



**New Armies for a New Era. Decrypting post-2011 Arab Military Reforms:
Trends from Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates**

NATO Defense College Foundation Working Paper

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The Arab armies' reaction to the 2011 uprisings is a subject broadly-inquired by analysts and academia. On the contrary, Arab armies' evolution and reform is a topic widely neglected², especially after 2011. But NATO can't miss this point. In times of *global interdependence*, the Atlantic Alliance must be ready to understand and interact with a changing Middle East, since NATO Arab partners' security is more and more NATO's one, in terms of shared objectives, common threats and cooperative security. Drawing upon multidisciplinary literature and day-by-day analysis, this paper wants to foster the debate on the state of the Arab armies, as units of study, decrypting trends in military reforms, with a specific focus on two different, but prominent case-studies: Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Our aim is to shift the focus on how Arab security forces, in particular the armies, changed after 2011, coping with emerging challenges and actors. Beyond the theoretical debate on "democratization" and "authoritarian resilience", the concept of military reform is here the lens of investigation to frame current, empirical Arab armies' trends.

1. Armies' New Context. Four drivers of change

Four intersected drivers of change can be isolated after 2011. They frame the developing context where Arab armies are called to operate: international, regional and domestic levels are more and more permeable and difficult to disentangle, thus magnifying intermestic politics.

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² Two remarkable exceptions, both prior to the uprisings, are Oren Barak-David Assaf, "The Arab Security Sector: A New Research Agenda for a Neglected Topic", *Armed Forces & Society* 36 (5), pp.804-824, 2010; Yezid Sayigh, "Security Sector Reform in the Arab Region: Challenges to Developing an Indigenous Agenda", *Arab Reform Initiative*, Thematic Paper, 1 December 2007.

1.1 Regionalization of Security

The current international system is characterized by multiple centers of power: besides the United States, Russia and China, different regional powers are becoming more actively engaged, leaving room for *ad hoc* cooperation as well as for indirect, proxy confrontation in many regions, including the Middle East. Since Washington's global governance aspirations ended, security vacuums have been quickly filled by other state/non-state actors, willing to set their own parameters of security: this is why global security remains a positive-sum game, but is more difficult to translate into policies than before. As a matter of fact, *regionalization of security* is the first powerful driver of change. If the management of security becomes a "regional matter", regional powers will enhance efforts to exert/impose their own security agenda on neighboring territories, so fueling counter-alignments, arms race and intra-regional conflict. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a perfect example of this kind of regionalization, which also masks rising nationalism in the Gulf region: under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the GCC became more active and it has relegated the Arab League to a secondary role in Arab matters, in particular after the uprisings. In March 2011, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates' military intervention in Bahrain anticipated this trend, openly unveiled by the 2015 Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen. In 2017, they also led the diplomatic crisis against Qatar. The *regionalization of security* dynamic has a deep impact on Arab armies, modifying requested tasks and expertise: but since it is the opposite of multilateralism, it increasingly serves security apparatus' national goals.

1.2 The Crisis of the Arab State

Middle Eastern order is in fragments, shaken by states collapse, civil wars and unsustainable social pacts: the Arab uprisings emphasized *the crisis of the Arab state*.³ This is the second driver of change: sovereignty is constantly eroded as state legitimacy, challenged not only by sub/trans-national actors but also weakened by persisting states' ineffectiveness. This contributes to diminish armies' available financial and human resources, also defying coherence and *esprit de corps* with respect to contesting agencies. The fragmentation of the social fabric affects different countries, leading to a resurgent tribalism that found fertile ground in Iraq and Libya.

1.3 Regional Polarization and Sectarianism

Middle East's disorder bolsters new power relations and inter-states realignments, strengthening the competition for regional power and hegemony: the "Cold war" between Saudi Arabia and Iran

³ Yezid Sayigh, "Militaries, Civilians and the Crisis of the Arab State", *The Washington Post*, The Monkey Cage Blog, 8 December 2014.

(fueled by the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq), as well as the intra-Sunni rivalry between Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates and Qatar reshaped regional dynamics and gave to external actors (Russia in particular) room for maneuvering, altering the balance of power in conflict-thorn countries (Syria). *Regional polarization and sectarianism*, exacerbated by intra-regional struggles, represent the third driver of change, in which identity politics systemically becomes a tool of power politics.

