“State and Army in the Middle East and North Africa: Reflections on the Past and the Future” by Stephanie Cronin

This paper asks what lessons may be may be learned from an examination of the historical experience of armies and their role in state-building in the Middle East and North Africa and to what extent such lessons may offer a guide to understanding the future role of armies in countries from Morocco to Iran and the likely shape of the emerging security architecture across the region. It places this historical experience in a pan-regional perspective, seeking to define broad similarities in approaches and consequences, but argues that, within this comparative paradigm, each country’s narrative is also nonetheless determined by specific national historical, cultural, political and economic contexts.

Firstly, the magnitude of the transformation currently underway across much of the Middle East and North Africa must be emphasized. The present crisis may indeed be understood as an historical reversal of a state-building project which is at least two centuries old. The Middle East entered the twenty-first century with authoritarian states supported by large, expensive armies, all, with the exception of the somewhat peculiar Arab Gulf states and perhaps also Libya, manned by conscript troops, their officers often strategically located within the commanding heights of politics and economy. This may be seen as the culmination of a long process which had begun in earnest in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, when a range of Arab, Ottoman, and Iranian polities began what was to be a protracted experiment with army reform. Nonetheless, despite the longevity and apparent success of this process, in 2015 the state-system across the region and the armies which underpinned it appear to have entered a prolonged and perhaps terminal period of crisis and collapse.

It should further be pointed out that, although the invasion of Iraq in 2003 prompted much speculation about the supposedly fragile nature of the Middle Eastern state system, the arbitrary nature of state borders, the frailty and illegitimacy of national institutions, yet in fact during the twentieth century this state system achieved a considerable degree of success and legitimacy and proved surprisingly resilient. Even in the nineteenth century, Ottoman sovereignty over the Arab territories, for example, was barely contested from within. Ottoman control was substantially weakened and removed only by European imperial action, for example by the British in Egypt in 1882, the Italians in Libya in 1911-12, and the French in North Africa. The relative stability of the Ottoman system continued during and until after the end of the First World War, the British-sponsored Arab revolt in the Hijaz notwithstanding. The post-War state system which emerged was, it is true, largely the creation of Britain and France, but it consolidated itself and became entrenched as an arena for national political activity. It survived intact all the many vicissitudes of twentieth century Middle Eastern politics. The strength of this system may be seen in light of the total failure of the one significant change, the creation of Israel in 1948, to achieve any regional legitimacy. It wasa traumatic blow from outside, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was to cause this regional system to begin to unravel, leading to the current crisis.

In broad historical terms, then, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa possess a common history of state-building. In the two centuries between 1800 and 2000, states, rulers and elites across the Middle East and North Africa shared a broad agenda of defensive military modernization, this project supported by a nationalist ideology which showcased the army as the national institution par excellence. Yet the events of the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 also demonstrated the significance of the specific local context in determining the very different reactions of individual national armies to moments of intense political crisis. In Egypt and Tunisia, the military high commands were able to muster considerable political cohesion and decisiveness and moved to eliminate unpopular figureheads of both army and state, Presidents Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia. In Libya, on the contrary, a weak and disorganized military almost immediately split into two, an eastern faction based on Benghazi supporting the opposition, a western army based on Tripoli remaining loyal to Ghadafi. In Syria, after some early defections and despite almost universal Western predictions that the army would disintegrate, enough of the army continued to back the Assad regime to enable it to survive. In Bahrayn the army, its rank and file largely composed not of Bahrayni citizens but of Sunni Pakistanis, quickly abandoned any pretence that it could meet the challenge from the streets and surrendered its role to the Saudi National Guard invited in by a panicking al-Khalifa ruling family.

It was the late eighteenth century, when the Middle East and North Africa first began to attract the sustained attention of modern European imperialism and colonialism, which first saw the birth of systematic local efforts to import European methods of military organization and techniques of warfare. Everywhere, Morocco, Tunis, Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran, Europeanized regiments sprang up, unleashing a process of military-led modernization which was to characterize state-building projects throughout the region until well into the twentieth century. The length, duration and near universality of the defensive modernization project so inaugurated has already been noted, as is the recent sudden and unexpected stalling or reversal of this project, leading to the proliferation of failed states, a novel development in the region. Equally noteworthy is the extent to which twentieth century armies were marked by the circumstances of their birth and infancy.

