

Transcript of lecture
“The role of the army in the Arab uprisings”
by Professor Yezid Sayigh

Athens, May 4, 2011



Thank you. I'm very grateful to Professor Roussos and the CEMMIS for the invitation to speak to you and I'm grateful to you for coming here, and I would also thank for this generous introduction. In Arabic there is an expression which basically translates as “better a reputation for being rich than a reputation for being poor”, so, if I'm such a great academic than a disparaged, better as a reputation than the opposite.

Well, I'll set the stage a little bit first by noting that the Arab uprisings since late December have clearly shown the important role that armies are playing in every single case. At the same time we also see that the role the army is playing in each single case is quite different. So if we look for instance at the two initial cases of Tunisia and Egypt is very obvious that in both cases the army was called upon at a certain moment to assist the regime in repressing the uprisings and it refused to do so. And its refusal sealed the fate of the presidents in power. So Ben Ali and Mubarak both were told basically by their army “it's time to go”. But what the Egyptian army did subsequently and the Tunisian army did subsequently are also different. In Egypt the army has taken power, it was given power, openly and in a legal manner. In Tunisia on the other hand the army has retreated again on the backstage and it is not

very obvious, it doesn't run the government as it does in Egypt. And if we look further around the region there are other examples. We have on one side Libya, where parts of the Army have defected to the opposition, other parts of the army are loyal to Gaddafi and other parts appeared to be neutral.

Yemen is yet another example where Ali Abdullah Saleh has also used violence against the demonstrators on a daily basis, there are at the least 140 / 150 deaths so far, in a highly armed society, almost every Yemeni male carries a gun and yet the opposition has not shot back and the army has not intervened and in fact several key commanders have refused openly to support Saleh or to fire on the demonstrators, as in one case at least, providing tanks to protect the main demonstrating area. So this is yet another example where the army in a way is balanced between the opposition and the president and it has basically managed to stay out of the all conflict, it has not decided the issue in the way of the army of Egypt and Tunisia, nor has it been used by the president the way Gaddafi has used his army.

Then we have the Syrian example, which is the opposite, where the Syrian army so far has remained united, while it maintains its cohesion. We don't have obvious cases that we know so far of defection or of refusal of orders, let alone of open intervention against the regime. So far the army in Syria is loyal to the regime and this is more or less the exact opposite of everything else we have seen. And here is what I want to argue that, to explain this variation and to learn something from these different roles of the armies. Clearly the role of the army in every single case is central and critical at this moment to transition, either of defending the old order and keeping it, preserving it, or of shifting to a new order and that of being a player in the new order of some sort. In order to answer the question of what this tells us, I want to argue that the particular role of the army in each case depends on how the army has been institutionalised into existing power structures, into social relations and social policies and into the economy. So the manner in which the army was previously brought into the state set-up, into power structures, into the ruling political system in Egypt or Tunisia, Yemen or Libya, Syria or Bahrain and so on tells us why in each case the army has played a somewhat different role.

So I propose (in the time I have got) to look at three main dimensions or areas in which we can explore this question of how the military role is institutionalised in the politics of each country. One thing I want to look at, first, is how the army is institutionalised or is embedded within power structures, within ruling elites. How it relates, in other words, to the president or the king, the emir and to the ruling political, economic classes around them. The second thing I'll look at is the role of the

army in internal security and its relationship with other agencies of coercion of the state. All states have agencies of coercion, all states have police, intelligence services, gendarmerie and of course armies. The question here, in these Arab cases, is to look at how the armies play both an external and an internal security role and how therefore they relate to the other apparatuses of armed violence, organised, legitimate armed violence of the state, the police, the intelligence service and all the other police forces. And the third dimension is the social and economic one. What role does the army play in the economy of each country and in its social welfare system. So these are the three things I'm going to discuss.