1.4 Transnational Threats

From a domestic point of view, *transnational threats* mark the fourth driver of change. States' weakening enhances sub-national, often regional-based loyalties as kinship and tribal lineages, emphasizing informal actors and alternative security providers' proliferation. Patron-client relations, also on a transnational basis, are able to spin regional events, consolidating asymmetric interdependence among states/non-state actors. Moreover, political marginalization affected disenfranchised populations, in particular ethnic and religious minorities already excluded by states' social pacts. This paved the way for increased instability, while tribal and ethnic affiliations rose in prominence, questioning both the usefulness of the colonial borders and the creation of new State entities (Kurdistan). In this vacuum, jihadism proliferated, taking advantage of state fragmentation and rendering border areas in Middle East and North Africa ungovernable.

2 Defying Arab Armies' Role. Traditional and New Obstacles to Military Reform

According to classical definitions of Security Sector Reform (SSR), two are the SSR's core dimensions:

- effectiveness and efficiency;
- democratization and civilian control.

However, these are exactly Arab Armies' well-known weak points, in republics as well as in monarchies: civil-military relations in the Middle East are characterized by undefined boundaries, and it is also more appropriate to talk about civil-security relations, given the variety of security providers. Following this coordinates, it is possible to isolate traditional and new obstacles to military reform in Arab Armies, shedding light on what mostly impedes Armies' effective adaptation to post-2011 challenging context.

2.1 Traditional Obstacles to Military Reform:

State Allegiance vs Regime Allegiance. Since national security is often overlapped with regime security, armies' first objective is regime protection, rather than state protection. This phenomenon becomes even more evident due to the decline of conventional inter-state wars, so giving priority to the security and intelligence services and contributing to the strengthening of the so-called Deep State. For instance, the military coup in Egypt in July 2013 highlighted the army's choice of regime protection, thus favoring a return to the authoritarian rule.

Politicization and Factionalism. Armies' politicization is the direct effect of regime allegiance. Academia has predominantly analyzed Arab Armies through the dichotomy "institutionalization vs patrimonialism", although reality is always more nuanced than constructed categories.⁴ As a matter of fact, states have attempted to build modern armies mixing professionals (in upper echelons) and cronies (in lower ranks), conscripts and mercenaries, foreigners and locals, in order to maximize loyalty and short-term results, while diminishing political risks in the long-term.

Accountability and Lack of Civilian Oversight. Morocco, Qatar and Oman don't have defense committee. In Jordan, the budget of the army is passed through the Parliament, even though committees and legislators are not allowed to examine expenditures. Among the Arab Gulf states, only Kuwait's Parliament has formal oversight rights on the security sector, given its constitutional tradition: but political devices and filters disempower an effective civilian control on the Army. Notwithstanding formal checks and balances, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki succeeded to build his personal military network, bypassing institutional bodies through regional command centers. In Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika managed to complete the overhaul of the security services in 2016, after a long power struggle with the powerful *Département du reinsegnement et de la sécurité* (DRS), placing the new *Direction des services de sécurité* (DSS) under his authority⁵. In Saudi Arabia, the new Presidency of State Security will control several security bodies (as the rapid intervention forces) formerly under the Interior ministry authority, so furtherly centralizing power on king Salman and his son, the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman. The role of the militaries in national economies is another obstacle to defense accountability and civilian oversight, as visibly occurs in Egypt.

⁴ Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East. Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2004, pp. 139–157.

⁵ Umberto Profazio, "The overhaul of the security services and the power struggle in Algeria", *NATO Defense College Foundation*, Maghreb Strategic Trends, November 2015.

