Military Politics in Muslim Societies ⓐ

Nicholas J. Lotito

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Abstract and Keywords

This article explores the role of the military in perpetuating authoritarianism in the Muslim world. Using cross-national data, the article demonstrates that military repression of large-scale protests has been more likely in Muslim-majority states than elsewhere. It offers three explanations for violent military responses to protests: chronic insecurity and political violence, exceptionally high levels of foreign military assistance, and military organizational cultures that favor authoritarian responses to unrest. The article finds no support for claims that Islam as a culture or religion has any systematic effect on military behavior. Several cases of successful democratization in the region demonstrate that authoritarianism is not an immutable feature of Muslim-majority societies.

Keywords: civil-military relations, democratization, authoritarianism, popular uprisings, repression, terrorism, foreign aid, military assistance, organizational culture, Islam

Authoritarianism is more prevalent in Muslim societies today than in other world regions, but it has not always been so. Instead, Muslim societies have been left out of global gains in civil and political rights over the past half-century. A prominent argument attributes the "robustness of authoritarianism" in the Middle East to the strength of the coercive apparatuses, including the police and military (Bellin 2004). Does this argument apply to the broader Muslim world as well? And how does the military specifically contribute to the institutionalization of authoritarianism and its survival?

Examining cross-national data, I find that the democratic deficit observed in the Middle East characterizes the broader Muslim world as well. By way of explanation, I consider how the armed forces can contribute to the persistence of authoritarian rule. In many Muslim-majority countries, the military has sustained authoritarianism by violently suppressing anti-regime protests, thereby foreclosing the possibility of mass-based democratization. Examining global patterns of democratization since the 1970s, I find that military repression of large-scale protests has been more likely in Muslim-majority states than elsewhere. I illustrate the role of the military in responding to popular uprisings

through the cases of the Arab Spring, then turn to explaining military violence against protesters.

To explain the prevalence of military repression in the Muslim world, I focus on three factors: security threats, foreign military aid, and organizational cultures within the armed forces. I find the Muslim world has been characterized by chronic insecurity, high levels of foreign assistance, and authoritarian tendencies embedded in the organizational cultures of the armed forces. These factors may all contribute to a higher propensity for Muslim-majority armies to intervene in politics, including by repressing protests. By contrast, I do not find evidence that factors related to Islam as a culture or religion have any systematic effect on military behavior. Several cases of successful democratization in the region demonstrate that authoritarianism is not an immutable feature of Muslim-majority societies.

Persistent Authoritarianism

Many authoritarian regimes *outside* the Muslim world have seen substantial improvements in civil liberties and political rights since the 1970s—Huntington's (1991) "third wave" of democratization—but Muslim-majority states have been largely left behind. Freedom House, the US-based NGO, has been tracking civil liberties and political rights around the world for the past half-century. Figure 1 plots the average score in each category (on a seven-point scale) annually from 1972 to 2017, grouping more developed countries, Muslim-majority developing countries, and other developing countries.
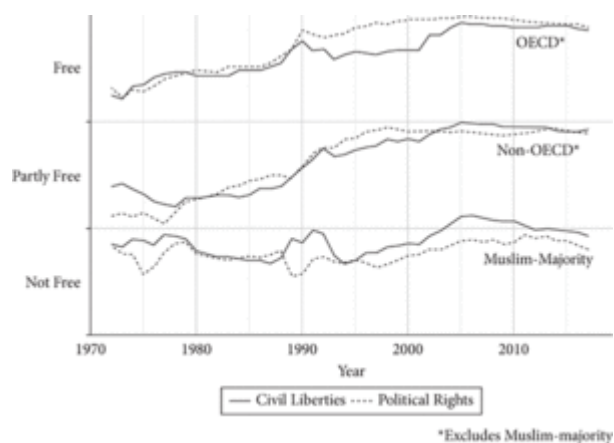

Figure 1. Freedom in the World Index, 1972–2017.

Note: Excludes Muslim-majority.

Source: Data from Freedom House.

