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REALITY VS. FANTASY: TRANSFORMING THE ARAB STATES' MILITARY FORCE STRUCTURE

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The nations of the Middle East have been undergoing far-reaching change and enduring severe challenges in the past decade. Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004, the Arab Spring in 2011, the conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen, and the emergence of the Islamic State have led to revolutionary transformations in governance structures. The governments of the region, struggling to cope, have turned to the security sector for support. This has prompted a rethinking and a reevaluation of the existing security sector, which does not seem to be well prepared to deal with the current challenges and its vastly expanded role.

The militaries and security forces of the Middle East are contemplating three major initiatives that have the potential to radically change the security outlook and makeup of the forces in the region. The first proposal is the creation of a system of national conscription, the second is the establishment of a Federated Arab Force capable of joint defense, and the third is the transformation of the ministries of defense. This study will focus on the Arab military

forces proposing significant changes and review their progress on each of the three proposals. In addition, as the situations in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen are in constant flux, I will comment on these nations sporadically.

CONSCRIPTION

In the 1970s, an international consensus on the need to end the draft and move militaries from national conscription to all-volunteer forces gained momentum. The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990 boosted this push away from conscription in most Western nations. The debate regarding the merits of both systems appeared to be largely economic — with cost-benefit analysis playing the primary role.

In the United States, in the late 1960s, public disapproval of the military was a strong factor in prompting debate on ending the draft, in part because the public thought the method by which the U.S. military selected conscripts was inequitable. The debate took place amid the unpopular Vietnam War and a lowering of the voting age, during which a new voting constitu-

* The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not reflect those of the Department of Defense. The usual caveats apply. The author would like to thank Kathleen Bailey for her invaluable assistance.

ency of 18 to 20 year-olds emerged. The discussions centered on three issues: fairness and sociopolitical considerations, the size and quality of the forces required, and the overall costs of the armed forces. Economic considerations were crucial in ending the draft, in the United States and elsewhere.¹ Lately, some countries are calling for national conscription out of a need to reaffirm citizen commitment to the nation state. This stems from a desire for an equitable sharing of sacrifice and the impetus to enforce social cohesion by creating a common shared experience.²

Adding to the debate is a range of youth issues, stemming from a massive youth bulge in most parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East. These issues include chronic unemployment and underemployment, corruption, socio-economic stagnation, and a lack of both opportunity and social inclusion. This has reached a critical point with the collapse of governments, the mass movement of people and the rise of dissatisfaction in various communities. The sense is that conscription will temper the youth and put them more in line with commitments to the political establishment.³

As of 2011, there were 72 countries with some form of conscription, and 101 that had none.⁴ In the Middle East and among members of the League of Arab States, Algeria, Egypt, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have a form of conscription for males.⁵ Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Syria and Tunisia have a tradition of military conscription, in most instances dating back to independence. Algeria has had conscription since 1969,⁶ Egypt since 1948,⁷ Sudan since the early 1990s,⁸ Syria since 1953⁹ and Tunisia since 1956.¹⁰

Qatar and the UAE have only recently

implemented conscription. The government of Qatar approved a proposal in late 2013 for military service of up to four months. While the official Qatari news agency described the decision as mobilizing to defend the nation, a four-month training period with no follow up for reserve duty hardly prepares forces for conflict. The move is more likely an attempt to address youth commitment to the nation. In fact, *Doha News* quoted a Qatari official as saying that the aim is to get young Qataris to rely on themselves.¹¹ The government has now changed some policies, such as the time commitment for the initial training period and follow-up training.

The UAE approved a law in 2014 making military service of nine to 18 months compulsory for young men and optional for women with their guardian's permission. *Gulf News* quoted the UAE prime minister as saying that the law is intended to "strengthen the sense of belonging to the nation among young people and plant in them discipline and sacrifice."¹² It is not clear what the UAE policy will be for the reserves. In both instances, the overriding reason for instituting the draft appears to be the need to preempt potential expressions of discontent such as those that have occurred in parts of the Middle East. However, the UAE appears to have recently stepped up its military activity, due to participation in the war in Yemen and increased pressure on the UAE to supplement its forces.¹³

Kuwait, which had suspended compulsory military service in 2001, passed a law in early 2015 to reinstitute it in 2017. There appears to be some opposition to the law, and it is unclear at this writing what the details and exemptions will be. The suggested period of service is up to a year, followed by reserve duty. Govern-

ment officials have been arguing the need for a stronger defense institution and the imperative for youth to serve.¹⁴

Though the Saudi Arabian government in 2014 denied it needed to impose conscription since there were enough volunteers to fill the ranks, the Grand Mufti, the preeminent religious authority, called for

the conscription of Saudi citizens early in 2017. He maintained, “Compulsory military service, if the nation approves it, will

contribute to preparing the youth for fulfilling their duties.”¹⁵ This may be a first step in giving religious sanction and legitimacy to conscription in Saudi Arabia. Again, the justification appears to be forestalling youth discontent since it seems that Saudi Arabia is not having trouble filling the ranks of its military with volunteers.