Welfare Function. In many Arab states, the Army, as well as the public sector, has also a welfare function: it alleviates poverty and social unbalances providing salaried employments, especially in less developed areas. However, overstuffed armies, or the waste and misappropriation of defense funds, contribute not only to feed pockets of corruption, but also to diminish armies' performance. For instance, fictitious, "ghost" soldiers are widely present in Yemen and Iraq, where in 2014 an investigation into corruption following the fall of Mosul revealed that 50,000 false names were on payroll⁶. In Libya, the Central Bank of Libya continues to pay the salaries of the country's warring militias, contributing to their proliferation and preventing any successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program⁷. Therefore, armies' welfare function and, in some cases, corruption (when allocated resources are systematically distracted from military personnel to personal enrichment), resist military reform attempts, so weakening defense effectiveness.

2.2 New Obstacles to Military Reform:

Increasing gap between Armies and Élite Forces: resources, capabilities and deployment. Middle Eastern states have heavily invested in the security sector, as élite forces (National/Presidential Guards or Special Forces), better financed, trained and equipped than the armies. These corps displayed a diversification of the security matters, certifying the mistrust of civil authorities towards the military: élite forces' deployment rise nowadays in frequency, engagement and impact, also abroad, widening the capability gap with the armies and so downplaying plans of comprehensive military reform. This strategy also resulted in fewer funds for the armies, increasing the risk of a lack of coordination between different and competing security forces: for instance, Morocco's gendarmerie reportedly absorbs the 22% of the military budget, while the army only the 17%. The occurrence of inter-state wars declines and domestic challenges rise: thus armies' original *raison d'être* is overshadowed, while the militaries and the police have increasingly overlapped functions. Given their background and cohesion, élite forces are more effective to cope with internal dissent control with respect to the armies: in Jordan, the gendarmerie (*darak*), a new established rapid intervention force, carried out its first operation cracking down on workers' protests in Aqaba (2010) and then was deployed to settle 2011 demonstrations. Some of the grievances that Jordanian military veterans denounced in 2010-11 were also directed against Special Forces' rising benefits. Élite corps also assure national/regime security protection in a wider sense, for instance fighting in third theatres (as the Saudi and Emirati Special Forces' intervention in Yemen).

⁶ Dominic Evans, "Iraq says it found 50,000 'ghost soldiers' on payroll", *Reuters*, 1 December 2014.

⁷ Colin Freeman, "Libya's central bank causing 'civil war' by paying rival militias, says UK envoy", *The Telegraph*, 8 February 2016.

Coexistence/Cooperation between Armies and armed non-state actors. Armies/élite forces and irregular forces are not always antithetical actors. After 2011, militaries and non-state fighters progressively experience coexistence and, in some areas, cooperation to achieve shared objectives. Since asymmetrical threats monopolize the scenario, regimes often lean on irregular forces (though asymmetrical too) as devices to manage highly fragmented societies, divided along identity lines. For instance, the tacit cooperation between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Hezbollah contributes to defend Lebanon's borders from jihadists and from the Syrian war spillover (as testified in summer 2017 by Hezbollah's military campaign against Daesh and then by LAF's operation on the Lebanese-Syrian border). In Iraq, the Iran-backed, predominantly Shia militia al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF) fights Daesh alongside the army, also entering Sunni provinces. This occurs also on a transnational basis: in Yemen, UAE's Special Forces combat Shia insurgents and jihadists, together with Emirati-supported Yemen's tribal militias (Security Belt Forces, Hadhrami Elite Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces); Hezbollah fights in Syria with Assad's loyalists and PMF are also engaged in Syria to strengthen the pro-regime front. The military's collaboration with asymmetrical forces does not hide the weaknesses and the inefficacy of the armies to counter complex threats. Furthermore, the overreliance on non-state actors represents a gamble: common interests of both parts could suddenly split once achieved a certain result.

Hybridization of Security Providers. The variety of security providers in the Arab states multiplies and is more and more difficult to classify them according to well-defined categories: élite forces and non-state actors (as militias), as well as army's militaries (conscripts and/or volunteers) and private security agents. Trapped between pragmatic complementarity and enduring competition, armies/élite units and non-state actors picture a scenario characterized by growing hybrid governance in the security domain: this hampers military reform. As a matter of fact, militias often receive informal legitimacy due to their work alongside the army or in replacement of regular forces: they often become institutional actors, formally affiliated to the Interior Ministry or the army (PMF in Iraq, UAE-backed militias in Yemen and Libyan National Army (LNA)). However, militias' institutionalization, but not disbandment, widens the "grey zone" between regular and irregular forces, leaving also unaccountable areas for justice.

