

## THE ROLE OF THE TUNISIAN ARMED FORCES DURING THE 'ARAB SPRING' AND IN THE PROCESS OF THE FORMATION OF THE NEW AUTOCRACY

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First of all, it is necessary to review briefly the situations existing in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria before "the Arab Spring". Tunisia was the birthplace of "the Arab Spring" and the first country where the Islamists won the elections, which led to the activation of moderate, radical or extremist Islamist forces in the Middle East, both in politics and beyond it, following the example of Syria. That is why, in addition to other factors, special attention is paid to the role of the Tunisian armed forces at the first stages of the "Arab uprising" and in the political processes in post-revolutionary Tunisia, the motivations that led to changes in their positions in the political arena and the differences between the interests of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Syrian armed forces are also the main focus of the article. The low-budget armed forces of Tunisia, in the period of ruling of the first President of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba (1956-87) and Ben Ali (1987-2011), never have wielded economic and political power, hence, the military never wished to have a close contact of any kind with the regime, that is why the armed forces of the country did not defend the government. Accordingly, the purpose of the article is also to present the reasons that led to the change of the position of the Tunisian military in 2021-2022.

After the revolution in Tunisia, the balance of power between the army and the police began to change. The emergence of serious security challenges has forced Tunisia's post-revolutionary leaders to focus on strengthening the armed forces. According to 2016 data, since 2011, the defense budget, unlike other ministries, has grown by 21% every year. The military has steadily enjoyed the benefits of new arms contracts and international partnerships. Especially from the United States of America, which tripled military aid to Tunisia by 2015. The military strengthening of the army was followed by the growth of its political influence. According to the data of the "International Institute for Strategic Studies", Tunisia's military budget, which was 666 million dollars in 2012, reached 1.14 billion dollars by 2020, of which 65-95 million dollars came from the military aid provided by Washington in the last 5 years. In 2015, the USA named Tunisia as the main ally among non-NATO states. After the revolution, a parliamentary system was established in Tunisia, and the armed forces came under the joint command of the country's new president and the prime minister. The institutional rivalry between the president and the prime minister for control of the armed forces led to the fact that both of them created a separate security council and appointed own military advisers. All this resulted the strengthening of the role of the military in the country's national security affairs.

After the Arab Spring in Egypt, the military still receives military aid from the US and, at the same time, owns military industrial complexes. As for politicization, the country's armed forces are distinguished in this regard, like Syria. The Syrian army still plays an important role in maintaining the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

In 2011-2016 11 active and retired military personnel occupied the positions of governors in different provinces of the country. During Bin Ali's 23-year rule, only one military person was appointed to governor in one province of country. And in 2014, retired officers provided guidance on drafting a new constitution and advised presidential candidates on defense policy. In 2017, the party "Nida'a Tunis" initiated the issue in the parliament regarding granting the militaries right to participate in the elections. Finally, the law was approved by 144 votes to 11, with 3 abstentions. Representatives of the armed forces were allowed to participate only in local and not parliamentary or presidential elections. According to the official data of the country's election commission, 4,249 people participated in the elections out of 36,495 registered security and military personnel.

The current president of Egypt, Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi comes from military circle and surrounded himself with friends from military academy and close relatives. After the coup against Islamist president Mohammad Morsi, Al-Sisi with military supreme council grabbed the power in his hands and it proves that the influence of the military in Egypt is still quite strong.

Also in Syria main pillar of the government are militaries. The top rings of this structure are staffed by officers from Shiite-Alawite and mixed Sunni-Shiite families. Due to the situation created by the civil war in Syria, there is no other alternative that the armed forces were not loyal to the regime.

According to the fact that Bourguiba and Bin Ali did not allow the militaries to have political and economic leverage and marginalized the armed forces for the sake of personal interests and the security of their own autocratic regimes, it saved the country from the establishment of dictatorship by the representatives of former political forces. A notable example of this is the rejection by the non-politicized Tunisian military call of the secular opposition for a military coup in 2013. The strengthening of the role of the armed forces in politics and interest in their financial benefits, on the other hand, creates the danger that the armed forces, in order to protect their privileges, may no longer maintain a neutral position during upheavals, which was also proven in the case of Tunisia in July-August 2021, and Tunisian militaries supported President Kais Said and blocked Prime Minister Mecic's office and the parliament building with tanks.

As for the Egyptian military, based on their interests, in order to play their multi-move combination, they did not prevent the people who came out to the streets to hold protests. If Hosni Mubarak's son, Gamal Mubarak, came to power, it was already known that he would not grant those privileges to the Supreme Military Council which were granted by the previous presidents of Egypt.

In Syria, despite the fact that many of Bashar Al-asad's soldiers left the army and participated in the ranks of the insurgents, the Baath-Alawi military clan has managed to maintain the regime in the interest of saving own lives.