

To Shoot or to Defect? Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings

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To Shoot or to Defect? Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings

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Abstract

By examining the events of the Arab uprisings, this paper looks into the nature and dynamics of armies' responses to popular uprisings. It argues that the outcome of the massive, regime-threatening Arab revolts in 2011 can be assessed by how a military responded to protests: did the army shoot protesters, did it stay idle, or did it largely defect? In light of the rich literature available on the historical experience of the "Arab Spring," this paper shows that an army's response to end popular uprisings in authoritarian regimes is determined by several key factors: the military's level of institutionalization; its relationship to the regime; the degree of the regime's legitimacy; the amount of international aid it receives; the prospects of foreign intervention; and, finally, the strength of the army's bond with society and its perception of its own role within society. Additionally, there is a factor often overlooked by scholars; namely, how the military assesses a regime's capacity to solve the crisis in order to triumph. The paper draws on evidence from the six cases of the 2011 Arab Spring—Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia—to illustrate the dynamics of troop loyalty or defection.

Introduction

This paper examines the nature and dynamics of Arab military responses to the uprisings that erupted in the Arab world beginning in 2010–2011, and which became known as the “Arab Spring.” The vigorous wave of protests that swept many Arab countries was unprecedented in scope, size, creativity, ambition, and consequence. Ousting two heads of state in under a month—Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali—these uprisings demonstrated that the entrenched authoritarian Arab regimes were more vulnerable than previously assumed, and their hopes were buoyed by the prospect of a radiant future of democracy in the Middle East. The revolutionary current churned the stagnant rivers of Arab politics, sending shockwaves throughout ruling establishments in the region and beyond, including states as distant as Iran and China.¹

Yet, even at the zenith of the political storm, in describing the events of that extraordinary year as the “Arab Spring,” and heralding an epoch of much-awaited democracy, many analysts and commentators missed two crucial points. First, although protests took place in various Arab countries, including Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, out of the twenty-two member states of the Arab League, only six countries experienced regime-threatening mass protests that resulted in considerable bloodshed: Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Only four of these states—less than one-fifth of the total number of Arab states—saw their rulers ejected from power. As political scholar Eva Bellin remarked, the rest of the Arab world experienced a rather “silent spring” in 2011 in which “politics remained ‘business as usual.’”² Second, at the time of this writing, the fate of these six countries can hardly be associated with any kind of “spring.” Syria has descended into the bloodiest internecine civil war seen in world politics in many decades; Libya and Yemen have plunged into states of quasi-anarchy and are confronted with the specter of

¹ See Neil MacFarquhar and Alan Cowell, “Iran Uses Force against Protests as Region Erupts,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/02/15/world/middleeast/15iran.html; and Jonathan Pollack, “Unease from Afar,” *Brookings*, November 18, 2011, www.brookings.edu/articles/unease-from-afar.

² Eva Bellin, “A Modest Transformation: Political Change in the Arab World after the Arab Spring,” in *The Arab Spring: Will it Lead to Democratic Transitions?* eds. Clement Henry and Ji-Hyang Jang (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 36.

disintegration; Bahrain has quickly dodged reform; Egypt has returned to the worst brand of authoritarianism it has experienced since 1952; and although Tunisia fared well, its transition to democratic rule is far from complete.

Regarding the Arab uprisings, Arab states can be divided into three categories at a general level of analysis: 1) states that remained relatively quiet amid the storm, such as Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE; 2) states that witnessed regime-threatening protests, but whose ruling elites managed to deflate the momentum of protests and remain in power, such as Bahrain; and 3) states whose leaders were jettisoned from power, paving the way for either civil war or for political processes designed to build a new, ostensibly pluralistic and democratic, political order, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. In all three categories, the coercive apparatus of incumbent regimes, whose capacity to suppress dissent is unquestioned, played a crucial role in shaping the outcomes that unfolded. Indeed, although causes of revolution are still widely debated by social scientists, one thing about nonviolent revolutions is clear: they can hardly succeed without the support, or at least the quiet acquiescence, of a regime's coercive apparatus, particularly the military.

Long ago, Lenin observed that “no revolution of the masses can triumph without the help of a portion of the armed forces that sustained the old regime.”³ Decades later, sociologist Stanislaw Andrzejewski argued with much confidence that “so long as the government retains the loyalty of the armed forces, no revolt can succeed.”⁴ The historical record of resistance campaigns in the period from 1900 to 2006 indicates that nonviolent revolutionary movements are forty-six times more likely to succeed when defections in security agencies occur.⁵ This centuries-old conventional rule was clearly confirmed during the Arab uprisings. In all six main cases of the Arab Spring, the ruler ordered his security agencies to quash the uprising by force. It was the response of these agencies that proved decisive to the fate of the uprising. Where the military—or, at least, parts of it—supported the protesters or exhibited neutrality, the

³ Cited in Diana E. H. Russell, *Rebellion, Revolution, and Armed Force: A Comparative Study of Fifteen Countries with Special Emphasis on Cuba and South Africa* (London: Academic Press, 1974), 3.

⁴ Stanislaw Andrzejewski, *Military Organization and Society* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1954), 71.

⁵ Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security*, 33, no. 1 (2008): 22.

incumbents were ejected from power in a relatively short period of time (Egypt and Tunisia). Where the military remained blatantly loyal to the regime, the protests were brutally suppressed (Bahrain and Syria). Where the military split between the regime and its opponents, civil war ensued (Libya and Yemen). To be sure, the behavior of the military was not decisive only during the uprisings, but also in the political transition processes that ensued thereafter. Even before the uprisings, military intervention in domestic political affairs had been much higher in the Middle East than in most world regions. Civil-military relations in the Arab world are marred by excessive military intervention in political affairs, heavy permeation of the state bureaucracy, and indulgence in commercial activities that includes the establishment of autonomous economic fiefdoms.

This paper looks into the literature of military defection during periods of massive societal mobilization. It is premised on the argument that the outcome of large, regime-threatening protests relies on one multilayered central question: Will an army attack protesters, will it stay idle, or will its members defect? My argument is twofold: 1) firstly, I maintain that during intense confrontations between a regime and peaceful protesters, which pose a grave threat to the survival of the regime, it is normal for the military elite to assess the regime's capacity to solve the crisis and act accordingly, whether by continuing to prop up the regime or by supporting the uprising; 2) secondly, I argue that armies with no viable future outside the orbit of the ruling regime are less inclined to focus on balance of power calculations, and so will most likely continue to support the regime regardless. The first part of this paper strives to identify and contextualize the variables that determine whether a military will remain loyal to the regime, stay neutral, or defect to the side of the protesters. The second part applies these variables to the six Arab countries in which the uprisings were most intense. A final concluding section summarizes the main findings of the paper.

The Uprisings: What Explains the Behavior of the Military?

The Arab uprisings provided proof of the theory that the behavior of the military during a revolution—how it responds to peaceful demonstrators—“is the most reliable predictor of that revolution's outcome.”⁶ It is certainly not the

⁶ Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 161.

only prerequisite for the success of a revolution, but it is definitely a *necessary* one. This begs a number of pertinent questions: What are the variables that shape a military's response to revolution? What explains the variation in the behavior of militaries during the popular Arab uprisings? In other words, what begets loyalty, and when and why does mutiny take place?

Although there is no scarcity of sources on military defection and loyalty amid popular uprisings,⁷ there is little agreement in the literature on the main determinants of military behavior. While some scholars emphasize a military's level of institutionalization, others focus on its degree of politicization prior to the uprising. Still others play down these variables and give additional weight to the impact of coup-proofing techniques, particularly ethnic stacking, in which rulers staff their armed forces with members from their own religious, sectarian, or ethnic groups. Furthermore, most theoretical endeavors either focus on *one* all-explaining variable, presenting a reductionist, mono-causal factor as the sole determinant of military conduct, or, lacking parsimony, offer a lengthy list including *all* variables, whether central or peripheral.⁸ Some scholarly works attempt to explain military behavior through neat dichotomies, focusing solely on the effect of external pressure, ethnic allegiance, or oil wealth.⁹ For instance, Blair argues that military officers who received training in Western institutions are more likely to support pro-democracy uprisings.¹⁰

⁷ Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (2012): 127–49; Sharon E. Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013): 337–49; Derek Lutterbeck, "Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil–Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 39, no. 1 (2013): 28–52; William Taylor, *Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings and the Future of Civil–Military Relations in the Middle East: Analysis from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Kevin Koehler, "Political Militaries in Popular Uprisings: A Comparative Perspective on the Arab Spring," *International Political Science Review* 38, no. 3 (2017): 363–77; Michael Makara, "Rethinking Military Behavior During the Arab Spring," *Defense & Security Analysis* 32, no. 3 (2016): 209–23; and Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*.

⁸ Zoltan Barany, "Armies and Revolutions," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 62–76; Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*; and Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring," 337–49.

⁹ Taylor, *Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings*, 2.

¹⁰ See Dennis Blair, "Military Support for Democracy," *PRISM* 3, no. 3 (2012): 3–16. It is important to note that, according to a survey of military officers who attended US military institutions conducted by Taylor, "there is no statistical correlation between the amount of time foreign officers spent in the United States and their opinions." In fact, some of them "become more critical of the United States the longer they spent time in America" (*Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings*, 4 and 14).

Instead of unidimensional approaches on one hand, and unparsimonious approaches on the other, this paper critically reviews the main body of literature on military behavior during the Arab uprisings, and suggests a list of seven central variables proposed by scholars that, I argue, largely shape the response of a military to revolution. Of these seven variables, four are endogenous factors stemming from the nature of the military itself (military-related variables); another is connected to the attitude and legitimacy of the regime (regime-related variables); and two other factors are related to external influences (external variables), all of which will be discussed in the next section. Moreover, I draw attention to one variable that has largely eluded the attention of researchers—that is, the military’s view of the capacity of the regime to solve the crisis.