The Sunset of Hierarchical Security: the Armies and the Horizontal-Network Security Model. Armies' traditional pattern presents clear leadership and organized chains of command. This structure, although frequently challenged and weakened by sub-national kinships, was the "should-be" model for the Arab states so far, especially at Western's eyes. But the rapid growth of

transnational identities, coupled with states sovereignty erosion, has been redrawing security governance, shifting armies towards a “networks security” model: states frequently craft a less vertical military approach than before, to better cope with such a slippery context. Therefore, armies often adopt a “horizontal model” to establish ground-cooperation with local actors (regional and/or tribal forces), in order to shape interdependent, adaptable security networks against asymmetrical threats. As a result, weakened hierarchical structures in the security domain are complemented/replaced by patronage circles, where ‘money loyalty’ wins on ‘ideological loyalty’ and the delivery of security comes first with respect to the nature of the security provider. In case of transnational patronage, this tactic also reduces local ownership, maximizing external penetration.

Time for Reform vs Time for Reaction: the Armies’ Chronological Gap. In the Middle East, current multidimensional challenges need quick answers by the security sector to contain unmanageable consequences. But there’s a “timing-gap”: military reform to acquire operative effectiveness and readiness can be achieved only through long-term planning, training and incremental adjustments. Therefore, armies’ time for reaction is not armies’ time for reform: this pushes regimes to seek for alternative, sometimes problematic roads, as non-state fighters, to enhance timely response capabilities *vis-à-vis* challenges.

3. Military Reforms Trends after 2011

Considering the long list of traditional and new obstacles to the reform of the military, the Arab states have struggled to adapt their armies to the new security context that emerged after 2011. Most of the Arab countries decided to postpone any change to better times, focusing on how to manage quickly the existential threats posed to them. At the same time, other states tried to implement ambitious reforms of their security apparatus, in order to adequately respond to the present challenges.

3.1 Tunisia’s Army in Transition: New Tasks and Domestic Pressures

Tunisia’s plan for a comprehensive reform of its military was eased by the quite successful transition of the country. The adoption of the new constitution in 2014 offered the opportunity of a reset, allowing the Tunisian leaders to make a fresh start on all the most pressing issues facing their country, including the SSR.

Compared to two regional heavyweights such as Egypt and Algeria, Tunisia’s army is definitely less powerful. According to several observers, this contributed to the success story of the Tunisian

transition⁸. The inability of the Tunisian military to play a central role in the post-Jasmine revolution period was a crucial factor, in particular after the July 2013 coup in Egypt showed how the revolution could easily turn into reversal.

Historical reasons, such as the existence of a police state in Tunisia and the mistrust of the military by Presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, help explain why the army and the Ministry of Defense were less favored than other security institutions. At the same time, this weakness became a liability once terrorist attacks started to strike the country, jeopardizing the delicate transition, highlighting the several deficiencies and the complete lack of a counterterrorism doctrine and strategy. The establishment in December 2014 of the new Intelligence, Security and Defence Agency under the Ministry of Defence was considered a first step in the right direction, strengthening the capacity of the intelligence apparatus in a comprehensive and coordinated way.

The need to protect and preserve the Tunisian experiment from the dangers of the regional turmoil urged many partners to help Tunis. The renewed Tunisian leadership could rely on the support of the United States, which increased their economic and security assistance to Tunisia, deepening its commitment for SSR programs. According to the Security Assistance Monitor, from 2011 to 2014 the US government provided US\$185 million to Tunisia through at least eight security aid programs, including US\$42 million for efforts in the SSR. In July 2015, Washington also designated Tunisia as its sixteenth major non-NATO ally (MNNA), a status that offered tangible privileges, such as eligibility for training, loans of equipment for cooperative research and development or foreign military financing for commercial leasing of several defense articles.

