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Public Trust in Arab Armies

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Rising public trust in Arab militaries at the expense of governments could signal a disruptive trend in civil-military relations and portend instability to come.

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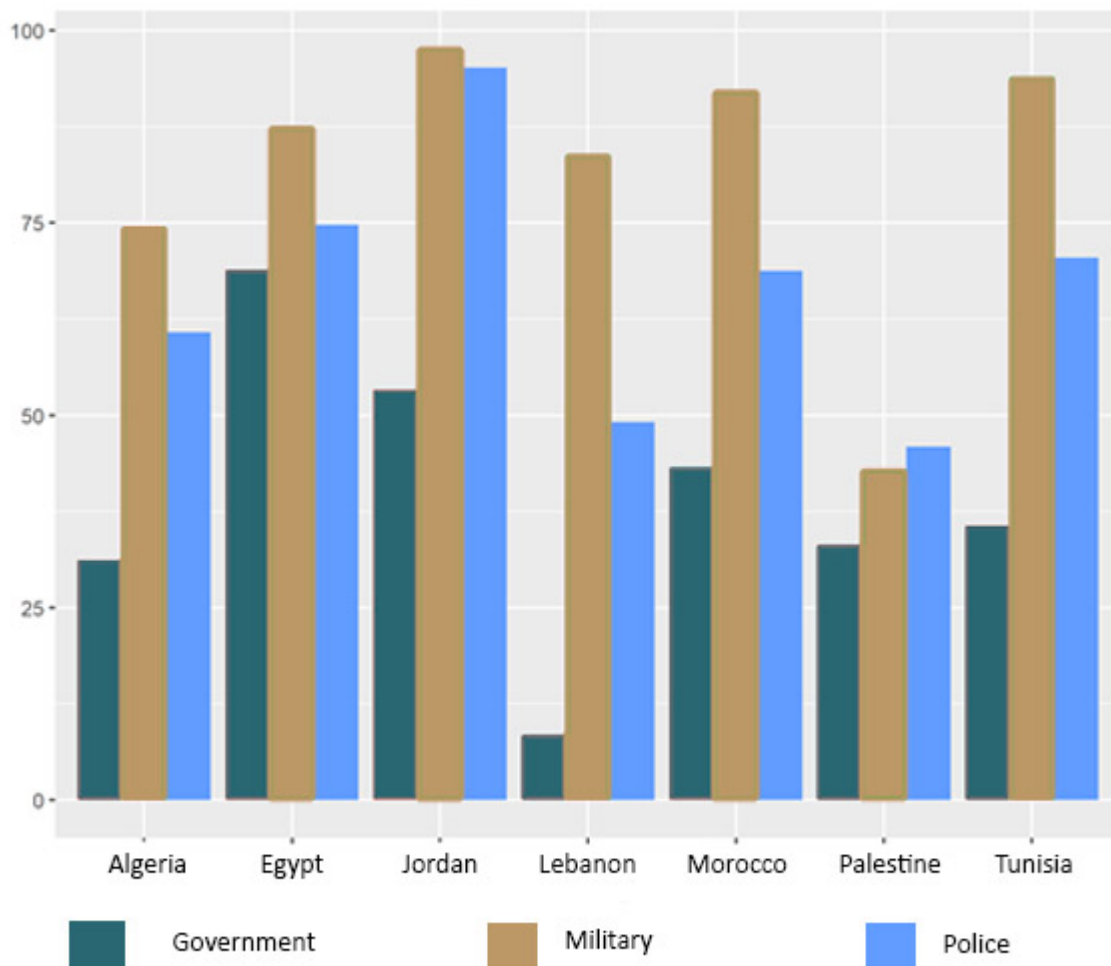
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Recent wars in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have helped push regional defense spending—already the highest in the world—to new heights. Led by the oil-rich monarchies of the Persian Gulf, enormous new weapons acquisitions pushed military spending in the Middle East to 6 percent of GDP in 2016, compared to the global average of just 2.2 percent. While the military’s strong fiscal health is a positive sign in the fight against terrorism, it has also contributed to unprecedented public trust in military institutions, reaching 81 percent in 2016 according to the the Arab Barometer. By contrast, trust in civilian governments continues to decline—from 54 percent in 2010 to 38 percent in 2016—creating a trust gap that threatens the region’s delicate civil–military balance.

Arab Barometer data demonstrate how this trust gap has widened since the regional upheaval of the Arab Spring. Since 2011, the survey instrument has asked respondents to record their level of trust in various public institutions, including the government, judiciary, parliament, police, political parties, armed forces, and civil society. In Wave IV of the survey, conducted in 2016–17, the military was the most trusted institution in virtually every country polled. The police were relatively less trusted, while the government was often the least trusted.