Before discussing these variables, two important caveats must be addressed. First, these variables apply only to endgame scenarios, defined as non-ideological and non-sectorial massive popular uprisings that threaten the survival of authoritarian regimes. This, by definition, excludes small protests, student movements, labor strikes, peasant uprisings, and regional movements. Second, the variables suggested are not applicable to how a military responds to armed insurgencies. A popular resistance that shifts from using nonviolent to violent techniques changes its character immensely; therefore, it should be subject to other theoretical endeavors.

Military-Related Variables

Degree of Institutionalization

The degree of institutionalization appears to be one of the most vital variables regarding an army’s response to protests. Armies with higher levels of institutionalization, in the Weberian sense,¹¹ are less inclined to use lethal force against protesters in contrast to armies structured along less institutionalized, more patrimonial lines. As Bellin explains, institutionalization exists where the military has “a sense of corporate identity separate from the regime . . . a distinct mission, identity, and career path . . . [and] will be able to imagine separation from the regime and life beyond the regime.”¹² Recruitment and promotion in

¹¹ Max Weber wrote at length about institutions in modern systems of government, explaining that they are based on the principles of order, legality, hierarchy, impartiality, efficiency and accountability.

¹² Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East,” 133.

institutionalized armies are rule bound and largely determined by performance and merit rather than political loyalty; in these regimes, an obvious distinction exists between the private and public domains, which inhibits predatory behavior toward society. In patrimonial armies, however, the military elite is tied to the regime elite by linkages of kinship, ethnicity, sect, or place of origin; career advancement is determined by bonds of loyalty, not merit or professional excellence. In this environment, there is no clear distinction between public and private affairs, and, consequently, corruption and cronyism become prevalent. In short, “the fate and interests” of the military elites become “intrinsically linked to the longevity of the regime.”¹³ Thus, in contrast to institutionalization, patrimonialism—when armies are wedded to the regime through bonds of ethnicity, sect, tribe, or kinship—replaces meritocracy with cronyism and political loyalty. As a result, corruption becomes pervasive, lines between the public and private realms are blurred, and the military becomes intrinsically related to the regime. Under these conditions, an army will be more hostile to calls for change and less opposed to using force against demonstrators.¹⁴

Makara disaggregates the degree of institutionalization—or lack thereof—into three distinct types according to the method of coup-proofing used by the regime: ethnic stacking, patronage distribution, and organizational factionalization.¹⁵ While the first type fosters troop loyalty, the latter two methods increase the likelihood of troop defection.¹⁶ Another perspective is presented by Ulrich and Atkinson, who argue that an army’s degree of professionalism relies on a number of factors, such as the level of political culture. This is evidenced by the state of the country’s institutions, the level of constitutionalism, respect for human rights, and the balance between the military and other institutions measured by budget expenditures.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lutterbeck, “Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil–Military Relations,” 31–2; Robert Springborg, “Arab Militaries,” in *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 145.

¹⁵ See Makara, “Rethinking Military Behavior,” 209–23.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Marybeth Ulrich and Carol Atkinson, “The Arab Spring and Arab Militaries: The Role of the Military in the Transitioning Middle East,” paper presented to the biennial meeting of the *International Political Science Association World Congress*, Madrid, Spain, 2012.

The Army's Relationship with the Regime

An army that is privileged by a political regime is likely to prop up the regime's incumbent ruler in the face of massive uprisings, lest it lose the privileged status it has enjoyed under that leadership. "Privilege" here refers to a package of economic status, political influence, and social prestige provided to the military by the regime through a set of tangible and intangible advantages. These include the allocation of high budgets for the military, enabling it to purchase advanced weaponry and equipment; decent salaries and benefits for officers and soldiers; and rhetoric and indoctrination that accords the military high respect and reverence in society. Additional privileges include professional autonomy, sizeable influence in decision-making processes, and insubordination to other state institutions (other than the presidency).

If the military is marginalized, if it has found disfavor in the eyes of the regime, or if its standing in the regime is threatened by rival institutions—whether in the security sector or the bureaucracy—then the army may perceive an uprising as an opportunity to reconfigure the regime's balance of power in its favor. It may be inclined, consequently, to throw in its lot with the protest movement.¹⁸ As Albrecht explains, a regime's treatment of the military, reflected in its coup-proofing techniques, could rely on two different rationales: integration, which binds officers closer to incumbents; and segregation, which moves the officer corps out of politics. The former provokes a greater degree of troop loyalty during crises than the latter.¹⁹

The Army's Bond to Society and Perceptions of its Role

The more an army enjoys a close relationship with the general population, the more likely it will refrain from repressing protests. Although it is difficult to gauge this variable quantitatively, it is still possible to measure its weight in officers' calculations by evaluating three factors: ascertaining whether the armed forces rely on conscripts or volunteers; analyzing the army's perception of its role in state and society; and looking into the historical record of the army's responses to popular revolts. Backed by evidence from nearly all major uprisings

¹⁸ Koehler, "Political Militaries in Popular Uprisings," 363–77; Barany, "Armies and Revolutions," 68–9; Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 31–4.

¹⁹ Holger Albrecht, "Does Coup-Proofing Work? Political-Military Relations in Authoritarian Regimes amid the Arab Uprisings," *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 1 (2015): 36–41.

over the past few decades, armies that rely on broad-based conscription are more representative of society and thus more restrained in using force against a mass uprising.²⁰ Examples include the Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia and Montenegro (2000), the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004–05), the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005), and the January 25 Revolution in Egypt (2011). In contrast, armies that are predominately drawn from one social or ethnic group, or those that rely on targeted recruitments or mercenary troops, are more likely to defend the regime.²¹ Cases in point include the Islamist uprising in Syria (1979–82), the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar (2007), the Shi‘a uprising in southern Iraq (1991), and the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria in 2011.

An army’s self-perception of its mission and role is equally important. There seems to be a general agreement among scholars that if a military harbors a sense of historical commitment to “the nation,”²² it would be more hesitant to quell protesters. For various historical and sociological reasons, officers of some Arab militaries (e.g., Egypt and Algeria) hold the conviction that their armies are above the regime; they consider themselves to be nation-builders engaged in the process of modernizing their countries and serving their societies. As Gaub remarks, “an armed forces which is seen, and sees itself, as an agent of the state . . . will have very little difficulty dissociating itself from any given government if necessary.”²³ Other Arab armies (e.g., Syria and Arab monarchies) are intrinsically linked to the ruling regime; if the regime falls, they will also collapse or disintegrate. Furthermore, historical precedents contribute to shaping a military’s behavior during popular uprisings; an army that has a record of human rights abuses or that has previously suppressed

²⁰ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 29; Nepstad, “Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring,” 340.

²¹ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 29; Lutterbeck, “Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces,” 33.

²² See Zoltan Barany, “Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military,” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (2011): 24–35; Nepstad, “Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring;” Lutterbeck, “Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil–Military Relations;” and Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*.

²³ Florence Gaub, “The Libyan Armed Forces between Coup-Proofing and Repression,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 223.

peaceful demonstrations is more likely to stay loyal to the status quo regime than an army that has no blood on its hands.²⁴

Institutional and Economic Benefits

Institutional, ideational, and economic benefits, by and large, foster loyalty to a regime. To create bonds of loyalty with officer corps, various regimes in the Arab world have relied on economic coup-proofing, granting officers generous financial benefits, opportunities of (often illicit) self-enrichment and lucrative post-retirement civilian positions, and allowing militaries to establish vast parallel economies that provide independent sources of income. Institutional benefits include granting the military huge budgets, access to state resources and modern weaponry, as well as elevated status in the state hierarchy and an aura of prestige and reverence in society. Therefore, militaries that have received institutional and economic privileges under an incumbent regime will tend to be more loyal to the state than those that did not.²⁵

Regime-Related Variables

Regime Legitimacy

Military elites are more likely to look askance at a revolution if they perceive the regime to be legitimate. By contrast, a military would be inclined to turn against a regime if that regime had lost its legitimacy and popularity in the eyes of soldiers and the general population.²⁶ The Romanian military's decision not to save Nicolae Ceaușescu during the 1989 revolution is a case in point. On the contrary, the Chinese officer corps' belief in the legitimacy of the regime, and the communist ideals it espoused, played a decisive role in backing it against the student uprising of 1989.²⁷ Certainly, defeat in war, poor socioeconomic performance, and entanglement in scandals are major causes of a regime's loss of legitimacy. Classical historical examples include the 1917 Russian revolution and the 1979 Iranian revolution.

²⁴ Barany, "Comparing the Arab Revolts," 25; Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 30.

²⁵ Albrecht, "Does Coup-Proofing Work?" 41 and 46; Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring," 338.

²⁶ Barany, "Comparing the Arab Revolts," 25; Barany, "Armies and Revolutions," 69.

²⁷ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 30.

External Variables

External Aid to a Regime

Generally, international political and diplomatic aid for an embattled regime will bolster a government in the face of a popular uprising, decreasing the chances of mutiny and troop defection. On the other hand, a regime will be severely weakened if it is ostracized, if international sanctions are imposed on it, or if its close allies decline to support it, which will in turn encourage the military to abandon the state and take the side of protesters.²⁸ Barack Obama's reluctance to provide vital political support to Egypt's Mubarak, and Vladimir Putin's generous backing of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, were both influential in the divergent positions taken by the two armies during the 2011 uprisings.

Prospects of Foreign Intervention

Armies take into consideration the possibility of foreign intervention, and whether this intervention will support the government or the opposition.²⁹ Officers and soldiers who calculate that a foreign army will intervene to support the protesters are more tempted to defect, while those that expect a foreign military force to intervene on the side of the regime will be encouraged to remain loyal. For example, in the context of the Arab Spring, the NATO intervention in Libya made the regime look more fragile, which emboldened the revolutionaries and accelerated the rate of defections among officers and soldiers. Also, Mikhail Gorbachev's reluctance to send Soviet troops to support the East German government during the 1989 uprising led to wide defections among the East German security forces. Conversely, Saudi military support for the Bahraini government in 2011 encouraged its military to remain loyal to the regime.