Three features of this new experiment in military modernization were to be of great significance for the future: purpose, cost and leadership.

The first concerned the purpose of the new armies. Certainly ruling dynasties in the nineteenth century Middle East and North Africa embarked on army reform because they wished to strengthen their defensive capacity and resist growing European hegemony. But such rulers also had another purpose: to strengthen their personal position inside their patrimonies, buttressing their own power as expressed in the form of a modern autocratic state. These origins stamped Middle Eastern armies indelibly as instruments primarily for the enforcement of domestic political power. Throughout much of the twentieth century and until the present, with a small number of exceptions, Middle

Eastern armies have remained important mainly for their role in guaranteeing regimes rather than conventional inter-state warfare.

The second issue to come to the fore concerned financing military reform. During the nineteenth century, ruling dynasties across the Middle East learned a harsh lesson concerning the cost of modern armies. Standing armies were inherently massively more costly than older types of military forces. Based on conscription, they required bureaucratic and administrative expansion and rationalization, the payment of salaries, provision of barracks and headquarters, and so on. The inevitable result, in the absence of economic development, an industrial revolution, or any other means of raising revenues, was a turn to borrowing from those very European countries against which the modern army was supposedly a defence. Indeed, in the nineteenth century army reform more often led, through the ruinous debts incurred, to an actual and complete loss of sovereignty and direct European control. By 1869, 1875 and 1876 respectively, Tunisia, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire had each been bankrupted by the crippling expense of their modernization programmes, at the heart of which was the army. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries were to produce no easy solution to the problem of paying for modern armies.

In addition to the requirements mentioned above, standing armies, unlike their predecessors, had a further very specific requirement, an officer corps trained in modern military methods or organization and warfare. In building modern armies, all the rulers of the Middle East faced the same difficulties in accumulating the cadre for a professional officer corps. The region than possessed no modern educational institutions, let alone military colleges, nor had local elites yet made any significant efforts to acquire training abroad. All therefore adopted the same solution, turning directly to European officers. This was quickly recognized as an enterprise fraught with danger, the requests for official missions only producing the creation of new mechanisms for the assertion of European political influence. Experience with Western military advice provided another harsh lesson for both existing authorities and rising nationalist opinion.

Thus the nineteenth century saw the military modernization project, intended to protect sovereignty and enhance centralized domestic political power, leading to exactly the opposite results. Nonetheless, the state-building project, produced complex and contradictory effects. Often leading to political authoritarianism, financial bankruptcy and loss of sovereignty, the attempt to create modern armies also wrought profound changes of long-term significance on a number of levels, administrative, social, political and intellectual. In the Ottoman Empire, for example, the new army became a route for the social advancement of officers from modest provincial backgrounds. In the Ottoman Empire and Egypt it also provided the mechanism for the articulation of a new national consciousness, such developments imparting a revolutionary dimension to the modern army's burgeoning sense of its own national mission. The ability of the state, embodied in the military, to extend its reach, and therefore its sovereignty, across the entire national territory and over the lives of the national population increased exponentially.

From the beginning of their existence, armies across the region were deeply implicated in politics, sometimes in defence of the established political order, more often as agents of its overthrow. Defeat in war was an especially important catalyst for change. The capacity of the modern armies constructed by Middle Eastern rulers to resist European power was almost non-existent. But military defeats were at least as, perhaps more, significant than success to Middle Eastern political development. The Young Turk officers of the Ottoman army were galvanized into political action in 1908, seizing control of the Ottoman government and deposing the sultan, partly by successive defeats and loss of territories in the Balkans and Tripolitania. Egypt in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries illustrates perfectly the linkage between military defeat and the emergence from within the officer corps of a radical political challenge. The multiple failures of the Egyptian army during Khedive Ismail's empire-building in Abyssinia discredited the old Turkish-speaking command, paving the way for the Egyptian nationalist revolt led by Colonel Urabi. The linkage continued in the twentieth century. Defeat in Palestine in 1948 galvanizing the Free Officers and led directly to the 1952 coup. Indeed, military defeat and failure in Palestine was to lead to revolutionary transformation across the Arab world. It is interesting that, by the latter part of the twentieth century, this long standing and almost universal connection between military defeat and political change seems to have been sundered, perhaps signifying the ossification of politics and the total immersion of the officer corps, especially at the coup-making levels of colonel and above, into existing political elites. Defeat, or at least lack of success, in the war with Iran, 1980-88, and after the occupation of Kuwait, for example, did not produce a successful challenge to Saddam Husayn's control of Iraq.

