The Arab uprisings that swept the Arab world in 2011 were driven by many catalysts, either short term (in the first place the death by immolation of the young street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia and the ensuing social rage against regimes) or structural (socio-economic difficulties, enduring authoritarian rule, new generations, etc.). The surge of mass, street politics with exuberant large-scale crowds gathered in public spaces was unprecedented; after all one of the most symbolic and essential features of authoritarian ‘normal’ governance over a given polity is its exclusive control of public spaces. The prospects for change were, therefore, very real. At the same time, the character and reactions of one particular state institution, the military, also framed the various trajectories of transition and their different paths.

Once characterised by the general prevalence of enduring authoritarian rule, the Arab world was then driven into a process of transition, a process of change from one type of regime (entrenched authoritarian rule corseting political and economic dynamics for decades) to other potential types of regimes. The latter were characterised by a complex mixture of strong societal pressures towards democratisation, or at least some changes in state-society relations, the weight of ‘surviving’-re-emerging actors, especially those posted in state institutions (the police, the judiciary, the media), the fuelling of counter-revolutionary trends, the electoral surge of different kinds of Islamism (the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis) and, in some cases, the derailments of transitional processes into civil wars. In such unstable settings, the rebuilding of new regimes has been especially chaotic; a far cry from textbook transitions to democracy. The difficulties have been made evident by the persistent role of military actors in most cases, rather than the revival of opened (democratic) political processes, the rebuilding of new civilianised political systems, the (democratic) control on the armed forces and security sector reform.

The Military, the State and the Arab Uprisings

Why did the military adopt such a central role? On the one hand, authoritarian regimes lacked legitimacy, with no ideas, norms, institutions or social bases for support that they could rely on in order to justify their enduring rule. Their day-to-day workings were based on a set of ‘appearances’ (‘normalcy’ in public spaces) and on the exclusive control by the ruler and his associated clique over major decisions. And they were ultimately buttressed by repression, coercion, or at least fear emanating from such prospects (‘the wall of fear’ as the Arab expression puts it). As revealed by the sudden shockwave of the 2011 uprisings, these regimes were founded on shaky foundations: they were very harsh, yet at the same time fragile. The search by regimes for sources of support when severely contested quickly fell on the military, due to a lack of sources for legitimacy, other than...

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1 Bahgat Korany, “A microcosm of the Arab Spring, sociology of Tahrir square,” in Mehran Kamrava, ed, Beyond the Arab Spring, London, Hurst, 2014.
coercion. As a corollary, Syria since 2011 has set about engineering the worst-case scenario, a descent into chaos, to sustain their rule. Authoritarian regimes had drawn up implicit ‘pacts’ with their respective militaries: they could keep it small in size, compensating this with hypertrophied security and paramilitary forces (the Ministry of Interior in Tunisia due to Ben Ali’s military background) or parallel armies as in Libya (and Gaddafi was far more systematic in using tribal recruitment and allegiance, even when compared with a country like Yemen, considered the archetypal case of tribalism); or they could exert huge social engineering in the officers’ corps to position loyal officers at key posts based on ethnic, confessional or tribal ties (Alawites in Syria, Sunnis in Bahrain, Sanhan tribesmen in Yemen); or, finally, they could draw up an implicit pact of support whereby the powerful military enjoyed some kind of ‘toned-down’ institutional autonomy based on privileges, particularly economic ones (Egypt).

On the other hand, the Arab uprisings were essentially a battle over the State, with struggles between very divergent points of view: those who considered that the problem was the authoritarian ruler and his clique – mostly people posted in the state apparatus and considered by others as ‘remnants (fouloul)’ of the old regime –; others who argued for gradualist reforms (some kind of accountability and rule of law); and finally those who pleaded for structural bottom-up changes in the name of (transitional) justice or ‘revolutionary’ legitimacy – the so-called young revolutionaries (al-shabab al-thawra) in Egypt or revolutionaries (al-thuwwar) in Libya. In such an intricate interplay, one essential state institution was the military, assuming it maintained a degree of cohesion during the transition process – the counterexample was the small and disorganised Libyan military or what remained of it after years of Gaddafi favouring ‘the people in arms (al-chaab al-musallah).’ The military was associated with the State much more openly and overtly than other institutions, such as the police or the judiciary – the latter were also endowed with a strong ‘sense of State’ in Egypt and Tunisia –. The military projected an image of itself as the embodiment of the nation, its ultimate protector in nationalist terms, at the service of the country, and held the socio-cultural sway, especially for conscripted armies (often filtered conscription) – but such a cultural weight as the military meant very different things in similarly nationalist armies. For instance, Tunisian officers’ loyalist attitude towards civilian rule, as compared with Egyptian officers’ sense of acting for Egypt but also as ‘owners’ of the State since 1952.