Now looking at the first question of how the army is embedded in the power structure and the ruling elite I want to make an initial distinction as borrowed on the work of Alfred Stepan, in the case of Latin America, who distinguishes between the army and its relationship to the state in which we look at, the army as a formal institution, that has a certain constitutional set of powers and obligations, versus the army as a part of a regime, of a political system with its own particular dynamics which may coincide with proper formal processes of state or maybe of course more informal and multifaceted or multilevel. So if we look at these various Arab countries having experienced uprisings or facing one form or another of challenge potentially in the future we see that a number of republican regimes Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen are the most obvious examples, Algeria as well and few others, Sudan, where the presidents started out as officers, in every one of these cases the people first at power from the original civilian government, whether in 1952, or in 1968, or in 1963, or in 1970 etc., were officers. And in every one of these cases as well, these presidents, these military presidents then moved on and civilianised. So they ceased to be simply army commander, army officers they no longer represented only the army's interests. Nor can we say anymore that the governments were military governments.

The military governments of the 1950s or of the 1960s of Egypt, of Yemen or Sudan, or Algeria etc. all of these military governments have been civilianised. The officers left governments and no longer hold ministerial positions and even where the president was a former military man that didn't mean that he necessarily represented exclusively army interests or army control. On the contrary what the presidents all did in these cases was to make themselves stronger than everyone, stronger also than the army, and stronger than the bureaucracy, and stronger than the business classes and other groups or

the ruling party. And they did this through a variety of means, for instance they produced networks of benefits, of patronage, of clientelism. They brought in family members, so Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, for instance, has placed his son Ahmed and his nephew Saleh and other of his nephews in command of key police and military units. But they have also used that position to also command important economic companies and interest groups in the country. Gaddafi has done much the same with his family. Saddam Hussein, not of a military background, but many of his relatives, of course, were originally in the army or placed in the army and provided the same sort of support network. So we have this network which includes big business partners, in many cases, along with family members, along with senior police, intelligence and army commanders, and other special interest groups that were tied into this system including senior bureaucrats or state managers. So that is one manner in which the army were maintaining some sort of autonomy or distinct nature in Egypt, or in Libya or in Algeria with its own interests, also it was part of a ruling system, as well. And often in a very personal way as some of the senior commanders became business partners as well, and I will discuss this a little bit later.

We have other examples, other models too, some which I've mentioned such as Yemen and Syria and Libya but also countries like Bahrain or Saudi Arabia, arguably in other ways Jordan and Morocco also built up their own methods of bringing the military into the ruling system. So for instance in Saudi Arabia the royal family itself, which has anything from 5,000 princes to even more than that, uses its many young male members to place them in command positions throughout the Armed forces, in the air force, in the critical sensitive areas, in the intelligence, in the domestic intelligence as well as of course in the ministries, in the civil service and elsewhere. This is one way in which the army isn't an independent actor: it is actually part of the family. Bahrain, Jordan most of these countries, in the Emirates also, the royal families include members who are placed in key positions in the armed forces, in the police, in the intelligence. Even though their royal families are much much smaller than in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is quite unique. But in all these cases we have got again the pattern of family, clan or tribal networks or regional, sectarian networks. In Syria for instance the Alawi Muslim community is a minority community and provides a lot of the key commanders in the army. Well of course, related either on a sectarian basis, of being Alawi, or on a clan basis, or a tribal basis. They belong to the Kalbia and Haddadin clans of Bashar Al-Assad and of his father Hafez who were presidents one after

the other. So, many of these networks of course are overlapping and mutually supportive. So a clan network and a family network and a regional network and a sectarian or an ethno-national network, all these reinforce each other. So there is quite a wide variety of forms but in all these cases of course the army is a very important player. What we do see however is that we have rare exception or maybe none at all, arguably, the army ceased over the last thirty to forty years to be an independent actor. It had a certain autonomy but generally speaking thanks to these networks, thanks to these alliances and being given privileged access or privileged benefits, these various presidents and kings whether they were themselves army commanders or not, managed to neutralise the army, in a sort of understanding that the army would be protected -its budget, its privileges would be protected- and in return it would stay out of politics. So a certain *modus vivendi* emerged in all the area, whether republics, whether monarchies, whether they were pro-Soviet, pro-American, whatever, in most of these cases pretty much the same pattern emerged.