In 2016, NATO also announced the establishment of an Intelligence Fusion Centre (IFC) in Tunisia, as part of its program to project stability's beyond its borders. The IFC would have involved military and civilian agencies, sharing intelligence and focusing on the phenomenon of the foreign fighters, which particularly affects Tunisia. However, internal resistance to deepen the partnership with NATO and the increasing competition among Western countries to provide support to the Tunisian security forces are delaying to the establishment of the IFC⁹.

At the same time, a wave of terrorist attacks in 2015 overshadowed the need to implement the most urgent reform of the security sector, confirming the chronological gap between time for reform and

⁸ Sharan Grewal, "How Tunisia's military has changed during its transition to democracy", *The Washington Post*, The Monkey Cage Blog, 8 March 2016.

⁹ Umberto Profazio, "Projecting stability beyond NATO's borders: an Intelligence Fusion Centre in Tunisia", *NATO Defense College Foundation*, Maghreb Strategic Trends, July 2016.

time for reaction mentioned as one of the new obstacles to the reform of the Arab armies. Tunisia found itself on the brink of a return to the police state after President Beji Caid Essebsi declared the state of emergency, following the terrorist attack against the imperial Marhaba Beach hotel in Sousse, in which 38 people (including many foreign tourists) were killed. Moreover, the terrorist attacks also forced the military to adapt to a changing environment, in which their role was redefined by security threats that fall in the grey area between law enforcement and military activities¹⁰ displaying a lack of coordination with internal security forces and the emergence of the security sectors' 'horizontal model' of cooperation.

Despite the security context has certainly improved (Tunisian security forces successfully repelled a terrorist attack in Ben Guerdane in March 2016 and were able to neutralize senior leaders of different jihadist groups), the delay of SSRs continue to pose a threat to the Tunisian transition. The state of emergency remains in place and affect the civil-security relationship in a relevant way. In May 2016, internal turmoil forced Essebsi to adopt exceptional measures, ordering the Tunisian army to protect the critical infrastructures of the country, in particular the oil, gas and phosphate facility. The resort to the army to protect facilities represents a new challenge for the military, as for the first time since the revolution soldiers had to face protestors during demonstrations and sit-ins in the most troubled parts of the country. Escalating tensions and the accidental death of one of the protestors in Tataouine in May 2017 didn't affect the relations between the army and the people yet. However, the frequent involvement of the military in police or internal security operations could increase social tensions and remains highly controversial.

3.2 Not Only Foreign Projection: UAE's Militaries as National Identity-Builders.

Since the Nineties, UAE's armed forces have played the "late federation-builders" role. As a matter of fact, the modern integration of separated military systems into a unified, Abu Dhabi-led force, allowed the al-Nahyan dynasty to centralize Abu Dhabi's rule on the other emirates, first of all the main competitor Dubai. This was possible due to the creation of a federal neo-patrimonial network linking the security sector with the royal family.¹¹ From that moment on, the military sector has become United Arab Emirates' distinctive foreign policy vector. In 2011, the Arab uprisings and the

¹⁰ Anour Boukhars, "Strengthen Tunisia's Army, But Keep It Out of Politics", *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, Diwan, 20 October 2015.

¹¹ Eleonora Ardemagni, "United Arab Emirates' Armed Forces in the Federation-Building Process: Seeking for Ambitious Engagement", *International Studies Journal* 47, Vol. 12, No.3, Winter 2016, pp.43-62.

consequent collapse of regional order gave to the UAE and to Qatar the possibility to translate Emirati and Qatari financial power, which skyrocketed in the 2000s, into regional power and, in the case of Abu Dhabi, military prestige. Therefore, the intra-Sunni rivalry openly started, driven by a mix of hard power (UAE) and soft power (Qatar).

