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# The Middle East and its armies

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Recent events have shown the ineffectiveness of armies in the Middle East, from Libya to Iraq, and extending beyond the region into Afghanistan. Training missions can teach troops to shoot and march and salute, but not to hold up under fire. Several armies have struggled or collapsed in recent conflicts, despite superior armaments, training, and numbers. Only a few have acquitted themselves well in battle.

The Libyan army collapsed in the face of lightly-armed rebels and a measure of NATO air support. The Syrian army has been driven from most of the country by a miscellany of rebel forces and can only maintain a stalemate with the help of Hisbollah and Iranian advisers. The Iraqi army was sent fleeing by a few thousand Islamic State (IS) troops and is only slowly regaining ground with outside help. And of course Saddam Hussein's army was devastated in a matter of a few days by the US and allies in 1991 and 2003.

Today, the prospect of 2,000 IS troops invading Saudi Arabia - a country with an army and national guard of several hundred thousand and a sizable air force - causes shudders in and out of the region.

These failures do not stem from Islam or colonial legacies. Nor are they restricted to the Middle East, as the Ukrainian army's timorous performance in Crimea demonstrated, perhaps especially to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Failures stem from organizational and demographic

problems that are unlikely to be redressed in coming years. This has great import for regional security and for future alignments with outside powers.

**Problems**

Armies are organizations. They are charged with recruiting soldiers, integrating them into national structures regardless of their backgrounds, and training them in an array of weaponry from assault rifles to jet aircraft. Armies must be able to keep abreast of changing military threats and doctrines. They must execute large-scale maneuvers and supply units in the most trying of conditions.

Organizational effectiveness in the region (and elsewhere) has been hindered by a lack of professionalism in the officer corps, from company-grade officers to the general staff. Officers are selected less for mastery of the art of war than for loyalty to rulers. This leads to resentment and mistrust: the rank and file from privates to colonels do not trust their superiors; and unit commanders do not trust those in charge of sister units that may be needed in desperate situations.

Social scientists of the 1960s argued that armies in developing countries would help build new nations. People from conflicting regions and groups would be brought together and would serve in a unifying institution. The experience would reduce regionalism and tribalism and sectarianism and build nationalism. That, however, has not been the case.

Commanders tend to come from one region or tribe or sect: Sunnis in Saddam's Iraq, Shias in today's Iraq, Persians in Iran, Sauds in the Kingdom, Alawis in Syria, Pashtun in Afghanistan. Other groups are resentful and often oppressed. Instead of reducing parochialisms, most militaries perpetuate and strengthen them. (Significantly, the region's most competent army, that of Egypt, has the fewest of these fissures.)

**Prospects of reform**

A country seeing military shortcomings all about it might be expected to embark on systematic changes in its officer corps and to make its rank and file more inclined to defend their nation. Some European states responded in that manner to the threat of revolutionary French armies, though only halfheartedly and in the end only temporarily. Middle Eastern states are unlikely to take any such steps in response to the threat of revolutionary Islamist forces. Tellingly, Saudi Arabia is responding to the IS danger to the north by building a fence along the Iraqi border.

Favoritism in appointments within army and state is too firmly embedded into the political processes to be significantly reduced, let alone abolished. Tribalism, once thought to be an archaic institution that modernization would sweep away, is an enduring part of army and state.

Sectarian tensions are perhaps higher than they were during Iran's revolution in 1979, making substantive incorporation of the other sect into key positions in army and state unlikely.

Westerners might see the lack of political participation as a principal cause of poor fighting

spirit, but inside the region political reform is seen as opening the door to extremism, paralysis, and anarchy, and to further weakening of the army.

Perhaps the greatest obstacles to reform are the knowledge that Western troops are available to provide regional security and the belief that the old networks of sinecures and favoritism can survive the transient crisis that IS poses.