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Militaries, civilians and democracy in the Arab world

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>> Military withdrawal from political affairs in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya will be essential for democracy to take root. Yet, as long-standing guardians of authoritarian power in the Arab world, generals may be reluctant to hand over power to Islamist-led governments that are likely to deprive them of their political and economic privileges and bring them to trial for past abuses. Without the army's commitment to withdraw gradually from civilian affairs, elected civilian governments will not be able to build a new order of thoroughly democratic institutions. Negotiating the military's return to the barracks will be a key challenge for incoming governments.

Past international experiences have shown that military withdrawals tend to be gradual. But different examples prove that pacts and agreements can lead to a situation in which armed forces can maintain limited prerogatives in accordance with the requirements of a democratic process. That said, in Latin America, the transition to democracy was accompanied by constant efforts to reduce the role of the military as a political actor.

In short, while re-establishing civilian rule over the military is a precondition of democratic governance, transitions will likely prove too fragile without negotiating the withdrawal of the armed forces from the process of decision-making too. If, when and how to limit the influence of militaries on political decision-making thus becomes a complex dilemma. This policy brief addresses the issue, looking first at the major challenges in civil-military relations facing aspiring Arab democracies today, and second at the lessons that past international transitions can provide.

HIGHLIGHTS

• In Egypt, Tunisia and Libya an in-depth reform of civil-military relations will be indispensable but highly sensitive.

• The key challenges to civil-military relations in Arab transitions will be finding the right balance between democracy and security and negotiating a safe exit for military leaders.

• Lessons provided by past international transitions point to the importance of establishing channels of negotiation between civilian and military institutions, finding the right pace at which to reduce military power and establishing a clear chain of command.

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>>>>>> **CHALLENGES TO CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN ARAB TRANSITIONS**

The role of the military in transitional countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) varies widely. In some states democratic transition is already underway (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya), while in others pro-democracy forces still struggle to oust authoritarian regimes and the army remains on the side of the incumbent regime (Yemen, Syria). This policy brief will focus on the former.

The Armies' role in ousting regimes: In both Egypt and Tunisia, the role of the army in supporting popular uprisings and ultimately toppling authoritarian rulers was crucial. The cohesion of the military body, combined with the allegiance of the population to the national army, made the transition possible. However, while the Tunisian army has maintained a low political profile ever since, the initially positive image of the Egyptian army has faded.

Finding the right balance between democracy and security: In Libya, the fall of Colonel Gaddafi was partly facilitated by internal splits within the army. Moreover, the absence of a strong, well-structured and united army led to the emergence of local militias. As external actors supported the final blow to the regime and the army proved unable to unite against Gaddafi, an opaque, even anarchic situation prevailed in the chain of command. Individual rivalries between leaders arose. As long as civilian leaders do not have sufficient legitimacy and popularity and the country lacks a strong national army, the population will rely on autonomous local means of providing security, which served them well during the revolution. This presents risks similar to those that arose in post-2003 Iraq, where attempts by the central government to consolidate political and military institutions were challenged by local sporadic protest actions that strengthened militias and empowered self-proclaimed local leaders. The presence of an articulate army under civilian rule remains an important condition for the development of a democratic state and institutions.

Tunisia may currently seem like the most promising scenario. The army has voluntarily and officially stayed in the background and left the task of re-designing the country's future order largely to civilian representatives. In fact, many Tunisians are concerned over their country's stability, and demonstrate regularly to demand more commitment and visibility for the armed forces in order to guarantee their security. A climate of fear has emerged among opponents of the electoral winner, the Islamist en-Nahda party. The opposition wants to ensure the army will remain a bulwark against a possible Islamisation of Tunisian politics and public life. As both the political process and Tunisians' trust in their elected leaders is still shaky, many consider a strong army a lesser evil in its role as temporary safeguard for stability and democratic values.