Now, here I want to move to the second main dimension which is the relationship between the military, the regular armed forces, and the other agencies of state coercion, the police, the intelligence services. And I want to give you a sense, through some statistics, of the importance of this whole sector throughout the Middle East. In Egypt, as of two months ago when Mubarak left, the ministry of interior -not defense, not the army but the ministry of interior- had, it is believed, 1,4 million people on its payroll. Police, central security force, other types of police, coastal police, whatever, informers, intelligence: 1,4 million people. The army has something like 400,000 maybe 500,000 people. So if you add them all up together, with a bit of, you know, loose change they say, you have nearly two million people in Egypt employed in the police and in the army overall. This is in a population of 82 million, so a good two percent of the population works directly in these sectors. If we look elsewhere, Tunisia, the interior police forces, intelligence, secret police etc. had anything from 120 to 150,000 people. The army had 26,000, so clearly the police forces were much larger and much more important. In Yemen, one single internal security organisation, the Political Security Organisation, as it's known which is commanded by Ahmed or Saleh, the nephew or the son of the president, alone has an estimated 150,000 men, just one security agency. Jordan has about equal numbers, 100,000 army, 100,000 the police and gendarmerie and son on. Iraq, where the United States disbanded the army, dissolved the army of about 400,000 in 2003 and more or less disbanded the police, has since then

helped to retrain and re-equip and reassign, reappoint, an army that has about 250,000 and it has anticipated to reach 400,000 once again, as big as it was under Saddam Hussein, and the police force overall of all different police agencies estimated between 450,000 to 600,000. So today Iraq has already approximately 850,000 men in the combined police, intelligence and army, which is pretty much as it was under Saddam. Overall in every one of these cases we are talking about a very large number of men who are used by the state, are armed by the state and are legitimised to use violence.

Now, very few Middle-eastern armies, very few, have fought a war against an external enemy for a very long time. The Iraqi army was the last one in 2003, the Egyptian army hasn't fought a real war since 1973; the Libyans haven't fought since they fought in Chad in the 1980's. Almost no other armies in the region have actually fought a war with an external enemy. So this tells us a few things. One is that the role of the army, and this is actually a constitutionally defined role in many cases in the Arab Middle east, is internal security as well as external security, as well. Second is that the result of past policies of protecting regimes from coup d'état have resulted in a massive range in number and size of competing intelligence police and army units. So since the 1970's whether was Syria, whether the Iraq, whether Algeria, whether any of these cases, each one of them set up multiple intelligence agencies first to monitor the army, then to monitor each other to prevent a coup d'état. The overall result of course was a massive expansion of the numbers of all the people employed in these various sectors. This went hand in hand with increasing salary, increasing budgets, increasing allowances, subsidies for food, for housing, for cars, all sorts of things. Another pattern there is that where minority communities, such as Alawis in Syria or others, have dominated the state, they have also tried to set up parallel military formations, the popular army or the Fedayeen of Saddam or various names that we have, where the state legitimises and arms additional military formations parallel to the army. Saudi Arabia has two armies, one is the National Guard, which has tanks and air crafts, one is the regular army. Iran too has a regular army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp which is at least as big and wealthy and armed as the army itself. There are many different forms but this is again a very common pattern.

And on top of this, since 9/11, since the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C., of course with the war on terrorism, most governments in the region have been building up counter-terrorism units, either in the army, or in the police or in both. So another very strong trend in all of the

region has been the development of a new form of what you can call militarised police or paramilitary agencies under the guise of the war on terror. So we have yet more proliferation and multiplicity of armed units some of which are tied more directly to the king or the president or to particular groups and so on which again points to the manner in which the means of violence have become part of domestic power struggles. Some units are privileged with training and weapons and equipment and support and the intelligence support from the United States, from the E.U., from the U.K., from France whereas other units are poor, they barely have boots to put on their feet, in places like Yemen for instance. And it all depends of course on who is believed to be loyal, who is believed to be disloyal, who is the real enemy domestically.

