Studying Middle East Militaries: Where Do We Go from Here?

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Research on Middle East militaries is imbalanced. In recent decades, scholarly interest in Israel and Turkey has expanded, while the Arab states have more often than not been overlooked.[1] In this essay, I suggest how to address the "gap" in the study of Arab militaries by drawing parallels with militaries in non-Arab states,[2] which have received considerable attention.

According to the Freedom House Index (2011), Israel and Turkey are currently the two most democratic states in the Middle East.[3] However, the pattern of civil–military relations in these states has generally not conformed to the Western "model." First, in both states the boundaries between the civilian and the security sectors are blurred and characterized by informal ties between acting and retired security officials and their partners in various civilian spheres. In Turkey, the term "deep state" refers to a network of individuals spanning the military, the intelligence agencies, the executive branch, academia, the media, and civil society that, among other things, has allegedly planned a military coup against the ruling pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party.[4] In Israel, the ties between acting and retired security officials have been conceptualized as a "security network" that influences domestic and external policy.[5]

Second, in both states the military has, since independence, reinforced the position of the dominant sector of society, the Jews in Israel and the ethnic Turks in Turkey, vis-à-vis the subaltern sector: the Palestinian Arabs and the Kurds, respectively. At the same time, some members of the subaltern sectors, such as the Druze, Circassians, and Bedouins in Israel and the Kurds in Turkey have been conscripted into the military, and in Israel military service has arguably improved their political and socioeconomic status, especially when compared to other Palestinian Arabs who are not conscripted.[6] Finally, in Israel and in Turkey, the military sees itself as the main guarantor of the state against domestic and external threats and has effectively monopolized the area of national security. In Turkey, the military has launched several coups to prevent the state from sliding into the abyss, though in recent years it has shifted to more indirect pressures and established informal "rules of the game" with the civilian leaders.[7] In Israel, some security officials have adopted the practice of inflating domestic and external "existential threats" to legitimize the military's privileged position and secure the resources that it demands.[8]

How can these observations inform the study of Arab states? First, in states such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and pre-2003 Iraq, where the military expanded into civilian spheres, especially the economy, the informal ties and networks between security officials and civilian actors should be explored in depth, although the impact of these ties on domestic and external policies—including during the current crises—might be difficult to discern. Second, in Arab states that are "divided societies," the military's role in reinforcing the dominant position of a particular sector should be investigated. In Iraq, for example, the military was dominated by Sunni Arabs before 2003,[9] while the new

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Iraqi military—the Iraqi Security Forces—was, at least initially, dominated by Kurds and Shiʿa, adding to intersectoral tensions.[10] In Lebanon, by contrast, the military has been transformed from an institution dominated by Christians (especially Maronites) into one that is shared by all societal sectors.[11] The situation in other "divided" Arab states (e.g., Syria and Jordan) deserves more attention.

Finally, several Arab militaries have presented themselves as the last barrier to foreign domination and civil war, and this factor has helped cement tacit alliances between the military and civilian actors, including civil society groups. A telling example is found in a book by Ali Salem, an Egyptian playwright, novelist, and satirist whose works are often highly critical of political and socioeconomic realities in Egypt. In 1994, when Salem was asked by an Israeli professor if Islamic fundamentalists would ever assume power in Egypt, Salem replied that the Egyptian army would never allow this to happen. He added, "The cultural and psychological structure of Egypt's military establishment throughout history has been fit to defend Egypt's borders. It moves on the ground and does not hover in clouds of vague thinking."[12] What is interesting in this response is how Salem accepts the dual role of the Egyptian army as both the guarantor of domestic stability in Egypt and the state's protector against foreign threats. A more critical perspective, also by an Egyptian civil society actor, is offered in the satirical 1992 film *al-Irhab wa-l-Kabab* (Terrorism and Kebab), which criticizes the manner in which real social and economic grievances in Egypt are conveniently framed as an Islamist threat by the regime and its security agencies.

NOTES

[1]Oren Barak and Assaf David, "The Arab Security Sector: A New Research Agenda for a Neglected Topic," *Armed Forces & Society* 36 (2010): 804–24.

[2]This essay does not focus on Iran; however, one insight that can be gleaned from the Iranian case is how Lebanon's Hizbullah, for instance, has established itself as a parallel military force to the official army, imitating, perhaps, Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

[3]"Freedom in the World 2011 Table of Independent Countries," http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/fiw/Tables%2C%20Graphs%2C%20etc%2C%20FIW%202011_Revised%201_11_11.pdf (accessed 29 March 2011).

[4]Serdar Kaya, "The Rise and Decline of the Turkish 'Deep State': The Ergenekon Case," *Insight Turkey* 11 (2009): 99–113; H. Akin Ünver, "Turkey's 'Deep-State' and the Ergenekon Conundrum," *Policy Brief* 23 (Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 2009).

[5]Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, "Israel's 'Security Network' and Its Impact: An Exploration of a New Approach," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006): 235–61.

[6]Alon Peled, *A Question of Loyalty: Military Manpower Politics in Multiethnic States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ronald Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[7]Ersel Aydinli, "A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 63 (2009): 581–96.

[8]Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, eds., *Existential Threats and Civil-Security Relations* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009).

[9]James Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24 (1999): 131–65.

[10]Oren Barak, "Dilemmas of Security in Iraq," *Security Dialogue* 38 (2007): 455–75.

[11]Oren Barak, "Towards a Representative Military? The Transformation of the Lebanese Officer Corps since 1945," *Middle East Journal* 60 (2006): 75–93; idem, *The Lebanese Army: A National Institution in a Divided Society* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2009).

[12]*Rihla ila Isra'il* (A Journey to Israel) (Cairo: Madbuli, 1996).

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