Negotiating a safe exit for military leaders: During the post-revolutionary transitional phase, the Tunisian army has decided, at least nominally, to support the civilian government in its leadership of the political reform process. However, the opposite has occurred in Egypt. While the Egyptian army protected protesters in Tahrir square and helped topple Mubarak in February 2011, since then criticism of its unilateral control of the transition process has become louder, culminating in renewed violent clashes in Cairo and Alexandria. Nevertheless, despite citizens' low level of trust in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), according to surveys, the Egyptian army as an institution is still respected among the population as a national symbol and as the only body able to guarantee stability. The SCAF's continuation of old authoritarian practices via controversial decisions such as the perpetuation of the Emergency Law, its referral of civilians to military courts and its insistence on having a continued political role in drafting Egypt's future constitution provoked the population. The latter had expected the army quickly to cede power to an interim civilian government, as SCAF leader field marshall Hussein Tantawi had promised in February. The SCAF's persistent unwillingness to leave power without far-reaching assurances for its own future, does nothing to reassure the

population that it will actually hand over power to an elected civilian government in July 2012 as promised. Any pact is likely to include promises of immunity and the retention of a number of economic privileges. Without such a deal, a fierce and lengthy power struggle between the SCAF and the new (most probably Muslim Brotherhood-led) government could ensue.

In each MENA country, an in-depth reform of civil-military relations will be indispensable but highly sensitive. At the same time, the military will remain an important actor during the transition process. Resistance to certain reforms within the military is considerable. Moreover, due to the low level of turnover in MENA army elites, leadership is often of a rigid and sometimes old-fashioned mindset. The army still believes it has a duty as guardian of the country and the dilemma of civil-military interdependence is likely to delay security sector reforms across the region. A look at how this dilemma was overcome in other regions can provide useful insights for Arab countries in transition.

Generals may be reluctant to hand over power to Islamist-led governments

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: LESSONS FROM ABROAD

Latin America, where armies have traditionally played a dominant role, provides particularly useful lessons for civil-military relations.

Establishing channels of negotiation: The majority of Latin American governments began their democratic transitions faced with dominant military powers. Their primary aim was to reduce the power of the military forces. Once democracy was (re)established the lack of institutional mechanisms to oversee the military apparatus became apparent. Defence ministers were neither agents of the executive branches nor politically or technically competent enough to constitute a

legitimate interlocutor between the armed forces and government powers. Most states therefore started by adopting policies to establish formal channels of negotiation with the military institutions. Although in hindsight this may seem an obvious step, at the time it proved a significant challenge for the still unstable regimes.

Reducing military power at a varied pace: Eventually, different states in the region adopted different approaches to military reform. Argentina, for instance, established trials to judge those guilty of committing crimes against its citizens. This was possible thanks to both the military defeat of the armed forces in the Malvinas/Falklands war, which marked a clear rupture with former military rule, and the democratic government's decision to withdraw the military's immunity. In contrast, Chile followed a gradual approach, prioritising long-term democratic governance without limiting military power until very recently. The cases of Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala, where transitions were left in the hands of the armed forces, have still not fully completed their transitions. For its part, Brazil created a Ministry of Defence in response to international pressure and because it wanted to be part of the United Nations Security Council; but in reality, this institution remained under the control of the armed forces. To understand the complexity of the process, it is worth noting that implementing a democratic defence policy does not merely require a reduction in the number of military officers (by 33 per cent in the case in Guatemala, or 75 per cent in Nicaragua). Rather, it involves institutionalising a professional model of relations between civil and military authorities.

The example of Turkey shows that deep security sector reform can occur even when the military traditionally exerts a strong influence in the country. After several military coups (1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997), the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 initiated an era of in-depth security sector reform. From 2003 to 2007, in an arguably difficult and often conflictive process, the AKP succeeded in gradually excluding the army from civilian ❯❯❯❯❯❯

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>>>>>> affairs. An important driver was Turkey's desire to join the European Union (EU), which required such reforms to fulfil EU accession criteria. Nevertheless, the Turkish case proves that even a heavily influential army can be brought back to the barracks if civilians have enough legitimacy and popular support to do so. It also shows that ideological divergence between the military and the civilian leadership – in this case, the frequent clashes between the AKP's Islamist and the army's secular stances – can be overcome. As such, Turkey brings important lessons for today's MENA countries, in which future predominantly Islamist-led governments will have to negotiate the generals' gradual exit from civilian affairs.