Table 1 summarizes the role of these seven variables in the six countries of the Arab Spring.

²⁸ Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence," 340; Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 37.

²⁹ Barany, "Armies and Revolutions," 72.

Table 1: Determinants of Military Response During the Arab Spring

| | Syria | Bahrain | Egypt | Tunisia | Libya | Yemen |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Degree of institutionalization | Low | Low | High | High | Extremely low | Extremely low |
| Army's relationship with regime | Extremely strong | Extremely strong | Strong (but waning in pre-2011 period) | Weak, marginalized | Disparate | Disparate |
| Army's bond with society | Weak | Weak | Strong | Strong | Disparate | Disparate |
| Institutional and economic benefits | Yes | Yes | Yes | Limited | Some units | Some units |
| Regime legitimacy | Mixed | High | Low | Low | Mixed | Mixed |
| External aid to regime | Very high | Very high | Moderate | Moderate | Limited | Moderate |
| Prospects of foreign intervention | Unclear in 2011 | Small | Small | Small | Extremely likely | Extremely likely |

Regime Capacity to Solve the Crisis

Although the literature on civil-military relations in the Middle East is vast, there has been scant references to the factor of regime capacity and no attempts to theorize it, or to contextualize it. In the early 1950s, for instance, Arnold Rose argued that soldiers estimate “the likely outcome of a conflict and take sides.”³⁰ Decades later, Bruce Watson concluded that desperation over a hopeless situation could cause desertion. “On the edge of powerlessness,” he explains, groups of soldiers surmise that “there is nothing the group can do to alter circumstances.”³¹ Alternatively, Nepstad wrote that troops are unlikely to defect “when they believe that the regime is stable,”³² but he stopped short of defining what regime strength or weakness means, or what causes a regime to be stable or weak, citing only “the presence of foreign troops” as a source that could reinforce the coercive power of the regime.³³ McLauchlin notes that,

³⁰ Cited in Gaub, “The Libyan Armed Forces,” 14.

³¹ Bruce Watson, *When Soldiers Quit: Studies in Military Disintegration* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 163.

³² Nepstad, “Mutiny and Nonviolence,” 346.

³³ *Ibid.*

generally, defections during a revolution can take place because of a revolution's appeal and noble ideals, but also because of its "apparent chance of victory."³⁴ Soldiers' belief in the likelihood of regime survival may provoke either loyalty or mass defection.³⁵

Assessing the regime's capacity is, in a way, tantamount to the classic posture of waiting for the victor to emerge, hedging one's bets, or "staying quartered" as Pion-Berlin et al. described it,³⁶ before announcing one's position—a common practice in domestic and international conflicts. This approach is facilitated by the fact that the task of subduing protesters and restoring order is more often than not assigned to internal security agencies—which fall under the command of the minister of interior—in the first stages of a revolution, giving generals in the inner sanctum of the army ample time to evaluate their options and devise an appropriate strategy. On the whole, officers and soldiers will remain loyal to the regime if they believe the regime will emerge victorious after the crisis. Conversely, the likelihood of soldiers and officers shirking orders, or even defecting, rises if they believe the regime will lose the conflict and be toppled. As Rapoport observes, supporting "a failing government can be disastrous, and it may be immensely lucrative to support a likely successor before its position is beyond dispute."³⁷ Moreover, playing an active role in ousting the incumbent can be rewarding, since "it is reasonable to expect that the richest rewards go to the most resourceful actors contributing to a transfer of power."³⁸ Therefore, although it may seem difficult, theoretically speaking, for an army that had been part of the embattled regime to switch to the side of the revolution, the historical record shows quite the opposite. Such switches have been frequent, and often accompanied by a rhetoric claiming that the army had "always"

³⁴ Theodore McLaughlin, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion," *Comparative Politics* 42, no. 3 (2010): 344.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.

³⁶ David Pion-Berlin, Diego Esparza, and Kevin Grisham, "Staying Quartered: Civilian Uprisings and Military Disobedience in the Twenty-First Century," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 230–59.

³⁷ David Rapoport, "The Praetorian Army: Insecurity, Venality and Impotence," in *Soldiers, Peasants, and Bureaucrats: Civil-Military Relations in Communist and Modernizing Societies*, eds. Roman Kolkowicz and Andrzej Korbonski (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 257.

³⁸ Erich Weede and Edward Muller, "Rebellion, Violence and Revolution: A Rational Choice Perspective," *Journal of Peace Research* 35, no. 1 (1998): 46.

belonged to the nation, and that its support of the revolution proves beyond doubt its loyalty to the people. However, on what bases do armies assess the regime's capacity to solve a crisis successfully? On what foundations do they base their calculations? I identify four variables that military leaders use in times of crisis to evaluate the efficiency of counterrevolution methods, and to estimate the regime's chances of survival.

Time

It is assumed that authoritarian regimes will attempt to keep a firm grip on power. The entire systems they preside over—political and institutional—are designed to prevent the occurrence of uprisings in the first place. In the case that protests occur, regimes are expected to defeat anti-regime movements swiftly, using the vast state resources and coercive power under their control. The more time that passes with protesters in control of public spaces, giving demonstrators the capability of organizing protests and other forms of dissent, the weaker the regime appears, and the smaller its chance of defusing the crisis. This explains why regimes seek, quite feverishly, to put an end to uprisings as soon as they erupt. The behavior of the Iranian regime in 2009, the Libyan and Syrian regimes in 2011, and the Sudanese regime in 2019 attests to this. Any additional day in the life of a revolution attests to regime failure, and diminishes its authority. Protesters have also historically understood that time is on their side, allowing the uprising to attract more sympathizers, gain momentum and strength, and expose the ineptness of the regime.

Economic and Human Cost

Army officers and soldiers realize that the higher the economic and human cost of an uprising, the lower the regime's capacity to put an end to the crisis. If a regime manages to quickly disperse protesters and restore order without incurring high economic and human costs, it will appear confident and capable of easily restoring the status quo. Conversely, high economic and human costs are harbingers of protracted battles that will hack away at the regime's power and influence. Human cost in this context refers not only to casualties among security forces, but also to the number of protesters killed at the hands of regime forces. As Hale argues, the more blood is shed to suppress massive rallies,

“the more likely it is that the military will hesitate to engage in violence.”³⁹ In short, “the less the better” motto is key to understanding the psychological repercussions of the fall of victims during social unrest. For the military, every additional fallen victim exhibits the regime’s weakness, not its strength. The economic cost could include damage to public or private property, lower levels of production and exports, capital flight, and a drop in investor confidence as a result of an uprising.

Another central question to ask about cost is: Does the bloodshed set a new precedent in the modern history of the country, or is it considered “business as usual” for the regime in charge? Undoubtedly, precedents have a profound impact. Because of its psychological effect and its capacity to further mobilize masses (who tend to believe that the unprecedented atrocities committed by a regime are not likely to go unpunished), an immense precedent will further erode a regime’s power and signal that it may be on a path to losing the conflict. Therefore, to ascertain how the cost of an uprising is calculated by the military, it is important to compare this cost with the historical record of similar events in recent times.

Geographical Reach

Determining the capacity of a regime to contain an uprising must take into consideration the situation on the ground and the distribution of forces on both sides—the regime and the protesters—across the country. Crucial questions to ask include: Are the protests dispersed across large swaths of territory, or concentrated in just a few regions, cities, and urban quarters? Are the protesters in control of strategic buildings, roads, bridges, and critically important public spaces in the major cities, or are they confined to detached, less significant parts of the country? The size of anti-regime protests is also a crucial indicator: Is the number of people taking to the streets increasing or decreasing, and are the protests large enough to constitute a real threat to the regime? Answers to these questions can inform a military of whether the embattled regime has the upper hand in a conflict, or if its authority is dwindling vis-à-vis the mounting opposition.

³⁹ Henry Hale, “Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” *World Politics* 58, no. 1 (2005): 141.

Map of Alliances

States pursue allies, internal and external, as a means of maximizing their security. The more allies a regime has at any given moment, the more secure it is. Obviously, states need allies the most when they face real threats. Hence, to assess the power of a regime situated in the throes of a sizeable uprising, military generals will naturally look at the regime's map of alliances before deciding on whether to defend a regime, stay neutral, or side with the demonstrators. The basic question to assess this is simply: Who is supportive of the regime, and who is supportive of the protesters? These allies could be internal actors and institutions—political parties, state institutions, and professional guilds—or external actors—regional and international powers. Army generals will measure these allies according to their level of commitment; the more committed an ally is to the regime and prepared to provide aid using influential political or military means, the stronger the regime will be. However, allies whose political pronouncements constitute nothing more than lip service are ineffective in bolstering the regime's position. A case in point is the posture of the Soviet Union towards the East European governments in 1989. Likewise, adversaries of the regime whose support of the uprising is limited to rhetoric will hardly undermine the regime's power.

It is important to note that a regime's capacity is different from its legitimacy, although they do slightly overlap. For instance, Barany stipulates that "the generals' view of the existing regime" is among the factors that would determine their behavior towards a revolution.⁴⁰ However, he conflated power and legitimacy, using phrases—such as "robust and popular" and "weak and unpopular"—that amalgamate both into one category.⁴¹ In authoritarian systems of government, regimes can be very unpopular but very robust at the same time, and vice versa. Examples of the former type include Saddam's Iraq and Gaddafi's Libya, and examples of the latter include Nkrumah (Ghana), Haile Selassie (Ethiopia), King Hassan II (Morocco), Allende (Chile) and Velasco (Peru). In his 2016 book, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why*, Barany states that legitimacy is "notoriously difficult to define, let alone to

⁴⁰ Barany, "Armies and Revolutions," 69.

