols of unity – they embody only the regime with its advantages and disadvantages and therefore resemble more a militia than an armed force in the classical understanding of the term. A good example for this are the Libyan as well as Yemeni forces. As the former had facilitated the ascent of Colonel Qaddafi to power, the institution overall came to be seen, by the population, as an agent of this regime. This image clashed however with the perception inside the regime in question, which saw the military first and foremost as a threat and therefore attempted to sideline it. The creation of parallel security structures, such as the Revolutionary Guards, was designed to keep the military in check and to distribute the regime's power base on several agents.

This distrust translated directly into the armed forces' internal makeup. Regular executions of officers because of alleged coup attempts maintained a level of fear within the forces; promotions and assignments based on tribal affiliation harmed officer's leadership skills, centralized structures discouraged individual initiative, while frequent rotations of officers in particular prevented the establishment of cohesive ties between leadership and enlisted personnel. As an overwhelming result of these efforts, the Libyan armed forces suffered tremendously in terms of cohesiveness, and therefore also in terms of war-fighting capacity.

The nexus between internal and external level of analysis, between macro- and micro-level became very clear within the Libyan military in the months of 2011. Ultimately, the armed forces' reaction to the large-scale social unrest was determined by institutional variables which had been created by the regime. Hence, the military reacted in broadly three ways to the uprising:

individual exit as individual soldiers deserted, collective exit as units disintegrated en bloc in order to join the rebel forces and loyalty as some units remained in the armed forces to crush the revolt. Not surprisingly, those units which remained militarily capable were those which had been allowed to maintain military capacity in terms of training, equipment and command structure. Mostly under the command of Colonel Qaddafi's son Khamis, these units benefitted from its commander's relationship with the regime and therefore received the necessary trust.

A similar situation applied to the Yemeni forces. Nationally, the armed forces were seen as an agent of the regime rather than the Yemeni population. Appointment to posts was often based on personal affiliations rather than qualifications; parallel security structures were created in order to keep the military in check, and training levels were maintained at a low level. As a result, the Yemeni forces disintegrated with the departure of an entire division, while other parts attempted to crush the revolt brutally. Just as in the Libyan case, the armed forces neither had the cohesiveness to act out in support of regime or the people, nor the necessary political capital to choose.

Conclusion

The four ideal types presented here offer explanatory variables for the behaviour of armed forces in times of social dislocation. They take into account societal as well as institutional dimensions in order to broaden the general understanding of Arab armed forces. While the societal analysis explains the driving factors in policy decisions pertaining to the military, the institutional analysis highlights the effect of these decisions on the armed forces' capacity to act, or react, in

times of crisis. The proposed framework of analysis therefore offers a combined approach to studying the Arab military which allows for deepened, and more accurate, understanding.

The four types clearly show that the room for manoeuvring for a military force in time of internal crisis depends on internal as well as external criteria; whether or not a force will act against demonstrators or refrain from doing so depends not only on its political perception of the situation, but also on its image within society as well as its self-perception, and its military capacity to actually take a collective decision and act accordingly. The latter reflects ultimately the relationship the armed forces has with the civilian regime: a relationship based on trust will translate into freedom to develop and maintain a capable military force, while one based on distrust will achieve the exact opposite.

As this framework allows for a more complex grasp of Arab armed forces, it explains the divergent reactions of the military to internal strife and enriches our understanding of the Arab military in general.

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ii Edward Shils, 'The Military in the Political Development of the New States', in *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries*, ed. John J. Johnson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 13 – 18.

iii Huntington, *Political Order*, 203.

iv Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, *Political Armies* (London: Zed Books, 2002) 18.

v John H. Johns et al., *Cohesion in the US Military* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1984) 9.

vi Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985) 10 – 12.

vii Henderson, *Cohesion*, 21.

viii Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe: The Free Press 1960) 435. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957) 83 – 84, 96 – 97. See also: Jacques van Doorn, 'The Officer Corps: A Fusion of Profession and Organization', *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 6, (No.2 1965) 262 – 282. Gwyn Harries-Jenkins, 'The Concept of Military Professionalism', *Defense Analysis*, Vol.6, No.2 (1990) 117 – 130. Giuseppe Caforio and Marina Nuciari: 'The Officer Profession: Ideal-type', *Current Sociology*, Vol. 42, No.3 (Winter 1994) 33 – 56.

^{ix} James T. Quinlivan, 'Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East', *International Security*, Vol.24, No. 2, (Fall 1999) 133.

^x Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, Report to Congress In accordance with the Department of Defense Supplemental Act 2008 (Section 9204, Public Law 110-252), December 2009, pp.34 – 35.