Over the period, full democracy (rated "Free") has been limited mostly to wealthy states with advanced industrial economies, represented here by OECD membership. Among poorer countries, the level of freedom was quite low in 1972, and the gap between Muslim-majority and other developing countries was small. Since the late 1970s, however,

there has been a marked divergence: the Muslim world has remained predominantly authoritarian even as other states have realized democratic gains. While the average score for non-Muslim developing countries is today near the top of the "Partly Free" category, the average for Muslim-majority countries remains "Not Free." Among Muslim-majority states, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has lower average scores, but other Muslim-majority developing countries still lag far behind the non-Muslim average.[1]

Why have Muslim societies been so resistant to democratization? As Eva Bellin (2004) has argued, the answer lies not in the absence of democratizing forces or prerequisites, but in the exceptional strength of authoritarianism in these countries. In other words, Muslim-majority states remain authoritarian because the regimes that have held power since independence are exceptionally resilient. In particular, the robustness of authoritarianism depends on the strength of the coercive apparatus: the civilian and military forces that repress dissent, undermine civilian political control, and suppress mass mobilization.

In societies where pent up demand for democratization has long been suppressed, popular uprisings are a natural pathway to political change. Between 1946 and 2010, 17 percent of cases of authoritarian breakdown occurred due to popular uprisings, which became more common after the end of the Cold War (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 179). The most common causes of regime collapse were coups d'état (35 percent) and elections (26 percent). While election-related transitions often lead to democratic regimes, such meaningful elections are unlikely to take place in the entrenched authoritarian regimes of the Muslim world. Coups d'état, on the other hand, rarely led to democratic rule during the Cold War, when they were common in the Muslim world. Coups have more often led to democratization in the post–Cold War period, but they have become less frequent as authoritarian leaders have employed coup-proofing strategies (Marinov and Goemans 2014). If both meaningful elections and coups d'état have become unlikely, popular uprisings may be the clearest pathway to democracy in many Muslim-majority societies.

Because political mobilization under authoritarianism is risky for individual participants, we are less likely to see the emergence of large-scale, pro-democracy mobilization where there is a high degree of routine political repression. Authoritarian regimes employ various internal security forces, including police, gendarmes, and intelligence services, to monitor citizens' political activities and limit mobilization. In many cases, the military contributes to this "routine" repression as well, usurping or duplicating the domestic roles of civilian forces. For example, Egypt has three main intelligence services.[2] Rather than working together in a cohesive interagency process, the components of Egypt's fragmented intelligence community duplicate many of the same roles in an effort to counterbalance each other and secure political influence (Kandil 2012; Sirrs 2010). This competition among civilian and military institutions is a common feature of authoritarian governance and can exacerbate the degree of repression.

Beyond its role in routine repression, the military also plays a unique political role as the regime's last bulwark against revolution. In most cases of mass protest, the police are up

to the task of basic repression, dispersing crowds, and restoring calm. But if mass mobilization grows sufficiently large, protesters will eventually overwhelm the capacity of the civilian security forces. When protests escalate beyond the repressive capacity of the police, leaders must choose whether to resort to the most severe form of physical repression: military force against unarmed citizens. Because the military generally has the physical capacity to violently disperse demonstrations, the military often becomes a de facto arbiter between protesters and the regime. Military violence does not guarantee that an anti-regime uprising will fail, but the cessation of such violence is often a prerequisite for the movement's success. A revolutionary outcome is often marked by a loss of the monopoly of force, which occurs when the regime or the military is unwilling to use (sufficient) force against protesters (Tilly 1993, 241). As such, no process of political liberalization can go forward without the support, or at least tolerance, of the armed forces (Barany 2012).

Military Repression of Protests

Is military repression of nonviolent uprisings more likely in Muslim-majority states? I test this proposition using original data on military responses. First, I identify popular uprisings from 1946 to 2013 using the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) 2.1 data set (Chenoweth and Shay 2019). I include protest campaigns that were primarily nonviolent, called for regime change, and included at least 100,000 participants. To focus on the role of the military, I exclude campaigns that were suppressed by internal security forces alone, without requiring military backup. For each of the resulting 86 campaigns, I code a categorical *military repression* variable to indicate the level of violence employed against protesters by the armed forces.[3]
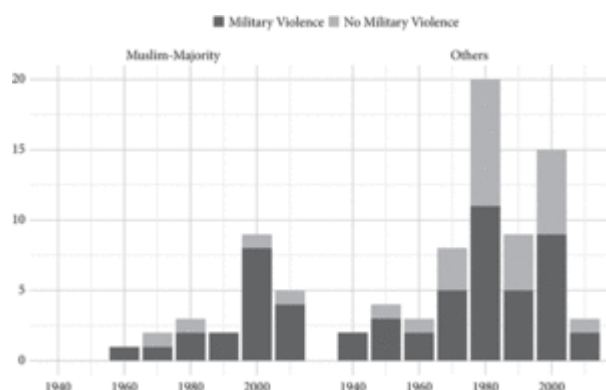

Figure 2. Military responses to popular uprisings, 1946–2013.