⁴¹ Ibid.

operationalize,”⁴² adding that it is dependent upon components like people’s attitudes towards authority and their views of the efficiency of state institutions. This variable seems to focus more on the generals’ and the public’s *opinion* of the regime and its morality, not on the regime’s chances of winning the conflict against the protesters, measured rigidly and unemotionally. Similarly, Nepstad observes that protesters could precipitate troop defection by raising the “moral” costs of troop loyalty. They can do this by persuading troops, arguing that “if they support the regime, they will go down on the wrong side of history.”⁴³

The trouble with these theories in the context of Arab authoritarianism is twofold. First, they seem to overlook the fact that Arab officers are, for the most part, not known for having much penchant for legitimacy, constitutionality, or other legal and moral considerations that are innately part of a regime’s legitimacy. Military officers, especially high-ranking ones who make decisions, are quintessentially pragmatic, and assess matters through a strict cost/benefit prism. Their major preoccupation during a social uprising, I argue, would be about who is winning. Consequently, if the regime is losing, the calculation would center around how generals might move to the side of protesters without incurring any personal or institutional costs.

Arab militaries have almost invariably supported Arab states—most of which have been illegitimate by varying degrees—ever since their genesis in the middle of the twentieth century; it is precisely coercion that has sustained these regimes. Moreover, Arab militaries would continue to support their regimes in times of crisis—even if these regimes are widely considered by the populace to be illegitimate—if they believe that the regime would emerge victorious. Legitimacy matters to a regime only if this will have an impact on state power and the overall outcome of a conflict. In short, acting predominately out of self-interest, armies will see which way the wind blows before deciding on whether to support the regime or to join the protesters.

Second, it is important to remember that indoctrination goes both ways—from outside the army (the public, mass media, etc.) and from inside the military

⁴² Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 29–30.

⁴³ Nepstad, “Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring,” 339.

establishment. Therefore, even if protesters can sway the opinions of the officer corps, the deep indoctrination by generals will likely be decisive in shaping their opinions. The Arab “military mind” has a distinct way of perceiving and interpreting political and social events,⁴⁴ focusing more on archaic formulaic clichés about their rights and roles. This explains the ease with which—under the pretext of serving the national interest—the Egyptian military in 2013 removed a democratically elected president and sanctioned a huge security crackdown on protestors and dissidents.

Certainly, the factor of regime capacity does not *substitute* the variables reviewed in the literature, but rather *supplements* our understanding of the response of armies to revolution. In other words, I am cognizant that all the aforementioned variables interact, often in complex ways, to shape the military’s final decision. This brings us to the second argument of this paper.

I argue that estimating a regime’s capacity to triumph over an uprising interacts with the other factors through one of two ways. First, measuring the balance of power between the regime and the protest movement is more likely to take place in states where military leaders think they can retain the army’s unity, coherence, and benefits should the regime collapse. Where a military is not particularly despised by the population, and where it can claim to have backed the revolution, it can defect if it perceives that the regime is fragile and/or is about to fall. Second, if the military can see no viable future for itself outside the current regime, it will continue to support the regime even if it looks fragile and/or if the balance of power has tilted in favor of the protesters. This typically takes place in ethnic-based armies, whose leaders know that regime downfall will lead to widespread purges at best, and to trials and executions at worst. Several African countries (e.g., Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Togo, and Congo-Brazzaville) witnessed what has been termed “seesaw coups,”⁴⁵ or power grabs

⁴⁴ The “military mind” is a term that is commonly used in the literature on military studies and civil-military relations. It was coined by Samuel Huntington and subsequently used by many other scholars. It refers to the distinct characteristics officers and soldiers acquire as a result of the professional and socialization process in the armed forces. See chapter three in Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁴⁵ McLauchlin, “Loyalty Strategies,” 339.

by different ethnic groups, each purging members of the other group after seizing power. In other words, for ethnic-based armies, the revolution may be winning, but the regime's loss is also, automatically and unquestionably, the army's loss.

The Army and the Arab Uprisings

Syria

Not only has the Syrian army staunchly served the embattled regime in the face of the popular uprising that erupted in March 2011, it also suppressed the demonstrations with an unparalleled degree of ruthlessness, even by Arab-world standards. The UN estimated that the death toll after nine months of protests exceeded 5,000.⁴⁶ Some defections took place, particularly among rank-and-file soldiers and low-ranking officers, but “no major fighting unit has broken away en masse.”⁴⁷ In fact, most of these soldiers were, in effect, deserters who refused to show up for military duty, rather than engaged in defecting—a process that entails both deserting the military and joining the militant opposition.⁴⁸

The patrimonial character of the Syrian army speaks volumes. The president and the majority of the country's political and military elite are 'Alawites, a Shi'a Muslim splinter sect that historically inhabited impoverished mountainous rural areas, and today constitutes around eleven percent of the Syrian population. Historically, 'Alawites were overrepresented in the armed forces since the colonial period. In the years from 1921 to 1945, the French authorities had adopted a discriminatory recruitment policy that excluded Sunnis and favored minorities, particularly 'Alawites and Druze.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “Syria's Bloody Uprising: Reported Deaths over 2011,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2011, www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2011/dec/13/syria-un-5000-deaths.

⁴⁷ Kheder Khaddour, “Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal,” *Carnegie Middle East Center Regional Insight*, November 4, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/11/04/assad-s-officer-ghetto-why-syrian-army-remains-loyal-pub-61449>.

⁴⁸ Dorothy Ohl, Holger Albrecht, and Kevin Koehler, “For Money or Liberty? The Political Economy of Military Desertion and Rebel Recruitment in the Syrian Civil War,” *Carnegie Middle East Center Regional Insight*, November 24, 2015, www.carnegieendowment.org/2015/11/24/for-money-or-liberty-political-economy-of-military-desertion-and-rebel-recruitment-in-syrian-civil-war-pub-61714.

⁴⁹ Alasdair Drysdale, “Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps: A Conceptualization,” *Civilisations* 29, nos. 3–4 (1979): 368.

The dominance of ‘Alawites intensified after the Ba‘thi coup d’etat of 1963. In the 1950s and 1960s, the faction-ridden army turned into a jungle of intrigue, plots, and counterplots among a plethora of officer blocs headed by ambitious officers.⁵⁰ Whether the power struggle was then shaped by sectarian affiliations—or, conversely, if religious feelings were stirred to achieve political gains—it is clear that Sunni officers occupied only 25–30 percent of army units by 1965.⁵¹ Some Sunni officers at the time held important positions in the army, but these were important “not as a group but as individuals and more in the professional than in the political sense.”⁵²

The “Alawitization” process of the officer corps was reinforced in the reign of Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000), especially after the 1979 attack by Islamist militants on Aleppo’s school of artillery and the 1982 Hama massacre.⁵³ Between 1970 and 1997, out of thirty-one chief officers picked by al-Assad to lead the armed forces and the security and intelligence apparatuses, at least 61.3 percent were ‘Alawites.⁵⁴ Today, they make up around eighty percent of officers in the elite units, such as the 4th Armoured Division and the Republican Guard, and in the intelligence agencies such as the Air Force Intelligence and the Military Security, all of which are well positioned to defend the regime. Moreover, the army is attached to the regime not only by virtue of sectarian solidarity, but also by blood ties. The tradition of appointing family members to key military positions began under Hafez al-Assad and continues unabated under his son, the current president, Bashar al-Assad, with key sectors becoming virtual family fiefdoms. Against a background of acrimony with the Sunni majority, the predominately Sunni uprising amplified the power of the ruling family

⁵⁰ For more information on the role of the military in Syrian politics from the 1940s to the 1960s, see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); and Gordon Torrey, *Syrian Politics and the Military, 1945–58* (Columbia: Ohio State University Press, 1964).

⁵¹ Hicham Bou Nassif, “Second Class: The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 627; Drysdale, “Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps,” 368.

⁵² Hanna Batatu, “Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria’s Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for its Dominance,” *Middle East Journal* 35, no. 3 (1981): 343.

⁵³ Bou Nassif, “Second Class,” 631–2.

⁵⁴ Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 218.

and the entire 'Alawi sect's sense of being a minority, and so made 'Alawites identify more with the regime and rely on it for support and protection. The army's ferocious response to the current uprising could have been inhibited had the army not spilled blood in its past encounters with social unrest. But the precedent of unashamedly carrying out a massacre against a Sunni rebellion (Hama in 1982) possibly removed such a psychological deterrent.

Meanwhile, the officer corps was tethered to the regime through systematic rewards and punishments. Before and during the 2011 uprising, army officers had access to an exhaustive scheme of benefits that efficaciously connected almost every aspect of their personal and professional lives to the ruling regime.⁵⁵ This included military housing, access to army hospitals, and the provision of basic goods at discounted prices. Access to benefits was not only organized along structural and formal lines, parallel patronage systems that rely on informal networks and back channels also flourished. Enmeshed in regime networks of support, the body of officers—including non-'Alawites—eyed the revolution with suspicion, perceiving it as a direct menace to their personal interests. In tandem, to discourage mutinies, the regime demonstrated its capacity to punish defectors and reward loyalists. As early as April 2011, the regime began to execute soldiers who shirked orders to shoot protesters.⁵⁶ By late 2015, the regime had increased the salaries of officer corps three times.⁵⁷ Concurrently, lucrative opportunities of illicit gaining had not only been condoned by the military leadership, but was encouraged as a tool for keeping officers appeased. In fact, so deep, pervasive, and rampant is this culture of corruption in the Syrian military, that even amidst the civil war, numerous reports have indicated the involvement of corrupt officers in the sale of weapons and fuel to rebel groups.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto."

⁵⁶ Ohl, Albrecht, and Koehler, "For Money or Liberty."

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, "Syria's Assad Accused of Boosting al-Qaeda with Secret Oil Deals," *The Telegraph*, January 20, 2014, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html; "Syrian Rebels 'Buying Arms from the Regime,'" *Gulf News*, October 30, 2012, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/syrian-rebels-buying-arms-from-the-regime-1.1095636>.