In this evolving context, Emirati's military reform pursues not only defense modernization (i.e. arms procurement), but also defense transformation (i.e. training, local expertise, operative intents, indigenous military industry). This has an impact on civil-military relations, gradually modifying UAE's pattern with respect to the traditional oil monarchies' one.¹² In the UAE, military reform has been currently following two main trajectories: the shift from 'hardware' to know-how building in the military field¹³ and the introduction of conscription in 2014 as a cultural tool of nation-building.¹⁴

Local expertise is the first driver of military reform. Surely, military expenditures for equipment have constantly risen in the last decade: but the Emirati leadership realized, earlier than neighboring monarchies, that military capabilities are not only related to arms procurement. This occurred notwithstanding the special, 'comfortable' relationship with the United States, which provides an unmatched security umbrella to Abu Dhabi. As a result, Emirati rulers began to allocate more defense budget resources than before to enhance militaries' professionalization, focusing on local defense skills. Expertise means also UAE defense manufacturing industry, which experiences a positive growth, fostered by economic diversification and direct offsets: this will contribute more and more to spin Emirati defense procurement choices. The establishment of EDIC (Emirates Defense Industry Companies) in 2014 wants to consolidate the military industrialization project at the eyes of foreign investors.

Emirati's active participation into the US-led Global Coalition against Daesh (2014) allowed UAE's combat pilots to furtherly improve air-power capabilities, among the most advanced in the Middle East: the UAE joined NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) since 2004. But in 2015, UAE's military intervention in Yemen (together with Saudi Arabia) was the real watershed for the Emirati

¹² Mehran Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East", *Political Science Quarterly*, 115, 1, Spring 2000.

¹³ Shana Marshall, "Military Prestige, Defense-Industrial Production and the Rise of Gulf Military Activism", in Holger Albrecht-Aurel Croissant-Fred H. Lawson (eds), *Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pp. 241-263.

¹⁴ Eleonora Ardemagni, "Emiratization of Identity: Conscription as a Cultural Tool of Nation-Building", *Gulf Affairs*, OxGAPS-Oxford Gulf & Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum, University of Oxford, St Antony's College, Autumn 2016, pp.6-9.

armed forces, especially for the Presidential Guards' Special Forces. First of all, Abu Dhabi led ground operations in Yemen, with a specific focus on the South of the country. UAE's military engagement was fundamental to recapture Aden from the insurgents: the amphibious operations from the new Emirati military base in Eritrea (Assab) to regain Red Sea islands (as Perim) and parts of the Western Yemeni coast (Al-Mokha), were an unprecedented success for the Emirati forces. Moreover, UAE's Special Forces are front-line actors in counterterrorism against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): they secured the third Yemen's city of Mukalla (Hadhramaut), pushing jihadists to withdraw in April 2016, working alongside Yemeni security forces, Yemen's tribal militias backed by Abu Dhabi and U.S. Special Forces. In the same way, UAE's elite soldiers are fighting AQAP's fiefdoms in Shabwa region since August 2017, also protecting critical oil and gas infrastructures.

Conscription is the second driver of military reform for the UAE. In 2014, the Emirates introduced the compulsory military service (as Qatar and later Kuwait in 2017¹⁵): all male citizens of 18-30 age must serve in the armed forces from nine months since two years, depending on the education level. After a first phase of study, exercises and lectures, recruits join the Presidential Guard for practical training; some draft soldiers were also deployed in Yemen until September 2015. The 2015-17 Emirati Strategy for the National Service establishes three batches each year of between 5000 and 7000 total recruits: nationals represent only 20% of the UAE's total inhabitants. For Abu Dhabi, the novelty has first of all a cultural meaning, but it has also a military impact that it has still to be assessed, although the Emirati army remains a small force, directly controlled by Abu Dhabi's royal family, mixing *'assabiya*-based officers and foreign manpower. At government's eyes, conscription is first of all a "top-down" measure to enhance the Emirati collective identity, still fragmented by different tribal affiliations, emirate-specific identities and the overwhelming numbers of expatriates. Identity is an incessant social construction: therefore, much of the "Emiratization of identity" project passes now through the army and the draft institution, with the purpose to awake young Emiratis' patriotism and national feelings, keeping them away from alternative identities which could harm national security, as militant Islamism and jihadism. The intervention in Yemen is a real laboratory of national consciousness: on September 4, 2015, 45 UAE's soldiers died in Yemen after a Houthi attack. This unprecedented deadly event was followed by a real, national mourning moment, highly covered by the Gulf media; at least 100 Emirati soldiers have died in Yemen so far.

¹⁵ On the introduction of conscription in some Arab Gulf states, see Zoltan Barany, "Big News! Conscription in the Gulf", *Middle East Institute*, 25 January 2017.