Source: Data from NAVCO 2.1 (Chenoweth and Shay 2019); Lotito (2018b).

These data, summarized in Figure 2, illustrate three key findings. First, military violence is a common response to large protests, regardless of world region or time period. In cases where protests overwhelmed the repressive capacity of internal security forces, the

military responded with violence 66.3 percent of the time. The high rate of military involvement underscores the pivotal role the army plays in revolution. Many cases of military violence ultimately resulted in success for the movement, but this does not suggest the military was therefore unimportant. Instead, the decisive moment in many such revolutionary situations is when the military stands down or switches sides.

Second, uprisings in the Muslim world have been more likely to face military repression. Nonviolent uprisings in Muslim-majority countries are one-third more likely to face military violence than similar protests in other countries (82 percent vs. 61 percent).[4] Where the armed forces are more willing to use violence to defend the regime, we are less likely to see mass challenges in the first place, because many protesters will be deterred by the risk of violent repression. Because taking to the streets in this repressive context is a strong signal of the movement's robust popular support, we might expect the military to be more reticent to use violence. Instead, the data show a low rate of large protests, but a high rate of military repression, across the Muslim world.

Third, the pattern of military repression mirrors trends in democratization. The "third wave" of democratization is clearly visible in the data from 1970 to 2010. During this period, the rate of military repression declined substantially, contributing to the success of so many democratization campaigns worldwide. However, the loosening of military repression took place only *outside* the Muslim world. By contrast, the rate of violent military repression remained high in Muslim-majority countries throughout the period. We may conclude that the continuity of authoritarianism in most Muslim-majority states is at least partially attributable to the robustness of military repression as a counterbalance to democratizing pressures.

These data offer only a partial story of pro-democratic mobilization in the Muslim world. Notably, they leave out the many protests that never matured into large, sustained campaigns, whether due to police repression, government concessions, or other causes. As the data illustrate, there have been relatively few protest campaigns in the Muslim world that have reached the threshold of potential military intervention. With fewer uprisings, we can expect fewer successes, so the non-emergence of large uprisings is an important cause of authoritarian stability. It is likely that high levels of domestic repression, carried out primarily by police and intelligence services, played an important role in preventing these uprisings from growing to revolutionary scale.

When the Arab Spring protests began in 2010, they quickly spread to virtually every country in a region where previous mobilization was limited. The widespread mobilization of the Arab Spring suggests that Muslim populations were not unmotivated to demand change, but rather that structural obstacles to mobilization had prevented the emergence of mass movements earlier. That most of these uprisings ended in military repression starkly demonstrates the military's power to sustain authoritarianism. Where national armies did not engage in repressing the protests (Egypt and Tunisia), old political leaders were swept from power.[5] But where national armies brought to bear their full military might against civilians (Bahrain and Syria), existing regimes remained in power. Even

where the military split apart and mutinous troops joined the ranks of armed rebellion (Libya and Yemen), military repression kept leaders in power until foreign intervention tipped the balance.

Scholars have widely recognized the central role of the military in responding to the Arab Spring, and many have attempted to explain variations in military responses. Most of this research frames the question of military responses to protest in terms of *defection* and points to various factors that might influence the military's loyalty to the regime (Albrecht et al. 2016; Albrecht and Ohl 2016; Barany 2011; Bellin 2012; Hazen 2019; Makara 2013; Nepstad 2013). In this view, the critical question for military officers is whether to "defect or defend" (Lee 2015). Whether loyalty stems from officers' professional values (Bellin 2012; Bou Nassif 2015b; Lutterbeck 2013), material interests (Bou Nassif 2015a; Brooks 2013), or ethnicity (Bou Nassif 2015c), scholars assume that soldiers will refrain from challenging the regime, and will even fight to defend it, as long as they remain faithful to its leader. Although each of these variables—professionalism, material interests, and ethnicity—offers some explanatory power in the Arab Spring cases, none of them seem to vary systematically between Muslim-majority societies and the rest of the world. If some armies in the Muslim world suffer from poor professionalism, patronage relationships, and sectarianism, many others are highly professional, well institutionalized, and untroubled by ethnic divisions.[6]