So this points to one further thing, well two further things. One is that throughout the region none of these forces, armies or police forces have a single nature, or a single purpose, or a single function, they all have hybrid natures. They all do more than one thing, they serve more than one purpose. The other thing is that partly what all these various military and police units do -I'm clearly expanding what I'm looking at here- is they provide a means of employment. This is where I come into my third dimension, the social, welfare and economic dimension of all this. If these armies, some of which are very large, at least a quarter of a million in Syria, 400,000 in Egypt, 250,000 to 400,000 within a few years in Iraq, and so on, some are small or medium, but some are very big, partly what they provide is social welfare. This is a way of dealing with unemployment. It's a way for countries that are privatising their national economies very rapidly now where as a result you have increasing poverty for a large part of the population and widening income disparities, so the richest are getting much richer, the poor are getting much poorer. The increases have been very sharp, very accelerated just since the 1990s, basically mid-1990s. In Egypt for instance most of this development has occurred simply since 2003.

So when you have a country like Jordan which I know particularly well, when, by the admission of the government, already as of three years ago nearly 40% of the entire population lived on \$2 or less a day -that's the poverty line in Jordan, \$2 or less: 40%- it is very important to make sure that a critical part of the population which provides the regime with its support and with its manpower, with its military manpower, with its civil servants, with its police manpower, that this part of the population is protected socially from the worst impacts of privatisation and of poverty. So military employment

becomes a means then to keep a very large number, relatively, of people more or less okay.

In many of these countries we are talking about a quarter of the labor force, of the active labor force that is directly subsidised by the state. It is not rich, it is not wealthy, gradually their real incomes, their real living standards are declining but they are better than everyone else who don't benefit from military employment, police employment or civil service employment. So there is a very important social welfare dimension I think to understand first of all why armies behave in a certain way in each country, why they are larger or smaller, it's partly about the politics but it's also partly about social welfare, it's partly why they are reluctant to reduce the size of the armies, not just because this would be bad for unemployment but also because it would harm a lot of families and critically important social sectors, tribal groups or whatever, which are loyal to the throne of Jordan or loyal to the regime. In Syria, for instance, by reducing military employment you are actually hitting directly at the household economy that keeps most of these people above subsistence level. So there are a lot of these factors which I think will be very important in the period to come, especially if economic liberalisation, privatisation has to proceed in the future, then the big question is how to generate jobs, how do you deal with poverty and how do you deal with income disparities. And here too we find that part of the answer has been for maybe thirty years now, to allow some of these armies to engage in commercial and economic activities.

Some legally, such as the Egyptian example, or the Turkish example is another one, but let's us stay to the Arab Middle East. In Egypt the army runs factories, producing everything from ovens to tires and vehicles, to clothing, it runs bakeries... Three years ago when there were massive food price increases and a critical crisis of shortage of bread for ordinary and poor Egyptians the army stepped in opened up its bakeries and produced a massive amount of bread at a petite cost. But it also runs hotels and tourist resorts originally for its officers, but now what it does is to provide them at a higher fee to everyone. What it is doing it is competing with the private sector in the civilian economy and it does so thanks to cheap labor, thanks to being tax free, basically, it is not taxed, it doesn't pay anything to the state treasury, it keeps all this economy within its own ranks and of course it can import goods at cheap cost or reduced fees, reduced taxes. On top of that, moreover until a few years ago, when the Egyptian currency was freed, as long there was a controlled exchange rate, the Egyptian army had privileged exchange rates. It could buy dollars, buy goods from outside at favorable rates. So the Egyptian army is

competing with the civilian economy in a very unfair way. But this is all legal.