The regime's web of reliable international allies also decreased the chances of military insubordination. Although the anti-regime forces (a loose alliance of Sunni rebel groups, including The Free Syrian Army and a motley group of Salafi militias) have been unsparingly supported and financed by a number of regional actors (e.g., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE), the regime managed to maintain a lifeline of support from outside forces, such as Russia, Iran, and—when the situation turned violent—Hezbollah, and a motley crew of Iraqi and Iranian militias.⁵⁹ These forces rescued the Syrian regime and tipped the military balance in its favor during several critical battles. Examples include the participation of Hezbollah fighters in the Al-Qusayr offensive in 2013, and, beginning in September 2015, the heavy Russian air bombardment of areas held by rebel groups.⁶⁰

Still, the uprising in Syria—which spread like wildfire throughout the length and breadth of the country, from the rural towns of Daraa, Hama, Deir al-Zour, and al-Hasakah to bigger cities like Homs and Raqqa—put to question the regime's capacity to triumph, or even survive. The regime could count on the lavish political and military support of a number of regional and international allies. Moreover, the brutal tactics the military used against peaceful demonstrators in the early months of 2011, resulting in thousands of fatalities,⁶¹ seemed mild in comparison to its employment of air power and heavy weapons to quell the 1979–82 uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood,

⁵⁹ For more information on these militias, see Ali Alfoneh, "Fractured Iraqi Shia Militias in Syria," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, August 22, 2018, <https://agsiw.org/fractured-iraqi-shia-militias-in-syria>; and Seth J. Frantzman, "Who Are Iran's 80,000 Shi'ite Fighters in Syria?," *The Jerusalem Post*, April 28, 2018, www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Who-are-Irans-80000-Shiite-fighters-in-Syria-552940.

⁶⁰ On Hezbollah's role in the battle of Qusayr, see Nicholas Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (August 2013), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-battle-for-qusayr-how-the-syrian-regime-and-hizb-allah-tipped-the-balance>; and Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah Marks Major Triumph as Qusayr Tips Back into Assad Camp," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 5, 2013, www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0605/Hezbollah-marks-major-triumph-as-Qusayr-tips-back-into-Assad-camp. For an assessment of the results of Russia's military involvement in Syria, see Joseph Daher, "Three Years Later: The Evolution of Russia's Military Intervention in Syria," *SyriaSource* (The Atlantic Council), September 27, 2018, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria.

⁶¹ "Syria's Bloody Uprising: Reported Deaths over 2011."

which killed tens of thousands of civilians.⁶² Nevertheless, these intricate calculations apparently barely crossed the minds of the military elites. Tied to the regime by formidable ethnic bonds, military elites knew they had “nothing to gain but everything to lose if the government were toppled,” and to “expect the worse should the opposition eventually come out on top.”⁶³ In short, the military elites were aware that they had no life outside the regime of Bashar al-Assad. As explained earlier, if the military can see no viable future for itself outside the orbit of the regime, it will continue to support the regime even if that regime looks fragile and/or if the balance of power has tilted in favor of the protesters. Therefore, the predicted variables of cost, time, and geographical outreach were of little relevance in the Syrian case. The revolution in Syria turned violent in mid- to late-2011, entering a militant phase whose dynamics fall outside the scope of this paper.

Bahrain

A similar pattern occurred in the tiny kingdom of Bahrain. Demonstrations demanding political reform and an end to human rights violations began on February 14, 2011, and quickly expanded to include, according to one estimate, around 200,000 protesters—approximately twenty-five percent of the adult population.⁶⁴ The military responded with brute force, killing at least eighteen civilians by the end of March 2011.⁶⁵ Since 1971, the Sunni Al-Khalifa family has ruled the archipelago, whose population is mostly Shi'a. As in Syria, the military has been wedded to the kingdom, using patrimonial bonds of family and sect. Army personnel enjoy good pay, advanced weaponry, and professional training, but the army is not a national army in the strict sense of the term. Rather, it is “a fighting force of Sunni Muslims who are charged with protecting

⁶² Jason Rodrigues, “1982: Syria’s President Hafez al-Assad Crushes Rebellion in Hama,” *The Guardian*, August 1, 2011, www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2011/aug/01/hama-syria-massacre-1982-archive.

⁶³ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 156.

⁶⁴ Adrian Humphreys, “The Arab Awakening: A Bahraini Activist Struggles to Keep Protests Alive,” *National Post*, December 21, 2011, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/the-arab-awakening-a-bahraini-activist-struggles-to-keep-protests-alive>.

⁶⁵ Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 77.

a Sunni ruling family and Sunni political and business elites.”⁶⁶ The military’s frail connection to the population was further weakened by its non-reliance on conscription, and its recruitment of foreign Sunni soldiers from Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, and Jordan, who constitute roughly half of its security forces.⁶⁷

Although the protests were initially populist and cross-sectarian, and evidence of Iranian meddling in the protest movement was “slim to nonexistent,”⁶⁸ the regime quickly stirred up sectarian tensions, and accused the demonstrators and the country’s largest political Shi‘a movement, Al-Wefaq, of being protégés of Iran and Hezbollah to stoke the fears of the Sunni minority. Describing the uprising, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa claimed that “an external plot has been fomented for 20 to 30 years for the ground to be ripe for subversive designs.”⁶⁹ Tared as religiously distinct (Shi‘i) and as traitors (clients of a foreign country, Iran), the sectarian “otherness” of the protestors was emphasized; the largely Sunni military had no incentive to oust the king and disrupt the political supremacy of Sunnis in the regime.

The weak international outcry against the repression played into the hands of the regime. The response of the United States to the suppression of the demonstrations was muted. Home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, Bahrain’s strategic importance to the US overrode considerations of human rights. As one Bahraini activist put it, Washington “carries a large carrot and a small stick” in its relationship with the Bahraini regime.⁷⁰ Moreover, in a show of support towards the regime, Saudi Arabia commissioned one thousand soldiers, and the United Arab Emirates dispatched five hundred police officers to Bahrain in March 2011, under the authority of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) “Peninsula Shield Force.”⁷¹ With the international community either supportive of the state or silent, the regime’s capacity to roll back the uprising was elevated,

⁶⁶ Barany, “Comparing the Arab Revolts,” 31.

⁶⁷ Nepstad, “Mutiny and Nonviolence,” 343.

⁶⁸ Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 81.

⁶⁹ “Bahrain Unrest: King Hamad Says Foreign Plot Foiled,” *BBC News*, March 21, 2011, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12802945.

⁷⁰ Frederic Wehrey, “Combating Unconventional Threats in the Gulf,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 6, 2013, www.carnegieendowment.org/2013/12/06/combating-unconventional-threats-in-gulf-pub-53840.

⁷¹ “Gulf States Send Forces to Bahrain Following Protests,” *BBC News*, March 14, 2011, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12729786.

enabling it to usher the exhausted protest movement out of the strategic Pearl Roundabout situated in the middle of the financial district, and to confine the protesters to the less important, far-flung, and isolated Shi‘a villages.⁷² In the twilight of the uprising, accordingly, the military elite saw the regime as ever more solid, further encouraging unwavering loyalty and support.

Calculations of regime capacity were not decisive in Bahrain. The Bahraini army was deployed as early as February 17, 2011—three days after the outbreak of the revolution—to extinguish the protests. The uprising grew in the following days, attracting larger numbers of people who occupied the Pearl Roundabout, blocked off Manama’s financial district, obstructed traffic, and blocked entrance to the parliament. Clashes with the army and security forces led to the deaths of at least fifty protesters by the end of April 2011. Yet, unlike Syria, the regime’s capacity, though put to a serious test, did not bend in the face of the crisis. From day one, military commanders “assessed that the regime’s long-term durability was high” and had “confidence that the regime would remain resilient regardless of the demonstrations.”⁷³ The regime could rely on the help of other GCC countries, and, by sectarian “divide-and-rule” tactics, it turned the uprising from a broad-based revolution into an isolated Shi‘a movement. It could be confidently argued, however, that even if the regime’s capacity to exhaust the protesters had weakened, the army would still have defended the regime. As explained earlier, calculations of regime capacity, including when the regime’s survival comes into question, are of little relevance where armies are wedded to regimes by ethnic or blood ties, and when they cannot envisage a future for themselves outside the umbrella of the patron regime.

Egypt

Contrary to Syria and Bahrain, the military in Egypt did not respond with violence to the popular uprising that broke out on January 25, 2011. Following its deployment to the streets of Cairo and other main cities on January 28, the

⁷² Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (California: Stanford UP, 2013), 55.

⁷³ Holger Albrecht and Dorothy Ohl, “Exit, Resistance, Loyalty: Military Behavior during Unrest in Authoritarian Regimes,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (2016): 44.

military played an ambiguously cautious role, announcing its support for the people, while giving President Hosni Mubarak's regime leeway to uphold the status quo and resolve the crisis. The military announced on January 31 that it would not use force against the protestors, and that it respected their right to assembly and self-expression, but it also called upon protesters on February 2 to end the protests, go home, and resume normal life.⁷⁴ In the same vein, "hoping that the protesters would be subdued,"⁷⁵ it did not prevent the armed, pro-regime thugs from attacking peaceful protesters in Tahrir Square, causing multiple deaths and hundreds of injuries in what came to be known as the "Battle of the Camel."⁷⁶ As the International Crisis Group summarized, the army "found itself almost literally on both sides of the barricades."⁷⁷ The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) only distanced itself from Mubarak on February 10, when the crisis spiraled out of control and the military ran out of other viable options.⁷⁸ The following day, on February 11, Mubarak resigned.