Explaining Military Responses to Protest

While the Arab Spring cases help illuminate variations in military responses to protests, as well as the importance of the military to political outcomes, existing theories do not appear to explain the higher rate of military repression in Muslim-majority countries. Why have these armies been so likely to use repression against mass protests? This section investigates three possible explanations for the difference: chronic insecurity, foreign military aid, and military culture.

Chronic Insecurity

As security organizations first and foremost, armies are deeply affected by the security environment in which they operate. Whereas armies in the developed world are generally oriented toward external threats (i.e., foreign invasion), developing states often rely on the military for internal security as well. Scholars of civil-military relations have long warned that the involvement of the military in internal security roles and missions tends to politicize the armed forces, to the detriment of their professionalism and adherence to norms of civilian supremacy (Desch 1999; Huntington 1957, 1995). The risk of military intervention into politics is heightened when civilian institutions are weak and lack legitimacy (Staniland 2008). In this view, even relatively low-intensity conflict or sporadic terrorist activity can have political consequences if the government turns to the armed forces to manage the threat. Unfortunately, many countries experience chronic violent conflict, so the involvement of the military in internal security becomes almost inevitable.

Political violence is hardly unique to Muslim societies, but the prevalence of civil conflict in the region has given the military an especially prominent role in domestic security. In the post–Cold War era, the Muslim world has experienced significantly more internal violence than other regions of the world (Gleditsch and Rudolfsen 2016). This divergence has been produced by a simultaneous increase in the rate of civil war in Muslim-majority countries and a decline in the rate for non-Muslim countries, beginning around 1990 (see Figure 3). By 2016 the incidence of civil war had become extremely concentrated, with six of seven active civil wars located in Muslim-majority countries.[7]
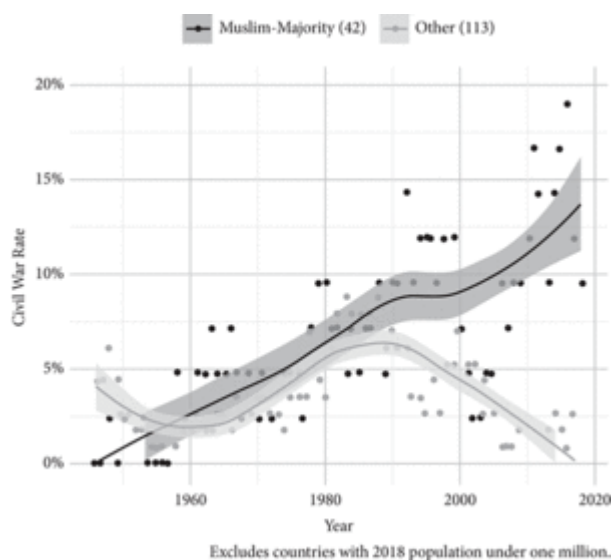
Figure 3. Incidence of civil war, 1946–2018.

Note: Excludes countries with 2018 population under one million

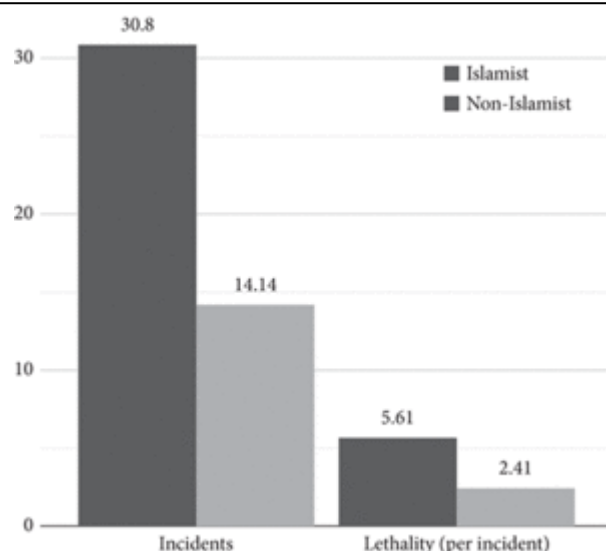*Source:* Data from UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset.