As Arab armies have responded to crises at home and abroad and public enthusiasm for regime change has faded, pessimism about the region’s economic and security woes continues. Fewer than half of all respondents expressed confidence that the government would be able to address the nation’s top two challenges within the next five years. For example, 84.7 percent of respondents agreed that the Islamic State poses a “very grave threat” to the Arab region despite the ongoing international effort to defeat the group. But as regional insecurity has risen in recent years, so has trust in the military. In 2016, 88.3 percent of respondents expressed trust in their nation’s armed forces. This striking figure represents an increase of 6 percentage points in those countries since 2011.

Trust in Public Institutions, 2016



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Although the Arab Barometer includes a diverse sample of Arab states, only countries that have maintained adequate security despite the region's recent struggles can be surveyed. In these relatively stable countries, citizens' trust in the military most likely results from an appreciation for domestic stability in the face of regional insecurity. Using their successes to improve their public relations, the armed forces in many Arab states have publicized their contributions to national security. For example, the Jordan Armed Forces tout their ties to the powerful United States military and diffuse positive messages through their own radio station, commemorative billboards, and social media profiles.

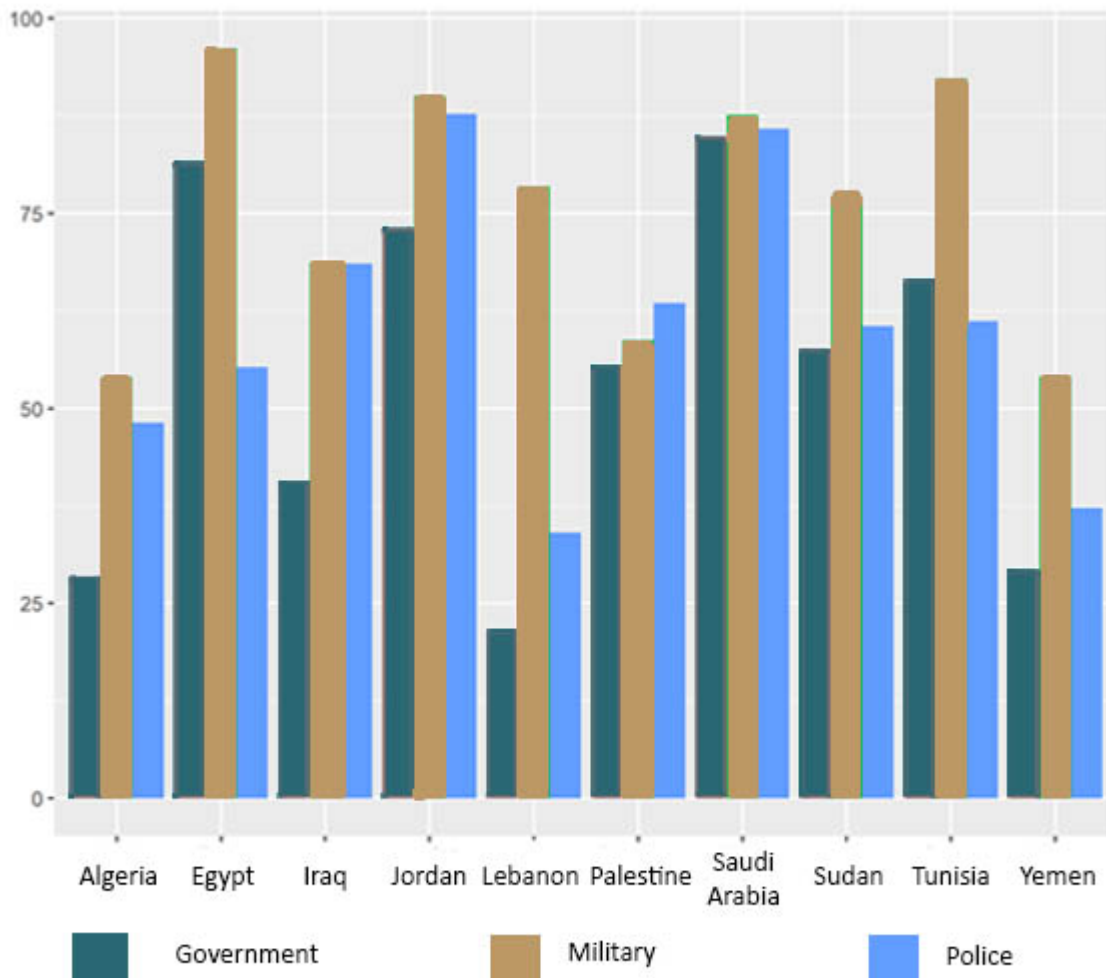
Jordan is the most striking example of this trend. The kingdom has remained generally secure despite an extreme influx of refugees and its proximity to war-torn Iraq and Syria. Trained as a special forces helicopter pilot, King Abdullah II has burnished his military credentials to shore up popular support for the army and the regime, donning his uniform to symbolically lead the counterassault on Islamic State targets in 2016 following the public execution of captured Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh. Trust in the Jordanian Armed Forces, already at 90.0 percent in 2010, had risen to 97.7 percent by 2016. By contrast, public trust in the government, already much lower, fell twenty percentage points in the same period to just 53.3 percent. Since the survey was conducted, anti-austerity protests in June 2018 grew quickly and forced prime minister Hani al-Mulki to resign, in another sign of deteriorating domestic approval for government.