This ambiguity existed because the military had ample reasons to both rescue Mubarak and abandon him. Contrary to Syria and Bahrain's patrimonial armies, the Egyptian army is, overall, a modern professional institution based on clear rules of hierarchy and meritocracy. It is based on general conscription, and its officers and soldiers are part of daily society. In addition, unlike the infamous Syrian army, the Egyptian military had, prior to 2011, no blood on its hands; since 1952, internal repression had been the exclusive job of the loathed Ministry of Interior. Even before the revolution, signs of discontent with Mubarak's regime among lower ranks, especially over its economic failures and the prevalence of corruption, were already evident, albeit subtle. To preserve the

⁷⁴ "Egypt Military Tells Protesters to Go Home," *CBS News*, February 2, 2011, www.cbsnews.com/news/egypt-military-tells-protesters-to-go-home.

⁷⁵ Clement Henry and Robert Springborg, "Army Guys," *The American Interest*, May 1, 2011, www.the-american-interest.com/2011/05/01/army-guys.

⁷⁶ Yasmine Fathi, "Egypt's 'Battle of the Camel': The Day the Tide Turned," *AbramOnline*, February 2, 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/33470.aspx>.

⁷⁷ Cited in Lutterbeck, "Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil-Military Relations," 38.

⁷⁸ Holger Albrecht and Dina Bishara, "Back on Horseback: The Military and Political Transformation in Egypt," *Middle East Law and Governance* 3, nos. 1–2 (2011): 15–16; Hicham Bou Nassif, "Generals and Autocrats: How Coup-Proofing Predetermined the Military Elite's Behavior in the Arab Spring," *Political Science Quarterly* 130, no. 2 (2015): 262; Lutterbeck, "Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil-Military Relations," 38.

army's esprit de corps and internal unity, repression was excluded as a viable option. A prominent Egyptian political commentator explained:

Had SCAF ordered the mid-ranking and junior officers to shoot on civilians, they would have turned their weapons against SCAF. The officer corps would have splintered along generational lines. [Minister of Defense Hussein] Tantawi refrained from opening fire on the protesters not to protect the revolution, but to safeguard the unity of the armed forces.⁷⁹

Undoubtedly, the Egyptian military enjoyed a privileged status under the shadow of the Mubarak regime—a position rooted in the 1952 military takeover of the “Free Officers” in which Gamal Abdel-Nasser was thrust into the country's leadership. In the six decades from the early 1950s to the outbreak of the revolution in 2011, the military held a monopoly over the presidency and enjoyed extensive political influence. A process of demilitarization, however, took place under Nasser's successors: Anwar Sadat (ruled 1970–1981) and Hosni Mubarak (ruled 1981–2011). While 35.6 percent of all ministers under Nasser had military backgrounds, this percentage declined under Sadat and Mubarak to approximately 19 percent and 10 percent, respectively.⁸⁰

At the onset of Mubarak's rule, an irrevocable, tacit trade-off emerged between the presidency and the military, whereby the latter shunned its involvement in politics and became subordinate to the president, but was allowed—perhaps even encouraged—to engage in commercial activities. The military soon indulged in multiple economic ventures, laying the foundations of a parastatal economic empire that operated defense industries, carried out infrastructure projects, ran social clubs, and produced a broad range of products, such as electronics, consumer goods, and basic food commodities. The military also owns about 87 percent of Egypt's unused land.⁸¹ The scope and budget of these activities—“Military, Inc.,” as described by Robert Springborg—have

⁷⁹ A 2012 interview with Abdullah Sinnawi, Egyptian daily *Ashbourouk* cited in Bou Nassif, “Generals and Autocrats,” 266.

⁸⁰ Koehler, “Political Militaries in Popular Uprisings,” 10.

⁸¹ Marwa Awad, “Special Report: In Egypt's Military, A March for Change,” *Reuters*, April 10, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-army/special-report-in-egypts-military-a-march-for-change-idUSBRE8390IV20120412.

largely remained without scrutiny or accountability, and their size remains a subject of speculation.⁸² While former Trade Minister Rashid Mohamed Rashid estimated that the military's economy comprises less than 10 percent of the country's economy, political scholar Amr Hamzawy pegged the military's economic undertakings at up to 30 percent.⁸³ Whatever the actual size, there is no doubt that by turning into a major economic actor, the military had become a mainstay of Mubarak's regime. Furthermore, Mubarak had created a vast system of control that provided reliable officers with pecuniary rewards and promises of post-retirement opportunities in prized positions in the state bureaucracy. For instance, of the 156 governors appointed under Mubarak, sixty-three were former army officers.⁸⁴ Many other officers were appointed to ministries, the diplomatic corps, public agencies, state-run companies, or as chiefs of cities and boroughs.

Despite its sprawling economic complex, and its permeation of almost all branches of state administration, as well as officers' access to a wide range of social and economic benefits, the military's influence had waned in the last decade of Mubarak's rule. Military leaders eyed with suspicion the expansion and the mounting influence of the various security agencies that fell under the command of Habib Al-Adly, Egypt's interior minister from 1997 to 2011. By 2011, the size of these security agencies had grown to an estimated 1.4 million, around 1.5 times the size of the armed forces, including its reserves. Meanwhile, the annual budget of the Interior Ministry increased at three times the rate of the military budget.⁸⁵ Military leaders also resented the meteoric rise of Mubarak's son—businessman-turned-politician Gamal Mubarak—in the ruling party, and the prospects of hereditary succession (*tawrīth* in the

⁸² Robert Springborg, "Economic Involvements of Militaries," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 3 (2011): 397.

⁸³ Shana Marshall and Joshua Stacher, "Egypt's Generals and Transnational Capital," *MERIP*, no. 262 (Spring 2012), www.merip.org/mer/mer262/egypts-generals-transnational-capital; Daniel Kurtzer and Mary Svenstrup, "Egypt's Entrenched Military," *The National Interest*, August 22, 2012, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/egypts-entrenched-military-7343>.

⁸⁴ Hicham Bou Nassif, "Wedded to Mubarak: The Second Careers and Financial Rewards of Egypt's Military Elite, 1981–2011," *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 4 (2013): 516.

⁸⁵ Yezid Sayigh, "Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt," *The Carnegie Papers*, 2012, www.carnegieendowment.org/files/officers_republic1.pdf.

vocabulary of Egyptian politics) that loomed large on the horizon.⁸⁶ In a US embassy cable shared by WikiLeaks, Minister of Defense Tantawi was reported to have complained about Gamal and his business cronies,⁸⁷ whose neoliberal economic agenda—underpinned by privatization, deregulation, and reductions in government spending—posed a threat to the army’s economic interests.

The sum of these variables partially explains the army leadership’s apparent hesitance, bordering on inaction, during the uprising. The top brass initially wanted to maintain the status quo, and rule without governing, but when Mubarak failed to stem the tide of the revolution, military leaders were forced to consider alternatives. Evidently, international dynamics encouraged the military elites to step out of their comfort zone. After a few days of hesitation toward the crisis in Egypt, the US administration leaned toward the protesters, advocating change of leadership and political reform. On February 2, 2011, President Obama insisted that “an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now.”⁸⁸ To avoid jeopardizing its close ties to the US military, which includes a lavish annual assistance package of \$1.3 billion, the military was compelled to wade into the political morass.

After their deployment on January 28, 2011, leaders of the Egyptian military hedged their bets as they followed the standoff between the regime and the protesters. It is important to note that the change in their stance from neutrality to “tacit, and later explicit support” of the revolution corresponded to the dwindling capacity of the regime to deal with the protesters.⁸⁹ In the first few days of the eighteen-day uprising, Mubarak seemed still capable of staying in power through a mix of concessions, repression, and state media manipulation, but the picture drastically changed two weeks into the crisis. The revolution had retained its momentum, with protestors controlling Tahrir Square and other public spaces in Cairo and major cities. The forces under the command of the

⁸⁶ Khaled Desouki, “Complications with Egypt’s Succession Plan,” *Stratfor*, October 11, 2010, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/complications-egypts-succession-plan>; “Tantawi Was at Odds with Gamal Mubarak: WikiLeaks,” *AbramOnline*, May 7, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/11559/Egypt/Politics-/Tantawi-was-at-odds-with-Gamal-Mubarak-Wikileaks.aspx>.

⁸⁷ Koehler, “Political Militaries in Popular Uprisings,” 10–1.

⁸⁸ “Obama: ‘Transition Must Begin Now,’” *BBC News*, February 2, 2011, www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-12341768/president-obama-an-orderly-transition-must-begin-now.

⁸⁹ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 141.

minister of interior had withdrawn from the streets; the ruling party sunk into irrelevance; a cascade of labor strikes swept ministries and industrial plants across the country; and the United States had shifted its position from supporting the regime to demanding an immediate start of a transition process.

That the cost of the revolution included a near halt of the economy and the deaths of more than eight hundred peaceful protesters at the hands of the police—a huge figure given that only three protesters had lost their lives in clashes with security forces in the decade preceding the revolution—sent shockwaves through the entire ruling establishment.⁹⁰ The mood shifted. Popular and well entrenched, the military still had a future in the post-Mubarak state.⁹¹ Indeed, the military still had “an entire regime to defend, even without its evicted president.”⁹² Therefore, by February 10, 2011, officers in the military establishment and in the General Intelligence Service began contemplating ways to tell Mubarak about exactly how bad the situation was, and that he had to go.⁹³ When the message was finally explicitly sent, Mubarak resigned.

Tunisia

In Tunisia, the army also refrained from shooting protesters. Of all the Arab militaries, Tunisia’s was truly *sui generis*. Fearful of military coups—at the time, the major method of political change in the entire region—Habib Bourguiba deliberately kept the military out of politics in his three decades of rule (1957–87). Striving to put in place a clear constitutional separation between the army and the regime’s political structures, the president banned officers from joining the ruling party, the Socialist Destourian Party. In fact, Bourguiba sacked his defense minister in the early 1970s—Beji Caid Essebsi, president from 2014 to 2019—for involving a military officer in the preparation of a party congress.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ These fatalities took place during the clashes that occurred between protesters and the police on April 6, 2008 in the industrial city of Mahalla.