The problems evident from the very beginning of the defensive modernization project, of financing, of foreign tutelage, and of political disaffection, continued to plague Middle Eastern armies throughout the twentieth century. They were, furthermore, intertwined. The tendency of these problems to reinforce each other, the danger they represented, and the inability of different regimes to address them successfully, can be clearly illustrated in the cases of Pahlavi Iran and Saudi Arabia. From the 1950s both countries rapidly abandoned any attempt to finance the army out of domestic taxation, relying on oil revenues. Both failed to produce sufficient pools of trained manpower for the oil-funded advanced military technology acquired from the West, leading to a dependence on foreign personnel. Both also failed to address the consequent generation of intense political alienation and dissent within the ranks of the army itself, and in wider civil society, leading to the overthrow of one monarchy, the Iranian, and the near destruction of the other, the Saudi.

In the second half of the twentieth century both Iran and Saudi Arabia avoided the bankruptcies experienced by the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire, Egypt and Tunisia by relying on oil revenues to fund military expansion. In both cases, this reliance freed the governments from normal domestic constraints, exercised elsewhere through taxation and democratic politics, but embroiled the countries in political and economic relationships which damaged not only the political credibility of the regimes, but even the military competence of the armies.

It may be argued, for example, that the oil price rise of 1973, which enable the shah of Iran to embark on a military spending spree of epic proportions, was one of the key factors which finally doomed the monarchy. The sudden availability of seemingly unlimited quantities of cash resulted in a military spending spree of irrational scope and dimensions, leading to the swelling of numbers of American advisers, both the spending and the advisers directly targeted by the various strands of the opposition, both secular and religious. The oil price rise facilitated the shah's grandiose plans for regional hegemony under US auspices, further provoking the domestic opposition, and created a lucrative Iranian arms market, encouraging the US in the direction of an increasingly uncritical pro-shah orientation. At the same time, within the Iranian army, dissent was silenced by a deluge of material privileges. When the revolution came, the army was ill-prepared to meet civil disturbance. The sophisticated high-tech weaponry so beloved by the shah was of little use against unarmed demonstrators in urban centres, the army very much a blunt instrument whose deployment on the streets invariably aggravated discontent.

In Saudi Arabia, the use of oil revenues to boost military spending led to similar distortions n priorities. Despite the multiple political problems and military weaknesses in evidence during the 1991 Gulf War crisis, the massive expenditure on defence continued unabated.As in 1970s Iran, its military utility was revealed as marginal, and it operated mainly as a mechanism for recycling petrodollars to the advantage of the Saudi elite and the Western arms industry and for cementing Saudi political and diplomatic relationships with the West, especially with the United States.

In Iran, the human resources on which the Iranian army could draw in the 1970s, for both its officer corps and its rank and file, were inadequate, unprepared to cope with the volume and sophistication of the new equipment. The lack of skilled manpower led to the arrival in Iran of vast numbers of American advisors to assist in the operation and maintenance of the imported weapons, a solution which contributed significantly to the unpopularity of the regime. All US military personnel were given legal immunity while in Iran and were consequently a particular object of revolutionary propaganda, denounced by Khomeini as symbols of Iran's subservience to the US, becoming a target for the guerrilla campaign of the 1970s.