In Syria, on the other hand, the Syrian army it is known for decades to have been involved in all sort of black market activities on a very massive scale, in Lebanon in particular, but also across the border with Iraq, across the border with Turkey, across the border with Jordan. And this involves almost every single police and military unit or major division and senior commanders and it is partly how these people are kept happy and part of the regime network. Then we have the Yemeni example which I have mentioned earlier where the president's family control the largest single economic enterprise in the whole country which is based on the military pension fund of the army, a sort of like the Turkish model of Oyak. But in Yemen the difference is that, well Oyak doesn't belong even to the army strictly speaking in Turkey and is a truly economic institution, in Yemen the economic organisation legally doesn't belong to the president and his family but effectively does. And it imports massive amounts and it exports and it controls chicken farms, duty free areas at the Aden port, leather production, all sort of activities.

So there are many different examples, many different models and a lot of these has to do with allowing the army to provide a bit of income to help improve the conditions for its officers and for its people on salary. This is not enough to deal with the consequences of privatisation or inflation. It also of course involves a lot of black market activity and increases the involvement of officers in commissions, in bribes, in corruption. Algeria is a very good example of this where the army has no legal role in the economy and yet it controls for instance oil companies, which you can imagine is a very important source of income. In all these cases the army may stand against further privatisation of assets -such as of oil, for instance, in Algeria- it resists opening up its own industry, to open audit from the government or Parliament, from the Ministry of Finance, let alone to actually compete on fair basis or to withdraw from the civilian economy altogether. So we can anticipate that in future, the Egyptian army for instance, will want on the one hand a stable political system so it can pull out of politics but it also will guarantee and will negotiate with the new government an understanding that would protect its budget and would protect its economy. And if there is a challenge to that then the army may behave differently. Or they would start to say “well in that case give us more budget because our officers can't maintain a decent living standard at the current budget levels”.

Then we have also to knock on the facts such as what about in that case reducing the army from

400,000 to 200,000. You are not at war so why do you have a large army? Why do you have 70-75% conscription when in a modern high tech army this is not a very effective way of having a professional army? Why don't you dump conscription altogether? But then of course they have to worry about unemployment and about the fact that hundreds of thousands of families in Egypt, or in Jordan, or in Syria, or in Iraq will depend on this little salary even of \$50 a month. For many, many, many families this is the one thing that keeps them from poverty. So none of these decisions and these options are going to be easy ones, clearly, and what the challenge is in Libya which has oil or in Algeria which has oil versus Egypt which basically doesn't have oil or Syria again. This sort of calculation I think are going to be more and more pressing because these are countries with at least 50% of population below the age of 20-25, up to 60-70% of population below the age of 30. These are all people entering the job market, they are also people who need education, health care, housing, all sort of things. Already their needs exceed the abilities of government to provide. Egypt alone needs to create over 700,000 new jobs every single year. So to factor the army into this and to factor the army economy into this and to factor in democracy and creating governments that can meet these challenges, maintain political stability and keep the army happy, these are obviously massive challenges.

I think that the result therefore is, in the short, to see a continuation of what we see now, uprisings, challenges, pressures for democratisation and transition, I think for the next few years, three to five years, we will continue to see this process unfold in Bahrain, in Saudi Arabia, in Jordan, elsewhere, with various outcomes and the military will continue to play a key role in each outcome. But from five years onwards, when we start to look to the medium and long term, then the big question is: how the new governments that emerge or the old governments that succeed in staying in power by repression, for instance in Syria maybe, are going to deal with the underlying major problem that everyone faces of creating jobs, of creating opportunity, of encouraging the private sector to grow, of maintaining external trade and aid links with Europe or America and so on and so forth, These are very big challenges and whether or not we can also look at the same time to the emergence of genuinely professional militaries that stay out of politics that only do a professional job, that perhaps aren't cheaper but that provide more military effectiveness for the same cost instead of acting as social welfare system. Well then that all depends on how the social welfare system develops, how the economy develops, how all these things happen.