Figure 4. Islamist terrorism in civil war, 1970–2012.

Source: Data from Terrorism in Armed Conflict (Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin forthcoming).

Terrorism has also become increasingly frequent in Muslim-majority countries. Despite the common association of radical Islamism with contemporary terrorism, until the 2000s, terrorism was more concentrated in democracies than in authoritarian regimes (Chenoweth 2010; Wilson and Piazza 2013). In the post–Cold War era, however, the correlation between regime type and terrorism has been reversed. One possible cause of this shift is that much of the terrorism observed today occurs within civil wars (Findley and Young 2012; Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2018; Stanton 2013). As civil wars have become more frequent in Muslim-majority countries, the terrorism rate has increased accordingly. Exacerbating the problem, within civil wars, Islamist groups tend to use terrorism more often than other nonstate combatants (see Figure 4). Civil war and terrorism tend to have negative effects on economic and political development, potentially undermining processes that might otherwise support democratization in Muslim-majority countries (Gupta et al. 2004; Neumayer 2004; Nitsch and Schumacher 2004).

The challenges of chronic insecurity are exacerbated when civilians enlist the military as a bulwark against domestic political threats. Islamism—a political ideology that seeks to radically change government and society to conform with Islamic principles—has motivated both violent and nonviolent challenges to the authoritarian status quo. In Muslim-majority societies, Islamists are usually among the most prominent regime opponents. Because Islamists are often quite popular, authoritarian leaders have a genuine fear of Islamist-led popular mobilization. Leaders often respond by empowering the military in an attempt to weaken their Islamist opponents (Cook 2007). Their fear also creates an interest in portraying even peaceful, everyday forms of Islamism as a national security threat. In this way, the question of religion in politics becomes *securitized*, as governments use the language of threat to describe peaceful political participation (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998; McDonald 2008). Securitizing important political debates leads to further

deference to the military and provides justification for oppressive national security measures. An example of a tangible legal consequence of this phenomenon is the continuous state of emergency promulgated in Egypt during the entire tenure of President Hosni Mubarak, from 1987 to 2011 (ICJ 2018).

In sum, the tendency of the military to intervene in domestic politics could be a consequence of political violence, which has occurred at a higher rate in the Muslim world than elsewhere in the post–Cold War era. When governments rely on military forces for internal security, it is likely to increase the politicization of the armed forces and their encroachment into additional areas of political life. The problem is exacerbated when authoritarian regimes extend the discourse of domestic security to include peaceful forms of political participation, encouraging soldiers to use violence against peaceful demonstrators.

Military Aid

A second factor that might help explain the high level of military repression in the Muslim world is foreign aid. Scholars have long recognized that international support can be critical to the survival of authoritarian regimes (Skocpol 1979). In fact, the risk of sustaining authoritarianism has encouraged many donors to condition their assistance on political or human rights standards (Carnegie and Marinov 2017; Dunning 2004; Resnick 2018). The likelihood that foreign aid will discourage democratization may also be higher in countries where rulers rely on small distributional coalitions, as in most Muslim-majority countries (Wright 2009). Even when the donors are Western democracies, aid *recipients* include some of the world's most authoritarian regimes. For example, the United States has been the primary international sponsor of authoritarian regimes in Iran (until 1979), Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia (until 1998), and other Muslim countries. As Jason Brownlee (2012) demonstrates in Egypt, American support has often helped those regimes stave off domestic pressures for democratization. "Elections and political reform," Brownlee observes, "are welcome only insofar as they impede extremists and enhance stability" (9).