Even in the absence of democratic politics, public attitudes towards the military may influence soldiers' political behavior. Late last year, rumors spread that senior military officers had been involved in a coup plot against King Abdullah. While officials denied the rumors, they highlighted the government's delicate position vis-à-vis the Jordanian Armed Forces. Although Jordanian public opinion (like Arab opinion more broadly) consistently supports democratization, citizens may begin to welcome greater military involvement in politics as the civil-military trust gap widens.

Across the region, the military continues to exert a potent coercive power in domestic politics. Military coups, once commonplace in the Middle East, are now rare. But in a region beset by domestic unrest, terrorism, and civil war, Arab political regimes must rely on the armed forces to maintain order. Whether by overt threats or subtle pressure, the military can leverage this power to defend favored policies or preserve the political status quo.

The Arab Spring brought the military back to center stage, demonstrating the central role of civil-military relations in preserving the political status quo. In country after country, socioeconomic dissatisfaction and widespread support for democracy translated directly into unprecedented mass mobilization against the entrenched political elite. The uprisings demonstrated that public attitudes can decide the fate of military-backed regimes; however, democratic transitions cannot be enacted without the support, or at least tolerance, of the armed forces.

Trust in Public Institutions, 2011



Wave II of the Arab Barometer, conducted between December 2010 and November 2011, offers a snapshot of public attitudes around the time of the Arab Spring. In Tunisia and Egypt, public trust in the armed forces post-2011 was consistent with the military's largely nonviolent response to the protests. Initially, both armies permitted democracy to take root, but their political paths soon diverged. Today, Tunisia continues its democratic experiment under its second freely elected president. Meanwhile, Egypt's democratization was reversed by a military coup in 2013. With President Mohamed Morsi imprisoned, army chief Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seized power himself and imposed a draconian authoritarianism, all while maintaining public approval ratings above 80 percent. This was possible because a pro-military majority entrusted military officers to guide the country's transition.

Despite these divergent paths, both Tunisians and Egyptians continued to report steadfast trust in the military despite the two countries' divergent behaviors. In every wave of polling since the 2011 revolutions, more than two-thirds of respondents in both countries reported "a great deal of trust" in the armed forces, the highest rating possible. This highlights the danger of public trust in unelected, and too often unaccountable, military institutions. While Tunisians' trust in the army has not overturned the democratic process, the military has increased its political influence, and soldiers recently voted in local elections for the first time. Meanwhile, Egyptians' trust has enabled the military to undercut and eliminate nascent democratic institutions while accumulating unprecedented power.

However, outcomes were worse still where public trust in the armed forces was low. In Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, Arab Barometer surveys taken in 2010-11 demonstrated a strong distrust of the military. For example, polling in Yemen took place after protests began but before soldiers began firing on protesters. The military's trust rating hovered just above 50 percent, higher than the civilian government and police, but still representing the second lowest score in the region. Distrust between the population and the army likely contributed to the breakdown of demonstrations into violence and ultimately civil war, which continues despite Saudi military intervention. While security conditions have prevented follow-up surveys in these countries, qualitative reporting suggests deepening disillusionment with all state institutions as government airstrikes target civilians in Syria and in Yemen.

All told, the data from 2011 suggest that the growing trust gap observed in the region today, characterized by declining trust in the government and rising trust in the army, could be a harbinger of instability to come. As public support shifts from civilian governments to the armed forces, the military's relative legitimacy and potential political power increases. Public trust in the armed forces can be a component of healthy civil-military relations, for example by reducing the risk of violence during mass demonstrations. However, when citizens place greater faith in the military than in the civilian government, they are less likely to resist infringements on their civil rights in the name of security. Public trust might even strengthen the military's hand in pushing through unpopular decisions, such as Sisi's agreement to transfer sovereign control of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia.

To hold the military accountable, civil society can help citizens monitor military encroachment into civilian politics. Foreign governments can encourage Arab partners, the largest global recipients of U.S. aid, to allow oversight and transparency in the military sector. Otherwise, individuals may continue to accept the military's authoritarian argument that political and civil rights must be sacrificed in the name of security. But as long as security challenges proliferate in the Arab world, this acquiescence means Arab dissatisfaction with socioeconomic conditions and poor governance is unlikely to mobilize citizens to make effective demands for reform.

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