The uprisings acted as ‘stress tests’ deeply challenging the ‘normal’ workings of authoritarian rule, and hence calling for the military’s potential intervention, and then served as litmus tests that revealed the true nature of the military: as a corps keeping some cohesiveness of its own, or as a mere tool used by the incumbent regime to repress, or finally in Libya as a non-existent entity.

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that for years occupied a place in the background, like a kind of black box, found itself thrown into direct and open politics – and this after there being very few external analysts of Arab militaries in ‘normal’ authoritarian times, before the Arab uprisings, if compared, for instance, with the number of analysts of Islamism.

The Huge Challenges of Transition and the Tunisian Exception

An essential intervening factor should be stressed: beyond the generic and sometimes misleading vocabulary of ‘transition,’ transitions are not all comparable. When compared with former cases of transitions in Southern Europe (Greece, Portugal, Spain), Latin America or Eastern Europe (after 1989), transitions in the Arab World are messier and less clearly framed than their predecessors. The former were often ‘pacted transitions,’ based on agreements drawn up between elites (moderates from the opposition and reformists from the regime). And in Latin America, a tradition of constitutionalism had persisted in a pattern of alternating civilian and military rule, with a memory of civilian politics in churches, labour unions, parties, judiciary institutions and civil society. In such settings, mass mobilisations occurred during transitions, but they were kind of ‘cork events’ that disappeared thereafter, with revived political processes taking over and with political elites (new or old ones) moving forward through elections, party building and institution (re)building.

Quite differently in the Arab world since 2011, street politics, which is not a unified actor, has been much more active and re-energised by frustration with the lack of tangible progress or with attempts by leaders or groups (the military, the Muslim Brotherhood) to treat people the same way authoritarian regimes had been doing for years. And after decades of authoritarian destructive rule, the institutional setting was in a dire state (as exemplified by cases as different as Egypt and Libya): the unravelling of authoritarian regimes that had acted as exclusive ‘owners’ of the State, led to all levels of the state apparatus to unravel, with bureaucracies either dysfunctional or dying, some elements of state institutions (especially the police) being targeted, and the disarray extending to numerous sectors, including the business community, whose top layers (‘crony capitalists’) had cultivated close links with authoritarian regimes.

So Tunisia has positioned itself as an exception with its ability to gradually extract itself from such a morass – though it was also shaken by the political assassinations of two opposition figures, which was something new to the country. The Tunisian military is one that is hyper-loyalist, whose officers are middle-class civil servants with very little experience of political engagement, endowed with a staunch sense of the State and regard for the protection of national sovereignty, without interfering in internal or regional disputes. There was some kind of control (authoritarian) of the armed forces under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and a civilianised Defence Ministry has been an essential point of departure for transition. Size also matters; Bourguiba and Ben Ali’s starving of military resources and limiting its operations reduced the army’s size influencing the perceptions of the officers’ corps with a nationalist but not hegemonic Tunisian military. In 2011, the Tunisian military smoothly handed power over to civilians to rebuild the Tunisian polity and played no political role beyond guaranteeing stability until elections were held in October 2011, and then in the context of acute threats of terrorism on the Tunisian borders (especially with Libya) and in the southern restive and mountainous borderland with Algeria.

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In parallel, institutional rebuilding played an essential complementary role giving further reason for the military to step aside. The institutional tradition was ‘hijacked’ by the Ben Ali regime but not destroyed by its workings: a ‘sense of the State’ (the State as the pillar of the nation and not just a tool in the hands of the regime in power) was preserved by numerous actors, middle bureaucrats, lawyers, university professors, jurists, trade unionists, civil
society activists, human rights defenders, etc., along with military officers. These actors were able to revive the Tunisian statist tradition after the fall of the Ben Ali regime through the ‘Instance supérieure pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, la réforme politique et la transition démocratique.’ And furthermore, civil society came in concert to play a role as watchdog on crucial issues (such as women, freedom, individual rights) and to pressure political elites towards consensus, with an essential role for trade unions (in particular the UGTT). As a result, the main difficulties in Tunisia came not from a huge military lobbying to preserve certain interests, but from the institutional weight of parts of the former regime (the Ministry of Interior, the justice apparatus) and the absence of transitional justice.