The army as a source of instability: Algeria is a prime example of a situation in which the army, instead of protecting the transition, stopped the democratic process altogether in order to preserve its own position. The rise of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) culminated in a military coup following the party's electoral win in late 1991. The ensuing civil war eventually allowed the military to dominate institutions and civilian representatives have to submit to their will to the present day. While the Algerian civilian government has embarked on a number of reforms to fend off public pressure for genuine accountability, these remain superficial and have so far not meaningfully altered the civil-military power constellation. Political institutions, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and members of the elected parliament are officially in charge of civilian affairs but in reality, the army is omnipresent. In the case of disagreements between the president and high-ranking military officials, the latter have the last word. The strong presence of the army in the Algerian economy and its deep involvement in security matters (anti-terrorism issues, surveillance of society, and limitation of the right to demonstrations) make it a major obstacle to a genuine democratic transition. Contrary to Turkey, the Algerian example shows that a military-ruled country cannot embark on a genuine democratic reform path if the army manages to preserve its strength and avoid the emergence of strong civilian leaders.

Establishing a clear chain of command: Latin American experiences show that establishing a clear chain of command is essential for the smooth development of civil-military relations. The president is usually at the head, handing down orders through a civilian minister of defence. It is essential that the Ministry of Defence be professional and technically competent, and maintain good relations with other agencies of the executive branch. The role of parliament must be strengthened to enable it to monitor the implementation of military policies, assign the budget for the military sector, and reserve the power of declaring war. The judiciary, for its part, has a duty to ensure that officers in the military comply with the rule of law, especially in their treatment of subordinates and soldiers.

Improving public diplomacy on defence matters: Communicating public policy on matters of military reform and defence policy is essential to ensure transparency and for promoting awareness amongst the society. This further implies the creation of independent organisations responsible for monitoring the field of defence policies. In Latin America, however, these lessons were only learnt many years after the start of the transition processes.

Changing mindsets: Transitional governments in Latin America embarked on an ambitious drive to change the mentality of the military. They erroneously assumed that simply by altering the programme of study in military academies they could nurture a new way of thinking in line with democratic principles. Such strategies did not succeed due to the nature of the armed forces, entrenched in defending their former professors and only changing the titles of subjects, not their content. The transmission of values continued in the hands of military instructors. Latin American reformers also failed to realise that professional/vocational training happens more on the job than in the classroom.

Regional integration strengthening civilian oversight: In Latin America, the transitional period was accompanied by a nascent process of

sub-regional integration. This encouraged neighbouring countries to view one another as partners rather than enemies. Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM), meetings between defence ministers from the region, and joint security operations formed the framework for each state to develop its military activities supported by democratic criteria. This new context of regional cooperation reduced the military's autonomy and influence over policy. The armed forces were also involved in various peacekeeping missions. Democratic govern-ments saw this as an opportunity to find a new role for the military and push for its re-professionalization. Such missions help to increase civilian oversight of defence matters as their structure is jointly decided between civilian governments and the United Nations.

CONCLUSION

Decades of autocratic rule have allowed the military to play an important political role in most MENA countries. While military dominance has been criticised for years, 2011 transition processes also showed that new governments cannot ignore the power and influence of the armed forces when negotiating a new democratic order. Crucially, the renewal of civilian elites is a lengthy process that must take place in a stable socio-political context in which all the actors are included. In Arab countries currently in transition, moving towards a new institutional scheme that strictly separates civilian and military powers will be a long-term operation. Lessons from abroad show that, for this process to take root, strong civilian institutions that enjoy broad popular legitimacy have to emerge first. At the same time, reforms are needed to establish a clear chain of command and foster a radical change of mentality within the military, including through a renewal of military elites.

However, even when reforms are underway, civilian governments will struggle to exclude the military from all political control. Armies will – at least in the short- and mid-term – continue to play an important role in MENA transitions. While civilian governments try to find means to negotiate with the military leadership, a number of instruments already tested in other regions such as pacts, legal agreements and military professionalization could help to push MENA armies back to the barracks and reduce their involvement in political affairs. In Egypt, such a process has already started via negotiations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military. Across the region, civil institutions will need to improve their negotiating position by consolidating their political legitimacy and proving they are strong enough to handle the political situation alone. This will strengthen the civilian administration and allow for the armed forces withdrawal from their role as internal security guarantors and for them to adjust to new functions under the new civilian authorities.

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