Similarly, the arrival of very large numbers of foreign military personnel in Saudi Arabia created intense political problems for the al-Saud. It contributed specifically to a crisis of legitimacy and the rise of Islamist opposition in general and of al-Qa'ida in particular. In Saudi Arabia technically competent and politically reliable recruits had been, as in Iran, in short supply. The numbers of foreigners employed in the kingdom on defence contracts accordingly grew to fantastic proportions. Yet, in 1991 with Saddam Husayn's occupation of Kuwait, the Saudis were forced to face the fact that their massive military expenditure, about $3 billion over the previous twenty years, had left the country practically defenceless. The Saudis were obliged to appeal to the US for direct protection

and King Fahd's invitation to US troops to defend Saudi soil inaugurated a prolonged political crisis in the kingdom.

In both Pahlavi Iran and Saudi Arabia, the character of military development produced deep fissures within the military, and pervasive criticism of the military from civil society. The 1950s was a decade of nationalist, sometimes left-leaning, coups in the Arab world. In Iran, however, the army had suffered enormous damage to its prestige by its recent role in the Western-led overthrow of a nationalist figure, Muhammad Musadiq, whose stature was growing with the passage of time. Despite the consolidation of the control of the post-coup regime over the army, subterranean discontent continued to exist for professional as well as political reasons, many officers disliking the necessity of court patronage for advancement and the royal dictatorship itself. As far as the wider society was concerned, in the years after the coup the army was profoundly unpopular. When faced with the revolutionary movement in 1977-78, the army was unprepared and unwilling to act. The high command, even when encouraged by the US through the Huyser mission, could find neither the esprit de corps not the political and military confidence to act decisively to defend the monarchy or to project its own power through a military coup. Middle ranking officers had already largely retired or resigned or defected to the opposition, this was even true of those at the traditionally coup-making rank of colonel, while the conscript units were rapidly disintegrating.

In common with other Arab armies, in the 1950s the fledgling Saudi officer experienced the appeal of pan-Arabism and Nasserism, and even leftism. As in Iran, officers were discontented both with what they saw as the backwardness and corruption of their own societies, and specifically with the brake this put on the modernization of their forces and the specific obstacle placed in their own professional advancement by the system of patrimonial rule and the entitlement of members of the royal family, by the 1990s numbering as many as 20,000 people, all three services and the defence ministry finding their entire upper echelons increasingly dominated by an ever-growing pool of officers of royal birth. As the growing oil wealth increasingly enabled the regime to buy off opposition among the better-educated, including among army and air force officers, so a social and ideological trauma resulting from that same oil wealth led to the emergence, among the poorer tribal groups heavily represented in the National Guard, of a different kind of dissent, now with a strong religious revivalist character. In 1979, the same year as the Iranian revolution, current and former members of the National Guard were central participants and even leaders of the radical Islamist attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

The Saudi monarchy survived the crisis of 1979, the Iranian monarchy did not. These two countries, in the three decades of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, shared a common project of military-led modernization and shared also the concomitant problems, but the contrasting outcomes also illustrate crucially the importance of the specific political and historical context. Traditions of political dissent in Saudi Arabia were weaker than in Iran and compromised by the persistence and strength of tribal ties. In contrast to Iran, the varying strands of opposition to the al-Saud failed to find common cause, the religious radicals isolated from the urban intelligentsia and the Shi'a dissidents.

In neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia, however, although for different reasons, was the army able to take control of security or politics in the fateful year of 1979.

Finally, to what extent is the military-led state-building project which exercised such hegemony across the Middle East and North Africa between 1800 and 2000 finally exhausted? Certainly much of the military conflict across the region now has the character of urban guerrilla warfare, and armies have either been forced to adapt, as in the Syrian case, or to rely heavily on militias, as in Iraq. Yet the project itself, on the ideological level at least, remains intact, armies still presenting themselves, sometimes successfully, as the pre-eminent national institution. However, the ability of countries across the region to emerge from the current collapse is at present unclear. As of the summer of 2015, indeed, the disintegration appears to be accelerating, with unprecedented levels of population flight. As outlined above, the state-building project in the Middle East and North Africa has been, as it was in Europe, protracted and difficult, involving domestic, regional and international contest and conflict. Comforting easy proposals, such as the provision of military assistance to entrenched local elites, is, on the basis of past experience, unlikely to lead to lasting solutions. Whether the region is still capable of generating the strength necessary to rebuild its state institutions, and provide the minimum of security necessary for everyday life, let alone political progress, remains to be seen.