Jordan suspended conscription in 1992, but successive national governments have been exploring a return to it for the past several years. The calls from various sectors of Jordan’s government are based on a desire to bridge the civil-military divide and a need to address social discontent and hooliganism among the youth.¹⁶ However, the prime minister rejected Parliament’s call for conscription in April 2015, citing the high costs of implementing it, the ability of Jordan to meet its recruitment goals, and the armed forces’ preoccupation with the regional security situation.

In addition, it is likely that the nations with conscription are utilizing conscripts as a source of free labor, working for

senior officers and developing the military-industrial complex. In Egypt, for example, former President Mubarak’s first minister of defense, Field Marshall Abd al-Halim Abu Ghazala, justified the use of “illiterate, working-class conscripts who were not ‘medically, culturally, technically, or psychologically fit’ for military service” as

free labor in the military industries.¹⁷ There are also documented cases of conscripts in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Egypt provid-

ing free labor to high-ranking officers on their farms and in business ventures, or to their families.¹⁸

Finally to be resolved is the issue of the status and privileges of the parallel security institutions and forces that are recruited based on tribal and communal ties. The main purpose of the latter is to balance and contain the influence of the regular army and ensure support for the ruling regimes. These forces typically serve under a chain of command separate from the regular forces. The National Guard in Saudi Arabia, the Royal Guard in Oman and the Emiri Guard in Qatar are examples. The Bahraini military, while not a parallel force, has strong communal ties to the Sunni population. In other nations, such as Jordan, the primary source of recruits is tribal. A carefully maintained balance includes representatives of all geographic regions while tending to exclude residents of major urban centers.¹⁹

The military in many Arab countries is increasingly viewed as the only institution with the capacity and experience to create

The concern is not with getting citizens ready for defending the nation, but rather appears intended to create a shared national narrative while reining in an active and increasingly outspoken youth population.

a common national resolve, impose discipline, and curtail future youth movements. While Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have escaped the youth discontent of the 2010 Arab Awakening, there is a clear attempt in these countries to move to a form of national service or volunteerism, rather than conscription or military service. The concern is not with getting citizens ready for defending the nation, but rather appears intended to create a shared national narrative while reining in an active and increasingly outspoken youth population. Finally, recently passed laws authorizing conscription recognize the need to build a reserve force to play a stronger role in defense and regional security, but few details are emerging as to how it would be formed, trained and utilized.

A FEDERATED FORCE

To an increasing extent, the Arab states are supplementing their political strategies and pursuing their interests with military power, apparently willing to project force outside their borders, whether in support of allies or against perceived foes. The strain on the regional militaries in both personnel and defense budgets has led to the idea of creating a federated force or some form of military integration capable of responding to regional security challenges.²⁰ Ideally, building a federated force implies sharing the burden by distributing financial obligations and troop commitments in an efficient way, enhancing and leveraging existing capabilities and avoiding duplication of effort. In a March 2015 meeting, Arab foreign ministers formulated the idea of a federated or unified defense force²¹ that would have a unified command and, at the request of any Arab nation facing a national-security threat, deployable against terrorist groups.²²

Troop commitments have stretched the manpower capabilities of the less populous Arab states, forcing them to recruit from more populous nations and, in several instances, from non-Arab countries. Several nations, including Bahrain, Oman and Qatar, rely on foreign soldiers due to their small populations.²³ In 2011, Bahrain's government came under increasing pressure from local protesters, and — under the aegis of the GCC Peninsula Shield Force — Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent in 1,200 and 800 troops, respectively.²⁴ Bahrain reportedly recruited people with army and police experience from Pakistan with the active involvement of Pakistani, Saudi and Bahraini officials.²⁵ Some reports also indicated that there were large numbers of Pakistanis, Jordanians and Yemenis in the Bahraini army.²⁶ More recently, the requirements of the Saudi-led Restoring Hope campaign in Yemen stretched the manpower of the Arab Gulf states. In 2015, as the Yemen engagement transitioned to a ground offensive, there were reports of Latin American and Australian mercenaries and troops from Sudan being sent to reinforce the UAE military.²⁷

Another potential source of troops are the reserves, who maintain a service obligation for some years after retirement. They are, on average, not young, not trained on a regular basis, and lacking in regular access to weapons. It is doubtful that any Arab military would be able to call reserves to active duty and deploy them in an effective manner. While some nations have contemplated reforming their reserves into a ready source of troops, none has taken any action.