The ‘Elephant in the China Shop’ and the Revenge of the State under Military Guidance in Egypt

Read in strict parallel, the Egyptian case displays the exact opposite features. This is the essential difference with Tunisia, beyond the similar role of the military in easing the early phase of transition in both countries. The transitional phase in Egypt was long, without a roadmap for transformation or to secure some kind of consensus among political forces for ‘robust competition’ and constructive deliberation. In Tunisia, political forces were aware of the potential disagreements and started building temporary institutions, until they forged some kind of consensus to proceed on and settled on a Constitution. In Egypt, the exact opposite happened, as exemplified by the unstable institutional rebuilding, with a referendum on a few constitutional articles, superseded by a constitutional declaration by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), then a supplementary constitutional declaration by the SCAF, then the Morsi Constitution and thereafter the Al-Sisi Constitution. No consensus was forged between political forces; instead, political divisions on the Constitution or on simple political decisions were transformed into existential and ideological issues (the identity of the State, the ‘civic State,’ the place of shari’a), displaying a strong ideological polarisation among Egypt’s political forces, with a rift opening in 2012-13 between two heterogeneous yet increasingly delimited camps, the Muslim Brotherhood vs. other political forces.

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In the middle, the military could position itself as the behind-the-scenes guardian of Egypt in a very proactive way. After the calamitous experience of direct rule by the SCAF, the ease with which President Morsi managed to force the SCAF out of power in August 2012 confirmed the military’s exhaustion and the army leadership’s broad-mindedness – particularly among the younger generals in the upper echelons of the SCAF, for instance General Al-Sisi – in entering into a tacit deal with the newly elected President Morsi in order to extricate itself from power and let civilians govern Egypt. The regime’s apparent civilianisation, a feature unseen in Egypt since 1952, with a civilian-elected President and vice-President, was not the end result of some regained civilian oversight over the military. As an indication of the tacit agreement between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, the 2012 (Morsi) Constitution gave in to all the demands of the military, including an autonomous budget and complete autonomy over its own affairs, immunity from prosecution in civilian courts and a veto in high politics by being associated to crucial decisions. The essential task of General Sisi during Morsi’s rule was to restore the military’s credibility: and the stunning fact is how successful the military was in restoring its popularity.

4 Others put the problem the other way: the military went to Morsi to offer such a deal.
and translating its own narrative into a kind of legitimacy adopting the role of guardian of the Egyptian polity (or in its own language, “the saviour of Egypt, inqadh Masr”) and in making Egyptians completely forget one year and a half of calamitous misrule by the SCAF.

But such a ‘quietist’ military stance could only be viable if the Muslim Brotherhood ruled Egypt smoothly – with direct military intervention remaining an option in case of failure, and not a foregone conclusion, as alluded to by numerous officers in the Egyptian press during Morsi’s rule. This did not materialise and the military overthrew Morsi on 3 July 2013 amidst a backdrop of popular mobilisations that granted the military the legitimacy to intervene: the coup d’état was rife with ambiguities, as many Egyptians deeply resented Morsi’s governance but genuinely did not want the President to be overthrown by the military or to witness the massacre that was committed against the Muslim Brotherhood’s sit-in in Rabaa square.

The military, or at least the parts of it (the military intelligence) around General (then Marshall, then President) Al-Sisi, has now rebuilt the regime based on an ‘authoritarian pact’ with the police, the media, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, certain businessmen, etc., legitimising itself by its ability to restore stability (istiqrar) in the country. The military has now taken centre stage with a new, previously unseen militarisation of power. In the 2013-15 period, the military-led regime has sought a general and systematic de-politicisation of Egypt’s political space and destroyed the street politics that had been active from 2011 to 2013 through the harsh repression of dissident voices ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood, intellectuals, bloggers, media anchors, university students, NGOs and religious preachers, to soccer fans. It has instilled an atmosphere of fear through heavy propaganda, while waging a ‘war on terrorism’ against alleged threats, ranging from jihadist groups to an array of different opponents, including the banned Muslim Brotherhood. And it has offered populist promises of economic improvement (with huge Saudi and Emirati funding).

State Implosions and Hybrid Security Sectors in Yemen and Libya

In Yemen and Libya, the very poor shape of the security sector, in particular the armed forces, at the moment of transition and the ensuing decay of the security sector – called in policy-oriented jargon the “hybrid security sector,” accounting for the blurred relations and often indeterminacy between on the one hand ‘official’ security forces, those related to the Defence or Interior ministries, and on the other hand ad hoc-recruited security forces such as tribal forces in Yemen or local militias in Libya – have severely harmed political processes and even precluded the very possibility of political games and the advances of transition. This is quite different in Egypt where the military acts ‘above the mess,’ presenting itself as an arbitrator, and the decaying security sector and absence of a restored Weberian state monopoly on arms have fuelled a political mess that is very detrimental to transition.