⁹¹ A 2011 poll showed that around 90 percent of Egyptians held a positive image of the military. See Robert Springborg, “Arab Armed Forces: State Makers or State Breakers?” *Middle East Institute*, July 14, 2015, www.mei.edu/publications/arab-armed-forces-state-makers-or-state-breakers.

⁹² Springborg and Henry, “Army Guys.”

⁹³ Abdel-Latif Al-Manawy, *al-ayam al-akheera linizam Mubarak* [The last days of the Mubarak regime] (Cairo: Al-Dar Al-Masriya Al-Libnaniya, 2012), 392.

⁹⁴ Michael Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2012), 87.

The military remained a small, non-praetorian, relatively professional and apolitical force that has consistently answered to the authority of the president. It never mounted a coup d'état, never fomented political instability, never participated in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and never took part in the decision-making process as political elite.⁹⁵ It is interesting to note that of the eleven different individuals who occupied the position of minister of defense in Bourguiba's thirty years of rule, none was an active or former officer.⁹⁶ In addition, the military was used neither as an instrument of nation building, nor as an agent of repression—a task designated to several internal security agencies, such as the National Guard and some units of the Public Order Brigade. On two occasions, however, the military was requested to restore order against the backdrop of civil disturbances: the general strike of 1978 and the food riots of 1984.⁹⁷ After order was restored, the military swiftly returned to the barracks in both cases. In fact, the military leadership had felt so uncomfortable with its troops having to perform the duties of the police forces that a discernible crack in its relationship with both the presidency and the Interior Ministry began to emerge.⁹⁸ Because of its professionalism and aloofness from politics, the term *la grande muette* (the big silent) is commonly used in Tunisia to depict the status of the military.⁹⁹

Keeping the Tunisian armed forces small and outdated on weapons drew the ire of military leaders. Cuts in military spending in the late 1970s against the backdrop of deteriorating economic conditions undermined the military's ability to deal with a possible threat from neighboring Libya's belligerent Muammar Gaddafi, who backed an uprising in the Tunisian mining town of Gafsa in 1980. By the early 1980s, a report issued by the US Department of Defense concluded that Tunisia's armed forces were largely underequipped and "so obsolete that they could not mount a credible defense against a Libyan

⁹⁵ Lewis B. Ware, "The Role of the Tunisian Military in the Post-Bourguiba Era," *Middle East Journal* 39, no. 1 (1985): 37.

⁹⁶ Koehler, "Political Militaries in Popular Uprisings," 11.

⁹⁷ Ware, "The Role of the Tunisian Military," 27.

⁹⁸ Nouredine Jebnoun, "In the Shadow of Power: Civil-Military Relations and the Tunisian Popular Uprising," *The Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 3 (2014): 300; Ware, "The Role of the Tunisian Military," 39.

⁹⁹ Lutterbeck, "Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil-Military Relations," 34.

attack.”¹⁰⁰ In the footsteps of his predecessor, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (in office from 1987 to 2011) opted to marginalize the military, while bolstering the network of security agencies affiliated to the Interior Ministry.

Although the budget of the military grew in the first decade of Ben Ali’s rule, it failed to keep pace with the budgets of the security agencies, which grew fourfold from 1987 to 1999.¹⁰¹ By 2011, the Tunisian armed forces were the smallest in North Africa, and were vastly outnumbered by internal security agencies—around 35,000 soldiers versus an estimated 130,000–150,000 police officers. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the deployments of the army were mainly oriented toward border security and participation in peacekeeping operations in the African continent.¹⁰² Meanwhile, defense spending constituted around 1.4 percent of the GDP in 2006, practically the lowest in the region, and, in 2010, Tunisia was ranked 109th worldwide in percentage of GDP allocated to defense purposes.¹⁰³ Even neighboring Libya, whose population is roughly half that of Tunisia, had an army that was twice the size of Tunisia’s.¹⁰⁴ After an outdated and improperly maintained military helicopter crashed in 2002—killing thirteen officers, including the army chief of staff Brigadier General Abdelaziz Skik—senior officers began using their private cars for field visits, calling military planes “flying coffins.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, the combat air fleet had not undergone any significant modernization effort since the mid-1980s.¹⁰⁶

A politically innocuous, highly professional force that relies on conscription and enjoys no institutional, political, or economical privileges, the Tunisian military was more aligned on the side of the protesters in 2010–11. For its part, the regime initially relied on its internal security agencies, while deliberately keeping army Chief of Staff Rachid Ammar misinformed about the security

¹⁰⁰ Claudia Wright, “Tunisia: Next Friend to Fall?” *Foreign Policy* 46 (1982): 124.

¹⁰¹ Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb*, 104.

¹⁰² Alejandro Pachon, “Loyalty and Defection: Misunderstanding Civil-Military Relations in Tunisia during the Arab Spring,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (2014): 513.

¹⁰³ Risa Brooks, “Abandoned at the Palace: Why the Tunisian Military Defected from the Ben Ali Regime in January 2011,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 210.

¹⁰⁴ Lutterbeck, “Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil-Military Relations,” 34–5.

¹⁰⁵ Jebnoun, “In the Shadow of Power,” 302–3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

situation,¹⁰⁷ an attitude that carried with it the seeds of the regime's demise. As in Egypt, the military initially remained on the sidelines of the crisis, and when it was ordered to deploy, it had no appetite for repressing the demonstrators, especially as the regime's capacity to deal with the situation had conspicuously declined. The military's reluctance to use force deactivated the last weapon in the arsenal of Ben Ali, and pushed him to flee the country on January 14, 2011.

The Tunisian case bears resemblance to the Egyptian one. Calculations of the balance of power had played a crucial role in the minds of military leaders before they decided to oust the president. Initially, Ben Ali relied on the police and security forces, and then on the Republican Guard and pro-regime vigilantes and thugs to stop the demonstrations.¹⁰⁸ On January 12, 2011, when it appeared that these forces failed to contain the revolution, Ben Ali—apparently, quite reluctantly—ordered the army to deploy in Tunis and main cities. The revolution had by then proved its strength and resilience, growing from a few local protests in the restive interior region into “a mass movement,” comprising the capital city and the wealthy coastal regions. The character of the unrest changed from being merely anti-unemployment protests to a larger movement calling for democracy and political change.¹⁰⁹ As Brooks clearly summed it up, by January 12, 2011, “the balance of power had changed” and “it was clear momentum had shifted.”¹¹⁰ Around 340 lives were lost at the hands of the police in the first twenty-six days of the uprising,¹¹¹ a huge toll given that only four people were killed in the 2008 Gafsa Mining Basin revolt, which had been the last, and only, incident of public disturbance in the country in three decades.

Although France supported Ben Ali until the end,¹¹² the United States had taken a stance, summoning the Tunisian ambassador for an explanation about the excessive use of violence, and advocating for political reform and people's right to assemble. Speaking in Doha at the Forum for the Future,

¹⁰⁷ Koehler, “Political Militaries in Popular Uprisings,” 373.

¹⁰⁸ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 135.

¹⁰⁹ Brooks, “Abandoned at the Palace,” 217.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 217–8.

¹¹¹ Associated Press, “Report: 338 Killed during Tunisia Revolution,” *Fox News*, May 5, 2012, www.foxnews.com/world/report-338-killed-during-tunisia-revolution.

¹¹² Angelique Chrisafis, “Sarkozy Admits France Made Mistakes over Tunisia,” *The Guardian*, January 24, 2011, www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/24/nicolas-sarkozy-tunisia-protests.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a speech about developments in the region “with unusual vehemence,”¹¹³ saying that “the region’s foundations are sinking into the sand,” and warning leaders that if “they don’t give young people meaningful ways to contribute, others will fill the vacuum.”¹¹⁴

Undoubtedly, had the regime’s capacity to suppress the uprising not declined, and had the revolution not expanded in size and outreach to where it “stunned political and military elites,”¹¹⁵ the Tunisian military would not have intervened in the crisis. Notably, as the security forces had brutally suppressed the protesters in 2008 and also in the early weeks of the 2010–11 uprising, the Tunisian military “was sitting on the fence.”¹¹⁶ Taking the posture of “waiting for the victor to emerge” proved once again how crucial calculations of regime capacity to triumph over revolutionaries are ever present in the minds of the military elite.

Libya and Yemen

The militaries in Libya and Yemen fractured along tribal lines in response to the 2011 popular uprisings. In Libya, military units in the recalcitrant city of Benghazi and in the eastern part of the country defected and joined the opposition, while units in the center and west remained loyal and fought fiercely in support of the regime. Since monarchical rule (1951–69), the Libyan army “has had difficulties finding its place” in the state.¹¹⁷ Under King Idris, the military had “no tanks, artillery and armoured personnel carriers.”¹¹⁸ Controlling through abandonment rather than interference, the monarchy developed no institutionalized mechanism for running civil-military relations. There were “no exchanges, no regular contacts, no supervision, no strategic guidance or indeed control.”¹¹⁹ Under the notorious rule of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya had established

¹¹³ Kim Ghattas, “How Does the US View Tunisia’s Revolt?,” *BBC News*, January 16, 2011, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-12200851.

¹¹⁴ Mark Landler, “Clinton Bluntly Presses Arab Leaders on Reform,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/14/world/middleeast/14diplo.html.

¹¹⁵ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 171.

¹¹⁶ Brooks, “Abandoned at the Palace,” 215.

¹¹⁷ Gaub, “The Libyan Armed Forces,” 5.

¹¹⁸ Florence Gaub, “Like Father, Like Son: Libyan Civil-Military Relations Before and After 2011,” *Mediterranean Politics* 24, no. 2 (2017): 184.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

“one of the world’s most bizarre governments.”¹²⁰ It had no constitution since 1951, held no elections since 1965, had almost no functioning state institutions, and had no official head of state—Gaddafi was nominally the “brotherly leader of the revolution.”¹²¹ Instead, Gaddafi relied on patronage, building extensive and overlapping networks of tribal ties and personal connections.