In the UAE, these trajectories of military reform have been redrawing civil-military relations, shaping original, although still embryonic ties between the militaries and the civil society. This emerging trend will be even more evident in the long-term, and it will likely impact on the political sphere, given the rise of a “military élite” made by Emirati officers. As a matter of fact, “national identity-builder militaries” mark a clear difference with respect to the classical Arab Gulf States’ pattern of civil-military relations, based on definite boundaries between armed forces and society, crystallized by the absence of conscription. In the current Emirati case, the security sector continues to depend from tribal communities as usual (obviously in case of upper echelons), but the royal political discourse is now constructed to overcome peculiar belongings in order to transform the federation into a self-aware Nation, able to cope with multidirectional threats to regime security. Such a cultural project, through military means, needs the active involvement of the Emirati youth, corroborated by UAE’s military and maritime projection for regional prestige. For this purpose, an interventionist foreign policy remains a long-term objective for the Emirati leadership, as already occurred in Yemen and Libya.

4. Towards a ‘patchwork security’ model. Perspectives for NATO

In the Arab states, military reform faces traditional, persisting obstacles, as politicization and factionalism, lack of accountability, regime allegiance and, especially in the post-colonial military-building, by conflicting interests among external partners.¹⁶ Given the evolving regional scenario, Arab armies’ military reform attempts are also increasingly challenged by new obstacles, as the resources and capability divide with élite forces, the coexistence and/or cooperation with armed non-state actors, the hybridization of security providers and the growing dependence on foreign military donors, which inevitably affects states’ foreign policy.

The crisis of the Arab State, coupled with regional instability, has led to the re-emergence of local belongings: they are protective umbrellas for militias and armed groups based on confessional/ethnic or tribal allegiances. Therefore, in the Middle Eastern region, security has no longer the meaning it used to have until a decade ago: the Arab states are dealing with a new kind of security, “*patchwork security*”, which inevitably shakes armies’ role and tasks, pursuing them to redesign the organization model ‘on the ground’, shifting progressively from a classical, vertical/hierarchical military scheme, to a horizontal one, which also relies on networks with local security actors to re-establish/manage security.

¹⁶ Stephanie Cronin, *Armies and State-Building in the Modern Middle East. Politics, Nationalism and Military Reform*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2014.

In this picture, not only the fragmentation of many states favors locally-based security agreements and not overall, national frameworks, but competing security providers also multiply on the territory, as cases of coexistence/cooperation between armies and armed non-state actors. This leaves room for hybrid security experiences of combat and, later, governance (Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Yemen are prominent examples of this emerging trend). At the same time, this hybrid security model, seen by many Arab regimes as a short-term device to achieve security goals, is going to furtherly challenge states' legitimacy in the long-term, so hampering SSR's projects.

On the other hand, the specific cases of Tunisia and United Arab Emirates, although so different, shed light on how Arab armies are coping with challenges related to military reform: not only armies are more and more called to perform internal security duties, but they have lost their "primacy role" in the military domain, due to the shrinking of conventional wars and the surge of elite forces and security services. As a matter of fact, armies accomplish with new tasks, as police operations (for Tunisia), military interventions abroad (for the UAE), counterterrorism and protection of oil/gas facilities (for Tunisia and the UAE in Yemen). Therefore, armed forces' involvement into daily life enhances, as testified by the army's most recent intervention to protect critical infrastructures in Tunisia or the impact of conscription in the UAE. This promotes the recalibration of consolidated civil-military relation models, whose political consequences have still to be assessed.

Given this framework, NATO's contribution is more and more critical to support the adaptation of the Arab armies to changing requests and contexts, preserving and maximizing armies' military role. For this reason, security partnership and practical cooperation are fundamental ways to shape Arab armed forces' new resilience. This is why NATO can play a prominent and dynamic role in this sensitive juncture, deepening education and training initiatives with Arab partners, contributing to learning activities and military doctrine, and stressing the importance of accountability and civilian oversight in military reform. This would help Arab armies to re-invent themselves in a new geopolitical era, thus building concrete paths towards mutual understanding, and then military interoperability.