However, the political effects of *military* aid specifically are less well understood. During the Cold War and since, the US and other great powers have provided weapons, training, and budgetary support to their allies' armed forces. Military aid can provide diplomatic benefits and improve security, but it also distorts civil-military relations in the target country by increasing the institutional strength of the military relative to other state institutions (Lotito and Joyce 2020). Military aid is particularly significant in the Muslim world: between 2010 and 2020, Muslim-majority states represented seven of the top ten recipients of US military aid.[8] Owing to the geostrategic importance of many Muslim-majority states and the global threat of Islamist terrorism, the Muslim world has received outsized amounts of foreign military aid. This pattern is clearly reflected in US military aid data (see Figure 5).
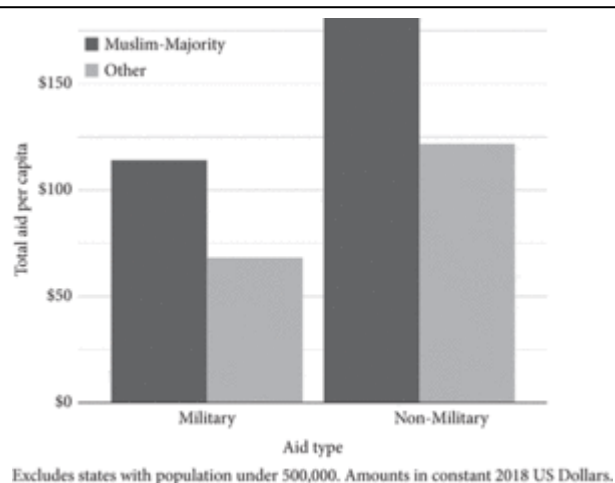
Excludes states with population under 500,000. Amounts in constant 2018 US Dollars.

Figure 5. US foreign aid, 2001–2019.

Note: Excludes states with population under 500,000. Amounts in constant 2018 US dollars.

Source: Data from USAID Greenbook.

Military aid comes in many forms. By far the largest category of expenditure relates to the acquisition of weapons systems and other equipment. While this equipment serves no direct political function, it may nevertheless produce political effects by bolstering the organizational strength and capacity of the armed forces relative to other state institutions. In more extreme cases, military aid can exacerbate violence (Boutton 2019; Dube and Naidu 2015). Rather than provide minimal military resources to otherwise defenseless nations, US military aid has supported exceptionally high military spending across the Muslim world. In fact, Muslim-majority states comprise ten of the world's top fifteen military spenders relative to national income.[9] One consequence of extravagant defense spending has been to strengthen the military relative to other state institutions. This imbalance is reflected in public opinion surveys, which consistently find that public trust in the armed forces far outstrips other state institutions in these countries (Lotito 2018a).

A relatively small portion of military assistance is dedicated to training and educating foreign officers. This form of aid is hypothesized to create the possibility of norm change, by exposing recipient military officers to democratic values. In a few cases, Western training has apparently generated some adherence to democratic norms by supporting an intergenerational shift in organizational culture (Soeters and Van Ouytsel 2014). More generally, American training is not associated with democratization (Taylor 2014, chap. 8). Foreign training may also have perverse effects. Savage and Caverley (2017) find that US military training *increases* coup risk because it strengthens the armed forces relative to the civilian regime. Similarly, Casey (2020) finds that US patronage has done nothing to reduce the risk of military coups.[10] These studies do not offer definitive evidence on the effects of military aid on responses to protest; however, they do suggest that military aid does not typically foster pro-democratic behavior and may instead encourage political intervention by the military.

Military Culture

A third factor that could help explain differences in military responses to protest in Muslim-majority states is military culture. Systematic differences in the organizational cultures of the armed forces in Muslim-majority states could explain general patterns of civil-military relations in these contexts (Lotito 2018b). The organizational culture view of military behavior holds that, like any large organization, the military responds to events based on its existing practices and knowledge. The constituent elements of organizational culture, like shared understandings and repertoires of action, are difficult to observe *ex ante*, so their causal role in producing any particular action can be ambiguous. Nevertheless, we can observe stable patterns of behavior over time and identify historical legacies and critical junctures in institutional development that may have contributed to those patterns. Even if organizational culture does not fully determine military behavior, it can powerfully condition soldiers' responses to protests and, ultimately, whether the army will engage in repression.