With the enfeeblement of the authoritarian grip of the Saleh regime (and the assassination attempt against Saleh) and the Gulf Cooperation Council’s transition plan (the election of President Hadi, a former vice-President under Saleh and officer), military/security high commanders have become ‘warlords.’ Although this is not in the traditional African sense of the term (Somalia, Sierra Leone), but rather as actors controlling fiefdoms, namely ‘their’ units/brigades: with those siding with the uprising counter-balancing the remnants of Saleh’s relatives who have remained influential in the military and security apparatus, along with President Hadi attempting to introduce reforms in the armed forces’ organisational structure. In Libya, the absence of a huge military corps was not an asset for easier transition, a kind of welcomed ‘tabula rasa’ when compared with the heavy weight of the Egyptian military in the political system. Militias/brigades (kata’ib), recruited on a local basis – though some have a very ideological agenda or are related to foreign projects of al-Qaeda or more recently the Islamic State/Da’esha – have filled the void and embedded themselves in the political process and in Libya’s social fabric.

And these specificities of the security sector have been reinforced by the lengthy transition in Yemen (with the 'national dialogue' that was to some extent disconnected from the real problems in the Mövenpick Hotel sessions in Sanaa)\(^7\) and the weaknesses of civilian institutions in Libya (the absence of state institutions and the huge tasks facing new rulers after the fall of Gaddafi). These essential features were instrumental in buttressing and ratcheting up a transition process in Tunisia, but were absent in Yemen and Libya. The Yemeni national unity government, composed of different political parties, did not work for the transition President and the transition period lingered as President Hadi’s two-year term ended and the deadline for the completion of the national dialogue approached. In Libya, the weak government in 2011-14 did nothing but help to create an environment that exacerbated the Libyans’ very paradoxical stance towards militias: Libyans resent their aggressive rule, but at the same time rely on them (hence the inflated figures regarding militiamen when compared with the real numbers who fought in the civil war against Gaddafi). In both countries, no real political institution-building took place to smooth the transition and displace the role of official or unofficial militias (or ‘officialised,’ such as Libyan militias that are registered as militias with their own chains of command by the Interior or Defence ministries).

Then in Yemen in September 2014, some northern actors, the revivalist Zaydi Huthis, capitalised on protests against a subsidy lift and a more general resentment against the transitional government to take power in Sanaa. This was helped with the tacit complicity of a few insiders, first among them former President Saleh and his supporters in the security apparatus, in the dreadful context of the growing threat of advancing al-Qaeda factions in several southern provinces. In Libya, the equilibrium of militias that governed the country, along with a weak central government from 2011 to 2014, cracked in May-June 2014 after a military campaign to ‘cleanse’ Islamists was launched by retired General Khalifa Haftar, a former Gaddafi-era official and then long-time dissident. Thereafter, multiple factions have coalesced into two rival yet heteroclite camps ('Operation Dignity' vs. 'Operation Libya Dawn') drawing the lineaments of a civil war, with two rival governments vying for control over the country and its huge wealth of natural resources and regional interventions (Egypt, United Arab Emirates) entering the fray.

**Modest Harvest: Counterrevolutions or Transitional Processes Still in Motion?**

Four years after the beginning of the Arab uprisings, regardless of their complex outcomes and different trajectories, the harvest in terms of institutional reforms and democratic transitions is elusive and at best modest, except in one case (Tunisia). The role of military actors remains pivotal in most cases, either through their enduring, weighty and domineering presence (Egypt until 2013, Yemen until 2014), or through their absence, their dereliction and the ensuing difficulties to restore minimal security and a state monopoly through violent means (Libya and Yemen after 2014), or with the military in Egypt in 2013 benefiting from the pitfalls of transition to take direct power. This is indicative of the difficulties of transitions and their shortcomings, along with the role of a strong regional counterrevolutionary force either due to the resilience of entrenched authoritarian rule (Bahrain, Syria) or the pro-active policies of conservative monarchies (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), based on other rationales (the fear of organisational actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Sunnis vs. Shias), but with indirect and powerful effects on local balances of power (Yemen, Libya, Syria), or in order to buttress the new military-led Egyptian regime.