The ambition of Arab countries to face and shape regional challenges through troop commitments has its limitations, which they are addressing by pooling their

TABLE 1. Level of Troops by Service (in thousands).

Country	Army	Air Force	Navy	Reserves
Algeria	147	14	6	150
Bahrain	8.5	1.5	1.0	n/a
Comoros	0.60	0.015	0.03	0
Djibouti	8	0.250	0.20	0
Egypt	340	100	18.5	479
Iraq	274.6	5.1	3.7	0
Jordan	90	15	0.5	65
Kuwait	11	2.5	2	23.7
Lebanon	53.9	1.0	1.1	44
Libya	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Mauritania	16	0.30	0.70	35
Morocco	175	13	7.8	150
Oman	31.4	3.5	4.2	0
Palestine	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Qatar	8.5	2.1	1.8	0
Saudi Arabia	75	36	13.5	100
Somalia	10	0	0.55	0
Sudan	240	3.0	1.3	n/a
Syria	200	89.2	3.2	n/a
Tunisia	27	3.5	4.8	n/a
UAE*	44	4.5	2.5	0
Yemen*	60	5.0	1.7	n/a

* UAE forces also have a Presidential Guard component of 12,000. Yemen forces include a Marines force of 500.

Source: IHS Markit, Jane's Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Center.

forces for large-scale ground operations and by providing a justification for a larger, more permanent, federated force. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the troop levels in the various Arab nations.

With the general exception of the oil-exporting nations, most Arab countries struggle financially with stagnant GDP growth and operate under highly constrained government budgets. At the same time, the entire region is facing a number of particularly serious threats and grappling with security challenges that necessitate massive spending. Worldwide, the Arab countries have the highest military spending rates and rapidly escalating defense budgets. In addition, the growing number of retired military personnel demanding jobs and retirement benefits is placing a strain on government budgets and policy. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates that between 2006 and 2015, the biggest increases in military spending came from Iraq (536 percent), Libya (225 percent), Algeria (210 percent) and the UAE (136 percent). Saudi Arabia and the UAE (in third and fourteenth place, respectively) were among the top 15 nations with the highest expenditures in 2015.²⁸ When local funding is scarce, key countries like Jordan rely on the United States for massive infusions of funding to keep the military operational.²⁹ Table 2 details various regional military expenditures.

The oil-exporting nations in the Middle East are also experiencing an economic crisis compounded by a decline in prices. Projections indicate they may not recover in the foreseeable future. These nations are balancing the economic needs of their populations with the demands on their defense budgets, resulting in serious strains. The International Monetary Fund (IMF)

estimates that, with the increase in government spending in these nations, there has been a sharp increase in the break-even point for the price of a barrel of oil (see Table 3). This is the price per barrel that a country needs to meet its anticipated outlays and to balance its budget while avoiding deficits. The IMF uses break-even prices as indicators of economic and political stability; these may affect the budgets available for government activities, such as defense spending.

The break-even point for Saudi Arabia's oil, for example, was \$106 per barrel in 2014, up from \$69 in 2010;³⁰ these prices are significantly higher than the average market price of 2015 at around \$58 per barrel. Although analysts expect increases in defense spending in the Middle East over the long term, the short and medium terms are uncertain. The 2016 defense budget for Saudi Arabia was lower than in 2015, while UAE defense expenditures are expected to increase in 2016. It is less clear what the trends are for the rest of the Arab League.³¹

The details of the federated force remain vague, as is the Arab League's Joint Defense Council proposal. While there are 22 members of the Arab League, the Arab federated force would likely be drawn mainly from Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and the UAE and would be headed by a Saudi officer headquartered in the kingdom. The force would be made up of an air command of 500-1,000, a naval command at 3,000-5,000 and ground troops numbering 34,000-35,000 — made up of a special-forces command, a rapid-reaction force and a rescue-operations command. The Arab Gulf countries would provide management funding, and the home countries would provide operational financing. The

TABLE 2. Regional Military Expenditure Data, 2015.