This view of organizational culture differs markedly from arguments based on cultural essentialism. For example, a prominent argument holds that *Arab culture* explains the poor battlefield performance of the Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Libyan, Saudi, and Syrian armies in their wars against Israel (Pollack 2002). By contrast, the organizational culture of the armed forces may be only tangentially related to the broader national culture. Nothing intrinsic to Muslim culture or the religion of Islam explains military intervention into politics, the politicization of counterterrorism, or extraordinary foreign aid flows. Instead, the armed forces of the Muslim world have often been indoctrinated with modernist and nationalist, not religious, ideologies (Picard 2005, 121). Moreover, political intervention by the armed forces has varied greatly across the region. For example, coups d'état are commonplace in some Muslim-majority countries, yet virtually unheard of in others (Powell and Thyne 2011, 255). Similarly, the armed forces have brutally repressed anti-regime mobilization in most cases but forced dictators from power in others. Islamic culture, therefore, fails to explain any observed authoritarian tendency in the military cultures of the Muslim world.

In many Muslim societies, the military plays a dual role, responsible for both national security and regime security. The ways these roles overlap and reinforce each other have resulted in more politically influential armed forces than elsewhere. In the postcolonial states of the Muslim world, the military played a critical role in defining national identity by "erecting and defending its boundaries against external enemies and internal separatist movements" (Picard 2005, 118). Intellectuals and governments alike often viewed the military as "the ideal instrument to direct the industrialization, institutionalization, and reform necessary for a modern society" (Cook 2007, 2). In their role as nation-building institutions, the armed forces have often been indoctrinated with strict secularist ideologies, which encourage violent responses to even nonviolent Islamist activism, encouraging soldiers to view religion through a security lens. In sum, processes of postcolonial

nation-building and chronic insecurity in the independence era both tended to enhance the political role of the military in the Muslim world.

A comparison of India and Pakistan illustrates how different military cultures can create divergent patterns of civil-military relations. Since Partition, India has not witnessed a single military coup or other serious breach of military professionalism. Meanwhile, Pakistan is a prime example of how a highly politicized military can serve to sustain authoritarianism in a Muslim-majority country. Superficially, the proportion of Muslims in the two countries (13 percent in India vs. 96 percent in Pakistan) corresponds to their divergent paths of civil-military relations; however, the most compelling explanations for the divergence have nothing to do with religion. Instead, scholars point to historical factors like colonial inheritances (economic and military), the strength of the ruling party in each country, and geopolitical insecurity to explain why civil-military relations have been far more democratic in India than in Pakistan (Staniland 2008; Wilkinson 2015). From a cultural perspective, Shah (2014) argues that the Pakistani army's repeated interference in the political sphere is best explained by norms within the officer corps. This "belief system" informs how soldiers perceive democratic institutions, how they interpret the proper role and function of the military, and how they respond to perceived civilian failures or threats to military interests (8). The organizational culture of the Pakistani military, Shah argues, explains its use of "virtually genocidal" violence against nonviolent Bengali protesters in 1971, among other acts of military repression (112). As Pakistan demonstrates, it is neither Islamic culture nor a universal military mindset that dictates the military's political behavior, but rather an organizational culture specific to a particular national army.

The historical persistence of military organizational culture also underscores the difficulty of democratic transition, particularly in countries where the military has played a central political role. Among the most successful democratic transitions in the Muslim world to date have been in Senegal and Tunisia, which transitioned to multiparty democracy in 2000 and 2011, respectively. Senegal's transition, which overcame potential ethnic divisions within the country, was facilitated by the military's long-held civic-national loyalty (Harkness 2018, chap. 4). In Tunisia, the military's decision not to repress a massive popular uprising enabled a remarkably peaceful transition to democracy (Bou Nassif 2015b; Brooks 2013; Jebnoun 2014; Lotito 2020). In both cases, military culture portended a successful outcome: neither army had been politically central, nor carried out a coup d'état. These factors made the Senegalese and Tunisian armies exceptional by the standards of the Muslim world, and indeed the broader developing world as well. Unfortunately, the military cultures of most of the region's other armies still reproduce authoritarian tendencies, so we should not expect them to embrace democratization anytime soon.

Still, we might take comfort in the observation that even some long-standing military dictatorships have made successful transitions to democracy.[11] In the Muslim world, Indonesia is a striking example of a state that sidelined its formerly dominant military (Lee 2009).[12] If Senegal and Tunisia demonstrate that a long-held culture of nonintervention within the military is the optimal scenario for democratization, Indonesia proves that cul-

tural *change* is also possible. As in many military-dominated regimes, political power in Indonesia became highly personalistic under the thirty-year rule of Suharto. A military officer, Suharto seized power by coup d'état in 1967, then concentrated dictatorial powers in his own office. Having brutally repressed all dissent for many years, Suharto lost power in 1998 when the armed forces ignored his clear and public order to suppress mounting protests. The sudden and decisive shift in military policy resulted from intense conflict and rivalries within army ranks, which created an incentive for the commander of the armed forces, General Wiranto, to defect from the regime (Lee 2015, chap. 4). Yet even as multiparty democracy flourished in Indonesia, it took years of gradual reform to reduce the military's role as a political "veto player" (Mietzner 2013).

