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SECURITY FORCES AND ARAB REVOLTS

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One of the most striking elements of the present sequence of protests and revolts in the different countries of the Arab world is the range of different responses from the security forces. The behaviour of the army, police, presidential guards and intelligence services is emerging as a key factor for understanding, on the one hand, the capacity of a regime to withstand citizen uprisings and, on the other, the degree of violence and repression used to suppress these protest movements.

In general terms, the Arab countries are known for their hefty Defence budgets, a significant presence of representatives of the security sector in the highest echelons of power, a long history of coups and military uprisings and for having particularly formidable domestic security forces, notable amongst which are the *mukhabarat*, the intelligence services tasked with struggling against the “enemy within”.

The rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Libya present four different kinds of response from the security sectors in each country, in keeping with the unequal nature of their armed forces. The Tunisian Army, with Rachid Ammar as its Chief of Staff, has a small number of personnel (35,000 men) and a discrete budget (1.4% of GDP in defence spending) but has had the backing and esteem of a population that does not associate it with the regime that has governed the country with an iron fist. Its sidelined position vis-à-vis the powers-that-be and the fact of its being first and foremost composed of conscripts explain its behaviour during the mass-based uprising that toppled Ben Ali.

Both before and after the flight of the president and his family, the army refused to open fire on the demonstrators and strove to maintain order and stability in the streets. This stance contrasts with the behaviour of members of the presidential guard and police units. Moreover, the Armed Forces insist that their role in the political transition is simply to uphold public order and security, without seeking to interfere in a process of changes that must be led and directed by civilian actors.

By contrast, in the case of Egypt, the Armed Forces are overseeing the transition after the desertion of Hosni Mubarak and, unlike Tunisia, the person pulling the strings since 11 February is a military man, General Mohamed Hussein Tan-

tawi. The leading role played by the Egyptian army in this transition is linked with its sheer material leverage (almost half a million troops and 3.4% of GDP in military spending) and the predominant role it has played in Egyptian politics over the last half century. The Egyptian army is the mainstay of a regime that has its origins in 1952 with the “Free Officers’ Movement” coup and all the Egyptian presidents thenceforth have come through its ranks.

Faced with the situation of political and social discontent and increasingly numerous mobilisations since 25 January, the top-ranking officers of the Armed Forces have understood that the best way to safeguard their position is to be open to dialogue with the demonstrators and the opposition. Once again, their comportment contrasts with that of the police forces. The state of play after sacrificing Mubarak seems to be working reasonably well in their favour. The sector of the regime embodied by Gamal Mubarak has been seen as a case apart and, for the time being, members of the opposition are not questioning the fact of the military’s playing an active part until the coming elections. They insist, however, that this must be a temporary situation and must end up with power being ceded to civilians. All in all, there are signs that suggest that the ideal situation for the Egyptian army leadership would be to settle for a position not unlike that traditionally occupied by the Turkish Armed Forces: as an actor with political sway, with a very high budget and influence in different spheres of the productive economy.

Following in the wake of Tunisia and Egypt, the population of the tiny Gulf archipelago of Bahrain has also risen against the regime. At first, the protestors called for a change of government and subsequently moved to turn against the royal family itself. Accompanying the harder line taken in the discourse of the demonstrators, more and more images of the Armed Forces opening fire on the population are now appearing. This contrasts with the restraint shown by the Tunisian and Egyptian military some weeks earlier.

The Bahrain army has at its disposal a large slice of the budget (4.5% of GDP) and is highly modernised in technical terms. Nonetheless, the clue to understanding its repressive response lies in its composition. It is a wholly professionalized army that has no conscripts and that has taken a large number of foreigners (Arabs, but Pakistanis as well) into its ranks while de facto vetoing access to a significant part of the population, which is to say the Shiites. In other words, these armed forces can take an emotional distance from the demonstrators and their claims and act in defence of the regime with high degrees of repression in their crackdown on the civilian population.

Libya is an even more complicated case. Its army is mixed, consisting of conscripts and volunteers in equal measure, and is relatively small (50,000 men) but, in addition, there are a series of paramilitary forces and the personal guards of the “Great Leader”. Although the figures are not very reliable, it would seem that the paramilitary corps have a large number of troops and some units are especially well trained and remunerated. Among these corps is the Pan-African Legion, which has recruited mercenaries from different African countries.

The duality of the Libyan system can mainly be explained by Gaddafi’s distrust towards his own army since he has always feared it might bring off a coup d’état against him. Indeed, a major part of the Libyan Armed forces deserted and joined the ranks of the insurgent population when Gaddafi ordered repressive measures against the popular uprisings in February. Nonetheless, the African mercenaries already based in the country and others contracted in several African countries in response to recent events have had a major part to play in the spiral of repression that has led the United Nations to apply sanctions against the regime.

From this brief overview of four of the countries that have been in the news with their mass-based uprisings in 2011, two conclusions may be drawn. First, is that the more representative the security corps is of the society, the less willing its members will be to defend a regime by violently attacking the population. Second, a security corps that has exercised total or partial control over a regime will attempt to superintend any process of change to prevent excessive erosion of its dominant position within the political, economic and social system.

It would be worthwhile to keep these two conclusions in mind when the European Union, NATO and individual countries decide in future to initiate programmes of aid, assistance and training for security forces. All too often, reforming the security sector has been approached in technocratic terms of modernisation while overlooking matters such as democratic control, connivance with private security forces, and establishing a vocation of serving the citizens. It is never too late to rectify things and this is still more the case if we recall that, as with other basic reforms, that of the security sector in the Arab countries is not going to be accomplished in a few months.