Country	Share of GDP (%)	Share of Government Spending (%)	Total (USD)	Per Capita (USD)
Algeria	6.2	14.3	10,413	258
Bahrain	4.6	14.2	1,430	1,105
Comoros	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Djibouti	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Egypt	1.7	5.3	5,477	61.9
Iraq	9.1	13.3	13,121	373
Jordan	4.2	14.6	1,616	237
Kuwait	3.4*	8.3*	5,941*	1,486*
Lebanon	4.1	14.2	2,239	492
Libya	7.3*	9.5*	3,289*	533*
Mauritania	3.9	9.1	135	36.5
Morocco	3.2	10.6	3,268	97.6
Oman	16.2	28.2	9,883	2,574
Palestine	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Qatar	1.5**	4.8**	1,877**	1,146**
Saudi Arabia	13.7	27.4	87,186	2,778
Somalia	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Sudan	13.8	18****	1,536****	115
Syria	4.1**	13.6**	2,485**	110**
Tunisia	2.2	980	980	980
UAE	5.7*	17.4*	22,795*	2,446*
Yemen	4.6*	14.3*	1715*	62.4*

* The reported data is from 2014. ** The numbers are not available for 2015.

*** Last available data is 2010. **** Last available data 2006.

Source: "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database."

likely framework nations would be Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Sudan; countries such as Jordan, Morocco and the UAE would provide niche capabilities.³²

At the time of writing, the Arab League has not decided on a final format. In fact, the meeting of the Joint Defense Council, tasked with drafting the protocols of the joint force, has been indefinitely postponed with no reschedule date. It is quite likely that military cooperation in the region will continue to be bilateral and sporadic.³³ Given the complications of coordinating and fielding a joint military-command structure, and the differences in political and security priorities, it may behoove the league to identify areas of commonality and cooperation and to define situations requiring the use of force in a way that is more focused and distributes the burden more equitably, rather than trying to realize the concept of a federated military force.

MINISTRIES OF DEFENSE

In considering the setting up or transformation of a ministry of defense (MOD), there are two main points of concern. The first involves the MOD's functions and administrative structure; the second concerns leadership and personnel. Both points are intended to establish the primacy of civilian control over the military, to ensure stability through the continuity of policy and personnel, to allow for the division of tasks and responsibilities between civilian authority and the military, and to maximize efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources.³⁴

The function and administrative structure of the MOD involves regulating the relationship between the government's civilian and armed-forces components. In the case of a democratically elected government, the will of the electorate imposes military policies on the MOD, and civil-

TABLE 3. Break-Even Oil Prices (USD / barrel).

Country	Average 2000-2012	2014
Algeria	n/a	135.3
Bahrain	61.7	122.5
Iraq	n/a	113.2
Kuwait	n/a	55.8
Libya	46.9	206
Oman	n/a	108.6
Qatar	41.9	53.5
Saudi Arabia	n/a	105.7
UAE	33	79
Yemen	n/a	160

Source: International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook*.

ians maintain oversight and temper military actions. The MOD is the buffer and the translator between politics and force. It is a two-way flow; the MOD advocates and represents the needs of the forces to the civilian government, and military action reflects the will of the civilian politicians and the nation's security policy. Mutual cooperation between the military and the civilian government is a necessity as the two institutions share the duty of defense in strategy, organization and operations. The failures of the Libyan military in 2011 and the Iraqi military in 2014 represent a breakdown in the relationship between the military and the civilian government, rendering the military unable to perform its duties.³⁵

The MOD is also the institution that manages the resources of the military; it is responsible for the long-term planning of development, acquisition, and maintenance of equipment and facilities. It is also the umbrella organization where the actions of the various services are joined to serve the overall security of the nation. It ensures that the mission of the services does not overlap and duplicate programs. It also balances the power of the services, acting as an arbitrator for a greater common good — national defense. The MOD is also the institution that manages the funds, planning, programming and budgeting to ensure a match between strategy and operations in equipment and personnel, and ensures transparency and oversight in the use of funds.

The second essential task of the MOD centers on leadership and personnel. The civilian minister of defense becomes the spokesperson for the military's interests, shielding the force from accusations of self-serving behavior and safeguarding it from unnecessary political meddling.

The minister also ensures that the nation's political interests and its legitimate use of force have been merged. The MOD leadership assumes the management of defense while freeing up the military leadership — such as the chiefs of staff — to concentrate on their mission, the mechanisms of defense.