Conclusion

In many Muslim-majority countries, the military continues to serve as a component of the coercive apparatus that sustains authoritarianism. The military's propensity to engage in repression may be heightened by chronic insecurity, military aid, and organizational cultures favoring the repression of mass protests. As long as these factors persist, the armed forces are likely to deter or suppress future protests. Nevertheless, cases like Indonesia and Tunisia demonstrate that civil-military relations can improve in the longer term.

The Arab Spring transformed the political landscape of the greater Middle East, leading to pervasive insecurity and the retrenchment of authoritarianism. The military was a critical player in the uprisings and continues to gain political influence in a region unsettled by terrorism, civil war, and great power competition. Much scholarship has focused on the unmet promise of the Arab Spring, leaving the prospects for future mass mobilization in doubt. Having prevented revolution in 2011, will the armed forces consolidate their political position, or will the high costs of civil war deter future military repression? Will new economic challenges reinvigorate protest movements?

Finally, when authoritarian regimes do fall, opening a window of opportunity for democracy, the coercive institutions that underpinned the old regime typically remain in place. The continuity of authoritarian institutions represents a serious threat to democratic consolidation, especially when political elites lack strong incentives to carry out difficult institutional reforms (Lotito 2019). Not enough research has been done to understand the circumstances under which these reforms might be accomplished in the Muslim world. Research on the role of the military in democratic transitions in Europe and Latin America has identified critical factors like regional organizations (e.g., NATO and the European Union) or elite pacts, which may not be relevant to Muslim-majority countries (Stepan 1988; Trinkunas 2006). The transitions from military rule in East and Southeast Asia, where popular uprisings swept military-backed regimes from power, may offer more apt comparisons and useful lessons for the Muslim world. If we are serious about understanding the prospects for democratization in the Muslim world, we cannot ignore the radical political transformations that have occurred further east.

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Notes:

(1.) For 2017, political rights scores averaged 5.67 for MENA, 5.04 for Muslim developing countries outside MENA, 3.27 for non-Muslim developing countries, and 1.22 for the OECD.

(2.) These are the General Intelligence Service, or Mukhabarat (under direct control of the president), the military intelligence service (under the Ministry of Defense), and the National Security Agency (under the Ministry of the Interior).

(3.) For coding details, see Lotito (2018b), 184–186.

(4.) The difference is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

(5.) Egypt's subsequent military coup of July 2013 underscores the pervasive political influence of that country's military.

(6.) Professionalism is usually defined subjectively, but Muslim-majority countries like Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey, and the UAE also rate highly on more objective measures, such as expenditure per soldier and the development of national military academies or military periodicals (Toronto 2017).

(7.) They are Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen. The other war was an Islamist insurgency in Nigeria, where the population is approximately half-Muslim.

(8.) The others were Israel, Ukraine, and Russia (to which aid was eliminated following the annexation of Crimea in 2014).

(9.) "Military Spending as a Share of GDP, The Top 15 Countries, 2019," SIPRI, https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/arms-and-military-expenditure/military-expenditure. Of the remaining top spenders, two are great powers with major current and historical military involvement in Muslim-majority countries (US and Russia), and each of the others borders a Muslim-majority state with which it has a history of armed conflict (Israel, Armenia, and South Sudan).

(10.) Soviet patronage, on the other hand, helped sustain client regimes through effective coup-proofing.

(11.) Notably, notorious military dictatorships in Spain, Brazil, the Philippines, and South Korea gave way to democratic rule during the Third Wave.

(12.) Another Muslim-majority country, Mali also underwent a remarkable transition from military rule to democracy in just two years (1991–1993); however, a coup d'état in 2012 underscored the fragility of civil-military relations and democracy more broadly.

Nicholas J. Lotito

Yale University