Moreover, perceiving his army as a source of threat rather than power—especially after a number of failed coups against his regime—Gaddafi deliberately kept it institutionally weak and underfunded, and kept its personnel poorly trained and demotivated. This was evident in the army’s mediocre performance in Uganda in 1979 and in neighboring Chad from 1978 to 1987. In fact, Gaddafi said that in his form of government, the Jamahiriya, his country would need no army once popular defense forces had been founded.¹²² Concomitantly, he created a plethora of parallel military units—commanded by his sons and relatives—designed to protect his regime. Making the most of classical *divide et impera* (divide and rule) politics, not only did Gaddafi play these armed units against each other, he often “played his sons against each other” to maintain his exclusive power.¹²³

Divided, highly patrimonial, and lacking any sense of professionalism or identity, the fragmentation of security structures in the face of the revolution came as no surprise. Decades of systematic civilian debilitation of the armed forces engendered “a hollowed-out institution.”¹²⁴ In a forlorn attempt to cultivate officers’ obedience, Gaddafi used cash rewards and coercion,¹²⁵ and, meanwhile, accused protesters of being traitors, conspirators, and cannibals, and of feeding “‘hallucinogenic’ drugs to youths in their coffee.”¹²⁶ Despite

¹²⁰ Daniel Byman, “Things Could Get a Lot Worse in Libya,” *Slate*, February 23, 2011, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2011/02/things_could_get_a_lot_worse_in_libya.html.

¹²¹ Heba Saleh, “Gaddafi Throws 40th Anniversary Party,” *Financial Times*, September 1, 2009, www.ft.com/content/24953480-9710-11de-83c5-00144feabdc0.

¹²² Gaub, “Like Father, Like Son,” 188.

¹²³ Ann Lesch, “Troubled Political Transitions: Tunisia, Egypt and Libya,” *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 1 (2014): 66.

¹²⁴ Gaub, “Like Father, Like Son,” 189.

¹²⁵ Barany, “Comparing the Arab Revolts,” 30.

¹²⁶ Cited in Mohamed El-Khawas, “Libya’s Revolution: A Transformative Year,” in *The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw: Unfinished Revolutions and the Quest for Democracy*, ed. John Davis (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 63.

the intimidation and the media haranguing, the regime lost its legitimacy and might; it was soon recognized by all parties that its days were numbered. Internationally, the brutish and maladroit Gaddafi quickly found himself isolated, and with no allies, even in the Arab world. The NATO aerial campaign that began in March 2011 against the regime was the last nail in his coffin. As a result, around 8,000 soldiers defected in the first month of the uprising, and, by June, the rag-tag Libyan army diminished in size to between 10,000–20,000 men from its pre-uprising size of 51,000.¹²⁷ Only Gaddafi's tribe, the brigade commanded by his son Khamis, and foreign mercenaries brought from sub-Saharan African countries continued fighting on his side until the very end.

The same dynamics were at play in Yemen. The Yemeni government “makes even the Karzai regime, in Afghanistan, seem like a model of propriety.”¹²⁸ Quintessentially a weak state structure cloaked in the support of tribes, the protests against President Ali Abdallah Saleh soon took a tribal character, and so, ineluctably, the highly unprofessional military fragmented along tribal lines. As Al-Ahsab explains, soldiers in Yemen would abandon barracks “in order to join their tribes if and when the latter fought against the state.”¹²⁹ Saleh retained control over the Central Security Forces and the competent 30,000-member Republican Guard, commanded by his son, Ahmed; while dissident officers and soldiers coalesced around the leadership of General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, commander of the First Armored Division, and his powerful tribe. To curtail the rebellion, Saleh cut taxes, increased food subsidies, and promised to raise the salaries of civil servants, but these concessions did not revive his regime's power, and student protests demanding his resignation intensified.¹³⁰ Led by Saudi Arabia, the efforts of the GCC to resolve the crisis by ushering Saleh out of office further eroded the regime's power and perpetuated defections in the military. The country, consequently, plunged into a protracted civil war.

¹²⁷ Gaub, “Like Father, Like Son,” 190.

¹²⁸ Dexter Filkins, “After the Uprising: Can the Protesters Find a Path between Dictatorship and Anarchy?” *The New Yorker*, April 11, 2011, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/11/after-the-uprising.

¹²⁹ Ahmad A. Al-Ahsab, “What Makes Yemen's Spring Different?” in *The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw: Unfinished Revolutions and the Quest for Democracy*, ed. John Davis (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 49.

¹³⁰ Barany, “Comparing the Arab Revolts,” 29.

The military's estimations of regime capacity to deal with the revolutionary tide were evident in both Libya and Yemen. In the two countries, the picture remained unclear as to the outcome of the conflicts, given that both regimes had sources of strength in the form of coercive apparatuses and networks of patronage, and sources of weakness in the form of weak institutions, a sizeable uprising chipping away at the state, and few international allies. It is clear that in both Libya and Yemen, desertions increased as time moved on, costs grew, and the downfall of the regimes loomed. In Libya, Gaub noted, "the further the uprising moved from East to West" and "the longer the conflict lasted . . . the more the regime's circles of support eroded . . . desertions increased as the conflict dragged on and it became increasingly clear to the soldiers that the regime would eventually fall."¹³¹ The expected NATO bombing, suggesting an additional erosion of regime power, led to further defections.¹³²

In Yemen, likewise, the growth of protests and the rise in the material and human costs it generated indicated a marked decrease in the capacity of Saleh's regime to prevail. Indeed, military defectors "perceived Saleh's fall as likely" and thus "questioned their interest in regime re-stabilization."¹³³ The killing of fifty-two protesters on one day, March 18, 2011, was a turning point, stirring the opposition and dividing the army. Units of the armed forces attached to the ruling family and tribe—including the Republican Guard, the Central Security Forces, and the Air Force—stayed with the regime, but various air defense, infantry, and artillery brigades joined the opposition or deserted.¹³⁴ Eventually, the army disintegrated. While units associated with the regime through tribal and blood ties fought until the end, other units took cues based on the regime's capacity to triumph, and defected with the passage of time, the rising costs, and the geographical expansion of the uprising.

Table 2 shows how the divergent positions taken by the Arab militaries during the 2011 uprisings corresponded to the interplay between the factors of

¹³¹ Gaub, "Like Father, Like Son," 190–1; and Gaub, "The Libyan Armed Forces," 15–6.

¹³² Erica Borghard and Costantino Pischedda, "Allies and Airpower in Libya," *Strategic Studies Institute* (Army War College, 2012), https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/articles/2012spring/Borghard_Pischedda.pdf.

¹³³ Albrecht and Ohl, "Exit, Resistance, Loyalty," 45–6.

¹³⁴ Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions*, 144.

regime power vis-à-vis the protest movement, and the professionalism of the army (or lack thereof).

Table 2: Army Professionalism vs. Regime Capacity to Triumph

| | Professional Army | Nonprofessional Army |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regime expected to win | <i>Allegiance to regime:</i> Egypt (Jan. 25–28) Tunisia (Dec. 18–Jan. 12) | <i>Allegiance to regime:</i> Bahrain (Feb. 17–Mar. 18) |
| Uprising expected to win | <i>Support for uprising:</i> Egypt (Feb. 10–11) Tunisia (Jan. 12–14) | <i>Allegiance to regime:</i> Syria (early months of uprising) |
| Unclear | <i>Hedging bets:</i> Egypt (Jan. 29–Feb. 9) | <i>Army splits:</i> Libya Yemen |

Conclusion

The fate of the Arab uprisings was largely determined by the responses of the countries’ armies. These responses were, in turn, determined to a large extent by a military’s level of institutionalization, its relationship with the regime, the strength of its sentimental and ideological bonds with society, and the military’s perception of its own role. Additional factors are a regime’s legitimacy, the amount of international aid it receives, and the prospects of foreign intervention.

In Syria and Bahrain, where the army is largely patrimonial and integral to the regime, and where its relationship with the general population is frail, the army remained loyal to the regime. While Egypt’s army was an essential part of the Mubarak regime, and enjoyed wide institutional and economic benefits from that association, it was more institutionalized and reliant on conscription, and its bond with society was exceptionally strong. When the mass uprising in 2011 severely undermined the regime’s capacity to defuse the crisis, the military, after some hesitation, applied pressure on Mubarak to resign. Since the Tunisian army was fairly institutional and marginalized in Tunisia’s quintessential police state, its leaders were reluctant to shoot the protestors. The state structures in

Libya and Yemen were extremely fragile and out of touch with modern times. Neither state had professional armies, but rather militias with deeply rooted tribal affiliations, and they fractured along tribal lines during the revolution, with some units defending the incumbent leader and others joining the ranks of the protesters.

The variable widely neglected by the literature and the one proposed in this paper—the calculation of the regime’s capacity to subdue the opposition—was evidently an important factor in the minds of military officers and soldiers during the Arab uprisings. In Egypt and Tunisia, it directly shaped their decision, thus determining the outcome of the uprisings. The ambiguity of the picture in Libya and Yemen had a mixed effect on troops, eventually giving rise to civil war; and, in Syria, it led to mass defections, although the army overall remained loyal to the regime. Only in Bahrain did this variable have almost no effect on the conduct of the army. The sectarian-based armies of Syria and Bahrain deduced from the onset that they would have no political future or legal immunity if the regime collapsed, and so decided to continue defending the government, even if chances of winning were dim. This materialized in Syria, with the gradual weakening of the regime and the military’s continued fight alongside the government until its last breath.

At the time of writing in 2019, recent developments in Algeria and Sudan have confirmed the validity of this set of variables. As long as social grievances remain widespread and militaries entrenched, the variables discussed in this paper will continue to be important in predicting and analyzing the course of future uprisings in the Arab world.

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