As part of the effort to reform the military, nations in the Arab Middle East are considering standing up MODs or appointing ministers of defense. Although a number of Arab nations do have MODs, most lack power and control; the military has the actual authority. In classifying relations between civilian and military authorities, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar and the UAE are examples of civilian control of the military with no constructive cooperation between the two sectors. In Lebanon and Tunisia, while there is no civilian oversight of the military, the military does not interfere in political life. In Libya and Yemen, both civilian and military authorities are too fragmented to be effective or function together. In Algeria and Egypt, observers consider the military to wield absolute power.³⁶ The regime in Syria exerts absolute power over military institutions and has been able to ensure a cohesion of forces.³⁷

In addition, most ministers of defense tend to be active members of the military; civilians tend to be figureheads with no decision-making authority. In Egypt, for example, Article 197 of the constitution, drafted on December 12, 2012, and preserved in the 2014 draft, stipulates that the minister of defense be selected from the ranks of active-duty officers.³⁸ In the case of Jordan and the UAE, the prime minister is the figurehead civilian defense leader, though he has no effective authority. A civilian heads the MOD in Tunisia,

where the military is apolitical and largely controlled by the civilian institutions of government.³⁹

In Egypt, each successive constitution from 1971 to 2014 increased the power of the military

and reduced all forms of civilian control and oversight.

In practice, every defense minister was an active mil-

itary officer, and the constitution of 2014 finally enshrined the practice by specifying this explicitly.

Even though the Iraqi constitution of 2005 places the military under civilian control with a balance of power, the defense ministry and military have effectively been disempowered, subordinated and subjected to sectarian politics. The prime minister runs the military under tight control, ensuring the MOD's weak institutional and war-fighting capability.⁴⁰

Algeria's constitutions of 1976, 1989 and 1996 asserted the preeminence of politics over the military. However, as the successor of the institution that fought for independence, the military retained a special status over all other parts of the government. It continues to wield power in Algeria's economic and social realms. Since independence, the defense minister has always been a military officer; often the president would hold both titles concurrently.⁴¹

In Lebanon, the president, as commander in chief of the armed forces — with the approval of the council of ministers — is authorized to make decisions on military budgets, deployments and

benefits. Most Lebanese defense ministers have been civilians.⁴²

In Saudi Arabia, the king is the ultimate arbiter of defense issues; in the UAE, the president is the supreme commander

of the forces.

Both nations, however, have a civilian minister of defense who is a member of the ruling family.

Even though the Iraqi constitution of 2005 places the military under civilian control with a balance of power, the defense ministry and military have effectively been disempowered, subordinated and subjected to sectarian politics.

Libya did not have an MOD under Qadhafi and before the Arab Spring.⁴³ At the writing of this paper, the situation there is tenuous; with a fragmented military and no credible institutions, the roles of the MOD and defense minister are unclear. Although Yemen currently does have an MOD headed by a military officer, the force is highly fragmented, and governmental institutions are in disarray. The functioning of the MOD and the chiefs of staff, and their relationship to the civilian government, are uncertain and ill defined.

CONCLUSION

It is unclear at this time which, if any, of the three proposals — the creation of a system of national conscription, the establishment of a Federated Arab Force capable of joint defense, or the standing up of ministries of defense — will be implemented. For national conscription, each country is likely to use a different approach. The less populous Gulf states, for example, will probably move slowly due to the competing demand for manpower from the private sector. They are going to need to resolve the structure and functioning of the reserves and to create a role for

reserve personnel who leave after fulfilling their obligations. Countries like Jordan that struggle financially and do not have problems filling the ranks have little need to implement a full-fledged conscription system. Jordan might consider youth programs of some kind to promote employment and national service. Saudi Arabia is the wild card. Some form of conscription might go a long way with their youth and help with their newly found outward-looking vision.

Regarding the federated force, negotiations for its creation have been postponed so many times that it is doubtful it will ever be formed. The Arab nations will need to be realistic; they need results that are inclusive of all — not just the Gulf Cooperation Council members. They will probably need a systematic and gradual approach to build confidence and trust in the durability of the effort and its benefits for all. They will have to focus on the buildup of mutually beneficial capacity and then consider a federated defense that is politically sensitive. There must be the political will to move away from the prevailing mindset of only focusing on bilateral relations, to a multilateral outlook with confidence-building measures.

Finally, it may not be realistic at present for Arab nations to acquiesce to

pressure from more established countries, like the United States and members of NATO, to adopt security-cooperation programs that follow an established model for MODs and democratic civilian control of the armed forces as a method for determining strategy and the purpose of their forces. The experience of Western nations — their security environment, governance structures and history of civilian control of the forces — is very different. To manage waste and streamline business, however, effective ministries of defense need to be a part of the governance structure in Arab countries. This also requires ministers of defense who can formulate and manage the day-to-day business of defense and free up the military to focus on their professional expertise. It is one thing to create an MOD and another to give it the necessary legal authority, financial responsibility, personnel resources and power. Competency in budgets, personnel, acquisition, and definition of roles and responsibilities will be necessary for the effective functioning and efficient control of resources expended on the forces. A delicate balance must be maintained between the civilian and military authorities. The end goal should be a system with transparent, accountable, predictable and consistent relations between the two sectors.

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